

## For a comparative film studies

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**ABSTRACT** *The paper argues that the comparative approach to the study of modern cultural forms should be founded on the common experience but divergent histories of the development of a capitalist mode of production and the impact of its reformatting dynamics on social, including cultural, relations. The paper then goes on to explore and propose a number of probably inevitable theoretical frameworks and tools to implement a comparative approach to the study of a thoroughly industrialized cultural form, such as cinema and films.*

**KEYWORDS:** Comparative cultural studies, comparative film studies, industrialization of culture, film theory, cultural theory, cinema, post-colonial studies, modernization theory

### Prelims

The turn to cultural relativism that accompanied the questioning of the established, mainly modernist, Euro-American theorizations of cultural dynamics, was in many respects both inevitable and salutary.<sup>1</sup> Especially if cultural relativism is seen for what it is: an initial move preparing the ground for a better theorization of cultural dynamics, capable of taking into account the different layers of determination and functioning which the previous theorizations could not, or did not, discern sufficiently clearly, being trapped within the confines of their own socio-cultural horizons. In that respect, the problem with Western cultural theories is not, or should not be, that they are Western, but that they fail adequately to take into account that they are shaped and bounded by the very social-economic factors that make the West into a pertinent geo-political or, better, geo-historical field. In other words, what is wrong with Western theory is not that it is Western, but that so much of it fails to realize that it is Western. Alternative modalities of cultural theory, marked and bounded as they are by other geo-historical formations, are not necessarily better or less limited. The real challenge is to find a way of overcoming the limits that any intellectual paradigm suffers from by virtue of, necessarily, being elaborated within a specific geo-historical field. In other words, the challenge is to find ways of overcoming the limits of any cultural relativism, any fetishization of geo-political boundaries, and to elaborate a cultural theory worthy of the name. At present, cultural theory, wherever practised, must be regarded as still mired in its prehistoric phase, precisely for being incapable of coming to terms with its own historicity. A breakthrough in cultural theory analogous to the achievement in physics of a Mendeliev table of elements or, in biology, of DNA profiling (metaphorically speaking, the construction of the DNA sequencing of cultural formations) is, unfortunately, unlikely as long as the financial resources required for such a project are withheld. Those resources will continue to be withheld for as long as religious modes of thinking about social and personal relations benefit the current power-elites. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl concluded after a detailed investigation of the ways in which literature became a national literature in Germany between 1830 and 1870, neither the emer-

gence nor the erosion of the bourgeois concept of culture can be correlated linearly with the development of organized capitalism: 'It was the interplay of capitalist organisation and state intervention with its rich potential for conflict, which gave rise to the formation that Adorno and Horkheimer were to characterise in the twentieth century as the culture industry. [And only] a new concept of industrial culture can offer a starting point for investigating the cultural change that occurred after 1870. Such a concept would have to begin by avoiding all culture-critical prejudices and debate anew the problematic correlation between the conditions of production (organised capitalism), social formation, and political struggle (state intervention)' (Hohendahl 1989: 334, 351). That is the context within which I want to pose the question of a possible comparative film studies, a project that must necessarily proceed by way of a collaboration between intellectuals from different geo-historical formations.

The precondition for such a collaboration is that the participants should be prepared to consider their own intellectual formations and thought-habits as symptomatic constellations shaped by the very same dynamics that animate historicity itself. To date, such a programme of work has been thought of, in my view correctly, in terms of the possibility of a historical materialist theory of culture. But in the same way that no theory has as yet been elaborated capable of reconciling Einsteinian physics and quantum theory, so there is no single theory available to us that is capable of articulating cultural dynamics with the socio-economic field. Reflection theory has been discredited for nearly a century, and its opposite, assuming a non-correspondence between the economic and the cultural, has, of course, merely muddied the waters. The long march to the theorization of cultural dynamics has barely begun, mainly because to date we have been able to identify only some of the directions in which we should *not* go.

The working hypothesis underpinning this call for a possible comparative practice of film studies assumes that cinema, a cultural form on the cusp of the economic and the cultural, is particularly well suited to provide a way into the question of how socio-economic dynamics and pressures are translated into discursive constellations. The second, perhaps even more contentious assumption is that cinema dramatizes the very processes of modernization understood as the differential encounters with capitalism underpinning what, in Marxist theory, is called combined and uneven development. The third, yet more risky hypothesis informing my own approach to these issues, is that there are two crucial questions to be addressed if we are to outline, however roughly, a map to orient ourselves on the long march. The first one is the further elaboration of a theory of subjectivity-in-history (with associated questions of individuation, modes of address, regimes of looking and so on). The second one is the as-yet still unasked question of how the transformation of physical energy into labour power, which is the founding dynamic of capitalism, happens to present itself in cinematic discourse. The problem underpinning a comparative practice of film studies would then be: how do cinemas emerging from within different socio-historical formations negotiate the encounter between capitalist modernization and whatever mode of social-economic regulation and (re)production preceded that encounter?

#### *From world literature to world cinema*

At the turn of the millennium, Franco Moretti published a stimulating essay in the first issue of *The New Left Review's* newly designed and numbered series: 'Conjectures on World Literature' (Moretti 2000). Now, in 2004, the *NLR's* publisher, Verso, has followed this up with a collection of essays edited by Christopher Prendergast called *Debating World Literature*. Although in publishing terms the book is triggered by Moretti's essay, which features centrally in Prendergast's collection, the editor claims that his book's point of departure is in fact Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres*, published in Paris in 1999.

However, Casanova's book is about the ways nation states competitively market their cultural productions. On the other hand, Moretti's essay, and Prendergast follows his lead in his introduction, regards the concept of world literature not as referring to national collections of marketable products or objects, but as a problem requiring a new conceptualization of the way literature is to be studied. That is to say, the notion of world literature is a theoretical question pointing to a series of problems in the way literature is studied and read. Prendergast's collection of essays provides a useful way into that theoretical problem.

The first thing to note about this problem for cultural theory (of which the theory of literature is one region) is the timing of its arrival on our agenda. Intellectuals have been concerned with the problem for many decades, even centuries (from Goethe and Marx to Auerbach, Spitzer and others) and the concern has even been institutionally enshrined in university departments of Comp Lit and associated journals, books and so on. Since the 1920s, that concern has been translated into adjacent academic fields such as comparative social history (Marc Bloch) and aspects of social anthropology. While Moretti acknowledges the importance of the work done in Turkey (by German émigrés in conjunction with Turkish intellectuals), Japan (Kojin Karatani and Masao Miyoshi) and the impact of Fredric Jameson's work, Prendergast notes that the concern with world literature as a theoretical problem takes the form of a swelling wave of interest in the areas of Comp Lit and Postcolonial Studies in the US, following in the wake of the El Niño effect known as globalization. The wave focused attention on the re-examination of national and diasporic public spheres in books such as Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996) and in numerous journals, including *Positions*, *Traces*, *Public Culture*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Boundary 2*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Social Text* and many others.

Much of the wave is taken up by the froth of ruminations about the spread and impact of electronic media, which makes the Comp Lit people feel neglected and unhappy. I share their unhappiness, but for different reasons. I have no wish to join the nostalgics for the Republic of Letters. The destructive impact of attributing too much cultural power to *litterateurs* of various types, usually a barely displaced way of installing a new priesthood, is all too evident in the role played by Lit and its Crit in Britain throughout the 20th century, and still today. The inhibiting and blocking effects of literature's domination in a nation's ideological state apparatus are also plainly evident in the history of French, British, German and American film theories: the centrality of debates around the triad of authorship, narrative and genre, together with an emphasis on literary and theatre-derived notions of performance and character, testify to that. This domination is now further extended, as Moretti correctly notes, by the apparent obligation imposed on (film) theorists to conduct their work in the form of close readings of individual texts. As Moretti writes, close reading as a strongly favoured type of engagement with texts, the heartland of which is currently in the US literary and publishing establishments, makes sense only if you think that very few texts really matter: 'If you want to look beyond the canon ... close reading will not do it. It's designed not to do it; it's designed to do the opposite. At bottom it's a theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously' (Prendergast 2004: 151). That is the context in which the current plethora of film books dedicated to single-text analyses has to be seen: a covertly anti-theoretical, theological exercise enforced by the power of an Anglo-US coalition for whom canons are an appropriate way of marrying religious modes of thinking to cost-saving marketing imperatives. It does not really matter which works are included or excluded from the canon. What matters is the maintenance and propagation of Canon Law, regardless of whether this comes in the form of best-seller lists or other listings or codifications (the 100 best of this; 50 milestones of that, etc).

In the current, early 21st century context, canons are no longer – or only incidentally – part of campaigns to exemplify aesthetic frameworks: classicism, realism, modernism, critical vanguardism and so on. Their use value has become transmuted into marketing value

and it is no longer even relevant to examine which items appear on the listings, as Peter Wollen does in a challenging discussion of canons<sup>2</sup> (Wollen 2002: 216–232) arguing that, in cinema, canonic listings performed a function in the spread of a modernizing (not quite modernist) critical paradigm. Instead, I would argue, they perform their authoritarian task enjoining us to consent to a theological mindset for which the commandments are promulgated by a journalistic-administrative priesthood in the service of the culture business.

However, the shift of focus from the literary to electronic media also has other nefarious effects for the time being and probably for the foreseeable future. The specialists in matters of iconic discursiveness, such as the historians and theorists of painting and other art historians, have as yet barely begun to think about electronic media as discursive practices. Instead, the field has been left wide open for the assorted peddlers of globalizing technohype. That computers can do other things besides combining telephony with calculators is still an unending source of quasi-mystical wonderment for most teachers and artistic practitioners of 'new media'. The vast majority of writing and exhibiting under the banner of new or digital media reminds me mainly of cargo cults and of the first Parisian spectators in 1895 who are said to have ducked in panic when they saw a film of a train arriving at the La Ciotat train station. I have no wish to contribute to the globalization soap opera which never seems to want to talk about exactly what is being globalized. An answer to that question has already been given some years ago by, among others, Jameson, when he pointed out that the issue is the ability of Wall Street, by way of the US Government, to project its power across the world in ever more varied ways. This is also why discussions of globalization tend to be so frustrating and misleading: it is an ideology that teaches us to forget history while equating capitalism as a mode of production with its contemporary US version. The globalization soap-opera encourages us to confuse the centuries-long dynamic of modernization, which describes the changes resulting from a social formation's encounter with capitalism, with the five decades-long process of Americanization. In this way, by substituting the taken-for-granted medium-term dominance of US capitalism for capitalism itself, as a mode of production with its own long-term history, it is the latter that is made to vanish from our horizon.

The late founder and director of the Rotterdam Film Festival, Hubert Bals, once remarked that he attached special importance to films that made mistakes in interesting ways. Moretti's essay stands as a theoretical equivalent of such films. It proposes extraordinarily suggestive mistakes, especially if we take it as an initial formulation of an intuition and systematically read 'cinema' where he writes 'literature'. Moretti begins with the formulation of something that he calls a Law of literary evolution: 'the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development, but as a compromise between a Western formal influence and local materials.' The materials that he has in mind – and he cites Jameson's introduction to Karatani's work on the novel in Japan for the purpose – are those that make up the fabric of social experience and which, in turn, are shaped by the socio-economic conditions put into place and managed by the institutional network that underpins and defines a nation state. Moretti then goes on to give examples drawn from the many studies that have charted the development of prose and particularly of the novel form in various regional and national cultures. In a footnote referring to the last chapter of his own *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (Moretti 1998), he gives three more such laws: 'the formal compromise itself is usually prepared by a massive wave of West European translations', 'the compromise itself is generally unstable' and, finally, that 'genuine formal revolutions' result from the successful matching of a foreign form to local social experience (Prendergast 2004: 152).

In terms of the cinema, a wave of translations is better envisaged as the international distribution and exhibition of (mostly American) films, dubbed or subtitled. Like translations, this circulation of films in altered forms of expression adapted to 'local' conditions is

often supported and subsidized by national governments seeking to derive prestige and profits from the export of the products of their cultural industries (or their industrialized cultures). In that respect, film distribution and exhibition confirm Pascale Casanova's view that nation states transform a selected range of cultural materials into nationally branded product-lines which are then competitively marketed abroad.

That such an approach has long underpinned the US film industry is particularly evident in the massive state subsidies allocated to the Hollywood companies (in the form of tax incentives, market research, protectionism, legalized accounting scams, publicly funded public relations and marketing campaigns, and so on), subsidies amounting to billions of dollars over the last two or three decades (see, for instance, Cook 2000: 11–14). In fact, Hollywood is by far the most lavishly subsidized film industry in the world. An early, amusing example of the US government's thinking behind this massive transfer of tax revenues into the pockets of corporate Hollywood can be found in a publication by the US Department of Commerce and the Office of International Trade, *World Trade in Commodities*. In the late 1940s (volumes 6 and 7) they issued a series of reports on the trade in motion pictures and equipment compiled by the US Government's embassies and consulates all over the world. The reports gave a brief history of motion pictures in their territories, especially from the industrial point of view, listed trade restrictions and opportunities, censorship issues and made a special point of noting the influence that Hollywood films could be said to have on the sales figures of US merchandise in the countries concerned. The films were deemed to be excellent advertising for the marketing of refrigerators, cars, foodstuffs, toys, fashion products and so on. The report on the Philippines in Volume 6, No. 3, dated January 1948, states confidently that 'as in the United States, the appearance of merchandise in the movies stimulates a desire to possess it' (US Department of Commerce and the Office of International Trade 1948: p. 8). However, most of the reports admitted that there was no reliable way of quantifying the impact of Hollywood's films on the sales of other commodities in the countries concerned. The point of this example, though, is that it draws attention to the fact that the US Government was not simply looking at ways of selling films and film equipment: the export of films is seen as having a multiplier effect on the sales of other US merchandise, even if there were no easy way of calculating it, and the sale of film equipment was seen as a way of preparing a local market, through the stimulation of local film production and exhibition, for all manner of US exports as well as for its films. This opens up a whole range of possible research projects into the 'real' profits accruing to US companies from the film industry as well as into the value of government subsidies to Hollywood. Instead of simply concentrating on tax credits and other financial measures or trade barriers within the US which channel public funds into the Hollywood companies, the public relations and market research functions performed by government agencies also need to be taken into account, not to mention the enormous sums devoted by cultural and educational institutions of all kinds to format the kinds of viewers and consumers required for Hollywood's products.

Moretti's Third Law states that the compromise between locally produced cinematic narratives and the formal aspects of the Hollywood models is unstable. In fact, the compromise between local material and foreign form is, as far as cinema is concerned, not particularly unstable. It yields many films, some very lucrative in their domestic markets. The films may perhaps best be described as products of an industrial cinema from which the most obvious American socio-cultural dimensions have been stripped away. In the most depressing cases, these films try to emulate and compete with Hollywood's productions or at least try to gain access to the US market by seeking to conform to (often naive) ideas about how Hollywood films function. In the more interesting cases, the cinematic narrativization of local social experience bears the stamp of its encounter with the forces that shape and energize the industrialization of culture locally. How the difference between those alternatives

can be read or assessed constitutes one of the challenges that a comparative theory of cinema will have to meet. Of all national cinemas, Hollywood displays the forms of industrialized culture most nakedly, perhaps because much of American culture has been shaped by the industrialization of US culture since the 1880s, with a second major 'formatting' wave in the 1920s and again in the mid-1970s and early 1980s (from the adoption of saturation release practices, massively promoted on television, to the synergistic growth of the video and music industries). In Hollywood, the fit between social experience and cultural forms is tightest, which also makes that cinema more difficult to decipher than films that adopt forms that fit less easily with the social experience they try to convey in industrialized forms.<sup>3</sup> And cinema, because of the capital intensive aspects of its production, distribution and exhibition, is by necessity an industrialized cultural form. How types of industrial organization and development are expressed in cultural forms must thus also become one of comparative cinema's main concerns. What *is* unstable is then not the compromise between local material and foreign form, but between local material and the transformative power and impact of industrialization itself, which is never simply 'foreign'.

Moretti's Fourth Law thus also needs to be reformulated if we are to avoid falling into the trap of equating American (Western) cultural forms with the forms generated by the industrialization of culture itself, that is to say, the forms generated by the encounter with capitalism. Hollywood's forms are generated by that encounter just as much as any other national cinemas. The formal aspects of, say, Thai or Indian or Chinese cinematic narratives are not (simply) to be measured against the way Hollywood does things. They are to be seen, just like the American cinema, as locally specific encounters with capitalism, rather than as simulations of the way that encounter turned out in the US. The problem is to sort out which of those local industrialized forms relate to the encounter with capitalism *by* and *within* the local formation, and which relate to an address or an imitation of the American models of industrial cinema. The currently hegemonic position of US capitalism, and thus of its cultural forms, should not blind us to the fact that, in the pre-Second World War period, the cinemas of reference for the modernizers in many Asian and Latin American countries were the French, Soviet or German cinemas, not the American one. Indeed, French and, to some extent, Italian cinemas offered the templates of modernity for the US cinema itself prior to the First World War, as Richard Abel has shown in his analysis of Pathé's role in the US before 1914 (Abel 1999).

The formal revolution Moretti has in mind does not come from the realization of any 'impossible programme' (Miyoshi's phrase) allegedly matching Western form to local experience, but from the elaboration of a form of expression appropriate to the local forms of content generated under the pressure of capitalism's drive towards the industrialization of culture. This is what is occluded in Moretti's First Law, stating that 'when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it's *always* as a compromise between foreign (Western) form and local materials' (Prendergast 2004: 154). No, it isn't. It is *always* as a compromise between local materials and capitalist modernization, and that is just as true in the West as it is elsewhere. Each culture moves towards modernity in its own way and at its own pace. Merely because the West has a longer history of doing so than many non-Western countries does not mean that the condition to which non-Western narrative forms move, is the particular compromise achieved in one particular Western country, however dominant it seems to be.<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is also possible that, in some cases, the Hollywood forms have been taken as the norm to be emulated, but this mainly applies to films made for export, that is to say, films expressly produced to try and reap profits in the US market. For the most part, when film makers extol the normative value of Hollywood films, they are merely using a convenient shorthand to refer to obscurely sensed aspects of those modern narrative forms generated by the industrialization of culture, a process that has formatted the West's cinemas for just over a century. In fact, what drives both Western and non-Western narrative

forms equally is one and the same dynamic: capitalism's re-formatting of social relations, that is to say, modernization. But as the social relations being re-formatted differ from state to state and region to region, so must the cultural forms generated by the industrialization of culture differ among themselves. The differences are programmed by local histories, the similarities are produced by the encounter with the same socio-economic dynamic as much, if not more so, than by conscious imitation.

This conceptualization of the ways cultural production has of negotiating modernization thus opens the way towards tackling cinematic narration in a comparative framework: how does the encounter with capitalism generate specific cultural forms in particular geographical areas? That question can then be reformulated as: how and by which social sectors are factors operating in a local history<sup>5</sup> formulated to render the specifics of the fabric of social experience in that locality. The answer to that question requires a multi-layered analytical investigation animated by two foundational theories: a still to be elaborated theory of semiosis capable of accounting for the connections between history and textuality, and one (at least one) theory of history as a process (for instance, historical materialism or, for short, Marxism, especially as revised in David Harvey's brilliant book, *The Limits to Capital*, first published in 1982).

#### *The comparative question for cinema*

When asking the comparative question in relation to cinema, a number of conceptual 'magnetic' fields suggest themselves as areas for research, profiling the gateways to areas of investigation likely to produce an understanding of how and why particular cinematic forms (both of expression and of content) obtain at particular times in specified, more or less state-regulated, zones of film production. The theoretical intuitions required as starting points for a comparative project are fairly easy to identify. Much of the work has been done already and the main initial work is to elaborate new sets of connections between aspects of familiar theoretical paradigms.

For the required theory of history, I have already pointed to the Marx/Harvey nexus as a good starting point, probably to be complemented by the economic histories of Giovanni Arrighi and Robert Brenner as well as that of the Regulation School of economic analysts and the historians who, following the likes of Fernand Braudel, D. D. Kosambi and Romila Thapar, take such analyses seriously into consideration when producing histories of specific social formations.

As for the required theory or, more likely, theories of signification, the issue is perhaps a little more contentious. First, there is no need to embark on a critique of reflection theory as the assumed direct mirroring of text and context has been discredited decades ago by the Russian and Czech formalists. What does need to be addressed is a fairly basic critique of the notion that representation involves a substitutive relationship in which one thing stands for another.<sup>6</sup> A return to aspects of C. S. Peirce's work, first put on the film studies agenda by Peter Wollen in the late 1960s, provides a useful way forward. We have to begin by abandoning the prevailing misreading of Peirce's work which alleges that he identified three different types of sign: the index, the icon and the symbol. Instead, we have to understand Peirce as talking about the three dimensions present in any given sign (but present in differing hierarchies of prominence). Then the door opens towards a type of textual analysis that can treat signs as partly representational (through their iconic and symbolic dimensions) and partly non-representational (in their indexical dimension). The latter does not involve a substitutive relation, but one of expressive contiguity, profiling an ontological connection between sign and referent. A first theoretical exercise then suggests itself: identify the three dimensions of any given film image by specifying the indexical, iconic and symbolic relations at work in the image.

The second theoretical domain to be mined in the Comp Cinema Project is Louis Hjelmslev's set of distinctions as reformulated by Christian Metz (Metz 1974: 208–212): the distinctions between matter, substance and form of both expression and content, constituting six further dimensions. In particular, the distinctions between the substance and the form of expression and of content appear to hold great promise for the comparative project at this stage, especially in light of Roland Barthes's identification of the cultural codes (substances of content) as one of the five codes structuring narration (Barthes 1975: 184). The combination of Peirce and Hjelmslev, spiced up with Barthes, then allows us to explore the iconic, indexical and symbolic dimensions of the substances and forms of expression and content of a given film text. Of course, such a bricolaged combination of elements from different theoretical configurations is open to all manner of objections connected with the particular selection of theoretical tools from each framework. For example, to ignore Peirce's notion of the interpretant as a defining element of the sign while retaining his identification of three dimensions of signs may be seen as an unwarranted truncation of Peirce's semiotic theory. On the other hand, I see no particular need for fidelity at this stage since my aim is not to argue for a Peircean way into the problems posed by a comparative approach to film studies. I do not need to accommodate Peirce's notion of the interpretant because this would lead me to the verbal, dictionary-definitions of semantic signifiers. The need to take Peirce's interpretant into account may return when the question of inner speech is raised as a dimension of signification, that is to say, when the thought processes that accompany the orchestration of discursive functions as described by Jakobson (Jakobson 1988: 32–57) have to be considered in relation to primarily non-verbal signs. The relevance of particular interpretants will then depend on the modulations of the process of address according to the activation of what Jakobson identifies as the metalinguistic function. Peirce's interpretant operates as an element of a (linguistic) code interacting with what Barthes called the cultural codes and which, together, constitute the metalinguistic dimension of a text or a textual fragment (such as a sequence in a film).

There are also other difficulties that need to be addressed in greater detail if the route advocated here is to become practicable. One of the main issues in this respect is that a film's form of expression is itself an exceedingly complex composite amalgam of different forms: even the film's commodity form can change along with a number of its expressive codifications when, for instance, a film made in 35 mm is circulated on 16 mm or on video. In such a case, the musical, spoken and written linguistic forms, the recorded noise patterns, and so forth, mobilized in the text also change to a significant extent.

In this context, a rough example illustrating what my proposed bricolage might mean will have to suffice. The *indexical dimension of a cinematic narrative's form of expression* would be determined by the available technology deployed in the making of the film (indexing a particular kind of industrial organization, division of labour and investment flows). In this respect, an identification of the lenses used, the type of camera used, the film stock, lighting equipment, studio facilities, printing techniques, colour process, special effects and so on, would all combine to index a particular kind of industrial organization of production in terms of the value tied up in the machinery deployed. The indexical dimension of technologies also points to the need to distinguish between, for instance, the role and possible structuring impact of different kinds of capital: constant (equipment and raw materials) or variable (labour power), circulating (raw materials and labour power) or fixed (plant), not forgetting the importance of fictional capital (land, of course, but also the potential values constituted by dime novels, newspaper items, old novels and plays, songs and so on, which often acquire value only after having been transformed into the raw material of a script or story outline, at which time these items are transformed and fenced into private property domains liable to yield monopoly rents).

On the other hand, the use of sound in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and in numerous other Hollywood productions may, as *the iconic dimension of the form of expression*, alert us to the analogy with the use of music in the retail trade, as in boutiques and fashion shops, whereas the older convention of discreet background music would iconically evoke muzak in elevators and waiting rooms. This iconic dimension of the form of expression could further signal, at *the indexical level of the substance of content*, the industrial psychology work that led to the widespread adoption of such silence-killing devices and to the manipulative public relations ideology underpinning such research. An example, for instance, would be to research the approach to music manifested in the cue-sheets and scores for silent films and to examine whether this changed (as I think it probably did) with the development of industrial psychology and the spread of public relations strategies as manifested in initiatives such as the BBC's music-while-you-work programmes initiated during the Second World War.

*The iconic dimension of a film's form of content* may alert us to the analogy between, say, the narrative structure of Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and a television programme such as *Hill Street Blues* (early 1980s) as well as the design of shopping malls catering for a range of niche audiences or shoppers. In other words, we not only need to learn to identify the iconic, indexical and symbolic dimensions of substances and forms of content and expression, we also need to consider the probable connections between these various dimensions as they interact within the same text.

Perhaps this point can be clarified further with the example of Greimas's semantic square, for a time adopted by Jameson for the purpose of textual analyses. The square is an analytical tool to delineate the structure of a text's form of content, that is to say, the structure of its underlying structural blueprint: the symbolic dimension of the form of content. In a film such as Im Kwon-taek's *Chihwaseon* (South Korea 2002), this form is structured by way of oppositions between public/private and state/individual. Individuation is further associated with disorders of various kinds, such as drunkenness, emotional instability, intense suffering, destitution and geographic destabilization (nomadic-ness). The indexical dimension of such a form of content refers us to an ideology that bears some resemblance to a similar ideological formation in Europe, later characterized as Romanticism, and conveys a similar set of ambivalences regarding individuation, which is dramatized in terms of an ungovernable emotionality that is both positive and painfully disruptive of the social order. Indexically speaking, the semantic structure of Im's film tells us that in South Korea today, like in Europe some 200 years ago, individuation is experienced as a painful problem. At the same time, the almost stereotypical attribution of emotional instability, unpredictability and drunkenness amounting to a condition of regrettable social dysfunctionality is still routinely practised in Hollywood films as well as in the writings of a Bukowski or a Henry Miller, indicating the stubborn persistence of pre-modern ideologies also in the United States and elsewhere in the West. Except, of course, that in those Western instantiations of dysfunctional (but positively valued) individuation the state, the public and the private spheres are positioned differently in relation to the Greimassian square (often consumerism, religion, or the military exemplification of social order provide the suggested alternatives that profile the field of tension for the drama). Iconically speaking, the ideological substances of content (the substances out of which the selected forms and terms have been chiselled, so to speak) resemble the ideological configuration known as Romanticism in the West. However, this is an analogical relation, which means that it is not at all the same thing: it just looks like it in a number of ways.

Another scenario is also possible, as happened with the emergence of Realism in India around 1900. When Indian intellectuals and artists developed an aesthetic capable of questioning the established order of things that faced them, they resorted to realism, whereas Western artists and intellectuals evolved, for the same questioning and critical purposes,

modernism. Obviously, modernist aesthetics do not resemble realist aesthetics. In fact, in the West, modernism was elaborated as a dialectical counter to realism, both as forms of expression (modalities of narrative causality, prose as opposed to other discursive forms and so on) and as forms of content (realism was deemed to espouse an affirmative or at least a fatalistic, passive, politically quietist ideology). However, at the symbolic and indexical levels of both Indian Realism and Western Modernism, these two currents both mark a process of individuation and critical questioning of a perceived ruling order. Indexically, they both refer us to specific processes of social change connected with the development of capitalist modernization. This does not mean that Indian Realism (a tendency exemplified perhaps by a Raja Ravi Verma) can be equated with European Modernism, even though aspects of them are functionally analogous. An iconic relation connects the symbolic and the indexical dimensions of the two aesthetics's forms of content, but *not* of their forms of expression. That is to say, both aesthetics perform similar functions within their respective social formations. By resorting to a bricolaged fusion between Peirce and Hjelmslev, comparative possibilities are concretized, which detailed conjunctural analyses of aesthetic configurations – however structural or deconstructive – cannot provide, ensconced as they are in the intricate differentiations and dynamics that allow us to understand the modalities in which Ravi Verma's or Cézanne's paintings operate in their respective socio-historical and aesthetic environments.

The combination of Peirce and Hjelmslev thus offers a way of envisaging a film's relation to economic structures, the range and type of technologies available, the circulation of different types of capital involved, the ideological configurations that must be in place for these particular forms and substances to be able to structure the filmic narrative, and so on. In short, different aspects of the text acquire, through their expressive-indexical dimension, value for something that could be called a forensic or an archaeological reading. That is to say, a kind of reading that Conan Doyle attributed to Sherlock Holmes and is currently most widely practised in medicine, both regular and forensic, although Kosambi also mobilized it for the purposes of historiography. In addition, such a reading would be able to identify the longer term social dynamics that over-determine the kinds of shifts and mutations chronicled, for instance, as formal renewals in the writings of Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynianov on the evolution of literary – or cinematic – styles. In this context, the detailed research conducted by David Bordwell and his colleagues on the so-called classic American cinema provides useful clues.

A third theoretical domain to be taken into account is Roman Jakobson's identification of six functions of discourse, especially if enhanced by Emile Benveniste's distinction between *histoire* and discourse. This conjunction offers a most useful way into the analysis of modes of address. Jakobson's work appears to be capable of suggesting how the conjunction between Hjelmslev's and Peirce's dimensions of discourse can be orchestrated into a textual fabric organized around intricate shifts of emphases among six overlapping axes of address. Moreover, the analysis of shifts and reverberations between functions of discourse, Peirce's three and Hjelmslev's six additional dimensions of textuality is likely to yield an insight into the way meanings can migrate from, say, an indexical dimension at the level of the form of expression to an iconic dimension at the level of the substance of content or an iconic dimension as the level of the form of content. In other words, the analysis may begin to show how the representational aspects of a text may be conditioned by their non-representational aspects, and how regimes of address orchestrate (energize and regulate) the dynamics at work in the textual fabrics. This is why I would like to suggest that, at this initial stage of the project, the most productive way into the problems of comparative cinema studies is by way of an analysis of a text's mode of address.<sup>7</sup> The subject positions thus identified would then, in the light of a forensic reading, be mapped (analogically, indexically or symbolically) onto the actual social subject positions (interest groups) in

contention in the social formation that presided over the formulation of the text in question, a procedure that would be able to place the text as a 'field' dramatizing the tensions between historically attestable positions occupied by different interest groups and to ascertain the vectorial impetus underpinning the text. In other words, such a reading would be capable of identifying from which historical position the text is primarily (never exclusively) enounced and in which direction, towards what kind of society, the text seeks to pull or push the addressee.<sup>8</sup>

This brings me to the fourth theoretical constellation that has to be mapped into the field of comparative film studies: Freud's identification of four processes of distortion in dream work seen through the prism of Walter Benjamin's notion of fantasy. It may be useful to quote from Benjamin at some length at this stage. Noting that Marx had already dismissed the idea that conditions of life were reflected in ideologies, Benjamin wrote in his notes for the unfinished *Arcades Project*: 'The economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure – precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the contents of dreams, which, from a causal point of view, it may be said to "condition." The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its life. These find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening' (Benjamin 1999: 392). This is also the context within which Benjamin developed his theory of dialectical images: 'It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object. And *this* situation is always so constituted that the interest is itself performed in that object and, above all, feels this object concretised in itself and upraised from its former being into the higher concretion of now-being (waking being)' (Benjamin 1999: 392). A little later, after quoting a passage from Marx on the way individual machines merge in the production process into a collective machine capable of continuous production, Benjamin wrote: 'Film: unfolding of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today's machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film' (Benjamin 1999: 394).

That film texts relate in some way to the historical dynamics which preside over their production has been commonly intuited for many decades. That they do so primarily by virtue of the indexical aspect of the formation of their substance of expression and their form of content is a hypothesis worth pursuing, as is the certainty that the translation from the real to the text, whether expressively or representationally, must be subject to the four distortion processes identified by Freud as being responsible for structuring fantasy and dream texts (displacement, condensation, secondary elaboration and conditions of representability).

One of the consequences of adopting that hypothesis is that it becomes possible to differentiate between two distinct, although related, levels in texts where fantasy processes are at work. At the level of *the substance of content*, a menu of culturally determined fantasy scenarios – ideological paradigms of a sort – exert pressure on the way networks of ideas are knitted together into secondarily elaborated ideological or philosophical frameworks or semantic fields underpinning the orchestration of a particular 'form': the particular version of the fantasy performed by/in the text. This is evident, for instance, in the late 19th century central European version of the Oedipal scenario so notable in Freud's writing, involving servants and other aspects of the prevailing division of domestic labour in bourgeois households. At the level of a text's substance of expression, what counts is the way that physico-sensorial aspects of cinematic signification are transformed into menus of expressive procedures. Examples would include, for instance, the recourse to special effects emphasizing iconicity over indexicality or expanding the range of possible actorial gestuality by means of stunt doubles, suspending actors from wires, using digital editing or amplifying the sound-track.

The selection of such procedures constitutes a substance of expression that operates as the carrier of another kind of fantasy scenario. For instance, a techno-fetishistic fantasy relating to a desirable corporate-industrial organization of film production may thus come to 'double' the oedipal scenarios at work in the narrative of a film such as the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999). Going one step further, it is probable that it is the relation between these two distinct levels of fantasy embedded in, respectively, the substances of expression and content, which accounts for whether a film 'clicks' with a contemporary audience or not. On the other hand, historical changes (cultural shifts or changes in personal maturation) might highlight alignments or discrepancies between these two levels, which remained unnoticed by contemporary audiences targeted by a given film's marketing strategies. In this respect, reviews, if read symptomatically, often contain a kind of *plumpes denken* commentary on whether the two fantasy orchestrations are deemed to be in the proper alignment for a given economically significant consumer group.

Peter Wollen (1998: 83–84), who was the first to draw film theory's attention to Peirce and Hjelmslev in his pioneering *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* first published in 1969, identified a telling example of this kind of *plumpes denken* in an essay on 'Architecture and Film' reprinted in his book *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film*. He notes how studies of film architecture seem to gravitate unreflectively towards the small group of films that feature architecture as 'star'. Focusing particularly on Dietrich Neumann's book *Film Architecture*, published in 1996, Wollen quizzically comments that:

what comes across from Neumann's selection of great 'film architecture' is that it is clustered in the genres of dystopian science fiction, horror and crazy comedy. Architecture as star represents criminal lunacy, pathetic farce or untrammelled despotism. With this in mind, it seems strange that architects themselves should be attracted by this vision of their art, even if it makes them the centre of attention! (Wollen 2002: 208–9)

The apparent contradiction relates to the discrepancies between two layers of fantasy at work in the films concerned. The fantasy generated at the level of the substance of expression stimulates the positive appreciation of the architectural designs; the fantasy underpinning the formatting of the substance of content does indeed suggest criminal lunacy, pathetic farce or untrammelled despotism. The former fantasy layer, because it is anchored in the substance of expression, makes a 'positive appreciation' possible through its – indexical – implication in the economic aspects of film production. The bulk of the films singled out where architecture features as a star (*Metropolis*, *L'Inhumaine*, *Aelita*, *Just Imagine*, *Things To Come*, *Lost Horizon*, *The Fountainhead*, *Blade Runner*, *Batman*, *Dick Tracy* and so on) are all very expensive productions mobilizing the industry's resources to showcase 'what cinema can do' when it embarks on prestige projects designed to make loads of profit (even if this intention is not always realized on the films' release). These films constitute a celebration of the film industry's corporate financial as well as cultural power, even if, at another level in the text, such power is presented as problematic.

At the level of the substance of expression, it is what might be described as the film industry's own criminal lunacy (its spectacular displays of corporate power deploying massive resources, mostly acquired by fraud, sharp practice and unfettered greed), pathetic farce (evident from just about any account of the production of 'big' films) or untrammelled despotism (by factory bosses, financiers, bureaucrats and their representatives on the studio floor and, in aspirational forms, by the way film makers address viewers) that is being celebrated by way of the spectacle starring architecture. From the industry's point of view, all these things are positive features of the great achievements of the culture industries and operate to the greater glory of the hegemony controlling the industry's resources. Hence the prominence given to the quantity of resources used in the marketing of such films. Architects such as Neumann simply disregard the substance of content fantasies

(which betray a populist ideological strategy) and appreciate, perhaps intuitively, the role allocated to architectural design in the 'real' display of corporate power underpinning the populist rhetoric decrying corporate rule. In that respect, Neumann's celebration of films starring architectural design is similar to the corporate support extended to, for instance, Reaganite rhetoric against 'big government': Reagan's backers and those hoping to profit from his election realized that the populist rhetoric merely masked a drive to increase corporate power and even bigger government. They were not shooting themselves in the foot by backing him. Quite the contrary. Similarly, Neumann was right, in a *plumpes denken* kind of way, to intuit that regardless of the populist rhetoric deployed against corporate power by the 'star architecture' films, these were, in fact, celebrations of corporate power at the level of the 'indexing' and display of the expressive resources so spectacularly on show. In these films, the two levels of fantasy operate simultaneously but are, from one point of view (Wollen's), somewhat out of ideological alignment. However, from another point of view (Neumann's), the fantasies conveyed through the way the industry's self-celebratory image is indexically encrusted into its substance of expression, easily outweigh any importance one might attach to the 'surface rhetoric' bad-mouthing the totalitarian aspects of the very untrammelled, despotic corporate power shamelessly spectacularized by the industry itself. These films celebrate the power, both cultural and financial, of the industries that produced them, in the same way that Vicente Minnelli's *An American in Paris* (1951) or Cecil B. De Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934) celebrate the resources at Hollywood's disposal, or as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) celebrate the triumph of corporate America simply by signalling, at the level of the expressive means deployed to make the film, that if you like *that* kind of cinema which so ostentatiously relies on the central control of masses of labour power and gigantic quantities of dead labour, you cannot object to the kind of social relations that must be in place to make it. By the same token, it is nonsense to make a film bemoaning, say, the arrival of electrification in a rural place: there is little point in making a film that conveys a wish to remove the very possibility of making or showing films while with the same gesture foisting rural innocence on the location prior to its encounter with nastily disruptive modernity. In such a case, it would be more honest not to make films at all.

Similarly, most disaster movies and post-apocalypse movies celebrate, in the very display of productive resources that constitutes the 'spectacle', the kind of organization of social relations that is on course to create the joyous spectacle of global mayhem. 'Blockbusters' and the mainstreaming of exploitation cinema as a business strategy (as opposed to the occasional 'epic' celebrating the joys of monopoly production) not only signify the rule of finance capital over the film industry: they also demand that we, the viewers, take delight in finance capital's utopias. The films acknowledge that there may be some rotten apples in the barrel of finance capital, but the decent chaps have our interests at heart. The kind of social organization of labour that can bring us Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) or Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998) and even sell us wars (as in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, 2000) may have its flaws, but isn't it hugely beneficent and worthy of support? Films do indeed speak with a forked tongue, and, as Peter Wollen was probably the first to realise – remembering his arguments in appreciation of the formal(ist) qualities of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) – fantasies inscribed at the level of substance and form of expression often speak louder than apparent story-contents, the kind of thing that is given false prominence in plot-synopses and film journalism.

It now falls to the new discipline of comparative film studies to begin to explore, more systematically, how social-historical dynamics impact upon and can be read from films. Such a reading has to proceed with forensic care, paying attention to the ways in which, in different geo-cultural regions, films orchestrate their modes of address, the relations between the indexical, iconic and symbolic dimensions of substances and forms of content

and expression, paying due attention to the co-presence of a dual fantasy structure vehiculated by that network of signifying relations. The programme of work is vast and must be done, and discussed, transnationally if it is to make any significant headway.

## Notes

1. For an account of the belated arrival of modernism in cultural theory, see Huyssen (1986: 178-221)
2. Peter Wollen argues for the symptomatic value of canons in terms of the aesthetic frameworks they convey. However, he does not take into consideration the socio-economic frames within which those ideological moves take place. This allows him to note that 'postmodern' film theory is derivative and 'seems unclear about its aesthetic commitments' (Wollen 2002: 232), rather than noting, as the situation demands, that the use of 'postmodernism' signals an inversion in the relations between aesthetics and marketing. Whereas previously canonising labels were devised with an eye on the need to propagate and market a particular aesthetic, the label 'postmodernism' announces the triumph of marketing over aesthetic considerations. Henceforth, the problem is no longer what one sells, but how much profit can be made from selling whatever it is. Consequently, it can be said to 'seem unclear about its aesthetic commitments'.
3. The issues become even murkier when we take into consideration that the US has been, and continues to be, dominated by anti-modernist forms of modernization, as shown by T. J. Jackson Lears (1981). In cinema, especially, the American people continue to be shielded from the quintessential modern experience of having one's screens occupied by non-domestically produced films.
4. It is also debatable whether Hollywood's films are considered as models to be emulated. In fact, Hollywood's 'global' empire only encompasses about 10 countries, which yield over 80% of its foreign earnings, and the only Asian country among them is Japan. No doubt, Hollywood is currently making strenuous efforts to occupy the screens of China and India as well, but as Charles R. Ackland noted, the globalization thrust attributed to the mid-1990s was in fact the solidification and intensification 'of long-standing routes of cultural commerce' (Ackland 2003: 30). In other words, to quote Ronald Reagan, as far as globalization is concerned 'you ain't seen nothing yet'. What seems more likely is that non-American film producers very much want to make the same piles of dollars that US media conglomerates say they are making, which is not at all the same as wanting to emulate Hollywood films.
5. Examples would be the procedures of state formation, the particular ways in which social relations are transformed and the resistances to that transformation, the particular dynamics involved in the shift from pre-modern modes of surplus appropriation to capitalist production, the transformation of people's physical energy into labour power, the competition for power between different fractions of capital and so on.
6. Since writing this paper, I have come across a challenging essay by Jane Gaines, written a few years ago, calling for a similar reconsideration (Gaines: 2004).
7. See, for instance, Willemsen (2002: 167-186).
8. See, for instance, suggestive remarks in this direction when Chua Beng-huat (2004) seeks to read traces in films, records and television programmes of when and where in East Asia a particular text originated, was produced or its distribution trajectory.

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