COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

"INDUSTRY/TECHNOLOGY/ART:
NEW READINGS OF AMERICAN MEDIA"

March 17, 1988

Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Seminar Notes

"The Classic Style of the Hollywood Cinema"

Prof. David Bordwell
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University of Wisconsin (Madison)

"Teenpics: The Advent of the Teen-age Exploitation Movie"

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Boston University

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1

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This session of the communications forum took an historical
viewpoint of the use of film technology. Thomas Doherty focused
specifically on the emergence of the "Teenpic" in the United
States in the 1950s with discussion of the growing importance of
market research in the film industry, while David Bordwell
provided us with a survey of film style with emphasis on the
evolution of technology and the possibilities it afforded film-
makers, especially in the 1930s and 40s.

Professor Doherty presented us with a view of Hollywood in
the 1950s. He noted his particular interest in what he calls
"the seduction and the courting of the American teenager."
Doherty pointed out the long period of time it actually took
Hollywood to come to the realization that there was a market for
movies explictly for the teenage audience. Prof. Doherty noted
that Hollywood is "lax" in catering to the teen audience until
the late 50s with the release of the first authentic "teenpic:"
Rock Around the Clock.

Doherty cited Martin Quigley, Jr., the influential editor of
the Motion Picture Herald, in describing how Hollywood
characterized its audience before full-blown market research
techniques: "everyone who was not too old, too young or too sick
went to the movies." According to Doherty and others like
Howard T. Lewis of the Harvard Business School, the decision-
makers in the movie industry, namely the producers, depended
mostly on instinct, rather than market research, in gauging the
kinds of films people wanted.

Doherty traced the changing character of the studio
executive. By the mid-50s the moguls of the film industry, e.g.,
Cohn, Warner, and Mayer had been replaced by 50s-style
organizational men. Harry Cohn, for example, had prided himself
with having an instinct for identifying unprofitable films. The
executives of the new Hollywood were middle-aged men trying to
make decisions about the tastes of juveniles with very little
statistical or market research information behind them. Doherty
notes that "compared to other industries like the automobile and
fashion industries, motion picture executives still made
production decisions in a haphazard way." Indeed, it was not
until January of 1950 that MPA (Motion Picture Asscoiation of
America) created a department of research.

Doherty notes pleas from those like MPAA President Eric Johnston that Hollywood should devote more of its resources to demographics. In the meantime, communications theorist Paul F. Lazarsfeld concluded from his analysis of movie audiences in the the late 40s that the largest segment of the movie-going audience was twenty-five years old and younger. Yet Doherty was quick to point out that this contradicted the conventional wisdom of the day. MPAA still perpetuated the notion that movie-going was a family affair.

Even in 1950, Doherty remarked that people like Leo Handel (<u>Hollywood Looks at Its Audience</u>) were documenting the "ongoing juvenilization of the movie audience" and they acknowledged that moviemakers were ignoring their warnings. Doherty alluded to several studies that identified the "typical moviegoer U.S.A." was a teenager and were subsequently ignored by Hollywood officials.

Doherty believes Hollywood's "astigmatism" can be explained. First, Prof. Doherty alluded to the fact the film industry did not have a tradition of using marketing techniques as other industries had been using for years. It was not until mid-1957 that the first nation-wide study of the American motion picture audience was undertaken by the industry itself. Secondly, he noted that many professionals in the industry, e.g., producers, directors, and screen writers were more interested in persuing their own artistic sensibilities and were not about to be controlled by purely economic interests. The majority continued to create pictures for an audience that Doherty tells us "really did not go to the movies all that much: married adults with children."

In the late 50s, even the trade press, e.g., <u>Variety</u>'s Quigley, Jr. started encouraging those in the industry to cater to the 15 to 25 year old age group. Despite this call, Doherty notes that there were still hold-outs in the industry in the late 50s like producer Sam Goldwyn who believed "in making pictures a man can take his whole family to see." Therefore, according to Doherty the industry faced a double-edged problem: how to make moviemakers recognize that the teen audience was crucial to the industry's economic future and how to "court" the teen audience successfully.

Doherty cites the success of producer Sam Katzman's "teenpics" as the start of the industry's real exploitation of the teenage moviegoer. Katzman produced the popular Rock Around the Clock that was released in 1956. Katzman's work in the area of "teenpics, according to Doherty," set the pace for others in the movie industry to exploit the teen audience with this new kind of motion picture.

Doherty traced the background of Katzman from his New York city, Jewish heritage to Hollywood. He is characterized as an ambitious, independent and mutli-talented young man. In the early 30s Katzman debutted with a low-budget film he wrote himself, starring John Wayne and filmed in six days. In twenty years he made over 350 films. Doherty describes Katzman as "one of the industry's most successful independents, specializing in disposable, low-budget fare with modest, but certain profits."

In 1946, according to Doherty, Katzman even billed himself in Monogram trade ads as a producer for "teenagers" and lived up to the title with the release of several films in 1946, including Junior Prom, Freddie Steps Out, High School Hero, and Betty Co-Ed. After the advent of TV, Katzman devoted himself almost exclusively to the production of "teenpics." Katzman refers to the audience of 1952 as "a new generation with the same old glands." His 1956 release of Rock Around the Clock, which took only one month to film, was, according to Doherty, the "first hugely successful film marketed at teenagers to the pointed exclusion of their elders." Its release proved to the industry that teenagers could sustain a box office hit. Although Doherty notes that most observers in the 50s saw the "teenpics" simply as a fad of the times.

Doherty acknowledges that Rock Around the Clock was a model of expoitation marketing for two reasons: it was the first film of its genre to be released and it had the best title. Katzman apparently beat his potential competitors to this fad by several months; it took others like American International Pictures, Distributors Corporation of America, Allied Artists, and Universal-International months to develop their own "rock n'roll" films. Katzman was even able to secure thousands of dollars in free radio advertising when he procured the rights to the catchy phrase--"Rock Around the Clock."

4

As Katzman's <u>Rock Around the Clock</u> garnered success at the box office, other film-makers jumped on the bandwagon. Doherty cited at least a half-dozen rock n'roll pictures that were completed by the end of 1956, including: <u>Shake, Rattle and Roll</u>; <u>Love Me Tender</u> starring Elvis Presley; the <u>Girl Can't Help It</u>; and <u>Rock, Rock, Rock !</u> Katman was even successful with a sequel released in January 1957--<u>Don't Knock the Rock</u>.

In showing us two clips from two movies of the 50s--Richard Thorpe's <u>Jailhouse Rock</u> (1957) starring Elvis Presley and Frank Tashlin's <u>The Girl Can't Help It</u> featuring Jane Mansfield-- Doherty showed the audience the difference between the "imperial" and "indigenous" strategy in movie making of the time. In these terms, <u>Jailhouse Rock</u> was labeled "indigenous" by Doherty because it aligned itself with the teenage subculture of the day. In contrast, <u>The Girl Can't Help It</u> represented the "imperial" model since it aligned itslef with parent, rather than teenage, culture. Doherty draws this "colonial" metaphor from the work of Edgar Z. Friedenberg's <u>Coming of Age in America</u> (1963) in which "parents play the imperial rulers, sometimes benign, sometimes oppressive, and teenagers the natives, sometimes acquiescent, sometimes rebellious.

In pointing out these differences across teenpics, Doherty wants to illustrate the different levels of sensitivity directors of the day had for the teenage subculture. For example, Doherty believes Tashlin's <u>The Girl Can't Help It</u> was nominally a rock 'n' roll teenpic, since the real focus of the movie seems to be Jane Mansfield's character. The video showed how this movie used a variety-type format to include the rock 'n' roll musicians, e.g., Eddie Cochran in to the movie, in contrast to integrating the performers in to the plot as is the case in <u>Jailhouse Rock</u>. According to Doherty, the latter movie, "validates the man and his music" especially in is visual presentation of Elvis, e.g., the elaborate choreography, the long takes.

The second speaker, Professor David Bordwell is the author of what has become the classic in the study of film: <u>The Classic Hollywood Cinema (?corect title?)</u>. He focused in this session on the concept of "style" in the history of film. Bordwell noted that discussion of "stylistic history" is not common since a division of labor has usually led to "film theorists and critics use of the concept of style without much analysis (more interest

in interpretation of individual films), while film historians have done stylistic history without much sense of the historiographic options open to them." To frame his presentation he posed the question of styles relation to the commercial film industry and the technology it deploys.

Bordwell turns to art history for a model with which to discuss the stylistic history of cinema. Prof. Bordwell believes this is a natural thing to do since art history has a distinguished tradition of stylistic history. In doing this, Bordwell, unveils three models, none of which, he believes, has been fully exploited in film study. He also proposed to synthesize the two models in to a third model and illustrate this using a concrete case study of a familiar film--<u>Citizen Kane</u>.

Bordwell believes the first model of stylistic history he is proposing--"the individual-centered" model--is most appealing to common sense and the one that has probably occupied most space in mainstream film history. Bordwell explains that in this model stylistic change is conceived as springing from the actions of a single artist. In other words, the artist chooses to adopt prevailing conventions or forge new ones. According to Bordwell, the artist is faced with the challenge of picking a particular course of action, and reconstructing that historically bounded set of alternatives becomes part of the scholar's task. He alludes to Wolfflin's famous formula here--"Not everything is possible at all times"--to convey the point that choice is a constraint on individual action.

In Bordwell's opinion, this first model has dominated film studies for some time now. He notes that when scholars want to explore the relation of style to technology, this first model can also be used. Bordwell points to a couple of examples, including films like <u>The Last Laugh</u>, to illustrate how technology, e.g., the continuously mobile camera, led screenplay writers to construct scripts to utilize these emerging technologies. He notes how Perkins, in <u>Film as Film</u>, characterizes technology as offering "continually expanding formal means for the filmmaker."

Bordwell admits that this model is not without its problems. One of the drawbacks of the model is the assumption of a fairly small-scale task to be accomplished, whereas Bordwell believes technology usually functions at a broader level. Bordwell also

sheds light on the control of technology in making films in that technicians can innovate eventhough no need may be felt by the artist. In this vein, he cites the example of Eastman Kodak's development of a faster film stock in the 1930s. While cameramen and directors were eager to use the new film stock, the artist in many cases had little say about its use. Thus according to Bordwell, one can see the difficulties presented to the individual-centered model when technology enters the picture.

Another problem Bordwell sees with this model is its treatment of the decision-making process. In other words, he believes that a film's style can only be viewed as the result of individuals or "collaboration" up to a point. He uses the example of <u>Citizen Kane</u> to illustrate this point since he believes the film's style is more than the sum of Welles and his collaborators efforts.

The second model Bordwell proposes emerges from the work of Wolfflin who viewed stylistic development in art coming from within the medium--pictures influence pictures. Wolfflin proposed the "art history without names," an autonomous stylistic history. In discussing the history of film style, Bordwell also alludes to the work of Andre Bazin. According to Bordwell, Bazin sees the history of film style as "a conflict between the urge to fulfill the medium's true vocation--the recording of phenomenal reality--and an urge to impose meaning on reality through artiface."

Bazin's proposes three stages: a "primitive" style relying on the long shot, the long take and depth; a "classical" style that breaks the scene in to details using cutting and close-ups in shallow focus; and a sythesis in which the filmmaker uses staging and sound techniques to direct the viewer's eye while maintaining a "spatiotemporal unity." This latter style is reflected in the work of Welles, Wyler, and Renoir.

Bordwell points out the special nature of film like <u>Citizens Kane</u>. He cites Bazin's characterization of this movie as "a dialectical step forward in film language." Bordwell believes that both Bazin and Wolfflin would agree that some artists like Welles intuitively see ahead to what is the next logical development of the medium.

7

Bordwell is positive about this second model in that it comes directly to grips with stylistic features and makes sense at a macro-level. On the down side, Bordwell finds fault with its abstract level of explanation which often ignores finer-grained causal factors, and the models "teleological" bent which he believes makes it difficult to account for the heterogeneity of stylistic practices in film at any given time. Bordwell also points to the blurring of stylistic categories as a major difficulty in using this second model.

Bordwell believes that the contrast of the two models "springs from the variation in explanatory scope that each offers," although he believes that "each one must eventually work at several levels of generality." He characterizes the first model (the individual-agent account) as a "botton-up" approach since it starts with the discrete acts of the artist. He believes the second model—the impersonal style approach—works downward from the notion of style to be attained, to the individuals acts of decision. He believes that historians using different models should be able to argue about the pertinent causal factors in stylistic stability or change. He acknowledges that in practice most historians, includng Bazin and Perkins, do a little of both.

After finding positive and negative aspects in models one and two, Bordwell suggests adopting a third model that absorbs the two. He refers to this as the "institutional" model. Again, he draws from art history for inspiration. In his third model, Bordwell attempts to "locate film style within the overarching structures of production, distribution, and exhibition that embed cinema in a social formation."

In making this proposition, Bordwell hopes to retain what he calls the "crucial concept of supraindividual norms," and the concept of rational agent. Innovation in this model is described by Bordwell as "not the swerving from fixed conventions, but the activation of potentials not fully perceived by other agents."
In general, Bordwell believes the "institution" constrains, but to a considerable degree the institution "enables," stylistic development and individual action to occur.

Prof. Bordwell uses <u>Citizen Kane</u> as a vehicle to discuss how this third model might be applied. Bordwell notes the central role of supranormal norms. He uses Bazin as a starting point in

8

the discussion, but notes his disagreement with Bazin in two major areas. First, he believes Bazin is not sensitive enough to the stylistic context since he is focused on the macro-level. Bordwell believes that the technical procedures Bazin focuses on---staging in-depth vs. editing--really fulfill comparable functions. Bordwell particularly looks at how sound channels our attention in many of <u>Citizen Kanes</u> long-take, deep focus shots as in a theatre production. He also points out that the staging in <u>Kane</u> tends to be very frontal, more densely-packed and evenly spaced than would be necessary in a film that used more cutting within a scene. Bordwell believes that <u>Kane</u>, for the most part, operates within general principles of legibility, etc. that define mainstream Hollywooed style.

Secondly, Bordwell also believes there is more stylistic heterogeneity in history than Bazin would admit. Bordwell points to the work of filmmakers of the 20s and 30s,e.g., Llyod, Murnau, Browning, Ford, Stroheim as resources that were accessible in prinicple to filmmakers of the 40s like Welles in making <u>Kane</u>. Bordwell thus believes these films were not so much sources for Kane, but are evidence for its style as a normalized alternative practice permissible in the history of cinema.

Bordwell also discusses the role of innovation in the "institutional" model. He notes that in this model innovation is called for by the filmmaker to solve certain problems. Bordwell believes that this was the case in the makin of <u>Citizen Kane</u>.
He also believes that Welles was specifically brought in to Hollywood to innovate, since RKO was aware of his innovative work in radio. Bordwell believes that the influence of Toland's work on Welles may be overstated since Welles was already operating under "institutional" forces to produce something striking.

Bordwell finished his presentation with an overview of Toland's work in the area of innovation and how it transformed cinematographers into white-collar workers. Bordwell highlights the role of the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC), as an institution, in defining acceptable solutions to problems in filmmaking and as supporters of progress in technology. In other words, the ASC sought to impell the individual to define his uniqueness according to parameters laid out by the institution.

In the context of <u>Kane</u> some have criticized Toland as being too flamboyant. He has been criticized for flaunting his

artistry and going too far, and in fact, forgetting the purpose of serving the story. Bordwell noted that Toland devices like deep-focus were used commonly in the 40s, but were absorbed selectively without the long-take and static compositions of Kane.