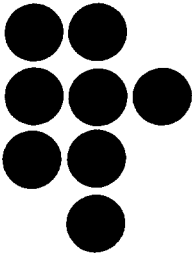




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"Cinema/History/Criticism: New Paradigms in Film Studies"  
17 March 1994  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Bartos Theatre  
20 Ames Street  
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

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**Professor David Bordwell  
Department of Communications Arts  
University of Wisconsin, Madison**

**Professor Roberta Pearson  
Annenberg School of Communications  
University of Pennsylvania**

**Professor Henry Jenkins  
Director, Film and Media Studies  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

**Kelly M. Greenhill, Rapporteur  
Graduate Student, Department of Political Science  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

Moderator David Thorburn [DT]: It is a very great pleasure to serve as moderator to a session of the Communications Forum devoted to the general topic, "New Paradigms in Film Study." The three speakers we have today are especially qualified to address this topic; each in his or her own way has made seminal contributions to the emergence of these new paradigms.

The first speaker, David Bordwell, is hardly unknown to most of you. The series of books he has written over the past decade have helped to divine the territory of film study. He is a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the author of an extraordinary number of seminal studies of the medium of film. To those of us who aspire to be published scholars, he is a very intimidating figure. Among the titles he is responsible for, include *Narration in the Fiction Film: Making Meanings, Inference, and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. The book that he has co-authored with Janet Steiger and his wife, Kristin Thompson, is an immensely influential book; it is entitled *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. His textbooks are very widely used, probably the most widely used textbooks in film study in the United States.

Our second speaker, Roberta Pearson, teaches at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. She has been a signal contributor to our understanding of silent film. She is the author of *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*. She is also co-author of *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*.

Our final speaker, who is very widely known to the M.I.T. community is the Director of Film and Media Studies, the redoubtable Henry Jenkins. He [perhaps because he was David Bordwell's student] is also much more prolific than any man his age has a right to be. As you may know, he is the author of a transformingly significant film about early sound comedy, with the memorable title *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* It is about vaudeville traditions and tendencies in the early sound period. He is the author of another book that is a kind of seminal study in helping to establish the territory of "fan communities," of communities of readers and viewers who congregate around particular texts; the book is entitled, *Textual Poachers*. He was also recently the co-editor of a book on film comedy and has many other titles, [and numerous articles] to his credit, in the relatively short time since he has left graduate school. All three of our speakers are eminently qualified to address this topic, and it is a pleasure to welcome them.

DAVID BORDWELL [DB]: The topic I have been asked to talk about addresses the prospects for integrating three rather separate tendencies in the study of film: theory, history, and critical analysis. I think that it is correct to begin with the premise that, indeed, there is a tendency right now to see a kind of synthesis or merging of those three trends. There are several directions in which we could take this discussion, but the issue that strikes me as most useful is that this emerging synthesis can teach us an important lesson about how film studies can be pursued as a serious research project.

This synthesis of theory, history, and criticism best takes place as an awareness that our research is really guided by a question, or set of questions, that we ask. That self-conscious acknowledgment of problem-solving is one of the most useful rewards that we have derived from this new synthesis. It has not always been clear, in the history of film studies, that we have been asking questions or trying to solve problems. It is fair to say that the film history we inherited in the 1930s and 1940s was very much data-driven. The assumption was, we have these films, so what do we want to say about them? Often the historical research that was conducted in the period was really determined by what was available in rather easily located places. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for instance, had effectively canonized the body of films as the official works in the history of cinema. Much of the work that came out of, say, Lewis Jacobs' writings or of subsequent writers from the 1940s and 1950s, were really dependent on the assumption that MOMA had safely collected all of the right films. Now it was simply a matter of looking them up,

finding the connections, and writing a film history. That is to say, the research program generated out of them really was not question-driven, it was data-driven. We did not look very closely at what questions or problems we wanted to pose. Similarly, it is fair, although a little more controversial, to say that film theory in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s has been doctrine-driven. That is, we have theoretical ideas available to us through our participation in an academic culture, and those theoretical systems are being mapped onto films--merged together, cut up and rearranged, applied to particular moments--to produce rather broad accounts of, say, ideology, subjectivity, or culture. Again, I want to say that it was often not question or problem motivated, but rather of having something at hand, in this case, an academic set of cultures that could be applied in a rather quick fashion.

The third tendency, film criticism, also was not clearly question or problem-driven. In most cases, the academic tradition of film criticism boils down to film interpretation. That has been the most eclectic of all domains because film interpretation has been quite opportunistic. Practically anything is grist for its mill if it is expected to shed light on this or that particular movie. It is rare, however, that these projects issue from clear delineations of what we want to know.

I would say the emerging paradigm we are talking about today puts on the agenda the need for formulating precise, focused questions or problems, particularly what we might call middle level questions or problems. These are not, on one hand, questions about particular films' genesis, nor are they be large scale theories of subjectivity or social relations. We make the most progress when questions are posed explicitly, and at the middle level. For instance, in Kristin Thompson's book, *Exporting Entertainment*, she argues that one of the questions worth asking is "how did this process come about?"--the process being Hollywood's domination of world markets after World War I. What are the causal factors that we can isolate that would explain the extraordinarily sudden and rapid ability of Hollywood movies to penetrate markets where before they had been barred. That question may or may not be counter-intuitive. It may or may not yield startling revelations, but it is a prototype of a middle level question that has a fair chance of beginning the kind of scholarly research and dialog that creates productive and useful knowledge.

My polemical point is that this new synthesis can help us recognize the importance of those focused and particularly middle-level questions, which is advantageous. On one hand, it directs the researcher's energy fairly fruitfully. It is not enough to say we should be merging theory, history, and criticism. In theory, we ought to be looking at everything, but in effect, we cannot look at everything. In practice, actually, one looks only at what one can find. The upshot is really that questions cuts through, to a large extent, what is available, so one can begin to make more fruitful use of his research energies.

The second advantage is that it actually makes clear the relations between distinct research projects. It sharpens our sense of what plausible debates might be. One of the most difficult problems in contemporary film studies is we do not always know what we are arguing about, [when we are even arguing], which probably does not happen as often as it should. But as often, we just do not know where the quarrel lies. The agreement that certain research projects are tackling the same questions, while other rival research projects are tackling different questions, is the first step to realizing what a possible debate might look like.

I would also like to optimistically suggest that making clear the relations among these research undertakings could lead to criteria for adjudicating among those rival accounts. It might be possible, if we realize we are asking certain kinds of questions, to sort the plausibility of various explanations. I would even suggest, most controversially, that if we can frame questions, we can make progress possible. Most attempts to answer questions will be wrong, but if we agree on a principle of approximate progress, faulty accounts could be revised by the kinds of scholarly debate that is very common in other fields. The best hope for an emerging synthesis is the recognition of tackling similar or kindred questions, which would lead film scholars to embrace problem-driven research model.

One of the most exciting areas of film studies today, early cinema, has achieved a lot of its luster largely because it has exactly this kind of frame of reference. The questions seem fairly well-defined and the scholars involved seem to understand that there are rather clearly competing accounts on important issues. The excitement of early cinema studies largely depends on the idea that a group of people are committed to trying to frame and answer at least approximately similar questions.

I thought I would finish up by gesturing towards the kind of question that interests me. I thought I might tackle this by looking at what I call the domain of research, identified as "a poetics of cinema:" an understanding of the principles of how films are made, the development of those principles over time, the conditions which generate various conceptions of a movie. One of these domains is stylistic, and one of many middle level questions we might ask within that domain is, "how does narrative cinema develop tactics for concentrating the viewer's attention by means of actors within the frame?" I believe this is a researchable question. It may not set everyone's pulses racing, but it does suggest some important issues about the capacities of film style to engage spectators, which everyone agrees is an important issue.

The hypothesis generally is that in the early 1900s, certain principles were forged by which the spectator's attention was manipulated through moving figures to and away from the camera. In some cases, drawing attention to particular actors, was accommodated by having them walk up close to the camera. Already in Griffith's films, he understood that when moving figures to and from the camera, you have to make sure other things do not distract you. So, for instance, to bring attention to characters entering from off screen, the director may block incidental characters already in the shot. Griffith does the reverse in *Musketeers of Pigalley*, a film he made just before *Battle of Elderbush Gulch*, where we are introduced to two characters who start very close to the camera. As these two move to the rear of the room, it is revealed that their bodies have been blocking a third character. If you are familiar with Griffith's films, you'll be familiar with his technique of suddenly revealing characters who have been on-screen in off-screen space.

My argument is that the technique of blocking is sufficiently in place that Griffith can play with it to create a visual surprise very early in this film. He could also use it in *Eldbush Gulch* in a rather sophisticated way, using movement to and from the camera, not just to deliver more information, but to create a really emotional effect. When Lillian Gish learns that her baby is at the sight of a massacre, her first impulse is to run and see the child. When the old man tells her, he warns her to run the other way, but she wants to go rescue the baby. As he tells her, she runs towards the left as he tries to pull her to the right. She then tries to break away, and pulls up very close to the camera. He pulls her back, and finally out of the frame. Griffith is able to exploit this back and forth action to do more than convey information, he also creates a kind of perceptual shock. By the time we reach the early 1930s, we have directors who are very adept at this technique. For example, one of the reasons Howard Hawkes' direction seems so smooth and invisible depends partly on his careful calculation of movement to and from the camera.

My argument could go on, after plotting some of these changes and options of stylistic qualities, to inquire into the casual factors which made these choices salient, or into the ways in which these choices become picked up and developed in more radical ways. For instance, in Welles' work, where the fixed shot becomes the dominant of a film like *Citizen Kane*, the movement to and from the camera is very much enclosed within a single frame. There seems to be a kind of freezing or fixing of the principle of more fluid and smooth movement that Hawkes developed. Or we could look at Sergei Eisenstein, who developed a use of the frame that was even more dependent on the use of foreground and background movement, while exploiting that quality that we saw in *Eldbush Gulch* with Lillian, heaving herself to and from the camera.

These examples I have given are one way to ask a middle-level question that could be corrected in light of subsequent research, sharpened, focused, and debated about, by

virtue of the fact that it has narrowed and directed its energies towards solving a particular problem.

ROBERTA PEARSON [RP]: I want to begin with a quote from an eminent film scholar, who just happens to be sitting on my left. In making meaning, David says, "one of the reasons we study history is that the things people said and did in other times were less predictable than what our contemporaries do and say. We do not want a critical language to flatten out what our predecessors' difference." Historical study touches off a surprise, not how like ourselves they are, but who would imagine they would do this. The reason I find history so utterly intriguing is that it is so very different. It is like time travel, going to an incredibly bizarre culture that has some continuity with your own, but with some major disjunctions that you just want to figure out.

I think the first time this hit me was when I was beginning to "dissertate" as a graduate student. I was at a terrible stage, torn between terror and exaltation. I had a topic, but I did not know if I could do it, but I had to do it because I had to get my degree. There I was watching Griffith biographs [I do not even remember which one], and there was a woman standing on the porch of a large Victorian home. There was a man standing on the ground beneath her, and they were both gesticulating wildly at each other. I had no clue what they were doing. Then after having watched more films, and having read about the period, it hit me that he was asking her to elope. Now, I just cannot imagine how I could not have understood it at the moment. But it was that moment of strangeness that I found really incredibly attractive. It was only through what we film-types call "inter-textuality,"--meaning that texts are not autonomous, they are part of a connected web of texts. To give those films' texts meaning that influence both their conditions of production and their conditions of perception is something that probably connects all of the work I have done on some level.

In this Griffith biograph, the biograph producers had, of course, been living in this inter-textual web where elopement was a fairly common occurrence. Thus it seemed natural to them to put in a scene like that, and the audience would have understood it in a way that I did not because that audience would have imagined it in that particular inter-textual web. That is one reason to study history. Since we are primarily interested in the films, what we are doing is illuminating a group of texts to look at the historical conditions of production and reception. However, one could also illuminate history through film. One can take these same texts and look at them in slightly different ways. Someone who was looking at these same biographs, but was perhaps less interested in performance style than I was, and more interested in the changing nature of woman's roles or the changing nature of gender relationships, might still want to see the film as part of this larger inter-textual web.

Since my work has seemingly traveled along a similar trajectory, from the first where history illuminates film, to the second, where film illuminates history, I would like to talk to you about three major projects I have worked on, or am working on. I shall focus on the two books I have written, and a project I am currently working on. The first book is called *Eloquent Gestures*, and is about transformation of performance styles. The second book is called *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*. Right now, I am working on a book about George Armstrong Custer, the guy who screwed up big time at Little Big Horn. This book talks about representations of race and gender in history in various texts, primarily cinematic and televisual, relating to him.

Let's begin by talking about the first two books because the biograph and Vitagraph books are both part of what has now been canonized as part of early film history. In order to tell you about the books and to address the problem of film in history, I have to tell you a bit about history, both film and American history. What happens basically is that film comes in about 1895, and is shown in entirely safe, respectable middle-class venues, primarily in vaudeville houses, lecture halls, churches, and places like that. And it is

primarily non-fiction, which is very important as well. It is didactic, which appeals to Victorian impulses. Nobody is bent out of shape or bothered by this new medium.

Then, in about 1905, there is a major kind of transformation. Films begin to be permanently fictional, which is a little dangerous because they are no longer seen as safe because, my gosh, they might give people pleasure. At the same time, the construction of exhibition venues that were absolutely cinematic, called nickelodeons, begins. They were often, in this period, located in urban working-class environments, and they were perceived as attracting the lower elements of society, those immigrants and workers who had been flooding into the country and into the cities, creating a kind of moral crisis among the ruling elite of the time. This was really a prequel to the whole debate about multiculturalism and valium and moral panics; it was playing itself out right at this time. Having started out as socially respectable, film suddenly began to be associated with these marginal elements. The people running the film industry were smart enough to know that the way to get more money [i.e., make sure the film industry continued to thrive] in this country was to associate with the "better elements"--the middle classes--those people who could actually pay more than a nickel or a dime to go to the movies.

This is the background that forms the context in which my first two books were written, and which also shows us a great deal of the work that went on in early cinema, and why I think people find this period particularly fascinating. What I wanted to do in the Griffith biography was to figure out why, if one compared a Griffith biography from 1908 with a biography in 1913, the transition in style was so amazing. To our modern eyes, even the 1913 film would look a little weird, but once you sort of immerse yourself in the inter-textual frame of the period, it was an amazing transformation.

I dealt with this problem in four ways, and I tried to adapt several different paradigms to address this central question. First, I looked at theatrical history and the emergence of what was known then as "realistic" acting. Arguing that film people were aware that melodrama had been abandoned, they would naturally want to emulate this new trend. I then looked at the narrative structure, and how these stories were told. I found the same kind of thing going on. There was a real emphasis on moving from a kind of stock, flattened sort of character to a psychologically rich well-motivated character, and that had to be reflected in the acting style that went along with it. I also wanted to look at the director and the actors, to account for individuality and experiences of specific actors and directors, and to see what each might have contributed. Finally, I tried to tie it all back into social upheaval and the kind of vexed nature of the film industry I have been talking about. The argument I ended up making was that this move towards realism and psychologically well-motivated characters had to do with a change that was taking place in bourgeois middle-class culture. These were the ways of creating meaning that were respectable in the sort of desirable circles of American culture. The film industry was making a conscious attempt to switch its performance style together with other systems of meaning, in order to appeal to this audience, to make itself respectable, and to distance itself from the marginalized elements of society.

The book on the Vitagraphs was about another studio of the time, and that book continues the trajectory I started with the biography book. The book also began with another moment of puzzlement about the very strange culture that I had immersed myself in. My co-author and I were at a wonderful silent film festival in Italy, where they were doing a Vitagraph retrospective. They had wonderful Vitagraph prints from all over the world, but they also had some films that were not so wonderful. They were literary adaptations, such as 15 minute, black and white, silent Shakespeare films. And there were a great many of them. There also were historical adaptations, such as *Napoleon, Man of Destiny* [the emperor's career in 15 minutes and 12 shots]. And there were others, like the five reel *Life of Moses*.

My colleague and I found these films so profoundly boring that we would go out in the lobby and have espresso. So, in fact, we did not see many of these films. But there was something perverse about the both of us that then forced us to write a book about the



films we had not seen and found very boring. We decided that they were, in fact, very exciting when we started to think about them. We decided that it was very weird that these films were made, in 1908 or 1909. If the film audience was not, in fact, working class, there was at least the perception that it was. So why on earth was Vitagraph making all of these high culture films? Well, there was an obvious explanation that comes to mind, which is that they were not making them for the people who were already in the nickelodeons. What they were, in fact, doing was making them for the kinds of middle-class people they wanted to reach, and that they were making them in order to be sure that they were positioned in the right place in American culture. That made sense, but we thought the real answer might be even more interesting.

Then, we looked at Shakespeare, we looked at a Dante adaptation, we looked at the Moses films, some films on George Washington, and the Napoleon film because we wanted sort of three different areas and discourses to think about. [I will just tell you about the literary stuff today.] If one thinks about Shakespeare in the period, it becomes very clear that Shakespeare was being used as cultural literacy in the same way that Alan Bloom and his contemporaries today have tried to valorize a certain notion of received culture. For instance, if you have got a bunch of very threatening, unwashed types getting off the boat at Ellis Island, flooding your cities, people who do not go to your churches or speak your language, what do you do? You give them Shakespeare because Shakespeare is crisp, sinewy Anglo-Saxon, as one of the commentators said. The plays have got great moral values, which will clean them up and acculturate them. That was obviously part of the motivation behind making these Vitagraph films. We discovered this by looking at the position of Shakespeare in American culture.

We also discovered, however, that most people did not really read Shakespeare, though everybody talked about Shakespeare, everybody knew he was a good tonic, but nobody really read him, even these middle-class types who were already respectable. Shakespeare was circulated very widely in the culture, in everything from advertising to writing tablets to calendars, and though everybody knew who he was, what they knew were the key phrases and the key scenes. They knew, for example, "Beware the Ides of March" from *Julius Caesar*, that Caesar was assassinated, and they knew who Mark Antony was. As it turns out, that Vitagraph pursued this same strategy. Not surprisingly, if one does a 15 minute film, they will choose a key scene that everybody knows. The really interesting thing is that everybody knew the scene, not just the middle class. It turns out that Shakespeare was so widespread--school curriculum, advertising--that he did not just circulate in this small segment of society. Thus, immigrants and working class audiences would have known about him, and for reasons other than from having it crammed down their throats in school. Immigrant bookstores carried Shakespeare, their theatres did Shakespeare, and in other words, there were all sorts of indigenous ways in which Shakespeare would have been known as well.

What is also interesting is that the Vitagraph sets closely emulated middle-class theatre presentations. This is even more fascinating when one begins to think of how the non-middle classes had learned about Shakespeare in live performance. As it turns out, there were a great number of immigrant aid societies that gave live performances, but they were often recitals or bare bones performances. It turns out that while the middle-class was getting kind of a spectacle, and was not really listening to the words, the lower classes were, perhaps, much more in tune with Shakespeare. As soon as one begins to unpack this historical moment and to question one's assumptions, it becomes absolutely fascinating.

Let me just finish up by just referring to the final book I am working on, which I believe will be called *Custer's Last Scene*. George Armstrong Custer has been one of the absolutely key figures in our culture. Even before he died in 1876, he had written for popular magazines, published a memoir, and was being written about in dime novels. He was a really fascinating and flamboyant figure. He continues down to the present day to be

recurrent in American culture. There have been five or six television documentaries just in the last year that dealt with him, or with the battle, or with the Indian wars of the period.

What I am really interested in is how racism is constructed vis-à-vis Native Americans, and how gender is constructed because, as it turns out, his wife Elizabeth, is a really central character in maintaining his legend. But the book is also about how history is constructed, and with this we are moving towards a third approach to film history, which could be expressed as the question: "How does film do history?" We are not speaking in terms of finding films, looking at them, and viewing them as some sort of transparent mirror on the culture, which as I have shown, does not work, anyway. What I am interested in is that film has to represent history. Film does not present histories, but history is always a construction of the present. I am interested in how film uses textual strategies to present history that are considered legitimate within a particular culture.

An example of how this works might go as follows: in documentaries on PBS, the Discovery Channel, Bravo--outlets that would be pretty similar in terms of their audience appeal, there seem to be different strategies for talking about history, and putting documentaries together. It is rather interesting to look at the ideological implications of those strategies. For example, one could talk about a great man, a Custer or Sitting Bull, and talk about them as the casual agents. Alternatively, as is sometimes the case, you can do a sort bottom-up look at the little man, and focus much more on the soldiers. Both of those strategies seem fairly common within popular representations of history. But there is yet another strategy that seems less common, and in fact, might be the kind of thing Sergei Eisenstein might have wanted to do. One could look at larger structural forces, for example, at westward expansion as a result of the economic pressure of the time. Occasionally some of these documentaries do this, but it is rare. It is very interesting to look at how film thinks about history and why film presents history in a particular fashion. This is something that historians are starting to think about, so there can now be some sort of dialog between people who do film history and people who actually do history.

HENRY JENKINS [HJ]: What I want to share with you today are some thoughts that have come out of editing a collection on the history of film comedy as a specific genre, a collection called *Classical Hollywood's Comedy*. I wanted to pose some questions about how we might write the history of a genre. One finds in practice there has been little historical work in film studies that really takes up the question of genre as a historical question.

Often there has been a tendency to flatten out history to come up with a quintessential model of genre rather than dealing with how that genre has changed over time. One of the things I discovered was that, when going back over an essay written by James Agee, the piece actually had more to offer than I had first imagined. In my introduction to *Pistachio Nuts*, I took issue with Agee for the degree to which he constructed a silent canon of four great comedians [Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon] and one great film maker, Max Sennett, and the degree to which he was totally unwilling to look at sound comedy.

I had seen him as someone who simply framed the canon that subsequent critics would write about and as someone who was generally hostile to the period I was most interested in. So I had sort of read him quickly in writing that book, and moved on. But I have since started coming back to look at writers who are outside of the academic tradition of film studies because I am looking for ways of writing about popular culture in ways that are accessible to popular culture, so I am drawn back to people like Parker Tyler, Gilbert Seldis, Robert Warshaw, and James Agee, who wrote in a popular vernacular about film. I can now say that they may have had more to offer than we were previously willing to acknowledge. I think the tendency was to draw a sharp boundary between the academic writing about film and "film buffery." But I actually think that as I began to work through the issues for the anthology of *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, I found myself in an ongoing dialog with James Agee. I want to pull out a few chunks of that dialog, which

piece together some notion of what Agee has gone through and what his contribution might have been.

I am going to begin with a passage very early on in the Agee essay, in which he describes the kind of non-verbal language of silent comedy. He goes into this thing about Ben Turpin's expression as an elaborate vocabulary of physical gestures. What he gets at in this passage is a tension or play between two things: on the one hand, a shared vocabulary of gestures and performance tricks, which are arguably the legacy of vaudeville as a performance tradition. On the other hand, there is the notion of the performer as virtuoso, the performer who is capable of moving beyond that vocabulary, instilling new values in it, defining new material that is uniquely expressive. He sees this as a dialectic between convention and invention, and between collective expression and personal expression.

What happened subsequently, he argues, is that only one side of that gets maintained. The tendency is to focus on the personal expressivity, and to ignore the degree to which the conventions have a history, and the fact that the conventions fit within larger frameworks. What he writes is that "those are fine clichés, but the man who could handle them properly--and combined several of the more difficult accomplishments of the acrobat, the dancer, the clown, and the mime--was the deeply conservative classicist who never tried to break away from them. The still more gifted men simplified and invented, finding new and deeper uses for the idiom. They learned to show emotion and comic psychology more eloquently than most language ever had. They discovered beauties of common motion, which are hopelessly beyond reach of words." He still acknowledges personal expression over the collective, but the personal expression, according to Agee, only makes sense in relation to this body of conventions that are in place.

I will argue that Agee is fairly late in articulating a set of discourses about comedy and laughter that come out of the vaudeville tradition in one way or another. The way in which vaudevillians copyrighted their acts, for instance, was by identifying one or two hooks or twists that their performance had that others did not, write them down and then seal them in an envelope at the Actors' Equity office. If there was ever a dispute over material, then the envelope would be opened, and one would evaluate whether or not your gimmick had been stolen. But the governing assumption was that most of the performances would be highly conventional and shared between the performers.

Another interesting passage in Agee speaks to what the role of laughter might be in this aesthetic. He says, "in the language of screen comedians, the four main grades of laughter are the titter, the howl, the belly laugh, and the boffo. The ideal gag would bring the victim up the ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees at the top rung, and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave, and brandish the ladder until he prayed for mercy." What I see in Agee's description of the different kinds of laughter is a technically specialized vocabulary, almost the equivalent of the apocryphal story about the Eskimo having different grades of snow. The point of this vocabulary is emotional intensification, emotional control, and the building of emotional states, and this specialized vocabulary gives you a way to talk about it.

What you find in Agee is that there is almost no discussion of narrative. Agee almost always talks about performance in isolated moments, or moments of spectacle, without an interest in an overarching framework. What happened after Agee when Gerald Mast or Donald McCaffrey start writing about comedy in the 1960s, the tendency was to value narrative continuity, character consistency, the kinds of traits that one would associate with the classical Hollywood cinema period. That becomes the criteria by which they are valued. The same canon holds, and the same set of four comedians remain the central ones written about, but in fact, these writers were very dismissive of moments in this film which cannot be narrativized. What is valued, then, is a particular moment, the 1920s, when Hollywood comedian comedy fits most comfortably within the reigning paradigm of the classical Hollywood narrative. This really becomes part of the way that mainstream Hollywood told stories.

Whereas Agee saw that comedy's greatest era was in the intensity of performance, Mast and McCaffrey saw it in terms of the complexity of the narrative. What has happened subsequently? What *Classical Hollywood Comedy* tries to do is to reintroduce comedy into some larger historical frameworks. In order to understand this as a set of norms that are in place [or esthetic conventions competing with one another], one side wins out over another at certain historical moments. What all other writers in this volume were trying to do was to look at how we might write a history of comedy as a genre. Coming out of that are a series of basic values. First, like all revisionist history today, it is profoundly distrustful of secondary texts, and is governed by a revisionist impulse that draws one back to the archive. Second, it looks at comedy in terms of a broader history of popular humor. Third, it broadens the corpus to consider films that fall beyond these four major figures of the era of the silent comedy. For example, as Charlie Musser notes, there is a whole series of tramp films in early cinema that Chaplin is drawing on when he constructs his own figure of the tramp. Fourth, you see comedy as part of a larger system of genres, which co-exist and offer alternative strategies for expressing related ideological tensions. It becomes tremendously important, for example, to talk about the interplay between melodrama and romantic comedy, or as I do in talking about *Unfaithfully Yours*, the Preston Sturges film, the play between *film noir*, melodrama, and comedy, and the degree to which many of these films merge multiple generic traditions.

I want to close then by suggesting a new way to revise the chronology of what Gerald Mast and James Agee offer. I am just going to present this in very broad terms. It essentially builds on the idea of a vaudeville esthetic, on one hand, and a more thoughtful laughter on the other. A more thoughtful laughter was embraced early on by critics at the moving picture world. The idea was that cinema should be tied to a middle-class sensibility around laughter, and the goal was a kind of careful welding together of pathos and comedy. The notion being that pathos would diffuse and balance out the other side of laughter, so with constantly shifting emotional tones, in the end, one comes up with a fairly restrained form of laughter. Laughter should not get in the way of storytelling, since the story is still the main thing and the gag is secondary. Given a choice between motivating the character or telling a joke not related to the character, the joke should somehow be yoked into the characterization rather than existing independently.

In the very earliest film comedies, we see that large numbers of them come out of the circus or vaudeville, where that esthetic of gag, gag, gag is present. As film comedy emerges and goes forward, people like Chaplin et al. become progressively enmeshed in classical norms of storytelling. What makes the 1920s a peak period for comedy is precisely the degree to which all of those people turn from a performance-based to a more narrative-centered aesthetic, while maintaining some elements of that earlier aesthetic.

With the coming of sound, new comedians come out of the vaudeville aesthetic into Hollywood. They have to be assimilated, they have to be accommodated, and as one watches the 1930s go on, we see the same pattern described above. Films went from being very performance-centered to being more narrative-centered. But almost destructively as the comedy was often completely subordinated to the story, and often the story was not very interesting because the same tales were told again and again. In the post-war period, there was a new self-consciousness about the genre itself. The kind of baroque period that influenced the Western or the melodrama or the *film noir* in the 1950s is represented in the comedian comedies of Danny Kaye, Bob Hope, etc. These comedic figures were pulled back to a more fragmented style but, with a very subconscious mixing of narrative and performance.

Today we have yet another generation of performers, performers who have come out of Saturday Night Live, SCTV, etc. These actors, who have come out of a performance-based or fragmented short sketch-based tradition, are now making longer films. In fact, one now sees a return to some of the practices of an earlier period, in terms of the comedian's disruptive role in the plot. For example, we have things like *Wayne's World*, which represents a series of gags that break up or disrupt the narrative to a high

degree. The other thing operating in the contemporary comedy is a hybridization of genres, which is true of Hollywood, in general. Most of the comedian comedies that have been successful over the last five or six years have also been horror films, or films of the supernatural, or of science fiction. Under the new model, we create disruption by having a man turn into a woman, or a white person turn into a black person, etc. In that sense, we justify the comic disruption with various elements of the supernatural.

One could trace through this process of attention going back and forth between a gag-centered esthetic and a narrative-centered esthetic as one meaningful way of creating a dialog about it. Romantic comedy, on the other hand, might seem to be the most narratively-based tradition. But what is interesting is that, even in a romantic comedy, it is possible to identify certain moments or certain performers who are stressing the virtuosity of performance. Romantic comedy has a different relation to performance, but the same tension plays itself out in romantic comedy as comedian comedy, with the proviso that romantic comedy has generally tended to be much closer to the mainstream of classical Hollywood cinema than the comedian comedy tradition. Thank you.

**QUESTION 1:** David Bordwell talked about manipulating the tension between characters in the frame. I wonder, though, to what extent are those techniques cinematic, and to what extent, are they are, more generally, theatrical? And how important is this distinction?

**DB:** I do not think we should be too preoccupied with cinematic specificity. From about 1950 to 1965, this very problem created a red herring in the field in a number of ways. Although it generated a number of interesting questions, it led to the concentration on certain creative options and film techniques that highlighted certain film makers, but, unfortunately, also excluded a number of others.

**QUESTION 2:** I wonder why there is not more of a crossover between theory and practice, and why more film makers are not writings and/or more theoreticians are not making films?

**DB:** There is a way in which we always draw inferences about artists' practices from the works, and we often do not have, in many fields--art history, theatre, painting--ancillary documents to tell us what artists planned or intended. But a lot of what I do assumes that there is a great deal of convergence of audience responses across time periods and cultures. For instance, Griffith, like all directors, wants to direct our attention to the salient narrative information. That seems true of any storyteller at any time. Though we cannot get back in Griffith's mind, we can contemplate what would be a likely end for him, and start to draw inferences from there.

**RP:** Basically the reason I do silent cinema is because the people are all dead, and I do not have to deal with them. But I will have to face people with my new Custer project. When one encounters a whole set of documentary films, covering the same event but in very different ways, one feels a desire to ask the directors and producers about their theories of history, to try to figure out why they presented the event as they did. But if you do that, they will look at you like you are nuts because people in the film business do not think that way. They think instead in terms of specific shots and technical stuff. You will have to draw out from those things what you are interested in. Hence, part of the problem between theory and practice is that there is a real disjunction between the two--a disjunction in motive, in practice, in technique, etc.--thus it is often difficult for us to talk to each other.

**HJ:** I would say that in many of the works I have done on the vaudeville traditions and its esthetic, many of the best insights I have gotten have been actually going back and reading things that vaudevillians were writing or saying during that period of time about their own craft. Part of what intrigued me about researching vaudeville was to find as many articles



in places like *Variety* that talked about what practitioners actually thought about the reigning esthetics in vaudeville, the goal of laughter, and what provoked laughter. I think that is partly what has allowed me to reframe my understanding of Agee's essay. By going from reading Agee as a critic, sort of removed from the process, to going back to the vaudevillians, and reading about how they thought about their craft, I learned a tremendous amount about how their goals might differ from the ways in which Hollywood film makers talked about their craft during that same period.

QUESTION 3: Have any of you thought about or written about the impact of war, specifically the First and Second World Wars, on film? I am particularly thinking of this, in terms of the issues that might have been raised by the emotional climate in this period.

HJ: There has been some work done in this area, but I have not done much myself since most of my work has been in the early sound period, and has thus dealt with the Depression as the dominant historical force. But the people working in silent comedy have started to deal with some of these questions. It would be interesting to think about the growing acceptance of what I call the "vaudeville esthetic" as being tied to a general recognition that release is a necessary model. This post-war attitude was, of course, very different from attitudes at the turn of the century when there was an on-going debate about whether jokes were socially dangerous.

QUESTION 4: It occurs to me that there is a distinction that needs to be made, one that perhaps has not been made clearly enough here. That is, the distinction between the study of cinema that seeks to reconstruct a certain set of conversations that people had among themselves, and a study of film that seeks to figure out how certain institutions and markets shaped the actions which film makers and audiences took. I wonder what you make of this distinction.

RP: There is always a tension there. Really what you are talking about is what we would refer to as "conditions of production" and "conditions of reception", the difference between what the producers are intentionally doing and the kinds of meanings that the audiences make of those intentions. As the wild successes and failures of Hollywood have shown us, producers' intentions can often vary wildly from the public's perceptions. What I tend to do in my own work is to look at that interesting tension, and try to analyze and explain both the consequences of producers' actions and audience responses to those actions. For after all, it is that tension which is most fascinating.

DB: I took your question to be posing what historiographers call the distinction between the logical individualism and the methodological collectivism. This is where, on the one hand, you have a theory that talks about agents and their intentions, and on the other hand, you have the theory that agents only function within institutions, and their goals are largely set by institutions. What I was suggesting is that film studies opens up a terrain for exactly this kind of debate. Though we do not yet have this, largely because people have not acknowledged that they have rival explanations and competing theoretical frameworks, it is time for us to acknowledge this, and a good start would be opening up this terrain within the field.

QUESTION 6: In the new way of approaching film studies that I have heard you talk about--a return to primary sources, a distrust of canons, a sensitivity to the way in which what is said in the primary sources is shaped by certain discursive inventions and codes--I am wondering what is in them that is inherently theoretical as opposed to simply being a careful, contentious historian. I wonder if this is just a defense against the claim that theory is good and creative, while history is industrious and mechanical.

DB: I think your point is well taken. If my sermonetta on question-driven research has anything going for it, it does suggest that one does not have to merge the two fields. If one has a solid theoretical question, and it is middle-level, maybe the kinds of answers will not entail any overlap into other domains. But I do think the synthesis is taking place. I think it is often forced and has a kind of Frankenstein's monster quality sometimes. One of the things behind this notion of the fusion of history and theory is theoretical self-consciousness more than theoretical doctrinaire positions. The idea is that by posing an explicit question, you are factoring other things out. It is not theoretical in terms of subscribing to this or that particular body of doctrine. It is theoretical in the sense of a kind of intellectual self-awareness, which, I agree with you, excellent historians have always had, but which some people believe, film historians have not always had.

HJ: I see the phrase "theoretically informed history" as meaning a bit more than window dressing. It seems to me that one of the things that theory provides is a way of moving between different levels or domains of analysis. If one works within one level of analysis, it may be possible to provide an interpretation that does not depend on a theory of society, but when moving between levels of analysis, certain theoretical models become tremendously useful in terms of teasing out broader implications of the phenomena I am examining. It would be hard to do the work that I do without having some theory of narrative, of performance, or of taste. Those categories seem really important to me, in terms of how we think about how to do a social or cultural history of the cinema.

DT: Thank you to our speakers, and thank you all for coming.