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# From Theory to Post-Theory and Beyond: Politics & Film

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*From Theory to Post-Theory and Beyond:*  
*Politics & Film*

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Of the  
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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most recent publications about film theory is David Rodowick's *Elegy for Theory* (2013). In an essay of the same name, Rodowick explains his choice for the title: "Combining the English sense of both eulogy and elegy, and something more besides, an *éloge* can be both praise song and funereal chant, panegyric and *chanson d'adieu*" (2007,100). The fact that one of the latest texts about film theory conveys senses of loss and nostalgia is symptomatic of theory's current situation. In fact, film theory is part of a larger crisis and uncertainty that surrounds the humanities today. In his essay "Sea-Change: Transforming the 'Crisis' in film theory," Robert Sinnerbrink succinctly puts it: "...the humanities today are under siege on two fronts: external pressures to become more geared to the needs of the new information economy; and internal pressures either to relativise the concept of the human or to reduce this concept to a naturalistic rump"(76).

On the one hand, film theory has been experiencing a kind of existential crisis as its object of study has been redefined by the advent of digital technologies. The move from analogue to digital image also caused anxiety over film's disciplinary status—in most universities today Film Studies has been merged with Media and Communications, Visual Studies or Digital Culture. On the other hand, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, film theory has undergone internal changes as it acquired new historicist and cognitivist foci that discarded almost three decades of theorizing, starting from the 60s. The cognitivist paradigm was marked in 1996 by Noel Carroll and David Bordwell's publication *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Cognitivists have defined themselves against the full ranging past theoretical research, which they have come to

label collectively as “Grand Theory”, thereby creating a rigid binary—Cognitivism vs. “Grand Theory” or Theory vs. Post-Theory (Throughout this thesis, I shall use these terms interchangeably). Concerns and ideas that loomed large in film theory, such as ideology, identification, subject-formation, or the unconscious, have been labeled as convoluted, inflated, biased and unscientific by the recent cognitivist ‘movement.’ Cognitivism is rooted in scientific methodology, defining films as data and spectators as ‘rational agents’. In contrast, “Grand Theory” seeks answers in humanistic inquiry, with emphases on psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism and cultural studies. It sees cinema primarily as an ideological apparatus, and audience as either determined by, or resistant to, filmic discourse.

The Theory vs. Post-Theory debate has not yet been addressed in a comprehensive way.<sup>1</sup> In a time of the professed crisis in film studies, however, I believe that it is important to map the differences between Theory and Post-Theory, in order to gain a clearer vision and generate a larger discussion on film theory’s ontological character. The latter is precisely what is at stake in the Theory vs. Post-Theory debate: should film theory strive to draw out meaning that has been obscured in contemporary society, or should it concern itself exclusively with technical and formal cinematic questions? Does film theory have a responsibility to challenge standardized forms of filmmaking, or should it only adhere to the existing ones? Will film theory engage with individual films as a way to validate itself, or would it dare to ‘think’ *with* film? These questions are particularly pressing today, in a time when film theory navigates through its existential crisis—and the instantaneous, digitized world. The answers that cognitivists

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<sup>1</sup> For indirect discussions on the Theory vs. Post-Theory debate, see Rodowick’s *Elegy for Theory* and Žizek, Slavoj. *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kiesłowski between Theory and Post-Theory*. British Film Institute: July 1, 2001.

and ‘Grand Theorists’ provide to these inquiries bear great consequences for film theory’s relationship with politics, and its engagement with individual films. It is through these two angles, politics and engagement with film, that I reflect upon film theory’s function and character in this thesis.

By analyzing the two approaches to film theory, I am aware that I run the risk of setting up a straw man argument. Given that both cognitivism and “Grand Theory” are widely eclectic and have produced an overwhelming amount of theoretical output, one cannot avoid making generalizations. Nevertheless, I feel that this is justified for two reasons: first, given that cognitivists have strung together almost three decades of film theory under a single umbrella term of “Grand Theory”, they have made it impossible for a discussion of Theory vs. Post-Theory to evade generalization. Second, an overview of Theory and Post-Theory actually allows for the extraction of their fundamental theoretical stances. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the two trends cannot be described in absolute terms, but it is possible to track their *enunciative* modalities in the way in which they construct contradictory definitions, logic and aspirations for film theory. After all, what interest me are the political implications of the epistemological ideals on each side.

Although I must acknowledge my reluctance to be persuaded by the cognitivists, I do not argue for the return of “Grand Theory”. Instead, I find it more productive to critically evaluate both sides, in order to formulate my own vision of film theory. Chapter 1, “*Grand Theory*” & *Cognitivism: Which is Which?* provides a background for understanding the specificities of “Grand Theory” and cognitivism. Because cognitivists define themselves against “Grand Theory”, I purposefully represent the latter as it is

imagined by the former. I primarily engage with texts by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll from *Post-Theory*, as well as more recent texts from the cognitivist film journal, *Projections*. I take time to define cognitivism, as opposed to evaluating it, and at times intervene to challenge its representation of “Grand Theory”.

After laying out both viewpoints, in Chapter 2, *Film Theory & Politics*, I turn to the critiques of Theory and Post-Theory. First, I explain the approach both sides take towards questions of politics and ideology. Second, I contemplate the political implications of their stances and theoretical practices. I examine “Grand Theory” through one of its most influential texts, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Paul Narboni. As I identify the impasses of cognitivism and “Grand Theory”—which amount to political resignation and political determinism, respectively—I argue for the significance of film theory’s political consciousness. I go on to expand on the vision of its existence as a politically minded practice.

Having established the necessity for a political film theory, in the final Chapter 3, *Theory & Film*, I seek to *defamiliarize* the concept of film theory by asking: what is the relationship between film theory and individual films? While the first two chapters deal extensively with Theory and Post-Theory, the third chapter, moves on to explore interpretation and dialogue as distinct modes of engagement. I use texts by Susan Sontag, Alain Badiou and Teresa de Lauretis to argue that individual films are able to produce theoretical statements, and thus create dialogue with film theory.

As much as I find the debate on the status and function of film theory urgent and stimulating, it is unfortunate that I have not extensively engaged with individual films. This may lead the reader to find the discussion too tedious or abstract. My hope is to

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invite the reader on a personal journey that starts with an interpretation of film theory's past and present, and ends in a vision its possibilities in today's world.

## Chapter I

### ***“Grand Theory” & Cognitivism: Which is Which?***

“To put it in good old Maoist terms, the principal contradiction of today's cinema studies is the one between the deconstructionist /feminist /post-Marxist/ psychoanalytic/ socio-critical/ cultural studies etc. approach, ironically nicknamed 'Theory' (which, of course, is far from a unified field – the above chain is more a series of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances') by its opponents, and the so-called 'Post-Theory', the cognitivist and/or historicist reaction to it”.

–Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*

The cognitivist movement in film theory began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, led by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. The cognitivist group was devoted to the criticism and revision of theoretical practices of the 60s and 70s—the practices that cognitivists have come to label as “Grand Theory”. In contrast to “Grand Theory”, which regards films as products of their socio-political contexts and spectators as subjects resisting to or constructed by cinematic forms of representation, cognitivists see films as empirical objects and examine spectators from biological, neuroscientific and psychological standpoints. However, the two share one important similarity—neither cognitivism nor “Grand Theory” is a unified movement or a theory. Bordwell broadly defines “Grand Theory” as everything that occurred in over 20 years of theorizing on film, from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. As for cognitivism, Carroll defines it as a “stance toward film research,” rather than a unified theory (“Prospects for Film Theory”, 1996,62). Not only do cognitivists explore different theoretical domains, but they also

disagree with one another (for example, Carroll versus Currie on empathy and simulation or Allen versus Carroll on “illusion”).<sup>2</sup>

Despite its heterogeneity, cognitivism appears in its most comprehensive and systematic form in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), coedited by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. The work presents a definition and critique of “Grand Theory” as well as articulations of cognitivist goals and examples of cognitivist theoretical practice. In this chapter I describe and evaluate Bordwell’s and Carroll’s individual essays from *Post-Theory*, “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory” (Bordwell) and “Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment” (Carroll). These essays, together, illustrate how cognitivism imagines “Grand Theory”, and how the former sees itself in relation to the latter. It is ultimately in their criticism of “Grand Theory” that cognitivists define themselves. At times, I challenge and reformulate cognitivist definitions and criticism of “Grand Theory” as a way to create a more comprehensive image of the material at hand. As a secondary source on film history, I continuously refer to Robert Stam’s *Film Theory: An Introduction* (2000). In the portrayal of cognitivist ideals, I use not only Carroll’s and Bordwell’s two essays, but also more recent writings by Bordwell, Carl Plantinga and the editorial board of *Projections*, the cognitivist peer-reviewed journal.<sup>3</sup> The following chapter essentially seeks to explain the epistemological backgrounds and methodologies of “Grand Theory” and cognitivism.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the roots of cognitivism can be loosely traced back as far as in Hugo Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay* (1916), which argues that cinematic effects are comparable to the workings of mind.

<sup>3</sup> *Projections* is published on behalf of The Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image and The Forum for Movies and Mind. It was founded in 2007.

### **“Grand Theory” as Defined by the Cognitivists**

Bordwell defines “Grand Theory” as a combination of what he calls “subject-position theory” and “culturalism”. This section explains both approaches at length.

#### ***Subject-Position Theory (or “Political Modernism”)***

According to Bordwell, “subject-position theory” developed with the advent of structuralism and post-structuralism in France and was subsequently adopted in the USA. Some of the most influential figures of these movements include Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault and others. A common denominator of structuralism and post-structuralism is semiotics, which suggests that the way we think about the world is inseparable from the language and images that we use to represent it. The world and our relationship with it are thus organized through representation that consists of conventional signs or *signifiers* that *signify* or convey a specific concept. Importantly, the meaning of signs is not individually and consciously determined but imposed by shared sociological, cultural, linguistic, historical and political contexts. The major difference between structuralism and post-structuralism lies precisely in the conceptualization of signs—while the former argues that a system of signs (culture, language) forms a distinct and rigid order which mediates between reality and abstraction, the latter commonly rejects the self-sufficiency of the system and claims that neither signs nor what they denote are fixed or homogenous, but contain contradictions within themselves.

Influenced by post-structuralism and semiotics, “subject-position theory”, as Bordwell depicts it, conceptualizes films in terms of cinematic codes with a structure that

was similar to that of a language<sup>4</sup>. In Bordwell's words, a question that such divergent theorists, as Christian Metz and Stephen Heath, commonly asked was: "what are the social and psychic functions of cinema?" To one degree or another, these theorists analyzed the reproduction of cinematic codes in the light of individuals not as sovereign beings, but as subjects produced by various forces that lay beyond their control—hence, Bordwell's label, "subject-position theory". Bordwell stresses on two of such determining forces—the subconscious (Lacanian psychoanalysis) and ideology (Althusserian Marxism). In the Lacanian case, the subject is split between its internal drives, desires or wishes that exist only in the forms of mental representation and their expressions or repressions in societal settings. For Lacan, unity within the subject is ultimately possible via the simultaneous operation of two registers—"the Imaginary, in which the subject finds visual representations of its postulated unity and bodily integrity; and the Symbolic, that register which creates difference and cultural law"(Bordwell,1996, 14).

As Bordwell tells the story, Althusser extended the idea of the Imaginary to ideology, whereby representation creates the ideal, unified subject and also appeals to the unconscious "by promising the impossible: gratification of desire in the Symbolic, fulfillment of drives in alienated identity" (Bordwell,1996, 14). As Althusser himself has declared in his most well known essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970): "Ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"(162). Thus, an ideological apparatus enforces and sustains itself through the means of representation, whereby it produces the type of (oblivious, obedient and unified) subjectivities that are most convenient for it. With

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<sup>4</sup> Bordwell briefly refers to the father of film semiotics, Christian Metz, who would apply the famous Swiss linguist's, Ferdinand de Saussure's theories of (linguistic) semiology to film.

representation so tightly tied to ideology and subject formation, it is of no surprise that much of the 1970s was devoted to thinking of cinema as a semiotic system of intelligible signs that powerfully affected the spectator on both conscious and unconscious levels.<sup>5</sup>

What Bordwell defines as “subject-position theory” has been called “Political Modernism” by Sylvia Harvey in “Whose Brecht? Memories For The Eighties” (*Screen*, 1982) and later by D.N. Rodowick in his *Crisis of Political Modernism* (1995). “Political Modernism”, I will argue, turns out to be a more illuminating term than Bordwell’s “subject-position theory” for two reasons. First, it emphasizes the political dimension of this theory (which Bordwell himself highlights in his critique). Second, the term “Political Modernism” has a historical specificity (which Bordwell overlooks in his critique).

The logic of “political modernism” lies in the idea that the ways we look as well as the aesthetic codes and practices that we perceive as intelligible are not natural but constructed by the dominant ideology that surrounds us. Referring to the theoretical output of 1960s and 1970s, Harvey writes: “This long dream of uniting or relating semiotic and ideological analysis, together with a desire on the part of some practitioners to combine a radical aesthetic practice with radical social effects, has resolved itself, or condensed itself into the term “political modernism” (45). Thus, “political modernism” is neither a homogenous position nor a cohesive theory but a collective desire to situate cinema in relation to the world and to break with the existing forms of exhibition, production, and distribution. Continuity editing, point of view shots, narrative transitivity

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<sup>5</sup> Bordwell writes: “ For Stephen Heath, cinema channels desire by offering identifications through sight – the register of the Imaginary – but controlled by the structuring and differentiating operations of the Symbolic. For Christian Metz, cinematic codes direct the scopophilic drive and create an identification with the camera and with the viewer’s self as a transcendental, purely perceiving subject. For Laura Mulvey, classical cinema mobilizes scopophilia through voyeurism, fetishism, and narcissism”(1996,14).

and the matching of sound with image, are all believed to create the illusion of visual unity and the camera's absence. These and other stylistic and thematic devices for example, the close-up, sentimental music and other melodramatic elements and a clearly defined protagonist serve as catalysts in identification processes, further making an audience oblivious to the implications of cinematic representation and means of production. In the process, through Imaginary identifications with a character(s) in film, spectators remain in false consciousness as the film "feeds" them the dominant values and norms. Consequently, dominant and conventional cinematic codes and practices as well as the ways they construct the spectators are believed to serve ideological purposes – reinforcement of capitalism as Comolli and Narboni notoriously claimed in "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (1969) or of sexism as Laura Mulvey famously argued in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

Rodowick describes the core emphasis of "political modernism": "...the principle focus of criticism is no longer the simple description of the system of the aesthetic text, but rather an analysis of the subjective relations produced by aesthetic language" (1995,6). Heavily influenced by Althusser, political modernists are interested in the text in as much as they believe that subjects are produced on the levels of cinematic discourse and representation. For them, not only is cinema primarily an ideological apparatus, but also spectators are its hopeless, passive consumers. Therefore, for "political modernists", the only way to resist the dominant ideology and "awaken" the audience is to subvert existing forms of filmmaking, to break the illusions of unity and identification in cinema.

On the one hand, "political modernism" acutely situates itself as largely a leftist force with the ultimate project of making change (undermining capitalism). On the other

hand, it necessitates avant-garde, or rather modernist, representational strategies to enforce the change. To use the words of Jean-Luc Godard, political modernism strives to demonstrate that “cinema is not the reflection of a reality, but the reality of a reflection” (McCabe, *Godard*, 2005, 72). The overall struggle ultimately lies between realism (of commercial cinema) that effaces the existence of the camera and is thus illusionistic, and modernism (of counter-cinema) that foregrounds cinematic effects, thereby producing *knowledge* of how the illusion is constructed.

In contrast to Bordwell’s term of “subject-position theory”, the term “Political Modernism” is historically situated, for the trend was certainly not born out of a vacuum but from the dramatic social and political contexts of mid 50s and late 60s. Importantly, film scholars commonly refer to the films of the time, which were produced as part of New Wave Cinemas from all over the world, as modernist. These films were concerned with formal innovation and self-reflexivity, and had a political project of “destabilizing” the Hollywood consumer.<sup>6</sup> Thus, with a common emphasis on change in forms of filmmaking and viewing, political modernism is innately tied to various New Wave Cinema movements of the 60s. In fact, filmmaking at the time conflated itself with theory, as the two informed each other in the process of reinventing cinema against the forces of Hollywood, in order to contribute their respective fights against capitalism, neo-imperialism, authoritative forms of communism, etc.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of films produced by New Wave Cinemas include but are not limited to Agnes Varda’s *La Pointe Courte* (1955), Jean-Luc Godard’s *2 or 3 Things I know about her* (1967), Vera Chytilova’s *Daisies* (1966), Glauber Rocha’s *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and Nagisa Oshima’s *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960).

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that unfortunately “Political Modernism”, as it is used in academia, is unabashedly western-centric, referring mostly to works and authors from France, Germany and Great Britain. According to Harvey: “In addition, political art seems to include the unspoken term ‘European’ or ‘Western’; it might not be applicable to developments in Cuba or Chile or Senegal”(48).

In the background of “political modernism” loomed the Algerian War of Independence, Second-Wave Feminist movements, the Vietnam War, the USSR’s invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the general “crisis of Western Marxism triggered by two events in 1956: the Soviet Communist Party’s acknowledgement of Stalin’s crimes and the crushing of the Hungarian uprising” (Stam, 130). More change would come from students and intellectuals from various cities all over the world, including Bangkok, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Berkeley, Berlin, who would revolt against capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and Russian communism (Stam, 132). In Bordwell’s description of “subject-position theory,” not only is the overall historical context virtually lacking, but he also omits the most defining date for the trend—May of 1968, which refers to the student-led protests that almost overturned the Gaullist regime in France<sup>8</sup>.

According to Colin McCabe: “May’68 had no tangible political results whatsoever, nor did it lead to a change of regime, and yet it was to become the shorthand for a whole series of political and cultural ambitions and aspirations, ambitions and aspirations which still animate much of the opposition to the global dominance of neo-liberalism”(2005, 180). In fact, May’68 was not only the largest general strike attempted in France, a strike that briefly paralyzed the operation of its advanced capitalist economy and centralized government, but also gave birth to a profound rethinking of existing institutions and practices that characterize and organize industrial societies.<sup>9</sup> The French

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<sup>8</sup> May’68 was preceded by Godard’s foretelling *La Chinoise* (1967) about a radical Maoist group of students in Paris, and by Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) in which he argued that life in modern capitalist societies is “an immense accumulation of *spectacles*...reality rises up within the spectacle and the spectacle is real” (*The Library at Nothingness*. [http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub\\_contents/4](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4) Accessed April 14, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Editorial Board. “The Beginning of an Era”. *Internationale Situationiste*. N12, 1969. *Situationist International Online*. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/beginning.html> (Accessed April 14, 2014)

film directors, cinéphiles, theorists, and technicians, all united in solidarity with the student- and worker-protesters, while also occupying *Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* and *Centre National de la Cinématographie*—France’s major film school and the main public funding body for film, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, they established the Estates General of Cinema (*Les États Généraux du Cinéma*) – a forum for continuous public discussion about rethinking the workings of cinema.

It is worth quoting Jean-Louis Comolli, who was actively involved in May’68 as the editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du Cinema*, one of the most political and influential French film magazines of the time: “We questioned the interests both of state power and of commerce. We were very aware of the commercial character of the state’s attempt to wrest control of the Cinémathèque...the idea that it was necessary to transform the functioning of the cinema, the cinematic order, was correct and essential. And a lot of technicians began to question their own practice, their way of doing things. The idea arose that, from within the spectacle, as alienation, there was the possibility of struggling, and of understanding how to use one’s tools in order to resist being caught up in the most alienating spectacle....” ( Interview, *Senses of Cinema*, 2012). In effect, political modernism was born precisely out of the radical, collective self-reflexivity that Comolli describes.

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<sup>10</sup> Months before the May’68 protests broke out, De Gaulle’s government increased censorship of films and the Minister of Culture, Andre Marlaux fired Henri Langlois, who was the cofounder of Cinémathèque Française, the pioneer of film preservation and the organizer of countless film screenings and cinephile gatherings that would influence a whole generation of young critics, theorists and filmmakers of the French New Wave – Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Maurice Pialat, Jean Jean-Paul Narboni, Jean-Louis Comolli, etc. The Langlois affair caused a national uproar among them, who not only managed to mobilize international support and boycott the Cannes Film Festival, but also won the struggle and brought Langlois back. Thus, by the time that the protests arose in May, they had all become suspicious of and invested in the struggle against the government. For a detailed discussion of the Langlois affair as well as May’68 and its influence on cinema, see Harvey, Sylvia. *May’68 and Film Culture*, British Film Inst; Revised edition: November 1980.

To fathom the very *raison d'être* of political modernism or what Bordwell has called “subject-position theory”, it is crucial to keep in mind the specificities of the historical context. May’68 inevitably made filmmakers and theorists put cinema at the forefront of the political struggle, in a way, revising the feminist motto, “the personal is political”. Hence, political modernism entails an imperative for constantly renewed self-positioning and self-reflection on the part of film theorists. In addition, political modernists believe that the forms of an image and means of production carry political implications in determining the form of spectatorship. Therefore, the struggle, as mentioned above, quite logically lies in reinventing cinema to at once create a politically conscious and engaged audience and disrupt the corporate-style film industry that is driven primarily by profit.

***“Culturalism” (or Cultural Studies)***

Subject-position theory is only one part of what cognitivists call “Grand Theory”. The other half is what Bordwell refers to as “culturalism”, which, in contrast to subject-position theory, shifts the emphasis from the text to the audiences. Bordwell notes three sub-trends within the culturalist trend: The Frankfurt School (Benjamin, Kracauer, Habermas, Negt), Postmodernism (Jameson, Baudrillard) and Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall). The Frankfurt School and postmodernism are characterized by theorizing about industrial and globalized societies, respectively. While the former analyzes social transformation and experience within the contexts produced modernity, including technological advances, market relations and commodification, the latter focuses on experiences of fragmentation and alienation in the presence of multinational capitalism

and ever-accelerating time. In the postmodernist tradition, film and mass media, more generally, become means of “endless diverting spectacle”(Bordwell,1996,9).

Bordwell claims that with regards to film theory, it is Cultural Studies that proved to be the most influential of the three culturalist trends. According to Bordwell, subject-position theory fell out of favor in US academia not because of “logical flaws”<sup>11</sup>, but out of leftists’ and feminists’ “pragmatism” – in overdetermining the audience by representation, “subject-position theorists” do not leave any agency to individual spectators. While Cultural Studies is similarly directed at demystifying the ideological effects of cinema, it is more optimistic than subject-position theory. As Bordwell describes it: “the everyday activities of ordinary people are said to be complex negotiations with the forces they confront. And in their strategies of appropriating popular texts, audiences are often said to be reading against the grain in a far more effective way than library-bound academics”(1996,11). In effect, by situating spectators historically, socially and politically, Cultural Studies, unlike “subject-position theory”, focuses on spectator’s autonomy in making meaning out of texts, resisting and rereading the dominant narratives or appropriating them selectively.

Bordwell sees Cultural Studies as more populist than what he regards as the elitist “subject-position theory”, which not only defines the spectator solely in terms of the text, but also exclusively “approves” of intellectually challenging avant-garde and modernist films<sup>12</sup>. Though “more open, dispersed, and nonlinear” than subject-theorists, Bordwell

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<sup>11</sup> What Bordwell sees as one of the ‘logical flaws’ is: “for instance, film theorists could have objected that constituting a subject through recognition required that a prior cognition, and hence a prior state of subjecthood, had already taken place: only if the individual has a conception of itself as subject can it recognize that in a representation”(8).

<sup>12</sup> The argument about elitism can be considered rather unfair given that the very project of political modernism or subject-position theorists was inherently dedicated against the elitist bourgeois ideology.

notes, in practice, culturalists have limited their variables of determining spectatorship to only race, class and gender (1996,12). What Bordwell fails to mention, however, is that in its focus on sexual, racial, and class differences, Cultural Studies—which was a product of civil rights, feminist and LGBTQ movements—reversed “subject-position theory’s” trend of conceptualizing spectators as normatively white, heterosexual and middle-class.

### ***Similarities between Cultural Studies & “subject-position theory”***

Though Cultural Studies and subject-position theory see themselves as contradictory, for Bordwell and Carroll, they together make up the definition of “Grand Theory”. Bordwell finds commonalities in the two trends’ epistemological commitments and practices, against which he lays the foundations for cognitivism. The most obvious similarities between the two approaches include conceptualizing human culture and institutions as socially constructed, describing spectatorship in terms of theories of cultural allegiances (cultural studies) or subjectivity and identification (subject-position theory), and imagining text as a semiotic system of signs that either constitutes the positioning of a viewer (SP) or is decoded by viewers on the bases of their pre-determined identities (CS).<sup>13</sup>

### **Cognitivist Critique of “Grand Theory” & Self-Definition**

For the cognitivists, all definitions of their theory are made in relation to their particular critiques of “Grand Theory.” This section, therefore, is organized around a

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<sup>13</sup> An important continuity between subject-position theory and cultural studies—not emphasized enough in Bordwell’s or Carroll’s descriptions but examined later in the chapter—is a radical commitment to deconstruct and subvert power relations and dominant ideology.  
SP = “Subjec-Position Theory”, CS= Cultural Studies

series of cognitivist critiques, which are made on the two levels of content and methodology.

***Cognitivist Critique I: “Grand Theory’s” Content***

The first part of Bordwell’s criticism of Theory is articulated on the level of content. He challenges the validity and usefulness of such notions as “culturally constructed” and “subject positioning”. Bordwell writes: “How can the intellectual argue that the activities of others are culturally constructed while arrogating himself or herself a position that purportedly escapes this?”(1996,13). Apart from seeing cultural constructivism as an obstacle to theory-production, Bordwell claims that in their emphasis on racial, sexual and class differences, “[the culturalist trend] leads to exaggerating the differences among individuals, groups, and cultures and to avoiding inquiry into the areas of convergence”(1996,13). Moreover, he is dubious of the notion of identification with film that constitutes to subject-formation. Bordwell finds the concept “too vague and equivocal” as it describes a variety of spectatorial associations with a character, ranging from seeing things from her/his point of view and putting oneself in her/his shoes, to wanting her/his efforts to be successful in overcoming a particular challenge in a film. For Bordwell, “there is no reason to expect that all these spectatorial activities have similar causes or functions”(1996,16).

In opposition to “Grand Theory,” cognitivism seeks to explain film reception by drawing on cognitive processes, such as information-processing, perception, and reasoning. In the 2010 winter issue of *Projections*, the editors succinctly state: “...it [cognitivism] means something like a rational, reasonable, and empirical explanation of how and why something works – in this case largely inside the spectator’s mind and body

but also inside the technical intricacies of film”. In a recent article from *Projections*, “A Part-Time Cognitivist: A View from Film Studies,” Bordwell formulates the main questions about spectatorship that are of concern to cognitivist film theory: “How do we grasp a shot’s three-dimensional array? How do we know who the protagonist is? How are we to judge characters’ actions? How does a melodramatic situation appeal to the audience’s emotions? Sympathizing with a corrupt character may lead us to a certain thematic statement; but what processes enable the film to mobilize our sympathy in the first place?”(2010, 6) These inquiries rest on the idea that films primarily engage spectators’ “non-filmic capacities and skills,” which amount to inherent or quickly learned skills and abilities (7).

According to scientific epistemology, spectators are “rational agents” and cease to be conceptualized as passive subjects determined by the film (SP), or as socio-politically situated individuals who read the film in accordance with their identities(CS). Bordwell uses the idea of “contingent universals” to claim that all human beings, before belonging to particular histories, cultures and identities, are, in fact, cognitively and psychologically determined—after all, almost everyone can see, hear, recall, recognize objects on screen, frame expectations, and be surprised when those expectations are not met.<sup>14</sup> He traces precisely such “universal or cross-cultural regularities” to contemplate spectatorship (1996,13).

In “Folk Psychology for Film Critics and Scholars”, Carl Plantinga argues for folk psychology—“intuitive and untutored”—as a way of understanding human mind and

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<sup>14</sup> Carroll concurs: “Surely, the perception of cinematic movement, the recognition of the cinematic image, and the comprehension of narrative will have the same biological, psychological, and cognitive foundations in any humanly imaginable, nonrepressive, classless, egalitarian utopia that those perceptual and cognitive processes have in present-day Los Angeles”(51).

behavior when reacting to films (2011, 26). Similar to Bordwell, Plantinga claims that folk psychology in itself is universal as “all healthy human beings ascribe minds, intentions, and beliefs to other humans”(28). The assertion resonates with a larger cognitivist focus on “objectivity” and norm in various aspects of cinema, including film viewing. For Plantinga folk psychology is essential for film scholars to understand how spectators comprehend narratives. An important part of folk psychology is what he defines as “the filmmaker-audience loop” – “...the common assumptions filmmakers and audiences share about human psychology and behavior... [that] allow spectators to understand characters and filmmakers to predict spectator response”(30).

In contrast to “Grand Theory’s” critique of spectators’ response, Plantinga defends spectators’ tendency to relate to or identify with characters in film and think of them as real-life persons. He believes that narrative fiction primarily functions as a tool to make audiences grow and learn from different perspectives of characters as well as to facilitate human adaptation, which he explains from an evolutionary perspective (32). Therefore, according to Plantinga, the processes of filmmaking and film viewing are transmissions of widely held beliefs about “human nature”, which exist as objective externalities. In other words, what “Grand Theorists” would define as the reproduction of a dominant ideology, is for Plantinga the reproduction of common sense.

Bordwell’s criticism of “Grand Theory” includes not only particular concepts that explain spectatorship, but also extends to its use of specific analogies. Bordwell reacts negatively to Stuart Hall’s analogy of language to explain “televisual discourse”. Hall claims that the latter is “subject to all the complex formal ‘rules’ by which language signifies” (Bordwell, 1996, 18). Taking Hall’s analogy a little too literally, Bordwell

exclaims: “*all* the rules of language? honorifics? subject/verb agreement? the formation of plurals?”(18). In the same manner, he is suspicious of Hall’s assertion that “highly habituated decoding has masked those rules from us. We take the sign for the thing: [naturalization] leads us to think that the visual sign for ‘cow’ actually is (rather than *represents*) the animal, cow”(1996,18). Considering Hall’s statement in absolute terms, Bordwell responds: “if this [Hall’s assertion] is true, then people react with surprising equanimity when they find tiny cows grazing inside their TV sets”(1996,18).

Bordwell’s comments resonate with a larger cognitivist tradition that is suspicious of “Grand Theory’s” deployment of metaphors and analogies. In his characterization of cognitive theory, “Cognitive and Analytic Theory,” Robert Stam’s concludes: “for cognitivists, metaphor is not necessarily a cognitive, exploratory instrument, but rather a kind of category mistake”(238).<sup>15</sup> Instead of taking Hall’s metaphor (film as language) as an evocative instrument, Bordwell simply classifies it as “wrong”.<sup>16</sup> In their commitment to empirical research, cognitivists use explanatory discourse and simpler language. Referring to articles in the first issue of *Projections*, the editors proudly declare: “the readers will immediately find how accessible and reasonable these articles are”. Cognitivists would like to avoid what they believe are “Grand Theory’s” hermetic psychoanalytic or linguistic jargons and inflated, overbearing discourses. As Stam remarks: “for the cognitivists, to put it somewhat crudely, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar”(142). Their scientific rationalism and empiricism, which follow the protocols of

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, however, Stam also mentions that “...writers like Noel Carroll are themselves fond of using witty analogies, a kind of metaphor, as a strategy in argument”(239).

<sup>16</sup> Here, again, Stam is helpful: “However, metaphors are not wrong or right; they are suggestive and illuminating, or they are not. It is one thing to say that a metaphor such as ‘film language’ has given us all it can give us and that we should move on or change tack; it is a very different thing to say that it is simply ‘wrong’”(239).

“inference, proof, demonstration, induction, deduction, abduction, [and] verifiability”, dictate clarity and comprehensibility as primary values for theory-production.<sup>17</sup>

***Cognitivist Critique II: “Grand Theory’s” Methodology***

Bordwell is acutely critical of what he calls “Grand Theory’s” “habits of mind”—argumentative strategies and protocols of theory making—as distinct from its content and uses of language. Noel Carroll, too, criticizes “Grand Theory’s” formal approaches. For Carroll and Bordwell, “Grand Theory” appears to be monolithic in its overarching generalizations about culture and society and appeals to authoritative figures.<sup>18</sup> In their criticism, a constantly recurring dissatisfaction with Theory is its lack of scientific rigor and “objectivity”.

***Large-scale Theories (and Interpretation) vs. “Piece-meal” Theories (and Empiricism)***

One of the most prominent cognitivist critiques has to do with Theory’s tendency to produce overarching generalizations in seeking to explain wider characteristics of society, culture, history, language, psyche, etc., through films. Cognitivists see claims about such large-scale topics as inherently non-falsifiable and lacking causal reasoning, based on associative reasoning, bricolage of arguments, parallels, and nifty but unsupported conclusions (1996, 24). Bordwell asks: “What could make people think that they [Theorists] *needed* a highly elaborated theory of ideology or culture, in order to talk enlighteningly about a particular film or historical process?”(1996, 21) According to

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<sup>17</sup>Here is how Bordwell differentiates culturalism and subject-position theory in terms of the accessibility of their writings: “...culturalism probably came as something of a relief. Its theory is generally less intricate and philosophically ambitious than its predecessor. Granted, Adorno and Habermas are not exactly beach reading; but most culturalist theories, particularly those on offer from British thinkers, are far more relaxed and user-friendly than subject-position theory. Given a forced choice, who would not rather peruse Raymond Williams than Lacan, or Baudrillard’s *America* instead of Kristeva’s *Revolution du langage poetique* ?”(1996,10)

<sup>18</sup> An important part of cognitivist critique has to do with “Grand Theory’s” ideological commitments. For the purposes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, I purposefully omit this critique here and address it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

cognitivists, Theorists approach films already having in mind substantive premises about larger issues of society. To engage with individual films, they employ these “ready-made” concepts from other authors, which manifest themselves as “Levi-Straussian analyses of the Western, feminist conceptions of the body in film, [or] Jamesonian accounts of the postmodernity”(1996,19). Cognitivists claim that “Grand Theorists” do not only borrow these concepts from “outside” sources, but also use them to answer all questions about a given film, instead of isolating certain aspects and making specific observations about them. For example, cognitivists do not approve of theorizing about spectatorial engagement with cinematic apparatus as such, not with narrative in general, but with characters in the film. Routinized applications of fixed, all-encompassing theories are what constitute for cognitivists Theory’s totalizing character.

In fact, Theorists are accused of not building theory at all, but instead producing interpretations of films in ways that validate the pre-existing overarching theories of ideology, subjectivity or identification. By using films as mere illustrative examples, as opposed to actually grappling with them, theory-production, cognitivists claim, becomes limiting and monotonous. Moreover, Theory uses redundant discourse in trying to always fit a reading of a specific film into concepts of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, suture, voyeurism, subject positioning or identity formation. Carroll argues: “film theory supplies major premises from which interpretative conclusions can be deduced, once the film has been described (or misdescribed) in such a way as to yield pliable (a.k.a equivocating) minor premises”(42). For cognitivists, to conflate theory with interpretation is a problem for two reasons. First, cognitivists believe that interpretation for Theorists has become a faulty substitute for empirical observations. Second, Carroll

makes a strong distinction between theory and interpretation, whereby the former involves causal reasoning and the identification of general patterns, regularities and norms, while the latter has to do with “puzzling” or distinctive cases(42).<sup>19</sup>

What the cognitivist critique overlooks, however, is that at the time of “Grand Theory”, and of “political modernism” in particular, theorists were also filmmakers and vice versa. In effect, they made a collective effort to dismantle the binary of theory vs. practice as they conflated the two as a result of common epistemological and political commitments. Some filmmakers who were Marxist, Maoist, feminist or some combination of these tried to incorporate theoretical foundations in their works, which informed both content and form. Most prominent examples would undoubtedly include Jean-Luc Godard, Glauber Rocha, Laura Mulvey, Agnes Varda, Ousmane Sembène and others. Therefore, Theorists saw it best to interpret or produce *knowledge* about a given film by engaging with its theoretical underpinnings—why not complement a Marxist film by deploying theories of fetishism, class and colonialism to explain it?

In 2010, editors of *Projections* wrote: “...[cognitivism] avoided the presuppositions, vast generalization, and jargon that had become part of the academic discourse”. In opposition to Theory, cognitivists refuse to interpret; instead, they observe and describe specific aspects of cinema for the purpose of deducing logical patterns. Bordwell and Carroll propose what they call “piece-meal theories” that construct theories “not of subjectivity, ideology, or culture in general but rather of particular phenomena”, such as horror, suspense, narratology, continuity editing, etc., (Bordwell, 1996, 29). They isolate film techniques, genres, institutions or historical processes to theorize about small-

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<sup>19</sup> Carroll’s distinction between theory and interpretation is addressed in more detail in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

scale topics that can have both theoretical and empirical foundations. Bordwell defines cognitivist research as “middle-level”—in constructing local theories that are rooted in scientific inquiry and have no overarching unifying context, cognitivists believe themselves to be creating a true diversity of ideas, innovation and depth of knowledge. Since the beginning of the cognitivist movement, cognitivists have made a wealthy contribution to research in film studies, in topics ranging from film narratology, horror and suspense to historical practices of film exhibition, human-computer interaction and study of motion picture companies.<sup>20</sup>

***Appeals to Authority (and “Hermeneutic Impulse”) vs. Auto-Generation (and Scientific Inquiry)***

In addition to Theory’s tendencies to produce overarching generalizations and large-scale theories, cognitivists criticize what they see as Theory’s appeals to authority figures. Bordwell accuses Theorists of a “top-down inquiry”, whereby a set of institutionalized and routinized texts on Semiotics, Structuralism, and Post-Structuralism by French authority figures, such as Christian Metz, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, govern film theorizing. He disapproves of heavy reliance on French intellectuals in US

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<sup>20</sup> According to Robert Stam: “The cognitivist research program by now has generated studies of classical Hollywood cinema (Bordwell, Thompson, Currie, Smith), the avant-garde (Carroll, Peterson), the documentary (Carroll, Plantiga.), and horror (Carroll, Freeland). A symposium on Cognitivism in Copenhagen (May 1999) featured papers on a wide spectrum of issues: nonfiction film and emotion (Carl Plantiga); the social psychology of the horror film (Dolf Zillman); a cognitive approach to film acting (Johannes Riis); cinema’s psychology of perception (Revor Ponech); film history and the cognitive revolution (Casper Tybjerg); lighting styles in Lubitsch (Kristin Thompson); and *Caligari* and cognition (Wayne Munson)” (237).

In more recent years, since the publication of *Projections* in 2007, cognitivists have written about violence in film ( William Brown, Dirk Eitzen, Henry Bacon, Will Gartside), transformation of "the archive" (Jaimie Baron), human-computer interaction (Joceline Andersen), animal and human comprehension of films (Asif Ghazanfar, Stephen Shepherd), perceptual realism (Stephen Prince), emotional affect of sound (kathrin Fahlenbrach), audiovisual emotions in *A Clockwork Orange* (Jens Eder), evolutionary approach to film emotions (Torben Gordal), private and collective memory of trauma in *Waltz with Bashir* and *Caché* (Rina Dudai).

academia for two reasons. First, “by the time [American] film scholars spot a trend [for example, Structuralism], it has passed out of fashion on its home ground [France]”(1996, 20). Second, French works are unfairly influential in the light of absence of works from East European film theory, Scandinavian semiology or German sociology and psychology.

Bordwell’s criticism is not only specifically focused on “Grand Theory’s” references to French intellectuals, but also, more generally, on its appeals to authority as such. He notes that Theorists have, in fact, drawn from a variety of intellectual traditions, including those of Freud, Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl and others (1996, 21). For Bordwell, such reliance constitutes to a rigid “doctrine-driven thinking” which “encourages a more or less contingent search for second-hand ideas”(1996, 20). Bordwell sees engagement with these “second-hand ideas” not as reflection on or rereading of past texts but as blind appeals to authority. Instead, according to him, scholars should strive for generating theories and reflections by themselves. However, he leaves it unclear as to how autonomous thought can be produced in isolation from the past. One can argue that Carroll, in contrast, clarifies the auto-generation of film theories by conceiving film theory as a producer of “generalizations or general explanations or general taxonomies and concepts about film practice”(1996, 39). For Carroll, these generalizations are theoretical as long as they are, indeed, general, and they count as film theory only if they are “distinctly cinematic” (1996, 39).<sup>21</sup> Cognitivists believe such general observations to be self-sufficient and self-generative as they follow the logic of empirical imperative.

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<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that though Carroll uses the concept of “distinctly cinematic” with ease, the question of cinema’s specificity has been debated, rethought and redefined over and over, since the very conception of film theory. Indeed, the existential self-inquiry and -examination of film studies continues till today as film’s very experience and ontology have been displaced by digital technologies.

Related to the usage of “authoritative” texts is the cognitivist critique of Theory’s “hermeneutic impulse”. As advocates for scientific inquiry, cognitivists accuse Theorists of not supplying sufficient evidence for their claims and of having disdain for empiricism. Cognitivists see the lack of data and the overall disregard for science as willful obscurity on Theory’s part. Bordwell suggests that in their ignorance of scientific updates, Theorists have taken no account of the fact that Lacanian theory of subject formation has been negated by psychological studies in child development (1996, 24). In contrast, by incorporating contemporary studies from neuroscience, psychology, biology and other disciplines, cognitivists posit themselves as up-to-date and trendy.

Interestingly, though Bordwell accuses Theory of passivity and blind devotion to works that are external to film theory, he condemns it for incoherence and eclecticism. Bordwell argues: “the risk of selectively borrowing pieces of theories is that the scholar may miss exactly those portions of one source that contradict the assumptions of others”(1996, 22).<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the fact of Theory’s careful borrowing from various texts and contemplation of inter-textual links are what allow Theory to produce new ideas of its own – which contradicts Bordwell’s claim about Theory’s docility. On the other hand, for Bordwell, differentiation or selectivity is a sign of conveniently patching together ideas, which is scientifically unwarranted.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In illustrating the divergences between cognitivism and “Grand Theory”, it is important not to construct a rigid binary between the two. In his description Stam is

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<sup>22</sup> Bordwell writes: “Film scholars characteristically cite Althusser for his account of Ideological State Apparatuses, ignoring his urge to demarcate a ‘science’. Theorists highlight Lacan on the Imaginary and the Symbolic, while his discussions of the Real, let alone his baffling excursions into topology and knot theory, are ignored”(1996, 22).

careful to acknowledge some of the commonalities between semioticians and cognitivists: “the appeal to scientificity, the search for rigor, the refusal of impressionism in favor of painstaking work on precise theoretical problems”(247). In “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”, an important representative work of “Grand Theory”, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Paul Narboni argue for a scientific criticism that rejects “speculation” and “specious raving” for the sake of “a rigidly factual analysis of what governs the production of a film (economic circumstance, ideology, demand and response) and the meanings and forms appearing in it, which are equally tangible”(28). Similarly, though in *Post-Theory* Carroll and Bordwell are explicitly against psychoanalysis, more recent writings in *Projections* by Esther Rashkin, John Hartman, Kim Vax, Lycia Alexander-Guerra, Andrea Sabbadini, and Rina Dudai combine psychoanalysis with cognitivism. In addition, Richard Allen and Murray Smith have incorporated psychoanalysis with postanalytic philosophy and Warren Buckland has written on cognitive semiotics.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to argue that the two trends do not represent distinct conceptions of film theory. Cognitivism and Theory differ in their epistemological and political commitments—while the former advocates for ahistorical and scientific inquiry, the latter maintains an ideologically committed humanistic approach. Stam aptly remarks: “...The danger of cognitivism is to reduce meaning, to see film receptions as only perceptual and cognitive processes. The danger of the other side, that of Grand Theory in the Barthesian-Lacanian tradition, is perhaps the opposite, to inflate meaning” (Quart, “David Bordwell Blows The Whistle”, 2000, 41). Though they

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<sup>23</sup> See Buckland, Warren. *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*. Cambridge University Press: May 21, 2007 and Buckland, Warren. Smith, Murray. *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Clarendon Press: December 1997.

run similar risks in their opposition, the two understandings of theory offer a particularly productive contrast with regard to theory's relationship with politics. This topic is explored in the following chapter. Though I closely analyze pertinent texts from each side, I use the disjunction between "Grand Theory" and cognitivism as a compass to ask larger metatheoretical questions about the rapport between theory and politics as well as between film and theory.

## Chapter II

### *Film Theory & Politics*

“The point of theory is...to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile”.  
— Edward Said, “Traveling Theory Reconsidered”

The question I ask in this chapter about film theory’s relationship with politics is essentially a meta-theoretical one: should film theory inquire about culture, economics, politics and the world at large or should it concern itself exclusively with the inside workings of cinema? Does it have a responsibility to challenge established forms of production, distribution and exhibition or do its analyses have to adhere only to the existing forms? These inquiries are critical since answers to them ultimately determine the ways we conceptualize film studies, its very being-in-the-world and its relation to other disciplines. The definition of cinema as primarily a socio-political product or an empirical object—a major difference between Theory and Post-Theory—largely shapes the connection between film theory and politics. This chapter examines the relationships that “Grand Theory” and cognitivism each entertain with politics.

First, I explain the cognitivist ideal of film scholarship, which is illustrated by Carroll’s notion of dialectic film theorizing. Second, I lay out cognitivist critique of “Grand Theory”’s ideological commitments and cognitivist attitudes towards ideology’s role in film theory. Third, I analyze political implications of cognitivist epistemological ideals based on their theoretical practices— theory as “piece-meal”, dialectic and distinct from interpretation. Fourth, I examine “Grand Theory”’s relationship with politics through one of the most influential works of political modernism—Jean-Louis Comolli’ and Jean-Paul Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” (1969). I argue that while Theory

is clearly vocal about and committed to questions of ideology, it runs the risks of political determinism and self-isolation. As for cognitivists, I claim that in their theoretical ideals and practices, they tend to reify existing structures of production and distribution and depoliticize both film scholarship and spectatorship.

The purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate the two opposite modes of theory's existence, as envisioned by Theory and Post-Theory, to arrive at a larger inquiry about the role of politics with regards to film theory as such. In the concluding section, I imagine a possibility of film theory as a politically minded practice exempt from the impasses of Theory and Post-Theory and reassert the importance of a political consciousness of film theory.

### **The Cognitivist Ideal: Dialectic Film Theorizing**

Though not united by a single theory, cognitivists see their piece-meal theories as part of a larger dialectic approach to film theorizing. According to Carroll, all theories that provide answers to specific questions have to be framed in historical contexts and put in competition with one another to compare the strengths of different responses to the same problem. He claims: "this [dialectic] conception of theory evaluation is pragmatic because: (1) it compares actual, existing rival answers to the questions at hand (rather than every logically conceivable answer); and (2) because it focuses on solutions to contextually motivated theoretical problems (Rather than searching for answers to any conceivable question one might have about cinema)"(56). Advocating for permanent inspection and criticism of theories, through which some get advanced, eliminated, redefined, broken down or radically altered, Carroll hopes that acute rivalry between theories will create a vibrant and rigorous self-regulating system.

Though he acknowledges that inter-theoretical debates, inter-textual discussions and contextualizations of past research was not foreign to “Grand Theory”, he contends that its “dialectical moment is hasty” and emphasizes the need “for film theorizing to become more conscious of its dialectical responsibilities” (57). In formulating the dialectics of film theorizing, Carroll implies that cognitivism provides a compelling example of dialectically engaging with “Grand Theory”—contextualizing and critiquing it to suggest alternative answers to questions raised differently about spectatorship by Theorists in the psychoanalytic, semiotics or cultural studies tradition. Carroll’s definition of competitive dialectics innately rests upon the ideas of truth and falsity, which serve as tools for assessment and are consistent with physical sciences and positivist philosophy but strongly rejected by “Grand Theorists”. The notion of Truth as monopolizing and thus politically dangerous has been contested by “Grand Theorists”. In contrast, Carroll believes that over time one should at least be able to say that certain theories “are getting closer and closer to the truth”(58).

### **Cognitivism & Politics**

To Carroll, a significant factor that contributes to Theory’s hegemonic character is its commitment to leftist ideology. He describes the radical politicization of Theory in the 1960s as “fashionably bruited about”—from a variety of events, discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 1, Carroll only touches on the May 1968 riots in France and the student movement against the Vietnam War in the USA. Carroll writes: “Proponents of the Theory let on that the Theory grew out of the student movement and out of a resistance to oppression everywhere. Consequently, from their point of view, criticism of the Theory virtually represents a clear and present danger to the very Revolution

itself”(45).<sup>24</sup> For him, Theory’s alliance with largely leftist ideologies and an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-neoconservative agenda, fosters certain fear among scholars of being excluded on the basis of their political views—to be labeled as “misogynist”, “racist” or “neoimperialist” by virtue of disagreeing with Theory.

Carroll claims that Theory’s authoritarian approach encourages self-censorship among theorists. By dictating what are the “right” questions to ask, it ultimately limits and isolates film scholarship. No matter how “humane and just” the political claims of the 60s were, Carroll does not believe that they “served in any respectable way by allegiance to the Theory”(44). For him, “Grand theorists” belief that film theorizing must be political is empirically insupportable, dogmatic and didactic. In fact, quite harshly, Carroll remarks: “Wrapping themselves in virtue, as others might wrap themselves in a flag, Theorists frequently resemble nothing so much as radical versions of those scoundrels whose last resort is said to be patriotism”(45). It is noteworthy, however, that what Carroll defines as demagogy, was for “Grand Theorists” an attempt of conscious self-positioning vis à vis social and political developments of their time.

Though Carroll acknowledges that films might at times have something to do with ideology, he would not go as “far” as to agree with “Grand Theorists” that a particular cinematic technique, whether it is a close-up or a point-of-view shot, propagates an ideological effect. He writes: “Cognitivists, unlike proponents of the Theory, tend to believe that there are aspects of cinematic reception that can be studied independently of

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<sup>24</sup> However, Carroll does not believe that the protests of the 60s had any significant historical bearing on films studies: “May 1968 is the date fashionably bruted about, though this is more a matter of symbolical than historical significance, as far as the literal institutionalization of film studies is concerned”(44).

questions of political or ideological consequences”(49).<sup>25</sup> For cognitivists, various, if not most, aspects of cinema, particularly those pertaining to our cognitive abilities to recognize cinematic movement and images, are ideologically neutral.<sup>26</sup> In addition, when exploring economic principles and management of the various film institutions that govern production, distribution and exhibition, cognitivists have avoided making any inferences about the politics of film industry. Instead, as Bordwell describes them, the conclusions had to do with identifying the most effective strategy and optimizing the organization of the industry.<sup>27</sup>

Not only do cognitivists believe that some cinematic aspects are separate from politics, but also that the relationship between politics and theory is at best “logically indeterminate” and at worst damaging. On the one hand, Carroll describes particular examples of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul de Man, who had Nazi sympathies, yet their doctrines did not point to or align with their political beliefs. On the other hand, Theory’s imperative to be politically committed film theorists is for Carroll an “ideological bias” that should be avoided at all costs. Carroll claims: “I would not want to preclude the possibility that someone might hold a certain theory due to ideological bias. And such

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<sup>25</sup> Carroll brings a specific example of a non-political inquiry in film theory: “For example, if we are studying horror films, it strikes me as incontrovertible that filmmakers often play upon what psychologists calls the ‘startle response’, an innate human tendency to ‘jump’ at loud noises and to recoil at fast movement. This tendency is, as they say, impenetrable to belief; that is, our beliefs won’t change the response. It is hardwired and involuntary. Awareness of this response enables theorists like me to explain the presence of certain audiovisual patterns and effects in horror films, without reference to politics and ideology”(50).

<sup>26</sup> Bordwell claims: “Contrary to what many believe, a study of United Artists’ business practices or the standardization of continuity editing or the activities of women in early film audiences need carry *no* determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, *no* univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political assumptions”(1996, 29).

<sup>27</sup> Bordwell describes: “How, these researchers asked, did economic forces and principles of management affect the institutions of film production, distribution, and exhibition? The answers began to show the importance of vertically integrating the companies, owning real estate, assimilating new technologies, dividing labor, and strategizing for a worldwide market”(1996, 28).

[ideological] bias, where it can be shown to exist, deserves criticism. Nevertheless, one has to establish the bias *independently of the theory held* [original emphasis]”(47). If films are empirical objects and theorists’ goal is to make observations about cinematic norms and patterns, ideology can stain the scientific inquiry. However, it is unclear whether it is possible at all to establish a theory *independently* of any “bias”.

Even though cognitivists claim to have distanced themselves from “Grand Theory’s” commitments to radical politics, instead embracing neutral “scientism”, their epistemological ideals are not devoid of political implications. In his essay, “Elegy for Theory”, Rodowick claims: “In a perspective that strives to be free of ideological positioning and to assert an epistemology that is value-neutral, the introductions to *Post-Theory* nonetheless express the longing for a different world modeled on an idealized vision of scientific research: a community of researchers united by common epistemological standards who are striving for a universalizable and truthful picture of their object” (2007, 97). Rodowick implies that imagining a different world is also political in as much as it indicates disregard of or dissatisfaction with the present and a desire to shape it according to one’s epistemological ideals.

Though cognitivist research is an eclectic constellation of piece-meal theories that take different, sometimes even contradictory approaches to film, cognitivists share the most fundamental commonality—cognitivist film theory seeks to “approximate the condition of science by progressing through empirical investigation and rational debate” (Stam, 240). First, through their goal to shape theory around empiricism, neutrality and generalizability, cognitivists seem to strip film theory of its critical character—which was film theory’s main function according to “Grand Theory”. Second, by imagining a self-

regulating, meritocratic system of competing film theories, cognitivists overlook the complex realities that determine theory's "survival" in academia and its "travel" abroad. Third, in seeking causality and logic to explain film reception, cognitivists run the risk of imagining a world populated by "rational agents", thus *essentializing* the spectator.

### **Political Implications for Cognitivist Theoretical Practices**

This section analyzes some political consequences of the cognitivist definition of film theory as dialectic, distinct from interpretation, and piece-meal and empirical.<sup>28</sup> The implications determine both film theory's ontological character and definition of spectatorship.

#### ***Carroll's Dialectic Approach to Film Theory***

Carroll's vision of dialectic theorizing is rooted in rivalry among various theories that continuously eliminate or recast each other.<sup>29</sup> In addition, it is essential that the competition rest upon an exhaustive consideration of past research and its limitations. However, cognitivist engagement with Theory does not adhere to its own dialectic method as it fails to suspend judgment, in order to fairly consider Theory's contributions. Lumping together subject-position theory and cultural studies—over twenty years of mixed theorizing—illustrates the cognitivists' own reluctance to systematically engage with the merits of one theory over another on a piecemeal basis.

In his description of the May'68, Comolli argues that there were categorical divergences among film theorists and directors. He claims: "French cinema is not a family, or if it is a family, it is a family whose members loathe each other. Hatred is what

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed explanation of cognitivist "piece-meal" theories and the notion of theory as distinct from interpretation, see Chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> It is somewhat ironic that cognitivists use the term "dialectic", as it is so closely associated with Marxism.

holds it together” (Interview, *Senses of Cinema*, 2012). Cognitivist critique fails to reflect on Theory’s internal discontinuities and divisions and, by extension, on its historical specificities. The disadvantage of an ahistorical rejection of Theory is that it neglects major intellectual contributions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such disregard ultimately runs the risk of losing past thought and knowledge to the present – as Walter Benjamin once wrote: “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably” (*Theses*, 1968, 257).

It is equally important to challenge Carroll’s definition of dialectic film theorizing from a political standpoint. In his historical account of cognitivist theory, Stam remarks: “In the background is this idea of a peaceful combat of competing hypotheses in a kind of free market-place of ideas, where the “best theories” will win out through the processes of meritocratic competition”(Stam, 240). Indeed, the similarity between the self-regulating free market and the self-sufficient system of dialectic theorizing is unsettling. The “invisible hand” in the case of film theory would ideally refer to the superiority of arguments and evidence that determines which theory “survives”. But do theories really exist in a “free market-place of ideas” or are they part of a greater, more constraining process? Theories are not produced in isolation but by scholars, who are part of academia, which belongs to a University system that is largely shaped by the global capitalist economy. Any given “intellectual infrastructure” is determined by questions such as: Which works get published? Which texts are translated? Which authors are publicized? What trends of thought are more readily accepted and popularized? All of these inquiries presuppose a clear separation between what is visible and invisible in the “market.”

It is not mere meritocracy that determines visibility of certain theories, as Carroll ideally imagines it, but a variety of complex circumstances that have to do with University politics, global economy, Western-centrism, etc.<sup>30</sup> One of the specific examples of the latter is Stam's critique of the monopolizing presence of Anglo-Saxon and French film theory: "Film theory is an international and multicultural enterprise, yet too often it remains monolingual, provincial, and chauvinist...work in Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, and German, not to mention Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Arabic, often goes untranslated and is therefore slighted, as is work in English from countries like India and Nigeria"(4-5).<sup>31</sup> While the promotion of inter-theoretical and inter-textual debates is crucial for film theory's growth and innovation, Stam illustrates that it is naïve to assume that theories are part of a meritocratic, self-regulating system that is removed from the world.

### ***Theory as Distinct from Interpretation***

The purpose that cognitivists designate for film theory is inherently apolitical. In "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment," Carroll allocates strictly separate functions to theory and interpretation. According to Carroll: "Film theory tracks the regularity and the norm, while film interpretation finds its natural calling in dealing with the deviation, with what violates the norm or with what exceeds it or what reimagines it" (42). Carroll justifies his definition by claiming that first, one does not need a theory to notice a divergence since it is only natural or "intuitively constructed" to do so; second,

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Bordwell himself criticizes U.S academia for borrowing too much from the French, while leaving aside works from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.

<sup>31</sup> Stam also mentions that voluminous writings on film theory and criticism by Glauber Rocha, one of the most important Brazilian filmmakers and the leader of the Cinema Novo movement, have never been translated into English. Given the similarity between Pasolini's and Rocha's works, the contrast in the accessibility of their respective works is all the more stark.

given the level of generality of certain theories, such as those pertaining to film industry and management or cognitive perception of film, interpretation in most cases is irrelevant. In his description, Carroll discusses “unusual” and “standard” cases as objective occurrences that are not influenced by any factor, whether it is the film industry, a set of market demands or socio-political contexts. He fails to ask what circumstances determine the “standard” in the first place.

The cognitivist imperative to identify and describe general patterns of filmmaking, while disregarding marginal cases that disrupt the configuration, prevents film theory from having any say or influence in the development of cinema as such. Writing about one of the early texts on film theory, Béla Balázs’ *Visible Man* (1924), Rodowick explains: “...Balázs is suggesting that in order to develop or unfold its expressive possibilities, the art of film needs critical reflection. Criticism guides film toward something like a heightened self-understanding not only of its internal formal possibilities but also of its external cultural presentation of ‘visible humanity’”(Rodowick, 2014, 69). For a continuous evolution of cinema, film theory necessitates critical evaluation of existing forms of filmmaking. Though cognitivism creates knowledge about the intricacies and specificities of existing genres, film techniques or spectators’ cognitive capacities, it fails to question the “standard”. Balázs’ insight implies that the politics of theory making lie in challenging, reinventing, redefining, or recasting existing forms of filmmaking. However, the cognitivist goal to use theory only to identify norms leaves space neither for reimaging them, nor for bringing to light invisible forms of filmmaking or forms that remain in the shadow of the “standard”.

### ***“Piece-meal” Theories & Empiricism***

As an attempt to downscale Theory’s ambitions, cognitivists adopt the “piece-meal” approach, whereby they not only choose to focus on more “manageable” research topics, but also analyze them in isolation. In their writing, Carroll and Bordwell explicitly claim that economic forces have nothing to do with theoretical questions about cinematic forms and structures.<sup>32</sup> For example, business aspects of film industry are looked at from an economic point-of-view and are strictly separate from theorizing about standard filmmaking practices of continuity editing, suspense or character development.<sup>33</sup>

Piece-meal theorizing does not only have to do with the scale of topics, but also with empiricism. A large part of cognitivist practice seeks to observe, describe and theorize small-scale topics, such as general film techniques, both formal and narrative. In seeking generalizability, cognitivists necessarily engage with the most well established forms: continuity editing, suspense, narrative transitivity, creation of a protagonist with a distinct psychology, etc. Cognitivists defend their commitment to empiricism by arguing that they do not see any need to challenge established forms of filmmaking, since film techniques as such cannot and do not propagate any ideological or political effects. For cognitivists, many of the conventions emerged either through “trial and error, self-experimentation by filmmakers, experimentation on audiences with box office as the

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<sup>32</sup> Carroll writes: “Some theoretical questions about film form, for example, about cinematic perception, may have answers that primarily advert to cinematic forms and structures, whereas other different answers to different questions might refer to economic forces. That is, some theories may be formal, while others may be social”(3).

Bordwell concurs: “Contrary to what many may believe, a study of United Artists’ business practices or the standardization of continuity editing or the activities of women in early film audiences need carry no determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, no univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions – in short, no commitment to Grand Theory.”

<sup>33</sup> See Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars*. University of Wisconsin Press:1976  
*United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry*.University of Wisconsin Press: 1987  
Thompson, Kristin *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market*. British Film Institute:1985

depended measure, and the rapid transmission (i.e., copying) between filmmakers” (Smith, “The Attentional Theory”, 2012, 3).

In fact, strictly piece-meal and empirical theorizing is directly opposed to the conception of dialectics, which is championed by Carroll, but originates from Marx.<sup>34</sup> A Marxist philosopher, György Lukács proposes a significantly different definition of dialectics in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923): “Only when the core of existence stands revealed as a social process can existence be seen as the product, albeit the hitherto unconscious product, of human activity... Man finds himself confronted by purely natural relations or social forms mystified into natural relations. They appear to be fixed, complete and immutable entities, which can be manipulated and even comprehended, but never overthrown”(19). Dialectics, as defined by Lukács, proposes a *pars pro toto* (a part taken for the whole) relationship between the totality of existence and its particular instance. Therefore, it is impossible to understand the particular as an isolated entity, in separation from the larger circumstances that determine it. In contrast to Lukács’ understanding of dialectics, the cognitivist practice offers a *totum pro parte* (the whole for a part) approach, whereby various instances (existing film techniques, genres, themes, etc.) are conceived as self-sufficient and generalizable. According to Lukács, an approach which isolates bears political consequences, in as much as it prevents one from seeing the power that operates as a determining force.

Fragmentary analysis of particulars posits them at once as natural and monolithic. By Lukács’ notion of dialectics, cognitivism depoliticizes theory in two ways. First, by isolating filmmaking practices from larger aspects of film industry to build “piece-meal”

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<sup>34</sup> Given that Carroll borrows the term “dialectic” from the Marxist tradition but does not account for it, I think it is justified to critique cognitivist practices on the basis of Marxist dialectics.

theories about them, cognitivism makes these practices seem natural and autonomous. The problem with this divisionist approach is that it overlooks intricate connections between the business of filmmaking, the market demands, standards of filmmaking practices and film reception. However, a strong correlation between box office profits and films with formulaic narratives, stars, guns, romance, suspense and feel-good endings indicate a liaison of film business and filmmaking practices.

Second, film conventions are believed to draw on spectators' cognitive abilities and converge with their experience. To cite some examples, Bordwell and Anderson explain the widely used continuity editing in terms of compatibility with spectators' cognitive abilities and similarity to their perception and experience of the real world.<sup>35</sup> Examining spectators' brain activities, Magliano and Zacks suggest that commercial film editing is best suited to support the comprehension of meaningful events in a narrative.<sup>36</sup> In "Toward a Theory of Film suspense", Carroll suggests that suspense is created due to filmic situations that suggest that "morally undesirable" outcomes are "strongly probable" – when it seems that the "evil character" will succeed and/or the "good character" will fail.<sup>37</sup> By theorizing about how a given film technique works to successfully evoke necessary mental responses in spectators, cognitivists posit these techniques as both logical and constant.

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<sup>35</sup> See Anderson, Joseph. D. *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press:1996

Bordwell D. *Narration in the fiction film*. University of Wisconsin Press:1985

<sup>36</sup> See Magliano, Joseph. Zacks, Jeffrey. "The Impact of Continuity Editing in Narrative Film on Even Segmentation". *NIHPA Manuscripts*. 2012 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3208769/> (Accessed April 15, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> See Carroll, Noel. "Toward a Theory of Film Suspense." Pp. 94–117, *Theorizing the Moving Image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Put differently, standards of filmmaking no longer represent ideological products, but follow the logic of human perception and comprehension. Thus, in its empiricism, cognitivism inadvertently naturalizes these standards, as it leaves no space for critiquing them. For cognitivists, the regularity of certain film practices is not dubious and has nothing to do with economic, political, social and historical contexts that could have produced it. But the cognitivist focus on conventions runs the risk of implying that a film language is homogenous and comprised only of Hollywood-type of filmmaking.

It seems appropriate to take time to illuminate the existence of a type of cinema that was very different from Hollywood in its very conception. In “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and Avant-Garde”, Tom Gunning claims that in the early years of cinema, before 1906, contemporary filmic conventions such as continuity editing and self-sufficient narrative were of little concern to filmmakers.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the emphasis was put on cinematic effects and tricks, while at the same time explicitly soliciting the attention of the spectator by breaking the fourth wall in different ways. At the time, when cinema was new and an attraction in itself, cinematic conventions had not yet taken over filmmaking practices. Gunning claims: “ the period from 1907 to about 1913 represents the true *narrativization* of the cinema...the look at the camera becomes taboo and the devices of cinema are transformed from playful 'tricks' – cinematic attractions (Méliès gesturing at us to watch the lady vanishing) – to elements of dramatic expression, entries into the psychology of character and the world of fiction” (60). Gunning’s description of early cinema confirms that cinematic conventions do not in any way represent objective and logical guidelines for filmmaking. However, as cognitivists

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<sup>38</sup> Gunning, Tom. “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and Avant-Garde”. *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*. BFI Publishing:1990

study the logic of and observe cognitive effects of cinematic conventions, they conceive of these conventions as timeless and universal.

According to Gunning, after 1907, the “cinema of attractions” did not disappear with the advent of narrative cinema but went underground, particularly as part of certain avant-garde movements (57). Although the “cinema of attractions” continues to exist as an alternative to standard commercial filmmaking, to the best of my knowledge, cognitivists have avoided engaging with it. However, the examples are not scarce—from surrealist and dada films by Buñuel, Deren, Cocteau, and Richter to modernist films by Godard, Rocha, Chytilova, and others, all disrupt narrative transitivity, identification with a protagonist, and character homogeneity. By tracing how filmmaking techniques often correlate with the workings of mind, cognitivists discount the fact that, after all, films do not exist to merely please our senses, but also to make us think.<sup>39</sup> A byproduct of cognitivist practice then, is also to marginalize those films that do break Hollywood rules. In its appeals to empiricist, piece-meal and general theorizing, cognitivist theoretical practice ultimately reifies not only dominant forms of filmmaking, but also those of distribution.

### ***Spectatorship as Conceived by Cognitivists***

Cognitivist commitments to scientific epistemology lead Post-Theorists, on the one hand, to emphasize regularities of filmic experience—what Bordwell calls “universal contingents”—and to focus exclusively on spectators’ cognitive skills and abilities, on the other hand. Cognitivist technique proceeds by formulating a question of how this or that technique works to achieve its effects, and frames the answer in cognitive terms –

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<sup>39</sup> Here I am reminded of Jean-Louis Comolli’s *Cinema, Counter-Spectacle* (2009), in which he reminisces about a type of cinema that conceives of and constructs a spectator who is not only able to see and hear, but also “capable of seeing the limits of seeing and hearing the limits of hearing”(5).

borrowing material from neuroscience, psychology, evolutionary biology or sometimes even conducting experiments on real-life spectators.<sup>40</sup> Spectatorial experiences are either measured in precise terms, such as by Hasson's "neurocinematics", or conceptualized by "reverse engineering", which involves identifying specific features that promote a particular cinematic effect as well as its impact on the audience's perceptual apparatus. But why is it so important for film theory to trace universal cognitive capacities and skills? For Robert Stam, such a focus seems nonsensical: "Cognitivists say that all viewers have the same perceptual apparatus. That's like saying we all defecate. So what?"(Quart, 41) Besides, the cognitivist insistence on spectators' rationalism is unconvincing – Couldn't films elicit contradictory responses? Couldn't spectators themselves have both rational and irrational responses to one film? Stam is right to ask: "Is our response to TV commercials, or to political "attack-ads", rational? Were pro-Nazi responses to *Triumph of the Will* rational? Were white responses to *Birth of a Nation* rational?" (242).<sup>41</sup> Cognitivism runs the risk of reducing the spectator to cognitive and perceptive apparatuses.

Importantly, essentializing the spectator on the basis of her/his cognitive skills – abilities to "recognize humans, grasp spatial and temporal relations, detect purposeful human action, understand certain facial expressions, build expectations, and the like" – predictably strips the spectator of her/his investments in political, social and cultural allegiances.<sup>42</sup> Stam aptly remarks that though all spectators are able to recognize characters in images, "a white suburbanite moviegoer" and "an inner-city young black

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<sup>40</sup> See Smith, Tim "The Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity". *Projections*, Summer 2012, 1-27.

<sup>41</sup> Stam justly asks: "Why do some people love and some hate the *same* films?"(Stam,241)

<sup>42</sup> Bordwell, "APart-time cognitivist: View From Film Studies".*Projections*. Summer 2010, p.10

man” do not see the same thing, when they see a white policeman on screen. It is ultimately the difference in seeing that matters more than the most self-evident, trivial capabilities. The hard-wiring of the spectator allows no space for addressing socially and politically shaped desires, fears, speculations or convictions of the audiences. Instead, spectators become a group of raceless, genderless, classless perceptual “machines”, who are, nonetheless, “imperfect reasoners”.

Stam claims: “while cognitivism claims to be the ‘latest thing’, it can be viewed as a nostalgic move backward to a world prior to Saussurean differentialism, prior to Frankfurt School indictment of ‘instrumental reason’, prior to Lacan’s destabilized ego, prior to Marxist and Freudian critiques of ‘common sense’, prior to Foucault’s power-knowledge nexus and the mutually constitutive relation between reason and madness” (240). In fact, cognitivism can be seen as a retrograde step to the time before particular historical moments during modernity caused the dislocation of the subject. According to Stuart Hall, a profound structural change has caused compression of time and space, fragmentation of neatly defined identities along the lines of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc., that have undermined our firm sense of self (*Modernity*, 1996, 275).<sup>43</sup> He further traces five authors/moments in modernity – Marx (Althusser), Freud (Lacan), Foucault, Saussure, Feminism – which revealed that an individual has no real agency but is subject to profoundly redefining forces that lie beyond its control. In contrast, cognitivists are still attached to the idea of spectators as sovereign, rational agents and neglect to explain why people with common cognitive skills see and react to the same film differently.

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<sup>43</sup> Hall, Stuart, Held, David. Hubert, Don, Thompson, Jenneth. *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Sage Publications: 1996

For Bordwell, film is “an experience kit, a pattern of prompts and prods that encourages the viewer to elaborate on what is given. Sometimes the path of elaboration is foreseen by the filmmaker; in that case we have the prototype of successful “communication”. But sometimes viewers spontaneously infer things that weren’t intended; this is common in the case of thematic readings”(2010, 10). As an answer to Bordwell, it is worth quoting Stam at length: “But why do we go to films? Is it to make inferences and test hypotheses? While that is admittedly part of the process, we also go to films for other reasons: to confirm (or question) our prejudices, to identify with characters, to feel intense emotions and ‘subject-effects’, to imagine another life, to enjoy kinaesthetic pleasure, to taste glamor, eroticism, charisma, passion”(241).<sup>44</sup> The argument here is that not only are spectators in themselves political beings in as much as they are individuals with various identities, but also that the act of film viewing in itself inherently involves politics. This is because films are not mere “experience kits” that let us practice our cognitive skills; they are also what reinforce or question our investments in certain worldviews, desires and fears. Cognitivism reduces film experience to cognitive and perceptual processing – the danger lies in creating an apolitical and ahistorical spectator.

### **Final Remarks on Cognitivism**

Cognitivists claim to be ideologically neutral in all their theoretical endeavors and see the possibility of a theorist’s political commitment as a bias to be avoided. However, their “neutrality” can be used as a synonym for political resignation. According to their epistemological ideals and theoretical aspirations, cognitivists tend to overall be

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<sup>44</sup> Here are two other sharp questions by Stam: “Can spectatorship be reduced to a matter of making inferences from the cues provided by a text? Why do we enjoy certain films, such as *Rear Window*, long after we have mastered their inferential cues?”(242)

supportive of “common sense” and “objective reality”, as illustrated by their conceptualization of filmic conventions as well as by their definition of film theory’s purpose. The scientific imperative is to observe and describe reality, but not to question, resist or reinvent it. A question to keep in mind is: does film theory have a responsibility in questioning, resisting or reinventing *visible* forms of making, seeing and understanding films?

### **“Grand Theory” (or “Political Modernism”) & Politics**

Though “Grand Theory”, as cognitivists define it, comprises both “political modernism” and cultural studies, this section only focuses on the former because of its vocal ideological commitments and exhaustive reflections on “the political”, especially with regards to film theory and criticism. To mount the most productive critique, what follows is an analysis of political modernism’s one of the most influential and illustrative works, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Paul Narboni.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***Context for Comolli and Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”***

“Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” was written as an editorial of *Cahiers du Cinema*, in 1969, following the events of May’68. At the time, a lot of film journals took political stances and created vigorous intellectual debates about the relationship between film, ideology and spectatorship and the nature of political films.<sup>46</sup> *Cahiers* actively participated in the protests of May’68 and explicitly defined its orientation as Marxist, political and scientific. As Comolli describes in an interview: “It was a time when the team was at its strongest, at its most cohesive, and when we worked the most. It was the

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<sup>45</sup> Comolli, Jean-Louis. Narboni, Jean-Paul. “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”. *Screen*. Vol 12, N1, 1969.

<sup>46</sup> To read about the political commitments of and divisions between various film journals, including *Cinethique*, *positif* and *Cahiers*, see Rodowick, D.N. *Crisis of Political Modernism*. University of California Press; Pbk edition: March 13,1995.

great period of *Cahiers'* theoretical work".<sup>47</sup> According to him, the guiding principle of the magazine was that "aesthetics cannot be separated from ethics". "Aesthetics" in this case implies both forms of images and forms of theorizing. "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" is a highly self-reflexive text that seeks to situate not only films, but also the very act of writing about films, in a political context. Though it is undoubtedly a product of the upheavals of its time, the questions that the editorial raises about the purpose of film theory are still relevant today.

### *C/I/C*

In "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" Comolli and Narboni attempt at once to define the functions of cinema and those of film criticism. Significantly, they not only see film production and criticism as inseparable, but also claim that the lines between criticism and theory are blurred.<sup>48</sup> For Comolli and Narboni, ideology – defined, in the Althusserian tradition, as "the imaginary relationship with the real conditions of existence" – infiltrates every aspect of both filmmaking and magazine publishing. Importantly, ideology is inseparable from the dominant economic system, which reinforces the former by dictating modes of production and distribution. The authors subject themselves to radical self-reflexivity and make it imperative to analyze their "positions and aims"(23).

Comolli and Narboni declare: "Our objective is not to reflect upon what we 'want' (would like) to do, but upon what we are doing and what we can do, and this is impossible without an analysis of the present situation"(23). In the context of capitalist ideology's omnipresence, they find it to be *Cahiers'* responsibility to identify and analyze films that resist and subvert the dominant ideology. Hence, *Cahiers* situates film theory

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.,27

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,29.

in direct confrontation with existing ideology and in the service of radical change – an explicit illustration of political modernism’s ethos. Comolli and Narboni’s characterization of film theory demonstrates an affinity with Jacques Ranciere’s definition of politics, which he defines as anything that disrupts the existing “regime” that determines our experiences and being-in-the-world, and is sustained by institutional frameworks.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, for Comolli and Narboni, film theory is most principally charged with critical and emancipatory purposes and is characterized by obvious leftism.

Comolli and Narboni come up with a typology of films from a) to g) that is classified according to films’ relationship with ideology on the levels of form and content, ranging from unabashed, blind reproduction of ideology to films that attack the existing system and are self-reflexive in the process.<sup>50</sup> For Comolli and Narboni, “every film is political, in as much as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing)”(24-25). No matter whether a film foregrounds it or not, it is inherently situated in a given economic- and thus, ideological system. On the one hand, even if a filmmaker opens the camera and just films “reality”, it is inherently going to be an expression of the ideology. Comolli and Narboni claim: “What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology” (29). On the other hand, prevailing narrative styles and forms as well as the production of meanings and subjects “all underline the general ideological discourse”(29). Any given film is then necessarily an expression of or a reaction to the dominant ideology. Therefore, films are by extension

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<sup>49</sup> *Dissensus: On Politics and Philosophy*.

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-ranciere/articles/ten-thesis-on-politics/>

<sup>50</sup> Comolli and Narboni write: “Which films, books and magazines allow the ideology a free, unhampered passage, transmit it with crystal clarity, serve as its chosen language? And which attempt to make it turn back and reflect itself, intercept it and make it visible by revealing its mechanisms, by blocking them?” (24)

also a manifestation of general societal tendencies. By engaging with films, political modernists believe themselves to essentially engage with the world. In effect, film theory's function automatically becomes tied to larger issues of culture and politics, as opposed to being limited to small-scale inquiries within cinema.

According to Comolli and Narboni, film theory's political activity is first and foremost to understand, evaluate and expose films that blatantly reproduce ideology, while at the same time to analyze, defend and stand by films that subvert ideology on both levels of form and content. They support films that "...do not just discuss an issue, reiterate it, paraphrase it, but use it to attack the ideology (this presupposes a theoretical activity which is the direct opposite of the ideological one). This act only becomes politically effective if it linked with a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality"(26). Here lies the reiteration of "political modernism's" logic – if cinema is inherently determined by the existing economic system, which also dictates cinematic forms, the only way to fight back is to resist not only on the level of content (signified) but also on the level of form (signifier). Importantly, however, in their theorizing, Comolli and Narboni also determine what are necessary for politically subversive films – it has to be modernist in its representational strategies, which means abandoning narrative, homogeneity of characters, matching of sound with image and instead foregrounding the filmic process, emphasizing multiplicity of realities and estranging the spectator. Comolli and Narboni are essentially arguing against the illusion of realism and for self-reflexive modernism in cinema.

Though Comolli and Narboni do not explicitly state so, the hope that defiance on the levels of form and content will work against the system lies in the transformation of

the spectator – it is “political modernism’s” primary belief as well as its impasse that form of the image determines form of spectatorship. The faith in the transformative power of the image inherently presupposes the spectator. In *Crisis of Political Modernism*, Rodowick claims: “What is politically at stake for the modernist text...is how the status of the subject-spectator may be problematized through modernism’s particular forms of semiotic organization, or rather, through its strategic form of disorganization, and how relations of aesthetic pleasure and cognition might be redefined”(1995, 6). The quintessence of “political modernism” lies precisely in its hope to change the spectator and redefine the pleasure of film consumption that comes with formulaic narratives and happy endings by displacing or rather, attacking established forms of cinema. The ultimate project is to change the world by changing its audience.

Stam writes about film theorists’ vision of cinema during the late 60s: “A monolithic conception of dominant ideology and dominant cinema viewed the apparatus undialectically, as if it were exempt from contradiction”(139). Indeed, even within Marxism, the bourgeoisie is believed to contain contradictions within itself. For Comolli and Narboni, the category e) in their list is that counters Stam’s critique. It denotes films that “seem to reproduce ideology but they do so only in an ambiguous manner...the cinematic framework lets us see it but also shows it up and denounces it” (27). The latter category is the only one that considers the possibility of unintended consequences or contradictions within a film, and hence, within the dominant ideology.

### ***Political Implications (or Shortcomings) of “Political Modernism”***

In contrast to cognitivism, “political modernism” is explicit about its political commitments and tries accordingly to position film theorizing vis à vis the existing

ideology. However, “political modernism” also has its shortcomings, as illustrated in “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism.” In their writing Comolli and Narboni necessitate modernist forms of representation as requirements for radical political filmmaking. In their conception of film as primarily ideological, they designate a filmmaker’s main “duty” to be active confrontation of the ideology (31).<sup>51</sup>They declare: “The basic problem is very simple; the cinema today is the instrument of the dominant ideology (bourgeois, capitalist); tomorrow we hope it will be the instrument of another kind of dominant ideology (socialist)” (C/I/C 2, 1972, 148). Is it reductive to think of films and of film theory only in terms of ideology? Is it a problem to classify certain representational strategies as conditions for radical filmmaking?

In *Crisis of Political Modernism*, Rodowick identifies certain impasses of political modernism. Subjecting it to a historical critique, Rodowick finds that political modernism has given in to its own logic of modernism vs. realism or avant-garde vs. normative text. Rodowick writes: "To the extent that the discourse of political modernism has divided the question of texts and their ideological effects on the basis of a binary logic of division and exclusion, one must assume both the essential integrity and self-identity of aesthetic forms..."(34). In “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”, Comolli and Narboni conceptualize forms of images only in terms of how an images expresses or resists to dominant ideology, and they measure a film’s “value” accordingly. Such rigid classification takes away the possibility of new forms of expression. In addition, overdetermining cinematic forms by ideology occludes any other definition or function of cinema.

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<sup>51</sup> Comolli and Narboni declare: “...the film-maker's first task is to show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality'”(31).

If cognitivists completely detach filmic conventions from the politics of the film industry, political modernists overdetermine them by leftist ideology(ies). As a result of its binary modernism vs. realism, through which political modernists reject the use of narrative as a propagator of ideology, Rodowick concludes that in the end “there is no text in film theory” because ideally, it is “autodestructive of itself and its spectator” (273-274). According to Stam:“...the enemy was never fiction *per se*, but rather socially generated illusions; not stories but alienated dreams”(150). Films can thus question, subvert and play with stories, but they do not have to do away with them, as Comolli and Narboni suggest. For Stam, cinema is only a single medium of ideology, and political modernism failed “to see it as part of a larger discursive continuum, within which most institutions played contradictory and politically ambivalent roles” (139).

Furthermore, Comolli’ and Narboni’s emphasis on the break from existing forms of filmmaking as the only way to subvert ideology and “awaken” the spectator inherently presupposes that spectators have no agency of their own but are completely determined by the text. Rodowick argues that “political modernism’s” tendency to organize concepts as pairs of binaries in conflict ultimately “obscured the importance of theory in the study and critique of ideology by excluding all but formal relations” (xvi). “Political modernism”, much like cognitivism, has made same the mistake of essentializing the spectator – in the former’s case, making her/him necessarily passive and oblivious, devoid of any political and socio-cultural allegiances. As described in the first chapter, political modernism’s disregard for a heterogeneity of spectators has already been criticized and recast by Cultural Studies.

***An Analogy: Ici et Ailleurs and “Political Modernism”***

The impasse of political modernism is aptly illustrated in a film by Jean- Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976). The film uses footage from *Jusqu'à la Victoire*, a film made by Godard in West Bank, Palestine in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin as part of their Dziga Vertov Group. The Dziga Vertov Group was a leftist film collective that was committed to Marxist ideals. Between November 1969 and September 1970, Gorin and Godard travelled to Palestine to film the ongoing project, “Until Victory,” funded by the Arab League in preparation for a Palestinian revolution.<sup>52</sup> The film shooting was finally interrupted by the infamous month of Black Spetember and the footage was abandoned after Godard and Gorin got back to France. In 1976, Godard and Miéville picked up the footage and performed critical work on it, making *Ici et Ailleurs*. The film intercuts scenes from the “Until Victory” project in Palestine with scenes of a contemporary French family watching television. Importantly, Godard and Miéville discuss the images from the footage and reflect on the differences between ways of seeing the same images in 1970 and in 1976. The film is essentially a rereading of these images to expose and critique the Dziga Vertov Group’s predispositions – defined by their political convictions – that determined their filmmaking.

One of the emphases in the films is Godard’s repeated phrase “The sound was too loud” – the “sound” in this case refers to the Dziga Vertov Group’s ideological commitments that were too blinding to discern the reality(ies) of the situation on the ground. According to McCabe: “...[the sound was] so loud that it was impossible to see one’s own activity in the image, finally too loud even to see what was in the image itself”

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.slantmagazine.com/dvd/review/ici-et-ailleurs/2342>

(*Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, 1980,73). Looking at the footage, Miéville's voiceover confronts Godard by pointing out the discrepancies between what Godard believed he was seeing and directing and what was actually going on. One of the examples is a scene with a Palestinian child, who recites Mahmoud Darwish's poem "I shall resist" in the middle of ruins. Though she looks innocent and the Dziga Vertov Group is tempted to represent her as a heart-warming symbol of the revolution, Miéville remarks that the form of performance is that of drama, which is not so innocent and comes from the French Revolution. Another striking example is an interview with a young Palestinian woman, who declares that she is proud to give her son to the Revolution. However, rewatching it, Miéville reminds Godard that he had instructed the woman off camera on how to hold herself in front of the camera. In addition, Miéville notes: "Something else is wrong: you chose for this shot a young intellectual sympathizing with the Palestinian cause, who isn't pregnant but who agreed to play the part. Furthermore, she is young and beautiful and you remain silent about that. It's a short step from secrets of this kind to fascism." Godard had directly intervened to alter the reality for the purpose of fitting it in the revolutionary narrative.

*Ici et Ailleurs* illuminates political modernism's shortcoming – its "sound" was also "too loud" as it reduced cinema and filmmaking practices to the reinforcement of or resistance to ideology and overdetermined the spectator by cinematic forms. What's more, through its ideological determinism, political modernism created rigid dichotomies of revolutionary vs. reifying films that translated into didactic "good" vs. "bad". *Ici et Ailleurs* illustrates the dangers of political determinism in assessing realities; Godard was almost purposefully misinterpreting and misrepresenting the Palestinian project for his

own revolutionary purpose. Political modernism, in defining individual films only in terms of ideology, refused to see any other characteristic of cinema and thus, also isolated film scholarship.

Nonetheless, it is equally important to emphasize that the aspirations of political modernism have been largely shaped by May'68 as well as by various events before and after. As a product of its time, political modernism's contribution to film scholarship lies in broadening the definition of "political" to include the forms of film theorizing and filmmaking.

### **Film Theory & Politics Today**

"Theory is, if not the helm, then at least the compass of artistic development. And only when a concept sends you in the right direction can you speak of erring. This concept – film theory – you must make for yourself".  
– Béla Balázs, *Visible Man*

It now seems appropriate to ask clearly: why does politics matter in film theorizing? The relationship between theory and film exists as a given since cinema is (still) a social practice and representation is necessarily political. Moreover, film is ultimately a medium of technological advances and societal change. It is part of larger processes and carries within it pieces of various socio-political contexts. In his *Elegy for Theory* Rodowick writes: "Because we must orient ourselves in this vast regime of universal change according to our limited perceptual context, we extract and form special images or perceptions according to our physiological limits and human needs. This image is the very form of our subjectivity and persists in the crossroads between our internal

states and our external relations with the world...images not only trace thoughts and produce affects; they may also provoke thinking or create new powers of thinking”(105). Rodowick describes a type of montage we create as spectators between ourselves and the images that surround us. Living among screens, our identities are produced on the level of representation, which is particularly noteworthy from a political standpoint.

Having film as its object of study, film theory then automatically has to do not only with individual films or particular cinematic techniques, but also with the world at large. Editors of *Projections* wrote in summer 2008: “We now live in an age when science and technology most directly influence our thinking and are writing the pages of our intellectual history: when science is reshaping our vision of self and society”. At a time when digital technologies are profoundly (re)defining us, as we are bombarded with images and sounds in the form of ubiquitous media, it is all the more pressing to conceive of film theory as a politically minded practice. As systems of power become more complex and the world is more interconnected, the effects of new media on the form of political what become are all the more intangible. Film theory faces a challenge of self-positioning—what kinds of questions will it ask about culture, science, technology and politics? How is it going to theorize and engage with the sweeping forms of new media?

As the urgent questions linger, it is crucial to ask: how can film theory exercise its political consciousness without failing into the impasses of Theory’s political determinism or Post-Theory’s political resignation? Even in their professed neutrality, cognitivists tend to be in uncritical favor of reinforcing existing realities. Film theory, however, does not have to pretend to being “unbiased” as long as it acknowledges its political commitments. What is valuable about political modernism is precisely its self-

reflexivity and self-positioning vis à vis various social, cultural and political developments. The limitations of political modernism lie in its rigidity and ideological determinism. Perhaps the true spirits of pluralism and internationalism of theory can make for a political consciousness that is inclusive and open. As Stam tells us: “The question is not one of relativism or mere pluralism, but rather of multiple grids and knowledges, each of which sheds a specific light on the object studied”(330).

However, it is important to keep in mind that film theory exists as part of Cinema Studies in universities. The editorial board of *Jump Cut*, a journal of contemporary media, describes the growing influence of neoliberal economy on universities: “As corporate management models are pushed harder and harder, any semblance of faculty governance is undermined. Using capitalist thinking, politicians and administrators see students as “customers.” Because students and their parents are now paying hefty tuition and expenses, they think they are buyers. Teachers are just retail agents, there to serve what the consumer wants”(2013). Forms of theoretical resistance or political thinking are certainly in conflict with the neoliberal imperatives to depoliticize theory in keeping with the needs of universities’ increasingly corporate form of existence.

Nonetheless, for Rodowick, a film theorist can and has to engage in an “active construction of meaning that not only challenges the preferred meanings of contemporary media, but also helps us recognize, and sometimes create, the utopian anticipation of forms of subjectivity, and ways of thinking, and desiring, that are occluded in contemporary society” (Rodowick, 4). Film theorizing, then, becomes an explicitly political act that exists as separate from the institution. While film theory can certainly not be *only* about questions of ideology, it has a responsibility in exercising a political

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consciousness, as its object of study participates in shaping meanings and definitions at the level of cinematic discourse.

## Chapter III

### *Theory & Film*

“There can be no fundamental analysis of film which is not theoretically informed – but that theory must always revive itself in a real love of the cinema”.  
–Colin McCabe, *The Firght of Real Tears*, Introduction.

In *Elegy for Theory*, D.N. Rodowick reminisces about a haunting question he was asked: “Despite thirty years of teaching and writing about the history of theory, I could not give a simple answer to his [Simon Gaunt’s] inquiry, for the question ‘what is theory?’ is as variable and complex as the desire to explain ‘what is cinema?’”(2014, 4). Though an unspoken understanding exists about what exactly film theory is, it still eludes definition. In fact, Rodowick claims that since the institutionalization of film studies in particular, film theory has been taken for granted both as a concept and a practice. Having charted the Theory vs. Post-Theory debate and discussed its political implications, it may be useful now to examine the concept of film theory by *defamiliarizing* it. It goes without saying that one could accomplish this in many ways, by (re)thinking film theory’s multi-disciplinary links, its connection to philosophy or new media. However, I would like to ask a seemingly simple question: what is the relationship between film theory and individual films?

While “Grand Theorists” run the risk of overdetermining meanings, cognitivists reduce films to data that serve for collecting pertinent evidence, in order to make empirical observations. On the one hand, film theory can provide conceptual frameworks for understanding films, their relationship with reality, spectators, other arts, etc. On the other hand, it can bring to light marginalized forms of filmmaking as well as question and

reinvent existing ones. In both cases, film theory necessarily comes in direct contact with individual films. As long as film theory wants to be a vehicle for the continuous development of cinema and to constantly regenerate itself, it cannot be limited to the production of generalizations about various aspects of cinema; instead, theory needs to engage with films. In this process of engagement, however, what matters most is the form – whether film theory’s function is to describe, interpret, or dialogue, the answer(s) bears profound ontological implications for film theory.

To discuss interpretation, I use Susan Sontag’s essay, “Against Interpretation” and introduce the notion of amplification as an alternative.<sup>53</sup> As for dialogue, I reflect on Alain Badiou’s notion of a dialectic relationship between philosophy and its four subfields—love, science, art and politics—whereby, instead of philosophers formulating objective “truths” about each one, the subfields produce their own “truths”, which ultimately inform philosophy. Similarly, I argue that films can produce theoretical statements of their own, thereby dialoguing with, validating or reinventing existing film theories. In fact, in 1985, Teresea De Lauretis argued that women’s cinema of the time was ahead of feminist film theory as it conceptualized women as social subjects and not merely fixed by their gender identity. De Lauretis’ claim illuminates film’s capability to not only produce theory, but also to challenge pre-existing theories. Her writing on Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983) is an example of what it means to create dialogue with, as opposed to merely interpret a film.

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<sup>53</sup> Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation". *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Picador:1966.

## **On Interpretation**

In “Against Interpretation”, Sontag argues that the act of interpretation, which is primarily focused on art’s content and seeks to locate its meaning, ultimately destroys the work.<sup>54</sup> First, by focusing on the implied meaning, interpretation disregards the discussion of form, downgrading the idea that form, too, creates or, for that matter, resists meaning. Second, interpretation wrongly suggests an inherent need for translation – as if there were some incongruity between a text’s actual meaning and the audience’s understanding of it. Thus, interpretation tries to solve the discrepancy by identifying the “true” sub-text. However, to fix the meaning, is to at once make art “manageable” and “comfortable”. Sontag writes: “to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’. It is to turn the world into *this* world” (7). By confining texts to various mental categories, one imposes the existing structures of seeing and understanding on a unique “world”, which is created by a text.

Interestingly, Sontag claims that film theory and criticism has successfully avoided interpretation. She explains her assertion by giving two reasons: first, cinema has for the longest time been recognized as a mass art and not as art; second, its technological aspect necessitates the discussion of “camera movements, cutting, and composition of the frame”(8). However, the identification processes with the protagonist in a narrative film often make inflated interpretations irresistible.

The temptation to understand characters as real-life people often leads to inflated interpretations. Raymond Durnat and Lesley Brill’s writings on Alfred Hitchcock’s

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<sup>54</sup> Sontag makes a distinction between past and present practices of interpretation: “... the contemporary zeal for the project of interpretation is often prompted not by piety toward the troublesome text (which may conceal an aggression), but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances. The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one” (Sontag, 6).

*Psycho* (1960) are compelling examples of precisely such interpretation. While Durgnat “excavates” Marion’s mind during her first conversation with Norman Bates in a motel,<sup>55</sup> Brill goes on to speculate about Bates’ childhood, his relationship with his mother and his murderous impulses, all of which are mostly left unrevealed by the film.<sup>56</sup> These are indicative of the type of monopolizing interpretation that Sontag calls “philistine”. All cinematic aspects, particularly that of form, are cast in the shadow of the character psychology decoding. Though characters are an important part of films, they are in no way integral to (noncommercial) cinema.

Sontag suggests that works of art exist despite their interpretations. In fact, for her, the merit of art lies not in its meanings, but in its form that has the ability to profoundly affect the audience/reader. Sontag writes: “interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there” (13). On the one hand, Sontag is convinced that art’s abilities to be tactile (for cinema, to be “haptic”) and evoke involuntary physical responses cannot be taken for granted in modern societies, which are characterized by an overproduction of images and sounds that dull our senses.<sup>57</sup> Though she does not mention these, examples of “haptic visuality” in cinema would certainly

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<sup>55</sup> “Gradually Marion realizes that she is his superior, that, if unhappy, she is self-possessed, whereas his ‘contented’ acquiescence in looking after his domineering mother has something weak and helpless [sic]. His wisdom about money and the example of his servitude help to free her from the power of her impulse. She realizes that what she stole was not love but only money, an attempt to avoid her problems” (1974, 324–325).

<sup>56</sup> Brill writes: “If the lack of a family and a place is crippling, the perverse realization of them is worse. Norman’s wretched ‘more than happy’ childhood has left him with an infantile and divided personality. The respectability of his ‘following the formalities’ conceals radical personal incoherence...it may also be that she [Bates’ mother] sets off his [Bates’] murderous impulses when she threatens to encroach on his fragile sense of place and to force the present into his past. Only when she suggests that Norman leave his home and put his mother ‘someplace,’ does he display overt hostility to her” (1988:229).

<sup>57</sup> Sontag writes: “Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life - its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness - conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed”.

include *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) by Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, *L'Age d'Or* (1930) by Bunuel, *L'Opera Mouffe* (1958) by Agnes Varda, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) by Chantal Akerman, *Twentynine Palms* (2003) by Bruno Dumont and *Oldboy* (2005) by Park Chan-wook.

On the other hand, Sontag claims that art cannot be reduced merely to its content as some works actively resist interpretation. Her examples include abstract painting, which most visibly lacks content, and modern poetry. In particular, Sontag remarks: “in good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret”. As part of her examples, she includes classical Hollywood era films (by Griffith, Cukor, Walsh, and Hawks) as well as modernist films (by Bergman, Antonioni, Godard and Olmi). Even if films include narrative, a sophisticated image and/or a clever montage can subvert the plot and directly address the audience. Sontag essentially assumes that if a film draws attention to itself either by foregrounding the means of representation or by creating a visual feast, spectators will be less likely to delve into interpretation; instead, they will ponder images as images.<sup>58</sup>

In effect, Sontag believes that “the best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of ...[the] sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form” (Sontag, 12). Interpretation is exchanged for criticism that ruminates about form, and rather than elaborating on meanings, it illustrates “*how it [the work of art] is what it is, even that it is what it is*” (Sontag, 14). Sontag’s emphasis on formal analysis also echoes in Comolli and Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” – in their list of films from a) to e), the authors

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<sup>58</sup> Here, a quote famously attributed to Jean-Luc Godard comes to mind: “it’s not a just image, it’s just an image”.

intend to offer rigorous analyses of both form and content, in order to situate films in relation to the dominant ideology. Importantly, similar to Sontag, Comolli and Narboni put form at the forefront of film's definition and of criticism's concerns.<sup>59</sup>

An alternative to interpretation, which keeps in mind the significance of form, can be conceived as *amplification*. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, amplification refers to "the particulars by which a statement is expanded".<sup>60</sup> In rhetoric, amplification signifies not only the acts of extending ideas or topics, but also the treatment of a specific topic from a variety of angles.<sup>61</sup> If interpretation is about finding *the* meaning in a given film understanding characters as people, amplification circles around a particular sound, image, symbol, reference, scene or a sequence to ponder possibilities of certain constellations. Thus, amplification does not violate the work but expands it – in the process, amplification makes meaning without fixing it. Most importantly, an underlying idea of amplification is that, in contemplating film's output, it recognizes film as an object that 'thinks'. Therefore, theorizing also becomes an act of producing knowledge *with* the film, as opposed to imposing an interpretation.

### **On Dialogue: Badiou's "Conditioned Philosophy"**

In a Preface to the English Edition of his *Metapolitics*, Alain Badiou writes: "Since *Manifesto for Philosophy* I have maintained that there are four philosophical conditions: science, love, art and politics. Equally I defend the idea that these four conditions are truth procedures. In their particular way they *produce* truths. Thus,

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<sup>59</sup> Though, unlike Sontag, Comolli and Narboni explicitly politicize form as they believe at once that form can propagate and subvert ideological effects.

<sup>60</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary Online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amplification> (Accessed 23rd April, 2014)

<sup>61</sup> Harris, A. Robert. *A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices* <http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm> (Accessed 23rd April, 2014)

philosophy operates on the basis of multiple truths, and certainly does not generate them itself” (2005: xxxi). This quote illuminates in a nutshell how Badiou conceptualizes the relationship between philosophy and its objects of study.<sup>62</sup> First, unlike it is commonly assumed, philosophy produces neither independent thought, nor objective knowledge about its conditions. It does not exist as removed from the existing structures but is imbricated with them. Second, the four conditions or truth procedures are what generate a multiplicity of “truths” about themselves. These “truths” ultimately function as mental stimuli for philosophy.

Badiou’s notions of truth, its origin and continuous (re)production are enormously convoluted. For the purposes of this section, it suffices to say that Badiou does believe in the existence of eternal Truth, however, for him, it exists outside of knowledge and is impossible to recognize. Therefore, Truth functions as a passage or a process through Badiou’s designated four “truth procedures”. Because it is generally unidentifiable, Truth ultimately manifests itself as a multiplicity of truths, which is generated by art, science, love and politics.

To make Badiou’s discussion of truths more tangible, here are some of the examples he mentions: “A truth appears in its newness because an eventful supplement interrupts repetition. Examples: The appearance, with Aeschylus, of theatrical tragedy. The eruption, with Galileo, of mathematical physics. An amorous encounter which changes a whole life. Or the French revolution of 1789” (“On the Truth-Process”, 2012). The production of truths thus entails radical shifts in a given paradigm, or what Badiou

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<sup>62</sup> In *A Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou gives more specific definitions of the conditions: “...science(more precisely the matheme), art (more precisely the poem), the political (more precisely the political in its interiority, or politics of emancipation) and love (more precisely the procedure which makes truth out of the disjunction of sexuated positions)” (1999,141).

calls “events”. Such “events” are innately disruptive as they fundamentally transform the relations between visible and invisible, the possible and the impossible, thus bearing inherent political implications. Significantly, in as much as an “event” is part of a “truth procedure”, it contributes to the construction of Truth but never quite reaches it.<sup>63</sup> Every truth that a condition produces, then, is in the form of endless “becoming” and never the whole Truth. Therefore, it would not be an overstatement to argue that Badiou’s notion of truth can also be understood as production of novel meanings and definitions, of new ways of being and seeing.

Interestingly, Badiou’s definition of cinema assigns it an inherent function to innovate. He writes: “The imperative remains that of demonstrating how a particular film lets us travel with a particular idea in such a way that we might discover what nothing else could lead us to discover...” (2013, 98). In this description, Badiou implicitly argues for film’s power to produce thought. As mentioned above, amplification as a mode of relation between theory and film also indicates that films are objects that think. According to Alex Ling: “...Badiou's principal concerns lie with the possibility of thought per se: of thought as divorced from the perambulations of knowledge, of thought as that which 'interrupts repetition', of thought as intricately connected to real novelty” (17). Therefore, the production of thought is directly related to that of truth, and thus, of innovation—Films can let us imagine new realities and possibilities of being and in the process, can unsettle dominant forms of existence and understanding. Here it seems pertinent to quote Sally Potter, who argues: “It may help to return to first principles and remember that cinema is ultimately there not to make money but to service our

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<sup>63</sup> According to Badiou: “A truth contains the following paradox: it is at once something new, hence something rare and exceptional, yet, touching the very being of that of which it is a truth, it is also the most stable, the closest, ontologically speaking, to the initial state of things” (Badiou, 1989, 36).

humanness, our ability to think, to see, to dream, to wonder, and to rage” (“Prospects for Political Cinema”, *Cineaste*, 14).

I suggest that in their creation of thought, films produce original theoretical statements that provide “food for thought” for film theory. What is most relevant in Badiou’s writing to the discussion on film theory’s relationship with individual films is his conception of conditioned philosophy. Alex Ling concisely describes Badiou’s notion: “Philosophy is the thinking of the real thought that truth procedures think”(Ling, 20). Thus, philosophy is entirely oriented and determined by its conditions. Importantly, it is an a posteriori relationship, whereby philosophy emerges as a reaction to various forms of thought and modes of existence, which are produced by the conditions, to situate, evaluate, reformulate or make meaning out of them.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, film theory, perhaps even more explicitly so, is also conditioned by its object of study, which is cinema. After all, film theory exists only in as much as films do. Rodowick describes the emergence of film theory as a response to “the ontological force of the new medium [that] confronts writers struggling to comprehend the experience of modernity through their experience of film” (2014, 79). In effect, film theory is born as a reaction to the inventive cinematic discourse—both a consequence of and an attack against modernity—which produces statements that rethink the present time. Similar to Badiou’s philosophy, film theory continues to gather and ruminate about films’ productions that respond innovatively to historical, cultural and political forces of their time.

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<sup>64</sup>Oliver Feltham writes: “Philosophy in itself does not produce truths; rather it gathers them after the fact. In thinking the immanent inventions that occur in these truths, and in creating a common conceptual space for them, philosophy will finally render itself contemporary with its own times. This is the doctrine of conditions” (Feltham, Oliver, “Philosophy”. Bartlett, A.J. (Editor); Clemens, Justin (Editor). Alain Badiou: *Key Concepts*. Durham, GBR: Acumen, 2010, p.20.).

The image of film theory's relationship with individual films is now becoming clear – it is a genuine conversation, as opposed to a rendering of an interpretation. Indeed, amplification as an alternative to interpretation provides the necessary framework for an equal exchange. Badiou writes: “philosophical evaluation requires one to circulate between the concepts it creates and its contemporary development of real truths [*vérités réelles*]” (Badiou, 2005: xxxii). In as much as philosophy is dependent on its objects of study, it needs to constantly revitalize itself in a dialogue with its conditions. Although this is also true for film theory, a dialogue does not guarantee a trivial agreement. In fact, if the emphasis on the exchange is important because it serves the goal of reinvigorating film theory, it should not come as a surprise that films could reinvent or challenge pre-existing theories.

***A Film Challenges Film Theory: De Lauretis on “Born in Flames”***

In “Rethinking Women’s Cinema”, Teresea De Lauretis argues that women’s cinema is ahead of feminist film theory in challenging the latter’s essentializing of women. De Lauretis is critical of feminist film theory of her time as it does not imagine women in their plurality. In particular, her disapproval is for “liberal feminism” that essentializes women by defining them exclusively as heterosexual, white and middle-class, thereby marginalizing women of other race, class and sexuality<sup>65</sup>. The questions about female spectatorship in feminist film theory of the time (Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane) centered not on *women* but on a *Woman* – woman as an absolute, unified and homogenous subject. De Lauretis argues: “Radical change requires a delineation and a

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<sup>65</sup> De Lauretis: “...the success, however modest, of this liberal feminism has been bought at the price of reducing the contradictory complexity - and the theoretical productivity - of concepts such as sexual difference, the personal is political, and feminism itself to simpler and more acceptable ideas already existing in the dominant culture”(167).

better understanding of the difference of women from Woman, and that is to say well, *the differences among women*. For there are, after all, different histories of women. There are women who masquerade and women who wear the veil; women invisible to men, in their society, but also women who are invisible to other women, in our society”(325). Arguing for intersectionality – the idea that sexism, or for that matter, feminism cannot be conceptualized solely in terms of gender but has to incorporate race, class and sexuality among others – De Lauretis calls for more inclusive and diverse feminism and theory.

As a compelling example of a film that not only produces a theoretical statement but in that, also recasts existing feminist film theory of the time, De Lauretis writes about Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983). *Born in Flames* is set in a fictional United States of America that is celebrating 10 years since its war of liberation to become a socialist democracy. The narrative is centered around the mobilization of different women’s groups to combat racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, etc., that are still rampant in socialist America. The film would be particularly controversial in today’s US that has declared the “war on terror” – it ends with the Women’s Army bombing the antenna on top of the World Trade Center and interrupting a national Television broadcast of the US President, who, for appeasement purposes, proposes that women be paid for their housework.

In effect, *Born in Flames* is a film with an explicit feminist agenda and so the temptation to apply a feminist theory is strong. However, what De Lauretis demonstrates is that the film resists such routinized application precisely because it challenges the well-established feminist theory of its time that homogenizes the image of women.

On the one hand, the film’s originality lies in women’s representation not only as

engendered but also as social subjects defined by class, race and sexuality. It achieves this through the absence of a main protagonist and the heterogeneity of characters, languages, discourses, and forms of communication. De Lauretis writes: “Just as the film's narrative remains unresolved, fragmented, and difficult to follow, heterogeneity and difference within women remain in our memory as the film's narrative image, its work of representing, which cannot be collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image (168). Indeed, one of the most compelling scenes is when Honey, the Phoenix Radio DJ, directly addresses the audience: “Black women, be ready. White women, get ready. Red women, stay ready, for this is our time and all must realize it”. The film creates an innovative and a powerful image of different ways of being a woman. Also, the use of direct addresses ensure that the conceived plurality has effects off screen – the breaking of the fourth walls constructs multiple identifications with women on screen, thereby inviting a spectator to position herself and (self)reflect.

On the other hand, *Born in Flames* is innovative and daring in showing that heterogeneity can also be a source of conflict and division as at first, different groups are skeptical about cooperating with one another. De Lauretis observes: “What one takes away after seeing this film is the image of a heterogeneity in the female social subject, the sense of a distance from dominant cultural models and of an internal division within women that remain, not in spite of but concurrently with the provisional unity of any concerted political action” (168). In the light of the illusion of a unified female subject, which also by extension implies an image of unified feminism, it is radical on the film's part to suggest that disparities both among and within women are, in fact, what bind

feminism. Therefore, *Born in Flames* not only profoundly redefines the (in)famous “Woman subject”, but also the relationship between women. De Lauretis claims: “...this process of reformulation – revision, rewriting, rereading, rethinking, ‘looking back at ourselves’ – is what I see inscribed in the texts of women's cinema but not yet sufficiently focused in feminist film theory or feminist critical practice in general” (167).

De Lauretis’ analysis of *Born in Flames* exemplifies Badiou’s vision of philosophy’s engagement with its conditions. De Lauretis does not produce an isolated guideline about how films should address the question of feminism or of a woman spectator in general; instead, she formulates a critique of the existing feminist film theory of her time in light of a film’s theoretical output. In addition, De Lauretis resists the common temptation to interpret the characters in *Born in Flames* that are divided and defined by distinctive personalities. Significantly, De Lauretis’ engagement with *Born in Flames* is one of the most accurate illustrations of amplification – she demonstrates what it means to not merely think *about* a film but to think *with* it. The fact that films can produce and challenge theory offers an important argument as to why it is wasteful to provide overarching filmic interpretations and why it is politically dangerous to engage in mere application of existing theories to individual films. An emphasis on dialogue ultimately serves the purpose of a more democratic, stimulating and productive theoretical practice.

## *CODA*

It would be unjust and inaccurate to reach a firm conclusion on a subject as volatile and ever evolving as film studies. Contemporary times are uncertain yet also exciting for film theory, as the world grows more interconnected, rising digital and other technologies redefine our ways of being, and images become all the more instantaneous.

Today films are made in abundance as online media platforms (Youtube, Vimeo) and user-friendly, cheap cameras facilitate the processes of film production and distribution. However, Robert Greenwald argues: “if everyone can be a filmmaker, the inevitable result is film fatigue. Amid the clutter, it is easy for high-quality activism to get buried” (“Prospects for Political Cinema”, *Cineaste*, 11). At the time when films’ overproduction runs the risk of creating a visual cacophony, film theory necessarily has to prioritize its engagement and favor some films over others. I am certainly not suggesting that film theory neglect commercial films but that it focus on films that produce thought courageously, innovatively and disruptively—in the same vein as Badiou’s “events”. As a result, film theory can bring to light and be in solidarity with marginalized films as well as actively contribute to the empowerment and evolution of cinema. In this way, film theory can highlight and reinforce its inherently political character.

In effect, in a time of a relentless technological innovation, real or perceived favoring of the ideology of “scientism” and the upgrade, it is important to keep in mind that the questions raised by political modernism are still relevant. In *Crisis of Political Modernism*, Rodowick acknowledges: “...the era of political modernism is still with us in many ways. The questions posed and the problems confronted during that period have not

disappeared in the last twenty-five years....the discourse of political modernism may have been displaced in a variety of ways by more contemporary arguments about culture and identity, as well as the role of a contestatory criticism and art, but the questions it asked and the problems it raised have been neither fully addressed nor completely worked through”(1995,2). Indeed, the questions of ideology, spectatorship and criticism are all the more relevant today—on the one hand, audiovisual literacy is vital for being able to make sense of oneself and of others in the increasingly inhabited virtual space, which has turned almost all spectators into potential producers. On the other hand, the fact that capitalism has come to be seen as the only viable model of living and producing inhibits self-reflection and the ability to locate power or identify the “right villain” on the part of filmmakers and film theorists.

While film theory has a chance to participate in molding the globalized cultural and intellectual infrastructures, the question remains whether it will do so critically or blindly. Will film theory respond to complex realities of global, instantaneous and digital culture or will it reproduce their dominant cultural logic? Neither cognitivists, nor “Grand Theorists” can provide us with “right” answers singlehandedly. After all, cognitivist critique of Theory’s inflated discourse is as valuable as Theory’s critique of cognitivist reductionism. In this thesis, I have tried to illuminate divergences between the two as a productive way to make metatheoretical inquiries about the role of politics in theoretical practice and the relationship between theory and film. It goes without saying that the debates between Theory and Post-Theory about epistemological and political commitments of film theory remain open and endless—As long as we have to keep asking “what is cinema?”, we will have to continuously rethink “what is film theory

(for)?”. Nonetheless, through this thesis, I hope to have suspended the debate for a moment and reasserted film theory’s power and importance as a politically minded practice, and the possibility for it to engage in dialogue with individual films.

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