

Response to Dudley Andrew: The Exemplary of Film Studies' Demons

Andrew Covert

Andrew Covert strikes a conciliatory tone in responding to Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," arguing that we need to find a balance between sober analysis and the subjectivities we inevitably bring to our scholarship.

For all of its ambition to equanimity and collegiality, Dudley Andrew's latest article "The Core and Flow of Film studies" in *Critical Inquiry* has come under sustained fire from virtually all quarters of the discipline. A recent talk given by Dr. Andrew here at Concordia on "The Exemplary of Film Studies" did little to quell the disquiet. But middle ways are often the most despised of solutions.

Andrew does much in his article to set up the position of the discipline in its current incarnation, presenting a good highlight reel of film studies from the past century or so. Although he sets up numerous debates that have defined inquiry into film, it must be admitted that his is a history with a particular end in sight. Many have condemned this superficially innocent cataloguing of film thought as an effort to smuggle late-model "cinophilia" into the current practice of the discipline. Andrew's history certainly establishes and defends a place for such an approach, but it is indisputably a cinophilia of the Dudley Andrew variety. Overall his article suffers from an ailment not unusual in historical accounts, that under the guise of an equitable statement of the facts he brings together themes that nevertheless present a very personal view of the events discussed.

The response by Dr. Haidee Wasson in this issue of *Synoptique* does much to add a more universalist and positivistic spin onto Andrew's rather deterministic progress report. Her article outlines a very cogent and legitimate criticism of Andrew's effort to boil down the disparate camps of history, theory, textual analysis and media studies to a single Hegelian direction. However, at points her commentary slips dangerously close to a homily on the nature of the "complexity" of the issues at hand. Such a commentary points towards the already selfevident nature of the vexed relationship between film departments and the changing structure of university finance and administration, as well as the thorny issue of interdisciplinarity and the consternation research areas like Visual and Cultural studies continue to cause the field. Any professor or student working in the discipline for the last ten to fifteen years would have been exposed to these issues. And while I would agree that Andrew's sins are many, simplicity is not one of them.

Wasson's particular target for criticism is not Andrew's in-depth research and knowledge of the area, but what is, for my part, one of the more solid points of his argument: the defense of incorporating the rather nebulous concept of a certain "cinephilic" essence into the work of film studies. I must agree that a historical defense of this disposition is hardly the most sensible approach, but I believe that it is just such a failure that illustrates the importance of the concept as a necessary part of film studies. My criticisms are not exclusively of Andrew's or Wasson's method, or the veracity of their factual assertions. I wish to concern myself instead with the conclusions they draw, the implications that follow

concerning authority and responsibility in the discipline, and the possibility of gathering the “nebulous” and the “concrete” together at the heart of our work.

As films scholars, we have traditionally been challenged by the question of authority. From where do we draw the conviction of our conclusions? Is it from the traditional disciplines that under-gird our methodological framework? (i.e. Literary theory, History, Social Science, Aesthetics, philosophies of time and space etc.) Certainly since its inception our discipline has had to borrow its authority from other sources, justifying itself with recourse to work done elsewhere. While the strength of its conclusions and the values of its contributions are undoubtedly the product of decades of very excellent and precise work, the discipline is still implicated in this diverse web of justification.

Many disciplines in the academy, with Science at its head, have a grand and highly formalized methodological tradition that invests them with authority, as much as it requires their responsibility. Where authority is vouchsafed by method, responsibility is clear. But in film, and other textually focused disciplines of humanistic study, that to which we are responsible is more questionable. Having employed a number of different methodologies to approach our object of study, to which are we ultimately responsible? In some cases ‘dancing with the one who brought us’ is not possible, and even less desirable. This question is however not an idle one, because it drives to the heart of film studies’ role in the humanities and what it can offer other disciplines at a time when all of our influence in the academy is at an all-time low.

It seems that since Post-Theory’s plea for (or should I say assertion of?) a singular and integrated method for films studies, much work has been done not exactly to this end, but more or less assuming that such an end already exists. Responsibility in the discipline has thus been split between those linking to a polyvalent matrix of disciplinary systems and those committed to a methodological ideal that has yet to fully emerge. While I would place myself unapologetically in the first camp, my position is more radical in that I believe that if we are to create for ourselves an approach which at least acknowledges an unabashed love of our object, it is to that object that we must see ourselves as responsible. Thus we must maintain a continual tension between our codification of film and its inherent singularity as the *justification* for, rather than a failing of, our conclusions. Such a position reads as problematic only because it embraces the fluidity at the center of humanistic

research, and because it places film, rather than film studies, at the center of our structure.

This position is not far from Andrew’s own, except for the effort he makes to conflate the goals of films studies with the goals of the institution and, as such, downplays and even conceals the essentially anarchic factors of film: subjective experience, material aesthetics, shock, dialectical image etc. No doubt these elements cause more problems than they solve. However, we cannot simply revert to naturalizing claims to objective knowledge in film, claims whose stock has fallen elsewhere in the humanities for the fact that they tend to merely dismiss these tensions. So, if we are to admit subjective experience to the discipline then we must not downplay the structural complication such an inclusion precipitates.

I wish to argue that our goals should have little to do with the integration of film into the pre-ordained structure of thought and administration. Our responsibility must remain to the object: to film—and all of the trouble, confusion and complexity such a commitment entails. Dudley Andrew ignores, as many scholars working so long for the acceptance of the discipline have learned to do, the tension that exists between the universality of our terms, codes and laws, and the singularity of the objects with which we deal. Haidee Wasson wishes to conserve the complexity of the “Big Picture” but in so doing picks and chooses very carefully the problems she’s willing to discuss. If we acknowledge the singularity of our texts and a subjective dimension to their reception, absolute systematicity in their description becomes questionable indeed. Of course, the danger does not lie in systematicity itself, but in the way in which it takes on a natural, and unreflexive character. In such cases it leads to a point where the theory, history or analysis around film becomes more important than the film itself.

We share many of these same challenges as our humanities brethren, if they are willing to be honest, but the modernity of our concerns and, dare I add, their currency, go far beyond these other disciplines’ possibilities. We must accept that the much sought-after authority and autochthonous solidity of the other more established humanistic endeavours is received, rather than inviolable wisdom. Far from having superior methodologies to which we must aspire, many have created an artificial distance and supposed independence from their disciplinary origins. As such, they miss the extent to which their structures of interpretation frame and digest their object of study, mistakenly asserting

their claims as holistic truths.

What is quantifiable and measurable in film will always be there to be found. It is inevitable that eager and enterprising taxonomists will continue to collect and archive such complexities. And we are all the better for it to be sure. However, it is the assertion of these elements as the *whole* of film—and furthermore the effort to measure the limitless and regulate the chaotic—that turns such a view into a dubious proposal for an absolute and singular method.

Our current problems I see as flowing from our efforts to make film “fit” either into a traditional mode of humanistic analysis or into models of social and scientific understanding. The challenge remains to re-ignite the historical and theoretical questioning film makes of the staid and conventional models of understanding art and experience in the modern world. Not, as I heard in a recent SCMS question period, for film studies to find “its method,” whatever that singular and sacred codex of laws may be.

Dudley Andrew’s work and position makes a positive contribution to the field. And yet it seems to retain at its heart a utopian eschatology, where at some point, in the sweet by and by, all of the current conflicts (and those that lie dormant in our past) will be resolved, and the discipline will take its rightful place in the pantheon of scholarly knowledge. For my part, I see film studies *as* these debates—that the discipline is inherently disperse, fragmented and fractious, because its object is all of these things and more.

The exemplary of films studies must include the fact that we exist at the fault-lines of most of the debates around art and scholarly inquiry in the modern world. Far from being a reaction to an inferiority complex, or a plea for anarchy, this argument recommends a preservation of tension at the heart of the discipline: a tension between the sober and the Dionysian, the known and the obscure, the professional and the amateur. Perhaps Susan Sontag remains correct in her demand, at the end of her famous “Against Interpretation,” for an *erotics* of film—with all the endless subjective complexities such a concept inspires.

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Edited by Dino Koutras.

Bibliography

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