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Response to Dudley Andrew: The Death of Cinema and the Future of Film Studies

Dino Koutras responds Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow of Film Studies" by suggesting that, as scholars, we can't ignore the evolving nature of our object of study.

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

The demise of film as an artform, the decay of film culture, the death of cinema—Dudley Andrew's recent article in *Critical Inquiry* rehearses a by-now familiar theme. This theme appears most often as a response to the seismic shifts that rattle the cinematic landscape from time to time—new technology, for example, or changes in movie-going habits. It addresses the sense of loss, or threat of loss, such shifts entail and typically takes the form of a lament or eulogy; although sometimes, as is the case here, it is delivered as a call to arms. When silent cinema succumbed to sound, such laments were common. The introduction of television, in its turn, provoked anticipatory mourning throughout film culture. Such hand-ringing has now become a permanent fixture in cinema circles, ever since the rise of the blockbuster. It has only intensified with the advent of home video and the digital revolution that followed.

But Andrew has developed a unique variation on this theme, for his concern is not only with changes in how we watch or experience films. His concern is primarily with how we study them. Film, he says, is being marginalized in the academy, ceding some of its hard-won autonomy to upstart competitors. On the surface this might seem like a benign enough development, but Andrew argues the stakes involved are actually quite high. He contends that film has historically attracted some of world's brightest minds and that, in trying to account for this formidable medium, these thinkers were led to produce a correspondingly sophisticated discourse. Andrew claims it is this discourse, above all, that is at risk with film's precipitous fall into academic irrelevance: that particular activity organized around attempts to come to terms with a medium that seems to stubbornly resist such efforts. It is the singular kind of debates—the "ingenious, complex and passionate arguments"—that flows expressly from film that he seeks to safeguard.

Where does cinema's stubbornness spring from? According to Andrew, partly from the films themselves, "especially powerful ones," which "have been able to stand up to the discursive weight that cinephiles (critics) and academics (theorists) have brought to bear on them." (913) Here Andrew reminds us that while some of the best minds of the last century were compelled to study film, equally great minds were compelled to make them. The list of (for lack of better word) geniuses that recognized and exploited the potential of the medium would be too long to list here. [1] But given the current commercial conditions of production, we must entertain the possibility that great minds are no longer as consistently drawn to cinema as they once were. Or even if they are, we ought to consider the current difficulties great filmmakers face in trying to make the kinds of films that challenge other great minds to study them. From a commercial point of view, video games are just as lucrative as movies. How long before the gravitational pull exerted on creative talent by video game makers begins to draw potentially exceptional filmmakers away from cinema's orbit? To me, this dilemma seems to constitute the bigger threat to film discourse than the absorption of film studies into media studies. For the debates cherished by Andrew to persist, films of a caliber necessary to bear the discursive weight required of them need to continue to be made. And—we must be frank with ourselves—it's not at all clear that they will be.

But beyond the types of films that have been made, Andrew contends there is something inherent in the movie-going practice itself that provides the conditions necessary for productive, protracted debate. Using the term *décalage*, Andrew suggests that the experience of watching a film projected on a screen in a darkened theatre promotes a state of mind in the spectator conducive to sustained reflection. By contrast, other media—television, the internet, video games—discourage reflection. According to Andrew, *décalage* ensures that cinema in endowed with a rambunctious quality that stimulates discussion and debate of a kind that is often fractious but always animated. But if film is as rambunctious as he claims, then its disruptive power should not be so easily smothered by an association with other, more banal, more immediate media. In fact, it is just as likely that film's unique power to promote reflection will only be enhanced when put in a position to serve as a point of contrast with, say, the unreflective immediacy of the internet. If, on the other hand, film's rambunctiousness is easily domesticated by this kind of association, then perhaps Andrew has overstated cinema's capacity to induce a reflective state of mind. If this is the case, then we must conclude that the role played by *décalage* in fostering those great debates was never quite as instrumental as Andrew suggests.

For my part, I think the concern over the film object's place in the academy is somewhat misplaced. It distracts us from the more pressing issue of recognizing—and adapting to—the revolutionary transformations that cinema is currently undergoing. We seem to have a hard time acknowledging, let alone accepting, that film is no longer the lone bright star that shines a light on our contemporary experience. It may have served that function at one time, but I don't think we can deny any longer that it has been usurped in this capacity by its younger media siblings.

There is a wonderful tension in film that springs from its inability to properly reconcile its material existence—the brute fact of its industrial production—with its more ephemeral, affective properties. These properties always escape or "exceed" a film's otherwise mechanical, codified, and sometimes rigidly choreographed design. It is no accident that this tension largely defines the general aesthetic tenor of the last century—the age of recording and reproduction. It explains why cinema has been so central to our understanding of the experience of modernity, and why, as a consequence, it has sparked such delirious discourse.

But we need to consider the possibility that this tension is no longer what defines our contemporary moment. We need to accept that perhaps our current concerns cannot be addressed via attempts to come to grips with the elusive properties of film. In this new media world, "cinema" as a visual phenomenon might persist, or even proliferate in some formal sense, [2] but the kind of experience that Andrew discusses is fading rapidly. Its demise was assured long ago by the consolidation of the blockbuster and the enthusiastic embrace of the "high concept" approach to popular film. This mode of cinema was spearheaded in the US by the likes of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, but it has since been taken up all over the world. In the blockbuster era, a film is no longer just a film. A film is more than ever an "event," a node in a much more expansive network comprised of several types of media. To experience a film in our current era typically involves engaging with a whole host of extra-theatrical experiences that, taken together, have made the simple act of "watching a film" or "going to the movies" an anachronism.

I sympathize with Andrew. I even share his lament. But we in the discipline are faced with a stark choice. We can either insist that what we consider to be the cinematic experience is defined according to some measure of *purity*, one that is contingent on appropriate viewing habits (one that induces *décalage*, for example), or we can open ourselves up to a more contemporary understanding of our object, and accept the range of possible cinematic encounters in their *plurality*.

The first approach might safeguard the still-raging debates over cinema's role in the mediation of the modern experience. But the liability of this approach is no small matter. By adopting it wholesale, we risk our capacity to properly respond to the realities of the contemporary film experience—in all its guises. We might also end up focusing on a potentially outmoded conception of "cinema" at the precise moment that cinema's progeny—including video games, graphic novels, and contemporary serial drama—has transcended its humble origins and is out there conquering the world. Film studies, in any claim to a scenario, would end up increasingly devoting itself to cinema's glorious past at the expense of any claim to contemporary relevance.

The second option, as Andrew so elegantly demonstrates in his article, has its own pitfalls. Mostly, we risk losing out too thin, losing the central core around which we have organized ourselves intellectually and according to which we have maintained our identity. We would also have to concede that maybe Susan Sontag was right all along, and that this time the death of cinema—the particular kind that film studies has long been devoted to—is finally at hand. But by going this route we might also open up ourselves to a whole host of emerging objects and practices whose lineage can be traced directly to cinema. We should not reject this option too quickly, if only for the possibility of renewal it brings, but also because we have much to contribute to our understanding these new, and important, phenomena.

Important debates will no doubt be fought this century by great minds, but it is questionable as to whether or not cinema will remain central to them. It part, the outcome remains up to us as film scholars. But we should not let ourselves be driven to distraction arguing over film's place in the academy because, as crucial as that issue might be, there is a more important question we need to focus on. We need to figure out what role we want to play in the debates that are to come, that are in fact currently taking shape. The question is not about sharing space with new media or cultural studies. The question concerns our current and future relevance. Do we want a seat at the table of the coming debates, where we can trade on our considerable expertise? Or do remain loyal to a narrowly conceived object—one that is seemingly on the wane—and thus allow ourselves to be pushed to the periphery. The choice is ours.

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Footnotes

¹ But here's a start: Welles, Hitchcock, Resnais, Kubrick, Godard, Eisenstein, Leone, Ford, Kurosawa, Fassbinder, Tarkovsky, Coppola, Allen, Rossellini, Bergman, Renoir, Herzog, Bertolucci, Fellini, the Marx Brothers.

² In his article "Dr. Strange Media; Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory," D.N Rodowick argues that this is, in fact, what has happened.

Bibliography

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