

Notes on the “Historical Turn” and the Uses of Theory by Eric Vanstrom

A recent “In Focus” section of *Cinema Journal* suggested that film studies is in the process of a “historical turn.” Despite the limited numbers of historical studies in the discipline, “the ‘historical turn’ still represents a slowly accelerating movement in film studies, if not a complete revolution” (Higashi 2004: 95). This “turn” is marked by “archive fever” and the predominance of cultural historians, who are “not as influenced by theory (indeed, some are resistant or hostile), eschew jargon, and posit human agency by foregrounding historical actors” (ibid: 95). Given film theory’s penchant for jargon and its proscriptive passivity since its inception through the 1980s, it would seem that something of a Kuhnian revolution, or at least a dialectical shift, is in the works. However, the turn toward cultural history in history and historical sociology is also marked by the method that makes up the basis of our discipline: the interpretation of texts. While social historians often unproblematically use quantitative data and causal arguments, cultural historians “criticize the documentary and causal mode of social historians and instead interpret texts” (ibid: 95). More recently, cultural historians have even posited a return to examining narrative structures as well as discursive formations (cf. Kane 2000; Hall 2000). Thus, “new cultural history” is built on the analytic method long associated with film studies. Perhaps now that interpreting culture and meaning formations have become central as a historiographic method, it makes sense that film history has taken up residence in the archive.

Of course, the mad-dash for the empirical is also closely related to the influence of postmodern theory and backlash against its proclamations about the impossibility of the real and the end of history. But can we ever escape theory? Ironically, as is often pointed out in critiques of postmodern theory’s call for an end to grand-narratives, postmodern theory itself posits a grand-narrative and speaks, what it claims to be, inherent truths. But, perhaps, that apt critique only alludes to the impossibility of doing away with theory in the generation of knowledge. If the notion that theory itself is impossible is nonetheless a theory, then what is “beyond” theory? Since “cultural history” was legitimized as a historiographic approach, it has been marked by intense theoretical debates, mostly sociological in nature. These debates have given culture a place in social theory and suggested “cultural as structure” or, more recently, “cultural as practice,” claiming that “it is now widely accepted that culture – symbolic systems of embodied meaning by which people understand their experience of the world, and in turn act upon it – is as constitutive of social structure, social order, and social change as material and institutional forces, and causally significant in historical events, transformations, and processes” (Kane 2000: 311). Does film history “widely accept” this proposition? Indeed, to write industrial, aesthetic, and receptive histories must we then become cultural sociologists, vested in social theory and culture’s place in social systems?

To answer any of the “five fundamental challenges for historical inquiry” put forth in Charles Musser’s (2004: 102) essay in *Cinema Journal*’s “In Focus” section, the answer is a most emphatic yes! To give just one example, Musser suggests that a “compelling problem” in studying early cinema “involves the nature of historical change,

causality, and the transformation of film practice” (ibid: 103). Indeed, this is a compelling problem not only for film history but also for sociology, anthropology, historiography and philosophy in general. Yet Musser does not cite a single theorist that addresses these problems from any discipline other than film history. Given Janet Staiger’s (2004) call for better literature reviews and repeated calls in the field for interdisciplinary scholarship, I would like to suggest what social theory and the debates surrounding cultural history can contribute to film history. On the other hand, given that historiographic inquiry and methodology now tread on very familiar ground to film studies and that film studies repeatedly calls for more social analysis as a means of generating and answering research questions specific to cinema history, I would also like to suggest what film studies can contribute to these same theories and why it is important to engage in these debates.

Historiographic inquiries, from Nietzsche (1874) to Georg Iggers’ updated edition of *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (2005), establish a shifting, yet constant, influence of the present on the writing of history. Historical distance, of course, makes this connection explicit. For example, the reification of power relations at work in the writing of “impartial” histories that seek to show “what had actually happened” reveal the existing order as God had willed by Leopold Ranke in the early 1800s or the racist discourses driving national histories of Nazi Germany. While the influence of the present on these histories is now exceedingly obvious, the connection between histories guided by the “archive fever” and the contemporary context that has brought about such a turn are more difficult to discern. I have already suggested the turn away from theory as a reaction to the pessimism of postmodernism, while others have connected this shift to the rise of a multitude of conflicting subject formations and identity politics. Thus, a return to the empirical is often seen as a move away from the heterogeneous, irregular, and contingent in favor of verifiable facts. Ironically, however, it seems to me, the logical outcome of the historical turn could do little but codify history as exactly what it sought to avoid: interminable and meaningless.

The goal of “total history” quickly becomes pure accumulation, or what Nietzsche calls an “antiquarian” mode of history, which lacks a “discrimination of value and that sense of proportion that would distinguish between the things of the past in a way that would do true justice to them” (1874: 74). This mode simply “preserves and reveres” history, reconfirming the heterogeneousness of the past. Like the crane out at the end of *Citizen Kane* (1941), all that is known is a series of facts and perspectives that never fully answer the question. Perhaps, this lack of answers is the answer, confirming the theoretical implications empirical research hoped to avoid in the first place: the randomness of history, unconnected from concern for the present. In this way, Nietzsche is right in juxtaposing history and action. But even here theory makes its infinite return as a conceptualization of the past in the theoretical discourses of the present. Even with the development of new technologies, such as searchable databases and digital distribution networks, the promises of comprehensiveness and immediacy are haunted by a model of history that “thrives on mutability, multiplicity and chaos” (Anderson “Past Indiscretions”).

Whether or not there is an order to historical development is not the question. The question, it would seem, is what framework of historical process is guiding the writing of history. Ignoring the question does not leave it unanswered, except at the expense of coherence and comprehension. Considering the historical turn is also marked by a desire to secure historical writing as a self-reflective active, the frameworks guiding research and historical writing should be made explicit, not eschewed. Those frameworks are either explicitly theoretical in nature, or are revealed through the research material as grounded theory, which contributes to theoretical understandings of historical processes. Take, for example, the role of culture as a historical agent, the site of much contemporary historiographic debate since the “cultural turn” (cf Hunt 1989; Fox and Lears 1993; Sewell 1999; Biernacki 2000; Hall 2000). The idea of culture as an effectual part of the social system, first gained momentum as a means of moving beyond Marxist and Annals’ models of determinism and simple causality. Influenced by Saussurian notions of “sign systems” and Geertz’s interpretative method, which viewed culture as an enclosed network of signs, cultural history posed cultural systems as the basis of meaning in society and, thus, as a material force of historical processes. Thus, culture became the governing principle of historical processes, not in a causal sense, but with regards to meaning. Culture, as sign system, was reified as a given dimension of social reality—the system through which social structure manifests itself, and the social dimension that, despite being coherent and totalizing, was nevertheless prone to the “possibility of multiple, even irreconcilable reconstructions by historians” (Biernacki 2000: 294). Through interpreting the cultural system social structure becomes knowable. Thus, the new cultural historians, who had customarily objected to the search for realist foundations for history, simply replaced one ultimate ground—economic conditions and social structure—with another, named “culture” or “sign system” (Biernacki 2000: 295).

More recently, cultural historians have conceptualized culture as practice, rethinking how culture fits into social structures, without returning to socially or economically determination, and how subjects use culture rather than how they are dominated by it. This shift was partly brought about through discrepancies between cultural systems and individual uses of that system and the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities of signs. It has led to calls for distinguishing between sign systems and their uses, comparative research, conceptualizations of agency and research into the formation of sign systems themselves, and the temporal dimensions of signification. However, the debate between culture as structure and culture as practice is more than an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between text and context. It is also, and more fundamentally, a crisis in the status of the text in historical contexts, a crisis that no doubt derives from a current sense of ambiguity regarding the interpretation of texts. Formalist textual histories ignore the question of interpretation and meaning, focusing instead on describing and explaining formal norms. However, the questions of ideology, social structure, and agency could be bracketed in formalist history precisely because the cultural as structure model tended to collapse other factors into culture, or, in this case, aesthetic systems. Everything became a sign system congruent to and often preceding ideological and social structures. It is not a far cry, then, to conceptualize the Classical Hollywood Cinema as shaped not alone by a complex of interactions, taking place on multiple levels, but through aesthetic considerations. Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger’s

(1985) analysis, then, turns economic determinism on its head just as the culture as structure model had; thus, it does not escape social theorization even as it tries to bracket it off. However, as the notion of culture shifts from a system governing the meaning of social interaction and ideology to situating culture as a structure among others, the autonomous realm of culture becomes increasingly difficult to maintain and formalist histories seem to leave a lot of questions unanswered. Moreover, as the interpretative approach to texts is called into question, the status of cultural objects comes to be seen as a shifting construction, a floating signifier. If culture is not a structure outside of time-space, then the relationship between culture and other social institutions and practices needs to be redefined as taking place over time.

This is not about theorizing a definitive causal flow of history or history as “continuous,” but rather how to conceptualize culture and subjects within a framework of historical explanation. While Foucault suggested the fallacy of teleological histories, he left history without a model of agency, without a means of understanding subjects and the past as anything but an effect of power. If the historical turn’s new focus on agency and human actors is to make sense, a theoretical model of agency must be established. Unfortunately, the guiding theoretical models of film studies—Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism—seem to have little to offer. To theorize the contextualization of culture and subjects without resorting to deterministic models would involve clarity of methodology. Film history has long had trouble separating theory from method. As such, calls for mid-level theorizing and formalist histories appeared sobering in the face of theory utilized only to codify itself. However, theory and method are two very distinct variables in the writing of history. Of course, there are connections between certain theories and the production of historical evidence. Methods, however, are meant to guarantee the verifiability of evidence and interpretation. As such, method assumes more influence over the formulation of the past and the writing of history than theory ever should. The application of different methods to similar research questions should challenge theoretical models, or at least qualify them, as well as generate new ones. Methodological foregrounding also limits the subjectivity of historical interpretation, restricting any foregone conclusions of method linked to theory, while recognizing the theoretical assumptions of certain methodological choices. Methodology insures the reflexivity of theory and historiographic practice. Thus, while the development of a working theoretic model of agency is no simple task, such development can only take place anew by distinguishing between theory and method in the interpretation of empirical evidence.

This task is made more difficult, however, because empirical evidence is never transparent. Not only is the writing of history marked by the reflexive monitoring of its practice but cultural evidence (discourses, texts, etc.) is similarly marked. Since the demise of cultures based on tradition, social relations and cultural actions have been predicated “in and through reflexively applied knowledge.” “The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens 1990: 38, 39). Such activity, of course, means that empirical evidence – from events to discourses to texts – are never interpreted for the first time, but

are themselves interpretations. Thus, social and historical knowledge already circulate through empirical evidence. If interpretation is always unstable and open to multiplicity, then not even the most dependable evidence is purely empiric. However, the point “is not that there is no stable social world to know, but that knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable and mutable character” (ibid, 45).

Paradoxically, however, with knowledge and action both seen as marked by reflexivity, it becomes easier to re-inscribe the subject/agent (and the historian) within historical processes. For the reflexivity of social relations turns, not only culture, but also subjects and structures, into a matter of interpretation, which suggests that the search for origin or ultimate causal determinant of historical process is not the goal; interpretation gives us access to social knowledge and historical representations, not facts. Theory becomes a means of bridging the gap produced in empirical research between embedded interpretations of the past and present attempts to reinterpret the past interpretations. Theory, in a sense, becomes another reflexive discourse circulating through empirical evidence, joining those already present within any given empirical object. The empiric does not transcend theory, nor does theory transcend the empiric. Theoretical frameworks are a given of social knowledge; they can be deconstructed and interpreted, but can never be removed. Theoretical frameworks explain the assumptions that are always made in order to make meaning and provide history with coherence, even if that coherence is based on disruption and fragmentation. Theory, thus, bridges the gap between past realities and present interpretations, which are themselves past realities of future interpretations. In that sense, the writing of history is really the “future of the past” (Staiger 2004). To that extent, theory is both inevitable and useful for understanding the past and negotiating the future.

Where film history can intervene on historiographic debates regarding the position of culture and the interpretation of empirical evidence is precisely at the level of the relationship between text and context. Theories of culture as practice tend to view media as a means or instrumental in the reproduction and questioning of social knowledge. Yet media are more than instruments determined by structures and practices beyond their borders. Media are logics which find their own rules of judgment, rules which then reflexively circulate back through structures and practices. Thus, a reflexivity of knowledge is accompanied by a reflexivity of aesthetics or “aesthetic reflexivity” (Lash and Urry, 1994). The shift towards considerations of culture in the social sciences has tended to collapse media and culture and, thus, collapse the question of representation practices into the question of cultural practices. This is done through an interpretative model of “depth,” a model that finds cultural meaning outside of the cultural text itself. However, the extent that social knowledge flows through texts does not mean that texts are nothing more than manifestations of social knowledge. Texts and media also influence themselves, have their own internal logics, logics which can be found in the relationship between the production and consumption of texts. However, social theorists, such as Giddens, and cultural historians, such as Hunt and Biernacki, often ignore the aesthetic dimension of representations. What social history and cultural historiography are missing then is a theory of representation, which is where literary and media history

re-enter social theory. How historical agents use culture must consider the various forms, and formal dimensions, of the culture they are using.

Cultural history threatens to turn media in to an undifferentiated part of cultural knowledge at large. However, through participating in theoretical discussions of culture and society, film history can define media as a realm of cultural history that deserves special consideration at the same time as it acknowledges that film history is much more than the history of media. Media history can contribute to the debates surrounding cultural and social historiography and the surrounding theoretical and methodological debates in social science in general. Theory is not only inevitable, but it is also useful. Considering that social theory and emerging frameworks of historiography have entered our midst, for better or worse, perhaps interdisciplinary participation in the debates can help us answer the questions social theory has been grappling with since its inception. Moreover, considering our discipline's long standing emphasis on interpretation, representation and aesthetics, we should have something to add to developing theories of historiography and social theory, as they attempt to grapple with questions of text, context, and human agency.

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