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## Response to Dudley Andrew: Small Discipline, Big Pictures

Haidee Wasson responds to Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow in Film Studies" by considering the institutional realities that Andrew's program would have to contend with.

[ Intro ] [ Koutras ] [ Ogonoski ] [ Wasson ] [ Covert ]

Let me begin by putting my cards on the table. I am co-editor of a book on the history of film studies called *Inventing Film Studies* [1]. This book includes a range of approaches to understanding the present and past of Film Studies; there are several arguments that the book seeks to make. Perhaps the most important one is that at the heart of a healthy discipline is debate. Good old-fashioned arguments help us to better hone our own thoughts, they fortify the core of our practice as a group of scholars, and they help us to direct future research traffic. Second, this book struggles honestly with an issue that may seem pejoratively academic to many. But to me and my co-editor (Dr. Lee Grieverson), this struggle is foundational. That is, writing the history of anything requires some sense of the parameters of that thing, that object you are working to historicize. Such a process of definition should, if not in whole at least in part, precede the closely related questions of method (how to study that thing you are trying to understand).

Now, defining what "film study" has been (and what it is) is far trickier than most attempts to discuss the discipline often allow. If we can begin with a most basic assumption, that an academic discipline finds its home in the university, we have at least a starting point for outlining the parameters of our inquiry. But we know that universities are complicated institutions with large bureaucracies. They receive money from different places (private and public) and are thus beholden to different extra-organizational interests and demands. Universities have different missions and mandates, different strengths and weaknesses, different faculty bases, different student bodies. They are filled with Faculties of Fine Arts, Arts and Science, Engineering, Business, as well as departments, schools, research centers and institutes. Like all institutions they are comprised of established interests and emergent ones, senior scholars and junior ones, senior administrators and junior ones, powerful individuals and lesser known team players. Universities are not only or simply the ivory towers their critics make them out to be. Often universities and colleges have a root-system of relationships with other organizations and institutions that have their own interests and identities. Productive relationships form and unravel with many such entities, from multi-national conglomerates to local arts groups. So, where does film study fit here?

If we are going to begin answering that question, we need to understand the basic institutional features of film studies. Of course, this kind of approach would undergird the other more familiar avenues of inquiry that shape understanding of any discipline. What are the key texts? Key journals? Key ideas? What is essential knowledge? How is that knowledge produced, disseminated and carried forward? What are the important professional organizations? What is their function and mode of operation? What should we as film scholars do with our time and expertise? How do we adapt to change? What should graduate students be required to know and do? What is and what should be our specific relationship to cognate fields and disciplines? What is our more general contribution to the whole of arts, humanities and social sciences research? Why does what we do matter? In what ways does it matter? And perhaps most importantly: What is at stake in defining the center, the periphery, the inside and the outside of something like film studies? Is the goal something noble like clarity and intellectual vision? Is the goal to win institutional capital, like establishing a program's status as a department or a school? Or, is the impulse more about including some kind of work and excluding other kinds? Perhaps it is more committed to establishing hierarchies of value and degrees of relevance? All of these questions must be asked; the clearer their answers the more honest and valuable the contribution any meditation on our discipline will be.

I say all of this to make a rather simple point: the components that constitute any discipline are numerous, multi-faceted, and complicated. Any attempt to assess the state of a discipline must always make some foundational assumption about what aspects of the discipline are most important. In making such assumptions, some aspects of the discipline rise to the fore and others are often forgotten, deliberately ignored, or devalued. This is the argument of *Inventing Film Studies*, which works to make some of the forgotten or perhaps ignored aspects of our discipline known. My co-editor and I worked toward this goal, in part, because we wanted to provoke a dialogue not just about how to define the parameters of our discipline but to call attention to the ways in which idealized articulations of what we do can too easily be mistaken as synthetic statements for what is, and what has been, or more nostalgically what, we had sadly passed.

So, these are the basic dispositions and insights (a few among many) that I bring to my own response to Dudley Andrew's recent presentation at Concordia, and his fuller, extremely elegant articulation of his ideas recently published in *Critical Inquiry*.

When working on *Inventing Film Studies*, I noticed that when film scholars talked about the discipline very often they were articulating an idealized wish-image: What does scholar X wish we would all do and do well, rather than what is or has been. And, of course this happens in other disciplines as well. Ironically, Cultural Studies—a field that does not fare well in Andrew's thinking—is an obvious culprit, persistently debating what its parameters and purposes are in this fashion. In Film Studies, the received history of our field demonstrates a focus on the 60s, on modernism, on the particular theoretical conjunctures of the 70s. Indeed, these things were ascendant internationally, as Andrew dutifully reminds us. Yet, a good deal of this historiography is flavored with a certain degree of idealization. Many questions about the modernism of Film Studies remain unasked. For instance, it was largely in the US, Canada and the UK, that Film Studies really became a recognizable, university-based discipline at that time. So, how do we explain that?

I would not dispute the importance of any of these things (the 60s political context, modernism, etc.)—they are crucial to the history of film studies and to other disciplines too. But what is often missing in this narrative are all of the other things and ideas and movements that also made the discipline/field possible: portable film and sound technologies; the cold war and the U.S. National Defense Education Act of 1958; a long history of art making and American do-it-yourself ideas in the universities; a long history of visual education movements and attempts to modernize learning; changes in the publishing industry; a vibrant public sphere organized around cinema; a changing American industry. And, most importantly, what's often missing is an accurate sense of what studying film has actually looked like for a long time: straddling departments, imbricated in A-V depots and labs, collaborating with political and arts organizations, and so on. Chapters in *Inventing Film Studies* support these claims with more elegance and evidence than I can supply here.

The concern I have in response to the Andrew lecture is that it triggered a lingering discomfort I have when cinephilia often resurfaces as the secret idealized history of the discipline, and a nostalgic cinephilia at that. While disciplines may in part be shaped by such crazy and often highly personal love, I don't think they should be constituted by it, or justified by resort to it. Obviously, we should work to acknowledge and never disavow the way that object-affection operates. Yet I become especially skeptical about the primacy of cinephilia when we in film studies think as intellectuals that our love is special, and that all of the other loves are lesser loves.

Our love (cinephilia) has led some of us to make rather surprising claims that don't always hold up beyond the parameters of our discipline. For instance, that cinema yields the most complex, difficult, rich objects amongst all other expressive forms. It might be true—but this is something we must continue to argue and support in comparison to other cognate forms and, ideally, in discussion with others who think that paintings, sculpture, poetry, literature, sound, comics or video games are the privileged points of entry to aesthetic, theoretical or cultural complexity. We cannot just internally anoint cinema and then designate ourselves as keepers of magic. If we do, then we die and become irrelevant.

Or take the case of teaching. Cinephilia is surely in operation as we design our courses; teaching and teaching films we love is an elemental pleasure. But the fact remains that we don't teach love, even though in some way we might model it. Our job is to teach students how to think in a more sophisticated way about what they see. We teach them how to analyze images, form arguments, write essays, harness evidence. Love might inform every bit of what we do in the classroom but it alone does not sustain responsible pedagogy or curricular design.

Cinephilia also likely plays a role in one of the other persistent subtexts in Film Studies—that film not only holds a privileged epistemological status vis-à-vis modernity, but it also possesses an inviolate, unrelenting, non-negotiable, avant gardism. This manifests in Andrew's plain assertions that film is more difficult than other media forms. This manifests also in something like the common "cinema of attractions" thesis, particularly as it has moved beyond its historically specific claims for early cinema and been used to understand all manner of cinematic spectacle, from Hollywood blockbusters to recent museum and moving image installation work. The idea that cinema's truest moments are beyond language, beyond the constraints of narrative, and elevate us above and beyond all other attractions persists. Undergirding this is, I think, a kind of cinephilia, a certain committed romance with the moving image. As we know, cinephilia, like any kind of object love, is complicated. But it's important to point out that as instrumental as the love of film may be for the achievements of film study, there is also an anti-intellectual and anti-institutional side to cinephilia that does not always serve the discipline or encourage healthy debate. The politics of taste are difficult, the politics of love perhaps even more so.

Thus, while I certainly have my own romance with moving images, I also find myself increasingly wary of the anti-intellectual aspects of cinephilia, especially in times when we need to work especially hard to maintain our specificity in the context of an institutional politic that would rather have us say we do everything poorly than one thing well. I don't think that this kind of love provides by itself the kind of impersonal and dispassionate currency we need to establish a foothold in meaningful debates, particularly those that rise above and reach out through the humanities, let alone across to all of those who practice film studies.

Lastly, I currently work here at Concordia in Montreal. We are a small discipline, a small department, a small faculty, and a small university. As a part of a real politic, I believe that we need to work hard not to retreat into a precious idea of "cinema" and "film study" but to embrace the change that is sweeping the field, a change that involves theories and methods, objects and no doubt a little crazy love. We need to work hard to explain to other scholars working nearby and far away why what we do matters. We need to know what they're doing. We need to form bridges across media technologies, visual forms, and scholarly methods in order to assert the relevance of what we do to colleagues across the university. This is both about claiming our place at the table, but also about allowing ourselves to be good for others working in neighboring fields. Happy dialogue, infuriating disagreement, and good old fashioned hearty dialectical debate will help us to ensure that our small discipline and its big images will continue to be relevant across the arts, humanities, and beyond.

A second major response to Andrew's presentation and paper has to do with the relationship of Film Studies to other fields and disciplines. Andrew began his talk here at Concordia with a familiar warning: Film studies is "gobbling" up film studies. This sense that "film study" is an innocent victim to essentially inimical forces, variously identified as media studies and cultural studies, is a common one. The parallel suggestion that "cinema" is a similarly hapless victim, "kidnapped" (p. 915) by consumers who "sequester" films to their monitors, belies a worrisome disposition to my mind. I find these claims, which were apparent throughout Andrew's presentation here and in his article, curious at best and most certainly arguable. What does it mean to suppose that a thing as abstract and complex as "film study" is innocent, fragile and persistently victimized by bigger, scarier, less well-intended disciplines? Or that film itself is a fragile, pure essence always at risk of being defiled by those other dirty media? Taking the case of the fairly recent pairing of film with media studies in university programs, one could easily observe precisely the opposite. Film departments are renaming themselves with impunity (Screen Cultures, Film and Moving Image Studies) but not seriously changing their faculty base, their curriculum, or their intellectual commitments. Some departments formerly known as "Film" claim to do just about everything (architecture, dance, sound, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, geography, economics and so on). But everything can start looking like nothing very quickly.

This tendency for film scholars to espouse—often in good will—a profound interdisciplinarity can also begin to seem not just thin but rather arrogant and even irresponsible. Imagine announcing to an architect that we "do" architecture in our film program. I, for one, would not want to work or live in that proverbial (or actual) building. A similar tendency might be seen in the SCS renaming itself SCMS, a renaming I supported for good reason. But, it should be said, there were media studies groups and scholars and the organizations long before our Society for Cinema Studies came along to claim them. Or read through any of the recent innumerable books that seem to suggest that cinema is in fact everywhere, constitutive of everything modern, everything visual, everything that moves. Cinema is the world, or so the supposition goes. In other words, one could equally argue that cinema, or at least the discourse of cinema, is gobbling up media and everything else in its wake. Some film scholars have been seriously forwarding these ideas.

Now, I don't think anybody wins in either of the above scenarios, that is, in a small, unchanging, narrow articulation of the discipline's primary object of analysis or in a diffuse everywhere-ness of it. In fact, the argument for specificity is unassailable as a basic element of any disciplinary foundation. It's one reason that I prefer comparative and cultural work, which allows for clear definitions but puts them in dialogue with difference and context. The argument for specificity, peculiarity, uniqueness and even exceptionalism with regards to any one expressive form need not mean that the study of film must take place to the exclusion of any or all other cognate forms. Studying technologies comparatively, examining industrial convergence, aesthetic hybridity, artistic and formal influences, and practical pairings (watching movies on television screens) can help with debates about specificity but also further ideas about its limits. If we are complicated enough to live well and happily with the current diversity of visual forms, I am confident that we, as an ever-growing group of scholars, can work together to understand them. It might even be fun.

I, for one, am certainly happy to give up on singular definitions and see where our wandering leads. And I am not alone in this disposition. Witness the recent special "In Focus" section of *Cinema Journal* devoted to the history of SCMS, the present and past of film study. We don't need to make bedfellows with the ostensibly promiscuous practices of cultural studies in order to articulate arguments for critically assessing the presumed coherence of cinema. For instance, Rick Altman makes this point through his rigorous investigations of cinema's past, and the tentacular intertwining of images, sounds, screens, spectators, practitioners, and industry that comprise his object of study: what we used to know simply as "silent cinema."

Surely we must always come back to some idea about specificity, but always assisted by basic caution in research, rigour of argument and evidence, and precision of language in our scholarship. Though, if we are going to argue that cinema is essentially about projected movies in movie theaters, it behooves me to observe that precious little has been written about movie theaters, projectors, or about the questions of space, light, and congregation that seem basic to dominant definitions of cinema. In other words, there are a lot of things about a conventionally defined "cinema" —celluloid projected through a machine of light into a dark room onto a screen—that have been deemed irrelevant or uninteresting, outside the boundaries of the discipline. In this sense, debates about specificity start to look overly specific, too partial, and inadequately interrogated.

In a nutshell, I don't share what seems like Andrew's intense distrust of the voracious Cultural Studies and Media Studies fields; and I don't share the construction of Film Studies as innocent, either intellectually or institutionally. And, if Cultural Studies and Media Studies are such a threat to Film Studies, might there be more to say about the ostensibly benevolent influence of English Departments? Lastly, I think it's time for more film scholars to make better friends with Cultural Studies and Media Studies, first and foremost, by developing a more nuanced sense of what these fields have been, what they are now, and where they are headed. I must confess that I do not recognize the cultural studies to which Andrew refers. When I think of cultural studies, I think of the nuanced materialism of Raymond Williams and the profound, engaged dynamism of Stuart Hall. To simply suggest that Cultural and Media Studies are a danger to Film Studies is to ignore the influence of these fields and to forego the help of some formidable writers, the above particularly influential on film scholars in the UK. (See the discussion between Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen on this in *Inventing Film Studies*.) But it is also to ignore some of the best work in film studies to be published in the last 10, 15 or maybe even 20 years.

I believe that we in Film Studies form a small discipline with an important contribution to make across the humanities and the social sciences. That contribution has something vaguely to do with understanding the specific combination of reproduced moving images and sounds, and their place in the modern world of art, entertainment, politics, culture, and industry. In order to pursue this understanding effectively, we certainly need an active debate about what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. In this sense, I thank Dudley Andrew for helping me to formulate these ideas and for contributing passionately to this cause. But I want to reiterate the importance of conducting our debate with an eye to the real politic of the university. This means many things but, most pressingly, Film Studies must work hard (as a small discipline) to understand what it has to offer other disciplines, both small and large, and the scholarly community as a whole. This entails, I suppose, a kind of double-burden. We need to be good at what we do. But we also need to find ways to explain what we do, to put it in dialogue with major paradigms across the arts and humanities, and occasionally the social sciences. I think many would concur that one of the primary reasons Film Studies gained a firm foothold throughout the 1970s and 1980s in universities was not just the intellectual ferment we associate with post-68 theory, and postwar filmmaking, but also the ways in which film scholars (themselves often trained in literature and sometimes sociology, art history or linguistics) were articulating their ideas to resonate and compel scholars from across the humanities to take notice, and to use these ideas in their own work.

I know of few people who would argue against the need for some degree of specificity in any discipline. Art historians study art. Music scholars study music. But we must also study with a clear understanding that our objects are always to a degree in flux, changing in this way and that. Vibrant disciplines adapt and grow around challenges to their object. For instance, definitions of art have long included anti-art. Thus, understanding the limits and particularities of specificity and the limits and possibilities of hybridity will contribute to an enriched context of debate. Alas, we have no choice. Our debates about specificity and purpose can only be conducted in a context of change, and so change our debates must.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Lee Grieverson and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Inventing Film Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008).

**Bibliography**

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**About the Author**

Haidee Wasson is an Associate Professor in Cinema Studies at Concordia University. Her research interests include modernity/modernism, film exhibition and reception, cultural institutions, emergent media, film and media theory, feminism, and film and media historiography. Her published work concentrates on cinema, but explores the broader relations among media forms and practices (cinema and newspapers, books, radio, film, television, internet).

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