

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema

Second Annual Conference of the Permanent Seminar
on Histories of Film Theories
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submitted by DANIEL FAIRFAX

There are those conferences which one attends out of a sense of professional duty, those one attends because of personal obligation, and those one attends in hopes of private advancement. And then there are those conferences, rare enough in today's dispersed academic environment, which one attends because they give off the unmistakable air of mattering, because they promise to be landmarks in the history of the field, to be sites where theories are made and remade (and sometimes unmade), where the vital discussions of the day are to be had, where participants examine and offer their views on the big picture—the current state of the discipline, how it is shaped by its past, and its future prospects.

“The Impact of Technological Innovations on the Historiography and Theory of Cinema” was one such conference, and, indeed, it could arguably claim to be *the* defining event in Film Studies in 2011. The conference organizers, André Gaudreault and Martin Lefebvre, under the auspices of the “Permanent Seminar on Histories of Film Theories,” not only sought to repeat the group's successful conference on Eisenstein's “Notes for a General History of the Cinema,” held in New York City in 2010, but also dramatically upped the ante. The conference was increased from three days to six days, its program promised a formidable lineup of high-profile participants, and the involvement of a range of institutional partners—including the Cinémathèque Québécoise, the Centre de Recherche sur l'Intermédialité,

Daniel Fairfax is a doctoral candidate in Film Studies and Comparative Literature at Yale University.

and the Observatoire du Cinéma au Québec—ensured that the conference would resonate in the city, beyond the academic domain.

Indeed, as the location for such an encounter, Montreal could hardly be surpassed. The city is imbued with a vibrant, long-standing cinephilic culture, and this was reflected in the large numbers of young people attending the conference sessions. Moreover, Montreal's bilingual makeup and its position at the crossroads of Anglophone and Francophone cultures made it a particularly pertinent site for far-reaching discussions of a discipline which, more than anything else, has been marked by the intermingling of French and Anglo-American theoretical approaches—not least because the numerous local participants, equally at home in both traditions, were able to give such a unique point of view on this phenomenon. And so, over the course of six chilly November days, another chapter of this cross-fertilization of thinking on cinema was written.

The high point of this chapter came on its second evening, with a roundtable reuniting the “original combatants” of the apparatus-theory debates of the early 1970s—Jean-Louis Comolli of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Gérard Leblanc of *Cinéthique*, and Jean-Patrick Lebel, author of *Cinéma et idéologie*,¹ along with feminist film theorist Geneviève Selliers. Comolli, who, sadly, could not be physically present at the event, nonetheless provided his thoughts via a video presentation, ably demonstrating the creative vitality of a line of thinking substantively launched forty years ago by his own article “Technique and Ideology.”²

Comolli, continuing in the vein of his recent publications *Voir et pouvoir* and *Cinéma contre spectacle*, granted that the unprecedented domination of the audiovisual medium could be seen as the “perverse triumph of the cinema,” but he insisted on making a firm distinction between “two types of representation of the visual, two types of spectacles of the visible,” namely those which are unframed (e.g., fireworks, sporting events) and those which are framed—films.³ The contemporary world, he argued, is marked by an “ideological and industrial movement to abolish the specificity of the cinema” and to “erase the boundary between the real and the represented.” Although the unprecedented ease of access to filmmaking equipment is indisputably a positive political step forward—and Comolli himself is an active documentary filmmaker—the flip side of this development is that “it just piles images on top of images.” To resolve this problem of excess, then, and to create forms which resist the *tout-visible*, requires a cinematic practice profoundly informed, in Comolli's view, by theory.

The fascination of Jean-Patrick Lebel's presence at the roundtable was not the least due to finally being able to see, in flesh and blood, someone whose status in the annals of film theory is as little more than a straw figure, known mainly for being attacked in

1 Jean-Patrick Lebel, *Cinéma et idéologie* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1971).

2 Jean-Louis Comolli, “Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field,” part 1, trans. Diana Matias, in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 40–57; parts 3 and 4, trans. Diana Matias, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 421–443. This six-part series was originally printed in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 230–235, and 241, from July 1971 through September–October 1972.

3 Jean-Louis Comolli, *Voir et pouvoir* (Paris: Verdier, 2004); Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinéma contre spectacle* (Paris: Verdier, 2009).

Comolli's signal article. Perhaps, indeed, his "Cinéma et idéologie," a series of articles for the communist journal *Nouvelle critique* (which have never been translated into English) deserves deeper recognition and possesses a more sophisticated argument than is commonly ascribed to it. Admittedly, even today, Lebel refuses the notion that the "ideological effects" of the cinema are derived from film form, and yet when he distances himself from a position that could lead "to a negation of the cinema itself" and argues in favor of "imagining a cinema opposed to the dominant ideology," the commonalities with the recent writings of Comolli are manifest.

Gérard Leblanc, meanwhile, reached back to the origins of apparatus theory, drawing on statements made by Marcelin Pleynet in a 1971 interview with *Cinéthique*, but he also confirmed his continued adherence both to the theory and the radical political stance underpinning it.⁴ Although much has changed about the manner in which films are made and consumed, Leblanc affirmed that "the question of the base apparatus itself has not been transformed." It is nonetheless necessary, he argued, to historicize and relativize the terms of Jean-Louis Baudry's iconic text on the "base apparatus" of the cinema and to recognize that "there exists a plurality of virtual *dispositifs* for every actualized, institutionalized *dispositif*."

The following morning's roundtable, featuring Thomas Elsaesser, Jane Gaines, Phil Rosen, and Will Straw in the discussion "Apparatus Theory in the Age of Multiple Screens and Exhibition Platforms," had, therefore, been set a high bar. Involving a clutch of figures who were responsible precisely for importing French film theory into Anglo-American academia, the free-flowing discussion which resulted was just as invigorating as the previous night's. But whereas Comolli, Lebel, and Leblanc stressed their indefatigable militancy, a distinctly more sepulchral tone imbued the discourse of their Anglophone counterparts. Launched by Elsaesser's uncannily Hegelian assertion that the consolidation of film theory coincided with the death of the cinema itself—a demise only further consecrated by the shift of moving images into the museum environment—the death notices came thick and fast, and the audience bore witness to a list of funeral proclamations for not only the cinema but also theory, the apparatus, and even ideology itself.

Perhaps, however, it is not the funeral of ideology which should be analyzed, but the ideology of the funeral. Is it merely coincidence that the roundtable participants who had adopted such a morbid attitude are all members of an academic generation nearing retirement age and close, therefore, to stepping down from a field in which, over the past four decades, they have played such a formative role? Could their anxiety be a reflection of their concerns about what will happen to the discipline once they relinquish the reins? Would it not be easier to simply disavow any continuity between the object of study to which they devoted their careers and the amorphous scholarly entity that now exists in its stead? If Film Studies were not dead, would they have had to kill it anyway?

Before we all start looking for owls of Minerva taking flight, heed should be taken of the more optimistic conclusions that were also voiced that morning. Echoing Leblanc, they maintained that *dispositif* theory could have new life breathed into it if its

4 Marcelin Pleynet, interview with Jean Thibadeau, "Économie, idéologie, formelle," *Cinéthique* 3 (1969): 8–14.

contemporary multiplicity were taken into account. Instead of a unitary approach to a singular object, it would be appropriate to talk in the plural, about theories of *dispositifs*. Indeed, even the hoary old issue of the very translation into English of the term *dispositif* (usually rendered as “apparatus,” thus eliding the French distinction between *dispositif* and *appareil*) was reanimated, with Rosen airing the term *disposition* as a possible solution. (The fact that he did so in jest did not prevent Francesco Casetti from enthusiastically responding to the proposal.)

At most conferences, being able to present either French philosopher Bernard Stiegler or Chicago professor W. J. T. Mitchell as a keynote speaker would be the undisputed highlight of proceedings. The fact that both gave addresses, and that these were overshadowed by the aforementioned roundtables, was testament to the strength of the program. Whereas Stiegler’s talk continued in the vein of his magisterial three-volume opus *La Technique et le temps* in using readings of Leroi-Gourhan, Heidegger, and Husserl to explore what he describes as the “cinematic constitution of consciousness,” Mitchell’s presentation substantially departed from his earlier work and broached the subject of representations of madness in the cinema.⁵ This was clearly a deeply personal project for Mitchell, but the conclusions drawn suffered perhaps from an excessive reliance on a rather conventional corpus of contemporary Hollywood films. This even included a focus on Ron Howard’s *A Beautiful Mind*—leaving us with no choice but to wonder as to what responses Mitchell could have had to the work of filmmakers such as Bauer, Deren, and Garrel.

A number of parallel events were arranged in conjunction with the conference, including the official launch of Amsterdam University Press’s highly anticipated History of Film Theories book series; the unveiling of the website www.filmtheories.com, which will incorporate an ambitious translation project of early film theorists; debates involving figures from the Québécois film industry on the current convulsive changes affecting the nature of film production and distribution; and a screening at the Sensorium, a 360-degree projection sphere recently installed by Montreal’s Société des Arts Technologiques.

It would be remiss, of course, to overlook the bread and butter of any academic conference: more than seventy panels gathered an array of speakers from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss their recent research. No report could hope to offer a comprehensive overview of the papers presented at such an event; nonetheless, a few stood out for me. André Habib focused on a barely noted epiphenomenon of film projection, the “cigarette burn” marking a reel change, in relation to Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and the melancholia surrounding the precipitous obsolescence of the hundred-year-old practice of celluloid projection. Philippe Gauthier’s presentation, which unearthed a trove of primary research on how various research organs in Film and Media Studies are currently defining the field, instigated one of the most vigorous debates of the conference, with starkly opposed views raised on the benefits of incorporating terms such as “new media”. Vinzenz Hediger, meanwhile, used an “iconic” image of Steve

5 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus* (1994), trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); vol. 2, *Disorientation* (1996), trans. Stephen Barker (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); vol. 3, *Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise* (2001), trans. Stephen Barker (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Jobs holding an iPad to initiate a catalog of theoretical responses to the frenetic pace of technological change in cultural production, with the categories of “technophobia” and “technophilia” finding a dialectical mediation in the “techno-Hegelianism” exemplified by Friedrich Kittler’s media theories. Hediger’s classification resonated intriguingly with Casetti’s appraisal of early theorists of the cinema—including Luigi Pirandello, Giovanni Papini, Émile Wuillermoz, and Eugenio Giovannetti—and their replaying of debates between iconoclasm and iconolatry dating back to the eighth century.

Finally, one of the last panels of the conference was also one of the most passionate, despite, or because of, the fact that it continued a debate on early cinema which has been fermenting for three decades and which can appear arcane to those not centrally involved in its intricacies. Charles Musser’s intervention began provocatively enough, by discarding the bell with which organizers had previously kept presenters to a strict time limit. He went on to claim that the notion of a second birth of the cinema occurring in 1910, voiced by Gaudreault in the recently translated *Film and Attraction*, marked a regression to the outmoded teleology of classical histories of the cinema that the Three Musketeers of film historiography (Musser, Gaudreault, and Gunning) had precisely struggled against, and he proposed an alternative viewpoint in which the seemingly insignificant advent of the three-blade shutter in 1903 marked a fundamental shift in viewing habits. Perhaps the most spectacular moment of the conference came in the discussion, when Gaudreault, having pledged to strip naked if he found himself in agreement with Musser, began to remove an item of clothing for each point with which he concurred. The extent of their consensus, however, was limited to three points; not only was Gaudreault’s modesty thereby maintained, but also the foreboding expressed by Musser that they would continue to have the same disputes ten or twenty years in the future seemed to be confirmed.

It is, however, precisely this inexhaustibility of debate which is the lifeblood of a theoretical tradition. If the Montreal conference demonstrated anything, it is that, at moments of sweeping transformation, whether in the cinema, in the academy, or in society as a whole, the best strains of theory do not become outmoded but gain a fresh dynamic as they grapple with their changed conditions. *