



Society for Cinema & Media Studies

SCMS Lifetime Membership Address: Stepping Sideways

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SCMS Lifetime Membership Address

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Stepping Sideways

by THOMAS ELSAESSER

It is my great pleasure and honour to have been asked to address the forty-ninth annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. That I should do so as this year's recipient of the Society's annual Lifetime Membership Award (for Distinguished Career Achievement) gives the occasion an especially festive allure, and I want to express my appreciation to the members of the committee for having selected me. As I accept the Award with gratitude, and a due sense of the responsibility that comes with such a distinction, I also want to extend warm thanks to Lucy Fisher, for her most generous introductory remarks, and to Patrice Petro for hosting me this evening as the Society's special guest.

Such a lifetime membership award invites—indeed obliges—one to enter into a retrospective frame of mind. I'm not too blasé to admit that the idea of one's peers thinking one has an achievement to look back on does soothe quite a few anxieties. It soothes the worry that what one has done doesn't really amount to much; it soothes the worry that what one is personally most proud of has gone unnoticed or unrecognized; and for many other common and garden-variety anxieties, such a distinction is a wonderful plaster on the narcissistic wound and a palliative for any soul not immune to self-doubt. It's like a general amnesty—a pardon, a reprieve—in the perpetual plea bargaining between me and myself. And yet, while the pleasure is real, so is the dawning realization that this is not, say, a mid-career show. This is a “lifetime” award, and therefore a hint—a gentle hint, for sure, but a hint nonetheless—that it may be time to prepare, if not for a retreat, then for taking a step sideways.

And this I am happy to do, the more so, when I think—still in this retrospective mood for a few more minutes, if you will forgive me—that my career has really been a series of sideways steps, or to put it too bluntly: my career as a film scholar has often seemed based on a series of misunderstandings—mostly productive ones, to be sure, but (in true melodramatic fashion) out of sync, too soon, too late, the right thing at the wrong place, or vice versa.

I do not mean the misunderstandings about my name: in the 1970s, the tease was that “Elsaesser” could only rhyme with “Althusser.” And in the 1980s, when I was living in North London, I rented a flat in Stoke Newington—some of you here may even remember it—from a Hasidic landlord, who would never have signed the lease had he not thought I was Jewish, presumably because all his neighbors were called Breslauer, Wertheimer, or Rosenthaler. But because in the London telephone directory I was listed just ahead of a Dr. El-Sayed and a Mrs. El-Saway, I would regularly receive letters addressed to Dr. El-sasser, reminding me of my duty to Allah, and asking me for generous donations to the Finsbury Park Mosque.

Nor do I mean the misunderstandings about my nationality, which ended (to cut short a long story of mistaken identities) with the Dutch thinking I’m English, whereas the Germans think I’m Dutch, and only the Americans have the good sense of knowing I’m from “Europe.”

I mean a different misunderstanding. The filmmaker Harun Farocki once told me how surprised he was about the international success of his film *Images of the World and Inscription of War*. He said: “I made the film in 1987 against nuclear power and cruise missiles on German soil, and it came back to me from America in 1990 as a film about the Holocaust.” I think I know what he meant: I wrote an essay about melodrama in 1972, to put in my bid, as it were, in a discussion about “authorship” and “genre,” hotly debated around the British Film Institute by, among others, Peter Wollen, Jim Kitses, Ed Buscombe, and Colin McArthur, and it came back to me in 1975 as a “seminal” article for feminist film theory.

What to do? Disown it? Not very likely. As I look back, I realize I’ve made a meal and a method out of misunderstanding or, to put it differently, I’ve been pursuing a poetics and a politics of parapraxis: not so much in the sense of a simple Freudian slip, more as a belief in the happy accident and the meaningful mistake. The melodrama article was in fact a follow-up to my first programmatic piece of film theory ever, called “Why Hollywood?” which was an article of faith in the American cinema, at a time (1971) when it was hard to hear a good word being spoken about Hollywood. The Vietnam War then was a lot more unpopular than the Iraq War now; you may recall Jean-Luc Godard’s “two or three Vietnams in the heart of the immense Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecittà Empire.” “Tales of Sound and Fury” was the second installment of a trilogy, which I completed with a manifesto called “The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero” (1975). David Bordwell—ever the voracious reader—later generously credited the first and third with having been useful in developing his definitions of the “classical cinema,” but otherwise the essays stayed pretty well ignored, once the melodrama essay had been rescued by Laura Mulvey and Geoffrey Nowell Smith from a short-lived film journal.

The journal, *Monogram*, and these three articles were meant to be my calling card: to get to the States and finally study the American cinema first-hand. The invitation eventually came, in 1977, to be a visiting professor at the best place there was in those years, the University of Iowa Cinema Studies Department (or rather, the Department of Speech and Rhetoric as it was then called), with Dudley Andrew, Rick Altman, and Franklin Miller on the staff, and such future luminaries of our profession as Mary Ann Doane, Phil Rosen, Mimi White, and Jane Feuer among the graduate students.

Imagine my sense of punctured ambition when I found myself teaching German Cinema: a course on “Expressionism” (about which I knew next to nothing) and “New German Cinema,” about which I knew only slightly more, mainly because I had translated, a few years earlier, Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s essay on Douglas Sirk for the Edinburgh Festival’s Sirk retrospective.

German Cinema: another fateful misunderstanding. The eight months in Iowa started a decade-long detour, or sideways move, when—year in, year out—I would cross the Atlantic and spend the spring quarter at UCLA, Santa Barbara, San Diego, Irvine, and Berkeley, teaching courses on Weimar cinema, New German Cinema, the Frankfurt School (by that time I had brought myself halfway up to speed), not to mention conferences (including quite a few SCS meetings) in Milwaukee, Chicago, New York, Purdue, Madison, Athens (Ohio), Monterey (California), Toronto, Vancouver, and many, many more places, lecturing about Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, or Fassbinder’s Germany.

When I finally decided that I should really study what I teach, I realized I couldn’t say anything worthwhile about the German cinema of the 1920s without knowing the German cinema of the 1910s and before. But in order to find out whether there was anything in particular that made these first two decades “German,” I had to know more about the first decades of the cinema in general, and so another sideways move began, which kept me busy for the best part of another decade, and ended in an edited volume on *Early Cinema*—more happy accidents, more providential mistakes.

In other words, if it looks as though my twenty-odd books are all over the place, please be kind and keep in mind that my career is probably nothing but one extended parapraxis, following the crab-like logic of a creature moving sideways along the beach, but once in a while being lifted up by a sudden wave, carried a bit further along the shore and then dropped down again.

While so far I have not published “the” book on American cinema I set out to write in 1971 (instead, two are in the works), I seem to have acquired one peculiarly American skill, for which I am not ungrateful, either: that of rebranding. Sirk’s and Minnelli’s women’s pictures became “family melodrama”; Expressionist film became “Weimar Cinema”; Young German Film became “New German Cinema”; Silent Cinema became “Early Cinema.”

Again, I cannot say that I set out to do any of this intentionally, nor do I claim to have accomplished it by myself; I merely want to point to another series of slippages, from one set of naming conventions to the next. And happily, the process doesn’t stop there. Expressionism has made a big comeback (thanks also to CGI and special effects, I imagine), and I am grateful to Tom Gunning for rebranding “Early Cinema” as “the Cinema of Attractions,” which among many other virtues and improvements has the advantage of ensuring that my collection is mentioned every time his article is cited.

What lessons, if any, am I drawing from these concatenations of displacements? Whereas the old are usually expected to admonish the young not to make the same mistakes, I think I can recommend the opposite: you can do quite well, it seems, by repeating your mistakes, provided you persist with them long enough—the liberating effect of metonymy, as Roland Barthes might have said. Or, to misappropriate a slogan

made popular by John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "bed-in" in Amsterdam in March 1969: "All that I am saying is, give chance a chance."

What else can I be saying here tonight? In the course of the last thirty years—that is, as long as I have benefitted from and been aware of its existence—the Society for Cinema Studies has seen a lot of changes, not least a rebranding slippage of its own name, when it became SCMS. The phenomenal growth of the Society, the fact that annual meetings can now be organized outside North America in places like London and Tokyo, is a testimony to the dedication of its members, the professionalism of its elected officers, its almost global reach, and its promotion of intellectual pluralism as well as diversity. More topics, methodologies, disciplinary concerns, and academic activities than I ever imagined possible are finding a place and now have a fixed abode in the house that is SCMS, which makes it quite fitting that this year's theme is architecture. Yet reading panel titles such as "The Architectonics of Costume Design," "An-architectures," "Architextures of Memory," "Architectures of the Metaverse," "Architectures of Gender, Power, and the Law," "Discursive Architectures," "Architectures of Alienation," "Architectures of Difference," "Architectures of Participation," "Architectures of Revolt," "Architectures of the Avant-garde," "Queer Architecture," "Mysterious Architecture," and "Paratextual Architecture," I began to wonder whether the house that SCMS built hasn't been designed by deconstructionists like Frank Gehry, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and Rem Koolhaas? Or could it be a homage to Dr. Caligari's film architects: Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig?

Let me explain: The "politics of representation" (perhaps now rebranded as "the architectures of representation") have become such prominent features of academic discourse in the humanities across the disciplines that it would be fair to say that cultural studies (however modified, adapted, and indeed "negotiated" since its British inception by local practitioners in the United States, Australia, and also northern Europe) is now the principal home for film studies in many universities, often redesigned in cultural studies' own image. And there is a case to be made that without such an opening up, cinema studies as an academic growth area might not have survived the so-called "theory wars" of the 1980s. Cultural studies, fortified by having films as primary objects of study and as exemplars for the politics of representation, has been able to build up something of a hegemonic position in the way manifestations of all cultures are now being analyzed: be it high culture or popular culture, be it literary culture or digital culture, be it the commercialism of television and tourism, or the somewhat more genteel commerce of the art world and exhibition practice.

But in the process, might cultural studies itself have become a little "expressionist," "gothic," or "neo-baroque"? Maybe because Hollywood and media culture has turned into one big trompe l'œil edifice and mirror maze? Could it be time for a bit of good old international modernism, a Barcelona Pavilion, maybe, by Mies van der Rohe, a piece of vernacular modernism, such as the Loew's Hotel here, or a Philadelphia building by Louis I. Kahn? On the other hand, cultural studies' modular principles, its lightweight materials and ad hoc designs, have also been enormously empowering, freeing up all kinds of energies for projects that continue to illuminate and entertain, infuriate and enlighten.

The question for someone in film like myself is whether cinema studies is comfortable within such a Broad Church as cultural studies has become. Or does it need to extricate itself from this ecumenical embrace and find or redefine its own agenda? And likewise, can cultural studies, such as it is currently practiced, assume the task that seems to have fallen to it, namely provide enough conceptual rigor and a set of intellectual sensors delicate enough to ensure the critical readability—as well as the ecumenical tolerance—for all that now goes by the name of culture? Does not the fact that “culture” can no longer be opposed to “nature” (no more than “nature” can be opposed to “technology”) require also a redefinition of cultural studies? Biopolitics, new media studies, and the paradigm of the post-human seem poised to become contenders to challenge the reign of cultural studies as hitherto practiced and understood.

I'm not in a position here to respond adequately to this second question, so I shall leave it standing in the room, including the very rough scaffolding, which scarcely does justice to either the depth or breadth of cultural studies from a media perspective. But in answer to the first question about the agenda of film studies: it is noteworthy that ever since Gilles Deleuze's cinema books, David Bordwell's major works, and the rise of cognitivism (all happening at about the same time, 1985), the cinema, or rather “film,” has entered an entirely different space of reflexivity and conceptualization from the one I grew up with forty years ago. One might call it the “philosophical turn” in film studies, the more so in that we have also seen a revival of interest in Stanley Cavell's work. More decisive in this philosophical turn than the possible exhaustion of the paradigms of “representation” and of the questions of “identity” (the central concerns of cultural studies, both of which Deleuze as well as the cognitivists pointedly avoid) would seem to be the crisis into which the cinema has been plunged by digitization. Depriving it of its material-indexical basis in photography—we are told every day—the digital image is said to alter the very ground of two of cinema's key characteristics, as a technical medium and as an art form: which is “projection” and “photography.” But when film studies aligns itself with philosophy (across a spectrum that ranges from continental philosophy to analytic philosophy, from Anglo American pragmatism to the revival of phenomenology), many other issues of a nontechnological kind are also at stake, such as questions of mind and consciousness, perception and apprehension, epistemology, ontology, “disclosure,” and “evidence,” but also of the senses and embodiment, as well as new ways of appreciating the aesthetics of appearance, of presence, and even illusionism. One can be fairly optimistic that film theory will reinvent itself, even if (or precisely because) the cinema as we have known it for its first hundred years has both remained the same and has changed utterly.

It is my sense that a shift is taking place, away from the epistemological questions that tormented my generation: what knowledge the cinema did promise to provide, yet somehow never quite delivered, leaving us with the task of denouncing its constructedness, whether of reality or of the self, voicing our disappointment, disenchantment, and sense of betrayal. Today, what seems on the way to becoming the consensus, without the identity war ever having been declared over, or the constructivist argument formally laid to rest, is that the cinema, or more generally, the photographic image, *is* the reality of the twentieth century, full stop, whether we

like it or not. “The lie of the image is the truth of our world,” as Jean Luc Nancy so pithily put it. As a consequence, we tend to treat the sounds and images, and with it, “the cinema,” as if it was the West’s (or our modernity’s) only anthropology that still matters, turning film studies into the reassuring murmur of ubiquitous autoethnography, academia’s equivalent to data mining.

Yet there is surely also another side to the cinema: the terrors and pleasures of a way of “being in the world” not dependent on my subjectivity, as André Bazin was the first to insist on, relieving me of the burden of self-consciousness, of existential guilt or simply of body, of and for the space of two hours, releasing me from the need to make sense of my life and the obligation to shape it into a work of authenticity, of truth and relentless self-improvement. Cinema suspends us from this gravity; it suspends reference, frees us temporarily from all kinds of accountability. It gives us lives and worlds that exist and unfold without us having to do much of anything. Hence its seeming frivolity haunts some of us, who have spent their lives trying to answer the riddle, not “What is cinema?” but “What is cinema (for)?” Yet it also explains the near-religious fervor of fans and of addicted aficionados. Light and projection, while they magnify the importance of those figures on the screen, allow us “to forget our inability to contemplate our own unimportance.”

Which conveniently brings me back to “lifetime” and “award.” Cinema’s comparative unimportance as a serious contender for generating useful, that is commodifiable, knowledge—sometimes so frustrating when making grant applications—can also be a blessing in disguise. Precisely because of its somewhat “performative” position in the academy, hovering over several disciplines, such as literature, art history, philosophy, gender studies, and a host of others, film studies is comparable to a bumblebee (feeding off, but also pollinating its hosts), and it can permit itself (if it wants to, if it’s bold enough) to be experimental, curious, adventurous, and even irresponsible: in short, opportunistic, meaning that it can seize opportunities when they present themselves, and “parapractic,” meaning it can afford slippages, happy accidents, and fortunate mistakes. This, as I have been trying to suggest, is how I have known film studies, this is how I have practiced it, and this is how I would like to remember it.

One final word: My first participation at a SCS conference was in 1978, held—if I remember correctly—at Madison, Wisconsin. I do recall the shock when I realized a palace revolution was in the making, a coup d’état was being planned and deftly executed, and that the old guard, then represented by Jack Ellis (from Northwestern), Stuart Kaminsky (from Chicago), and Richard Dyer McCann (from Iowa) were being unseated by some of the young Turks, among whom, if I’m not mistaken, Doug Gomery and Bobby Allen (themselves recent graduates from Iowa) were especially prominent.

But the meeting was also memorable, thanks to the first shot being fired in the “theory wars” that were to mark the subsequent decade, because it was there, on home ground, that David Bordwell delivered a blistering attack on Peter Wollen and his use of Vladimir Propp: what later became “ApPropriations and ImProprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative,” published in SCS’s own *Cinema Journal*. I am happy to note that both Jack Ellis and Peter Wollen have preceded me on the list of recipients of this award, as indeed I am delighted to find so many of my mentors

and comrades in arms, from the days of *Monogram*, *Movie Magazine*, *Screen*, and the BFI Education Department similarly honoured: Laura Mulvey, Robin Wood, Noel Burch, Stuart Hall, and Richard Dyer. Of course I can't speak for them, but as you are honouring us with this lifetime membership award, please, do us this final honour: don't put us on a pedestal; try occasionally also to push us off the pedestal. Long live the Society for Cinema and Media Studies! *