

book review

Grieverson, Lee. **Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System.** University of California Press, 2018

Matthew Ellis

In the decades since the “rediscovery” of early cinema during the 1978 FIAF Brighton Congress, historiographic scholarship on film has taken a series of circuitous routes to arrive at its current state of disciplinary heterogeneity (Elsaesser 2016). One genesis of this story might sound something like this: astonished by the then-recent restoration of underseen early 35mm prints from the years 1900-1906, Francophone and Anglo-American scholars such as Noël Burch, André Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning radically helped to reorient the field’s understanding of cinema’s socio-cultural development away from the teleology espoused by amateur connoisseurs towards sophisticated notions of historical discontinuity, often centering theories of spectatorship, ideology, and materialism alongside archival empiricism. In the years since, this so-called “historical turn” has given rise to modes of analysis often at each others’ throats as much as sharing the same table: take, for instance, the feminist historiography of Jane Gaines and Mary Ann Doane, or, perhaps, what some have called the post-theoretical turn of scholars such as David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Douglas Gomery, amongst others (Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, 2007). Alongside these approaches might be the more recent media studies turn towards “media archaeology” found in the work of Thomas Elsaesser, which takes inspiration from both Michel Foucault and Friedrich Kittler

in an attempt to place media forms within broader epistemological and discursive practices throughout history, placing cinema within (or conceiving it as) a particular *dispositif*—a historical order of what was both “said” and “unsaid,” consisting of a system of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws,” and so on (Foucault 1980).

The strength many of these disparate approaches share in mining the archival history of cinema, however, is echoed by the practical questions they often seem unequipped to provide a convincing answer for, from the simple what does this actually tell us about cinema itself? to the more concrete why does this matter, now? It is precisely within this methodological gap that Lee Grieverson’s colossal new work, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* situates itself, proffering an exhaustive materialist narrative of the imbrication of early twentieth century media within the rise of liberal political economy, focusing primarily on state and private institutions use of media in the period between the two World Wars. Much like Grieverson’s earlier work, from *Policing Cinema to Film and the End of Empire* (with Colin MacCabe), *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* is an argument for the import of both critically reading films as texts and as products of/in history, with a keen eye on the political and historical stakes of why this work

matters in the first place. Grieveson's is far from a unique approach within the field of cinema and media studies, however: one could point, say, to a similar Foucauldian method deployed by Anna McCarthy in *The Citizen Machine*, which traces a genealogy of the rise of television alongside neo-liberal political governmentality in state and private institutions in postwar America. But the scope of Grieveson's genealogy attests this is no simple trip to an archive, nor an abstract theoretical reading which seeks to unite a group of privileged filmic texts. In 335 pages, Grieveson travels from the birth of United States' federal film production by the USDA during the 1913 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition to the growth of British documentary aesthetics to counter the United States' growing world hegemony after the First World War, from the use of didactic films with biopolitical aims by corporations such as Ford, to the League of Nations' and the BBC's use of cinema and radio to foster a global network of capital flows in the remaking of the world order. It is this scale, alongside Grieveson's explicit commitment to the political stakes of this genealogy within the cultural field that separates the book from contemporary approaches within cinema studies, from the theoretically engaged but often politically nebulous wanderings of media archaeology to the more austere historical work which might seek to "rediscover" a lost auteur for the historical canon. In this sense, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* challenges the notion that deep archival work cannot also be theoretical, that theoretical analysis is only made more concrete and useful when connected to a deep history. Rather than pit these approaches against one another, Grieveson suggests that any historical or theoretical question cannot be approached within a vacuum, that they are only useful insofar as they can simultaneously tell us something about our current moment—what Foucault called a "history of the present"—in an attempt to conceive of what a more equal and just world might look like (Garland, 2014).

Grieveson's central conceit is that cinema—and popular media in general—played a crucial role in what he sees as the "foundation of the modern world of globalized capital, principally from 1913 to 1939, which marked the slow dissolve from one world system to another" (Grieveson 2018, 1). His theoretical approach then, unites both the genealogy of the mid-1970s Michel Fou-

cault with the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and others. This is a period which embodies a transition, according to Grieveson, in which production from the material infrastructure of the second-stage industrial revolution gives way to an emerging monopoly stage of global capitalism, as British global imperialism began to decline amidst the rise of the neo-imperialism of the United States and its careful dance between state and private industry. The questions, then, are as follows: how is the ideal subject (typically Western, racialized, gendered, sexed) to "live and consume in the new eras of mass production and consumption?" (2). How do new forms of distribution give rise to new conceptions of the state, or the globe? How do new technologies such as radio, or non-theatrical cinematic exhibition used within and outside Hollywood, help fashion new experiences of the market, or state power? To answer these, Grieveson follows in part from a legacy of work on modernity and early cinema by scholars of film history's "historical turn" as mentioned above. At times, it is the films themselves which help usher in these new conceptions of the subject's relation to liberal governmentality. In others, it is the material growth of capital itself, which transforms a new industry into both an ideological tool and a productive instrument for the making of a new world system. The book is divided into thirteen chapters, and its complex journey is too exhaustive to fully detail here—instead, I will focus on a few of the most compelling arguments.

In two of the book's most compelling chapters, "The Work of Film in the Age of Fordist Mechanization" and "Highways of Empire," Grieveson connects the cinematic apparatus' formal use of time-space compression and segmentation not merely to the logics of the assembly line or mode of production, but also to the literal growth of the market across the rural United States and changing geography of the British Empire. Listing a series of educational films produced by the Ford Corporation and the British Government, Grieveson performs both close textual readings as well as outlines the growing industry of the new filmic industrial apparatus which sought to understand the way these films constructed their ideal viewers, and how they worked to establish a new spatial imaginary emerging in the interwar period. For the films of Ford, it was not merely enough to rationalize time and space for the worker in the new

technological marvel that was the assembly line, nor was it enough to ensure pedagogic, biopolitical lessons for the construction of the new ideal worker. These films both literally traveled across space and textually articulated a technological connection with global sites of Capital—the production of “a new technological space, a networked infrastructure shared out between corporate and governmental forces that would enable market expansion and the incorporation of rural America into an emergent consumer economy” (127). Likewise, Grieveson notes the globalized racist logics within the British Government’s Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE)—funded by the American Carnegie Institute and housed within the British Conservative Party’s Empire Marketing Board (EMB)—which produced a series of “instructional” films between the years of 1935-37 that sought to “educate” African farmers into their subjugated roles as mere labor within the Empire. But as Grieveson notes, this “experiment” was not a mere source of racist propaganda seeking to ensure the spread of a particular ideology within its ideal subjects. Instead, the BEKE was troublingly an “anthropological” exercise performed by British colonizers to “study” how Africans reacted to the films themselves. Grieveson reads this in part as an “early reception studies project,” although of course one always already imbricated in racialized hierarchies, with the results of the experiment written into its design. In this sense, the BEKE was both an attempt to reinscribe colonial logics to challenge Hollywood and the United States’ “falsehoods” of a new liberal system, as well as a machine seeking to buttress a new spatial order for the Empire (186).

Of course, the construction of a genealogical narrative this large is bound to bring with it its own set of problems. Foucault himself turned to genealogy only after the insufficiency of his archaeological method became clear as he grew unable to account for change in his construction of entire epistemes (Garland 2014). It was instead an attempt to answer a specific kind of question: genealogy seeks not to “confuse itself with a quest for...’origins’... (it) does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present” (Foucault 2010, 80-81). In this sense, genealogy tells the theorist something,

but not everything—the construction of a dispositif is not the construction of an entire episteme, despite what many media archaeologists want to tell us. But this is rather a problem of reading and use rather than one caught up in the text itself. It should be clear that Grieveson does not use the language of dispositifs to outline this genealogy, and takes pains in a footnote to suggest a sympathy with both a Marxist critique of political economy with Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality as noted in his late 1970s lectures (Grieveson 353). These might be problems emerging from a less careful attempt to link history and theory, but one which nevertheless haunts the pages of Grieveson’s text. Did the propagandistic pedagogy of these films always work, for instance? What about the non-Western cinematic response to the growth of liberal governmentality in this era? What about historical fascism, which played such a crucial role in imagining what kind of governmentality would emerge following the Second World War alongside the threat state communism posed to the liberal capitalist state? For the most part, these qualifications rest outside the purview of the kind of historical narrative Grieveson is outlining here: for it is only when this narrative is deemed to be a total one that its coherence begins to break down. Perhaps this is a problem with the concept of governmentality itself, which begs the theorist to answer for the outside—a longstanding critique of Foucauldian approaches to questions of knowledge and power.

Ultimately, it is Grieveson’s notion of the proliferation of cinema as biopolitical pedagogy in the service of both imperial and liberal logics of governmentality as well as an object of study itself that stands as the book’s most important contribution to the field. The brief history of film historiography as outlined in this opening paragraph is one (of many) stories told by cinema studies itself as a discipline in the current academy seeks to position itself in a moment of industrial precarity (both through the uncertainty of the medium of film’s increasing imbrication with digitalization, as well as within the crisis of labor in the humanities itself). This crisis, to Grieveson, is not merely one in which an overly ambitious discipline found itself led astray in the later years of the twentieth century with its institutionalization within the academy—it is rather that film historians may have placed the primary scene of their discipline’s birth

in the wrong place altogether. In the book's later chapters, Grieveson takes pains to note the rise of communication studies not simply within the academy itself, but also through the rise of corporate capital, anxieties over cinema's influence on children, and of course, the ever-churning PR machine that united the film industry itself with the cultural sphere in a perhaps all-too obvious base/superstructure riff. But rather than echo the well-treaded story of how the Payne Fund's studies on the ethics of cinema reception gave rise to the Hays Code within Hollywood, Grieveson notes that these private studies explicitly sought to delink the study of media from ideological questions of ownership into useful questions of media influence, easily picked up by logics of the expansion of liberal political economy in the inter-war years:

Deemphasizing the question of influence and ownership in traditions of film and communication thereafter has been dangerously politically disabling, mistakingly ceding the ground of necessary debate about media power to the conservative (and frequently censorial) agenda, from where much of it originated in the first place...It has seemed to me (among others) that the now mostly conservative and fragmented discipline of film studies might collectively muster better responses to the political and economic uses of media and culture and the related ongoing devastating consequences of globalized capitalism on people and the world than it currently does (245-6).

These questions—what does this tell us about cinema itself? and why does this matter, now? here become constitutive questions for the future of the discipline in the work this book does, arguing that a theoretical interrogation of the history of cinema must be useful in outlining the very specific and real crises facing our current moment. A history of the present, indeed. Rather than search the archive that one missing auteur, or ask abstract questions about the future of, say, cinematic materiality with the hegemony of the One and the Zero, Grieveson reminds us that the crises the film historian faces are not separate from the broader geopolitical crises facing this order from its birth to its current moment of crisis.

References

- Chapman, James, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper. "Introduction," in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*. New York: Palgrave, 2007. pp. 1-11.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Confession of the Flesh," in ed. Colin Gordon. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Vintage, 1980. pp. 194-228.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," in ed. Paul Rabinow. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Vintage, 2010. pp. 76-101.
- Garland, David. "What is a history of the present"? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions." *Punishment & Society* 16, 4 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474514541711>.
- Grieveson, Lee. *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World Order*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.