

HISTORICISING THE MOVING IMAGE.

FILM AND THE THEORY OF CULTURAL FUNCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, historiographic research on American cinema has proliferated, situating individual films within the larger context of industrial, production, exhibition, and reception histories. This shift to a more complex understanding of film communication has been immensely productive. Yet it has also brought about a tendency to distinguish between a text-based 'culturalism' and an archive-based 'empiricism' of research, which regards the former as (mere) interpretation and the latter as generating 'reliable knowledge' (Bordwell). Taking *The Birth of a Nation* as a case in point, this essay argues that for both, cultural and empirical approaches to film history, the concept of functions that films are meant to serve has been a crucial presupposition. However, the various functions that films may have in different contexts have not yet been adequately theorised. In this essay, I offer a new functional model for film analysis which interrelates the hitherto distinct explanatory frameworks, pertaining to design, institutional, and cultural functions.

In the development of film and media studies, the 1980s saw a gradual shift from a hitherto dominant interest in theory to various forms of historical research and scholarship. This historical turn gave rise to different modes of historicising moving images: Textual, industrial, technological, and reception-oriented approaches proliferated and contributed to increasingly complex ways of conceptualising moving images.² However, for a number of reasons, a sense of crisis seems to have developed around the writing of film history. First, the concept of moving images has been constantly changing since the 1980s, as the digital revolution began to transform all aspects of film production. Increasingly, scholars have reflected upon the metamorphosis of moving images (grounded in photography) into the virtual space of computers (grounded in mathematics). This shift from analogue to digital theories of visual representation does not only question production and film aesthetics, it seems to jeopardise the whole field of film studies, which in itself only recently acquired the status of a full-blown academic discipline.³

1 This paper has benefited from comments by Eva Boesenberg, Winfried Fluck, Markus Heide, and Martin Klepper as well as the participants of the conference "Moving Images – Mobile Viewers: 20th Century Visuality" at Stuttgart and of the W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures at the Humboldt University, Berlin.

2 For instance, the 1980s saw the publication of seminal studies such as *Classical Hollywood Cinema* by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, or *The Genius of the System* by Thomas Schatz.

3 David Rodowick has made a convincing case for the continuing relevance of film theory and for treating cinema studies as a distinct academic discipline. He concludes that "neither television nor digital studies has emerged with a coherence separate from a grounding in film studies, and therefore critically understanding the evolution of film narrative and new variations in cinematic spectatorial experience still relies on the core concepts of film theory" "Dr. Strange Media" 1403. Yet other authors are more

Second, even though the historiographic discourse on moving images has become a field of growing importance and sophistication since the 1980s, here, too, a critical assessment prevails. Scholars like David Bordwell have bemoaned the dominance of interpretations or 'readings' within academic film studies as opposed to midrange research projects, such as on historical poetics. Furthermore, a growing debate has developed around the empirical foundation of historiographic claims, and attempts have been made to theorise and critique dominant forms of writing film history from the perspective of poststructuralism. Authors like Jenaro Talens and Santos Zunzunegui have emphasised the need for fragmentary histories and the necessity to question or rethink concepts like causality, continuity and the role of the document.

While these different debates about historicising moving images do not form a comprehensive discourse, they raise crucial issues for a reconceptualisation of film historiography which I would like to address in this essay. Firstly, drawing on recent interventions, I will discuss certain aspects of the critique of film historiography. My aim in this first part is not to reconstruct all facets of this critique but rather, more modestly, to point to a number of pertinent questions that have arisen from these critical assessments. Secondly, I will examine *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)⁴ as a complex case study that can demonstrate how historiographic arguments have evolved and changed – particularly in the fruitful interactions between film history and American studies. Thirdly, I will propose a heuristic model of historiographic work that combines a number of approaches but focuses on a history of functions. I will argue that functional theories of film are productive but have been hampered by overemphasising either internal or external functions of films, and that it may be more fruitful to differentiate between three analytical perspectives.

1. NOTES ON THE CRITIQUE OF HISTORICISING MOVING IMAGES

In his recent book, *Poetics of Cinema*, David Bordwell argues that film studies are dominated by theory-driven, or as he puts it, 'doctrine-driven' interpretations and readings of films. Instead of looking for implicit or symptomatic meanings, scholars should focus on midrange approaches such as a 'historical poetics,' which Bordwell understands to be an empirically grounded framework for asking questions about the construction and effects of films.⁵ This at times highly polemical debate goes back to the 1980s when Bordwell, together with Kristin Thompson, began to develop a – by now highly influential – neoformalist approach dealing primarily with

skeptical, cf. Lisa Cartwright, "Film and the Digital in Visual Studies." I am using the term 'moving images' to indicate the convergence of film, television, and digital studies, but the majority of my examples is taken from traditional scholarship on film.

⁴ *The Birth of a Nation*, dir. D.W. Griffith.

⁵ Cf. David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* 11–17.

questions of form, narration, and style. Taking on the tradition of 'readings' which emerged from New Critical practices of interpretation, Bordwell's crucial argument revolves around the status of theory that he sees as lacking internal consistency and film-specific relevance, claiming it to be primarily an interpretative framework intended to produce novel readings.⁶ Accordingly, in the late 1980s he bemoans

the present situation, whereby in many American universities film criticism is legitimated by virtue of the theory that underwrites it, not by reference to claims about the intrinsic value of cinema or even the strengths of particular interpretations. 'Theory' justifies the object of study, while concentration on the object can be attacked as naive empiricism.⁷

In spite of the sometimes overly aggressive rhetoric, Bordwell's focus on academic routines of producing interpretations rightly problematises the status of theory and the concept of empirical data. Hybrid aesthetic objects like film can be examined within different disciplinary contexts, so that it becomes necessary to ask what the aims, methods, and assumptions of the respective academic practices are. What is the status of theory in the context of these practices? In particular, what is the relation between theory and empirical data? Is the primary aim to produce novel readings, or should the research design aim to generate what Bordwell calls "reliable knowledge"⁸ about the object itself?⁹

In a related sense, a number of scholars argue that the history of moving images is too exclusively text-centred and consequently lacking in empirical breadth. Instead of focusing on texts and their meanings, scholars should expand their range of interests to include the great variety of archival resources. Recent publications have been making this pro-breadth argument, which, however, can be traced as far back as Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery's introductory textbook *Film History* from 1985. Most prominent in this emphasis on archival primary sources as the proper domain of film historiography is a recent collection of essays titled *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader* written and edited by

6 Cf. *ibid.* In the 1990s, Bordwell subsumed most interpretative work under the rubric of "culturalism" (ranging from the Frankfurt School to postmodernism and cultural studies). One of the strategic advantages of these approaches, as opposed to his project of historical poetics, was its 'user-friendliness' in the system of higher education: "Culturalism's closeness to 'cultural commentary' as practiced in journalism and belletristic essays renders it attractive, accessible, and highly teachable." "Contemporary Film Studies" 11.

7 Bordwell, *Making Meaning* 97. In opposition to this concept of theory, Bordwell proposes two major areas for his midrange notion of poetics; first, analytical poetics: "What are the principles according to which films are constructed and through which they achieve particular effects?" and second, historical poetics: "How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?" *Poetics of Cinema* 23. On the status of poetics, Bordwell writes: "Poetics is thus not another critical 'approach,' like myth criticism or deconstruction. Nor is it a 'theory' like psychoanalysis or Marxism. In its broadest compass, it is a conceptual framework within which particular questions about films' composition and effects can be posed" *Making Meaning* 273. For a critical contextualisation of neoformalism and cognitivism cf. Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* 526–556.

8 Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* 55.

9 This concept is clearly at odds with Jonathan Culler's definition of theory within literary studies as a mixed genre that "is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study" but, rather, designates "works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong." *Literary Theory* 3.

Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich, and Sharon Monteith. In the preface, the editors state that they want to propagate the “practice of historical film research,” since they believe that “students should not be given the impression, from early in their studies, that film history is largely about the processes of aesthetic development.”¹⁰

Thus, their collection assembles a large number of essays devoted to a mode of film historiography that does not put its emphasis on films as aesthetic objects or semiotic sign systems. Rather, it draws on primary sources to illuminate the numerous non-textual, or non-aesthetic, histories into which films can be integrated. Primary among these are industrial histories focusing on modes of production such as the studio system, domestic and international trade relations, or individual entrepreneurs and corporations. Connected to these industrial histories are the history of technology and the history of institutional interactions such as the Production Code Administration, or important court decisions related to censorship. Finally, work on the history of reception demonstrates the complexity and variability of effects that films have had on diverse audiences. Here, too, the emphasis shifts methodologically from a close examination of textual characteristics to historically specific primary sources and documents. Consequently, the editors feature work by authors like Douglas Gomery writing about movie palaces and the invention of air-conditioning, Richard Abel on the trade war between Pathé and Edison, or Jackie Stacey on Hollywood stars and the discourse about consumption in Great Britain during World War II.

One of the problems with research of this kind is that the crucial process of aesthetic mediation tends to become secondary when films are studied within primarily non-aesthetic discourses such as economics or politics. Yet, it is undeniable that the work on industrial, technological, institutional, and reception-oriented aspects has greatly expanded knowledge about the cinema as a cultural force, and that without this knowledge the emergence and transformation of textual or filmic characteristics cannot be adequately understood.¹¹ Thus the dominance of culturalist ‘readings’ is not just challenged by an empiricism *à la* Bordwell, it is also countered by the methodology and evidential base of traditional historiography.

However, the debates over the uses of archival sources, and the concomitant claims of producing factual knowledge, have also been criticised from the very different perspective of poststructural theory. Following Foucault, Ricoeur, and others, Talens and Zunzunegui, for example, have argued for a practice of critically investigating the notions of historical documents and events. Instead of postulating a transparent relation between historical event and its historiographic reconstruction, Talens and Zunzunegui emphasise the strategic arrangement of documents and events within the discursive logic of a posterior reconstruction. They argue against

¹⁰ Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich and Sharon Monteith, *Film Histories* viii.

¹¹ An exemplary case in the reader is Douglas Gomery’s work on exhibition (based on his book *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation*) which shows that the individual ‘film-text’ in the silent era often only played a minor role in a much more comprehensive mixed media show, as well as in the experience of a specific performance space – the “movie palace” *Film Histories* 93–119.

what they call “monumental histories” with their emphasis on great works, national cinemas, chronology and linearity: “In all cases, we are dealing with Histories of a positivist-based nature that presuppose the existence of the facts they describe prior to that same description, and that conceive the film historian’s task as one of bringing out the facts ‘as they really happened.’”¹²

Even though they concede that “a mistake of traditional histories was to confuse Film History with the History of films (or of authors), leaving aside the complex and versatile character of the cinematographic phenomenon,”¹³ Talens and Zunzunegui are making a case for fragmentary histories, favouring concepts such as plurality, discontinuity, and fragmentation as opposed to causality. While Talens and Zunzunegui therefore problematise, in a general sense, the different types of film historiography, and while they, too, argue against the primacy of aesthetic histories, one of their crucial points is to reflect upon the status of the document at the foundation of – and legitimising – the historiographic narrative. Thus, they highlight the concept of empirical evidence at the heart of the research: Does the focus lie on a text-based analysis, or does the research follow the plea for widening the scope of material, primary sources, and historical evidence?

2. MOBILITY AND MODERNITY: HISTORICISING “THE BIRTH OF A NATION”

In the second part of this essay, *The Birth of a Nation* serves as a case in point for historicising moving images. It can help to illustrate different models of film historiography within the context of American studies which have repeatedly returned to this film.¹⁴ I will concentrate on three influential and at the same time controversial arguments: that it represented the ‘birth’ of American cinema (the popular culture argument), that it placed American cinema into the larger history of racism (the racism argument), and, finally, that it must be seen in the context of imperial expansionism (the empire argument). After introducing these arguments, albeit as very rough sketches, I will assess them in light of the preceding section on film historiography.

2.1 THE ‘BIRTH’ OF AMERICAN CINEMA

The title of the film – changed, before its release, from *The Clansman* to *The Birth of a Nation* – has inspired continuous variations on the birth metaphor. With the advent of *The Birth of a Nation*, American film and, in-

12 Jenaro Talens and Santos Zunzunegui, “Toward a ‘True’ History” 21. Talens and Zunzunegui criticise that, on the whole, film historiography does not acknowledge the degree to which its findings are shaped and determined by the mode of textual representation. Instead, they argue for an anti-positivist stance which is based on a “narrativist theory of history that adopts, as a basic starting point, the idea that the very writing of History is not something exterior to History itself; on the contrary, it is the basic element of its configuration” *ibid.* 17.

13 *Ibid.* 27–28.

14 Lack of space does not permit me to go into the complicated relationship between American studies and American film. With regard to *The Birth of a Nation* it has indeed been fruitful, yet in a more general sense it may be viewed as a missed encounter; for an introductory assessment cf. Jonathan Auerbach, “American Studies and Film.”

deed, the story film as a new art form, is understood to have been 'born;' in these uses the birth metaphor refers to national cinema and the dominant tradition of cinematic story-telling. Yet, the birth of American cinema is predicated upon the exclusion and denigration of African Americans, i.e. on the birth of a white nation and a new concept of whiteness and in this use the birth metaphor relates to concepts of national identity. As Robert Sklar points out in *Movie-Made America*, a book that was first published in 1975, a recurrent opposition in the film's reception has been to see it as either a cinematic masterpiece or as a cruel example of cinematic racism: "Herein lies the issue about *The Birth of a Nation*: is it a work of racist propaganda or of consummate artistic skill?"¹⁵

Robert Sklar's argument developed out of the popular culture debates within American studies of the post-1960s era.¹⁶ Among the aims of these debates was the legitimization of cinema and popular culture as objects of study. Consequently, Sklar's 'culturalist' narratives revolve around the relation between art and mass culture as well as the interrelation of culture and national identity.¹⁷ According to Sklar, Griffith is perceived as a mature artist in control of the art-work, he is the epitome of an early *auteur*. Since he signals the emergence of a new art-form, he comes to signify a larger shift or reconfiguration within culture and the spheres of art. Perfecting certain cinematic techniques such as parallel editing that greatly accelerate cinematic storytelling, an intensified representation of mobility comes to be regarded as a crucial sign of modernity. On the one hand, the film is seen to establish the cinema as a serious art-form, thus reshuffling the cultural fields: It 'gives birth' to the story film as well as American national cinema. On the other hand, it modernises vision; forging a new film style and grammar, it creates a new sense of speed which in turn affects and moves the audience in new ways.¹⁸

With Griffith, innovation and the creation of a unique cinematic style are seen to reinforce each other: "He was the first to forge them [the new techniques] into a complete and original style of moving images."¹⁹ Yet, as Michael Rogin points out, he eventually comes to be seen as less of an innovator than someone who combined existing techniques to create a truly modern mode of representation: "Griffith created an art of simultaneities and juxtapositions rather than traditions and continuities."²⁰ Griffith thus contributes to the mobility and modernity of cinematic form and narra-

15 Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* 60. According to Janet Staiger, this controversy goes back to the earliest reactions to the film where contemporary reviewers claimed that it was possible to separate narrational and stylistic techniques from subject matter; according to Staiger, all subsequent debates over censorship vs. free speech can be related to this initial reaction; cf. *Interpreting Films* 139–153. However, in the early 1990s, this controversy no longer appears to be valid, as Scott Simmon concedes: "[...] *The Birth of a Nation* has evolved into one of the ugliest artifacts of American popular art" *The Films of D.W. Griffith* 105.

16 For an influential reflection on the paradigm shifts within American studies cf. Gene Wise, "Paradigm Dramas."

17 Cf. Sklar, *Movie-Made America* 48–64.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid. 54.

20 Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became" 157.

tion: He creates more flexible, mobile spaces, and he creates an intensified experience of narrative time. Yet, as Sklar makes clear, the so-called culture industry appears to represent a genuinely new cultural formation if a great *auteur* like Griffith can experience a dramatic reversal of his career (from prestigious and famous silent film artist and studio owner to financially and artistically washed-up recluse in the sound era): "Where, outside the hermetic world of Hollywood, are there comparisons to fit the first and greatest of American directors?"²¹ In the context of popular culture debates within the post-1960s American studies, Robert Sklar ultimately focuses on the difficulties of dealing with mass culture: "The question is still not settled. Whether art can be created in a setting where maximum profit is the primary goal remains an issue throughout the mass-entertainment industries."²²

2.2 AMERICAN CINEMA: 'BORN IN A RACIST EPIC'

The second context to be mentioned in this brief overview is the racism argument according to which the film is characterised by a strong degree of ambiguity. The modernised, accelerated logic of story-telling is counter-balanced by the historical theme and traditional, indeed, old-fashioned notions about gender. Yet, following the highly influential interpretation by Michael Rogin, what dominates the overall form is the interrelation of a modern vision with a modern/ised form of racism. As he provocatively puts it: "American movies were born, then, in a racist epic."²³ The modernisation and modernity of the film's vision is combined with a modern form of racism: the myth of the black rapist and a new concept of whiteness neglecting cultural or religious differences among immigrant groups in favour of skin colour.²⁴

This interpretation can be related to the ethnic turn within American studies of the 1980s and the growing importance of theories of identity emphasising interracial and interethnic relations. Rogin's examination of the representation of race is the most pronounced, and also the most complex, attempt to argue for the impossibility of separating cinematic masterpiece and racist message: "Virtuoso parallel editing climaxes the movie, but the aesthetic force of the climax is inseparable from its political message."²⁵ Rogin's argument thus cuts through the historical discourse of the film by claiming that the modernity of its form also characterises the contemporaneity of its racist message. The modernity of the film's racism lies in

21 Sklar, *Movie-Made America* 50.

22 Ibid. 49.

23 Rogin, "The Sword Became" 150.

24 Following Rogin and other authors, Linda Williams argues that Griffith reconfigures Harriet Beecher Stowe's Tom tradition to create a strong anti-Tom tradition in American culture based on the myth of the black rapist; (cf. *Playing the Race Card* 96–135. As Scott Simmon's shows, the film is a skilful and cunning ideological reversal of Stowe's Tom tradition: "In an audacious stroke, the film flips Stowe's masterful linkage of domestic sentiment and political argument on its head: Whereas Stowe's suffering mothers and violated women served to damn the institution of slavery, *The Birth's* suffering mothers and violated women damn Reconstruction ideals of equality" *The Films of D.W. Griffith* 126.

25 Rogin, "The Sword Became" 179.

its attempt to unify a heterogeneous old-stock and an immigrant population under a new concept of whiteness, and to dissolve former notions of distinction and difference: "*Birth* established film as a legitimate art, one whose appeal cut across class, ethnic, and sectional lines. The opposition between North and South in the film, as well as that between immigrant and native in the history outside it, had been replaced by the opposition between white and black."²⁶

2.3 GRIFFITH AND THE REPRESENTATION OF IMPERIAL WARS

In the third example of historiographic scholarship, Amy Kaplan's analysis introduces the empire argument: The film partakes in a cultural shift inaugurated by the footage on the Spanish-American war – which at the time, in the late 1890s, was a ubiquitous attraction – , coupling moving images with the spectacle of war and images of military mobilisation. According to Kaplan, the cultural desire behind these images is the imaginary of imperial expansion. Her argument is exemplary of a post-national and post-colonial phase within American studies in the 1990s which can be called the 'imperial turn.' Theories of identity emphasise and problematise concepts of the nation and of imperial relations within the domestic and the foreign sphere.

Kaplan postulates that the so-called Spanish-American War "surfaces at key moments of innovation in the development of American Cinema."²⁷ She goes on to argue "that imperial films provide the submerged foundation on international terrain for a history that charts not only the internal bonds of national unity but also the changing borders between the domestic and the foreign."²⁸ However, Kaplan argues that imperialism is not necessarily an explicit topic, rather it is embedded within, and signified by, the larger narrative of mobility. The appeal of the war films lay "in the spectacle of American mobility itself – in the movement of men, horses, vehicles, and ships abroad and in their return home. The films celebrate the capacity of military power and the camera to encompass the globe."²⁹ Consequently, she argues that Griffith and his cameraman Billy Bitzer (who had been active as a cameraman in the war) were not only influenced by representations of the Civil War, which they recreated from photographs and sketches, but that they also drew upon the more recent representations of the Spanish-American War. Thus the experience of imperial warfare provided American cinema with a distinct narrative structure and linked the domestic home front with the foreign battle-ground. According to this argument, American moving images are 'born' in the aesthetic and cultural logic of imperial warfare.

This brief sketch of three influential historiographic arguments about *The Birth of a Nation* may illustrate different ways of approaching

²⁶ Ibid. 156.

²⁷ Amy Kaplan, "The Birth of an Empire" 1068.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. 1069.

film history. In all cases the film is seen to be representative of larger forces and developments at the level of national cinema and identity. As a cinematic “masterpiece” it connects the value judgements of high art (e.g. the complexity of an individual style) with the critical assessment of popular and mass culture (Sklar). As a “racist epic” it irrevocably links the history of American cinema with the history of racism (Rogin). Finally, as an “imperial fantasy” it relates cinematic history with the cultural imaginary of expansionist warfare (Kaplan).

In terms of new interpretative paradigms – ‘theories’ in Bordwell’s derogatory sense – American studies have thus undoubtedly proven to be a creative and productive field. Scholars like Robert Sklar have been instrumental in forging a wider, more inclusive approach to the cinema. And in many cases of interpretative innovation, theories of national identity have served as a kind of ‘master trope,’ so that producing ‘novel’ readings is usually connected with new approaches to identity formation. Yet when it comes to analysing aesthetic objects closely, scholars within American studies are highly dependent on approaches developed in more specialised fields like film or literary studies (e.g. semiotics, formalism, narratology). As the discourse on *The Birth of a Nation* shows, historicising moving images often oscillates between a focus on the internal or the external functions of an aesthetic object. The focus on the internal functions of the ‘film-text’ is represented by Robert Sklar’s discussion of the birth of a cinematic language, of Griffith as the first American *auteur*, and by the discourse on *The Birth of a Nation* as a “masterpiece.” The focus on external (cultural) functions, on the other hand, is clearly dominant in the two more influential arguments I have sketched: Amy Kaplan’s thesis that the film’s imaginary partakes in a cultural logic of imperial expansionism, and Michael Rogin’s extrapolation of American film history from the representation of race.³⁰ In both cases, the relation between object and context becomes crucial. With the focus on internal functions, the emphasis lies on the object – e.g. style, film language – while external functions shift the focus to contextual aspects such as ethnic or national identity.³¹

Functional explanations of this kind are a productive way of combining micro- and macrolevels of analysis. Yet I want to argue that they have sometimes been hampered by being focused either too strongly on textual properties or on contextual factors. In some cases – Kaplan’s for instance – the choice of historical examples appears to be highly selective, and the interpretations often focus primarily on aspects in support of the ‘culturalist’ argument. More generally, the recurring reference to the birth metaphor reveals a tendency among ‘culturalist’ arguments to extrapolate a fundamental ‘law’ (like the inherent racism of American cinema) from a single example, thus making the argument vulnerable to attacks of empirical reductionism. As an alternative way of thinking about functions I will propose

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In his book-length study *Blackface, White Noise*, Rogin expands on this notion when he writes: “Four race movies – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind* – provide the scaffolding for American film history” *Blackface* 73.

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On the differentiation between internal and external functions cf. Marion Gymnich and Ansgar Nünning, “Funktionsgeschichtliche Ansätze” and Hans Ulrich Seeber, “Funktionen der Literatur.”

an approach that, instead of looking at two categories, considers three different though interrelated levels at which the issue of functions can fruitfully be raised. First, as an introductory note, and to emphasise that there exists no unified theory of cultural functions, I will sketch the emergence of the term function in the context of literary studies.

3. FILM AND THEORIES OF ITS FUNCTION

In the German academic discourse which has been instrumental for the concept of a 'Funktionsgeschichte' – i.e. a history of functions – theories about the question of functions emerged primarily within literary studies in the 1970s. Coming in the wake of the post-1968-movements, they were in part a reaction to the general notion that the study of literary and cultural objects should be grounded within larger social structures and thus be made more socially 'relevant.' In many ways, they signified attempts to refine the sociology of literature and culture, which had developed as a new and pressing interdisciplinary project.

Two different schools developed theories about the functions of literature that prefigure what, in more recent publications, has also influenced the concept of functions in film studies. On the one hand, the Constance School whose most prominent scholar was Wolfgang Iser, developed the idea of function around the concepts of fictionality and use. Iser and his colleague Dieter Henrich wrote: "A fictional utterance is directed towards its usage which in turn determines its function. Thus it is defined by the ways it shall be employed."³² Thus, they were interested in the question of how fictionality is determined by the specific uses to which it is put, and how textual structures could be seen to shape the reception process.

On the other hand, the idea of function was also taken up in the context of Critical Theory by scholars like Peter Bürger who connected their analysis of literature with the critical schools of Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer or Jürgen Habermas. Here, a major concern also revolved around the idea of use or consumption but, in contrast to the Constance School, the idea of a specific use value of art objects was more deliberately opposed to their exchange value which, as early as in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, was seen to have primarily damaging effects. In trying to assess the social functions of literature, Peter Bürger introduced the notion of literature as an institution, thus shifting the focus away from individual texts to the institutional context which determined and, in a way, policed the legitimate functions of literature.³³

Even though practitioners of the Constance School and the Frankfurt School had different theoretical premises and research agendas, they both argued that looking at functions would provide a way of connecting the categories of textual structure and social context.³⁴ Among the ques-

32 Dieter Henrich and Wolfgang Iser, "Entfaltung der Problemlage" 9. [translation by editor]

33 Cf. Peter Bürger "Institution" and *Vermittlung*.

34 Arguably, although the terminology was different, similar questions were addressed at roughly the

tions they raised were: How and at what level can the functions of texts be determined? How are textual elements such as style, narration, or form related to these functions? What is the relationship between function and use? Or, to put it in Nicholas Garnham's words, what is the "use value of aesthetic consumption?"³⁵

Within film studies one can also distinguish between two basic and theoretically opposed models of functions, both of which show strong parallels to the earlier ideas of the Constance and Frankfurt School. On the one hand, a text-based approach infers potential uses and functions from the design of the textual features. On the other hand, the potential functions are seen to be determined by extra-textual forces (cf. Illustration 1). The first approach was put forward by David Bordwell who has made a case for analysing films by adopting what he calls a 'design stance': "We ask: what purposes is the artifact meant to serve? How are those purposes manifested in the materials and structure of the whole? We offer, that is, a *functional explanation*: we analyse the artifact's overall form and explain it in light of the purposes we take it to be trying to fulfil."³⁶ Bordwell uses the terms purpose and function interchangeably, yet it should be clear that his basic assumption is remarkably similar to the Constance School as practiced by scholars like Winfried Fluck: The potential purposes and effects of films are inferred from their textual, i.e. material and structural, form. Or to put it differently: The functions that works of art are meant to realise within the larger cultural context are inscribed into their textual design.³⁷

The second approach is opposed to this text-based concept of function. In his study of alternative cinematic forms in the 1960s, David E. James makes repeated reference to the social functions of films. He does not focus on individual films but instead on the mode of film production which in Peter Bürger's model could be thought of as an institutional factor. James writes: "The direct and homologous relationships among industrial film's textual properties and the industrial cinema's social function all intersect at the capitalist mode of film production."³⁸ In a later passage, James explains the specific position of alternative cinemas: "Constituting an alternative practice as an alternative cinema, this register of functions [in the social unit] determines the filmic form, with alterity to the dominant mode being but one component in it."³⁹ In this case, textual properties are not understood to reveal potential functions but, on the contrary, the register of functions is determined and contained by a specific

same time by Pierre Bourdieu in his theory of cultural fields, and by Raymond Williams in his focus on institutions and cultural forms. Indeed, much earlier, in the 1930s, coming out of the Prague circle of structuralism, Jan Mukařovský had already developed a sophisticated theory of aesthetic functions.

35 Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation* 154. On the discourse about literary functions cf. the introduction by Gymnich and Nünning "Funktionsgeschichtliche Ansätze;" a critical assessment of different functional models is provided by Roy Sommer "Funktionsgeschichten."

36 Bordwell, "Neo-Structuralist Narratology" 203f.

37 Cf. Winfried Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre* 14 and "Sentimentality." Winfried Fluck has continuously refined his framework for a functional analysis, from an early focus on literature to an increasing inclusion of questions of aesthetic experience and visual culture, cf. Fluck, "Funktionsgeschichte."

38 David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema* 10.

39 *Ibid.* 23.

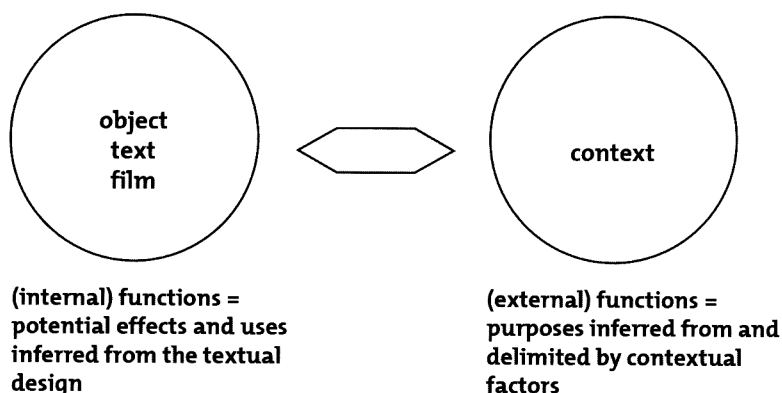


Illustration 1 Text- and context- based theories of function.

extra-textual force, namely the mode of production. While Bordwell links the concept of function with a *potentiality* that can be inferred from the design of the object, James emphasises contextual factors that control the range of design possibilities.⁴⁰

Both approaches undoubtedly yield interesting insights, yet it can be argued that there exists a tendency, on both sides, to overstate the respective defining category of text or context. In Bordwell's case what is missing is an indication of how the textual design and the contextual factors are interrelated. James, like Bourdieu, understands them to be homologous, yet Bordwell does not even mention this aspect of interrelation. The contextual approach, on the other hand, tends to neglect the heterogeneity of individual texts by subsuming them under a dominant extra-textual logic. Nevertheless I do believe that the concept of functions can be fruitfully employed to analyse and historicise the social significance of the cinema and would therefore like to present a revised approach that incorporates the two that I have just discussed. One of the crucial problems of the context-based approach has been to conflate two categorical issues that, for analytical purposes, should rather be separated. However, it should be clear that, as with the older approaches, this revised model can only be a simplified construct intended primarily for heuristic purposes.

Instead of looking at the dichotomy of text and social context I propose that we should employ a model of concentric circles which consists of three different functional levels (cf. Illustration 2): 1. design functions, 2. institutional or systemic functions, and 3. social or cultural functions.⁴¹

⁴⁰ In his materialist argument, James interrelates the mode of production and the film's formal characteristics in terms of a mainstream vs. alternative practices model: "The financial and technological resources employed and the social relations of a film's manufacture and consumption mark the limits of its formal possibilities, and indeed it is only in respect to the principles and conditions of its production and consumption that a film's formal properties may be understood or evaluated" *ibid.* 12.

⁴¹ Even though the category film/text appears at the centre of this revised graphical arrangement, it should be clear that this is not meant to imply a methodological hierarchy. The functional analysis can begin at, or focus on, any of the three levels.

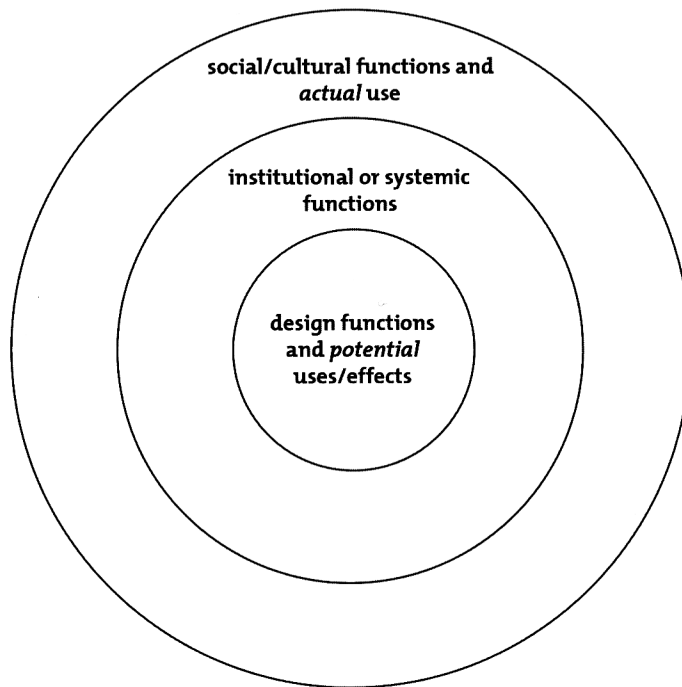


Illustration 2 A three-layered model of functional levels.

Following Bordwell, the first level of design functions relates to the purposes of the parts for the design of the object as a whole. From this design follow assumptions about the *potential* purposes of the object, or to put it differently, the *potential* functions are inferred from the (text-)design of the aesthetic object. The second level of institutional or systemic functions relates to the purposes of the design within an institutional framework that defines and regulates the production and dissemination of the object. In Bourdieu's terms this level could be called the cultural field. On this second level we are dealing, on the one hand, with the inference of potential uses and effects that the design may have, but also, on the other hand, with concrete systemic functions – e.g. the film as an economic investment or an instance of censorship.

The third level of cultural and social functions has to shift methodologically from text and institution into the realm of historical reception. At this level, we focus on the impact of the cultural object in a specific social and historical context. Only if we examine actual processes of decoding and reception are we able to understand why the same textual design may have different, indeed diametrically opposed, social functions in different cultural formations. While on the first level we are thus talking about potential purposes and uses, on the third we are looking instead at the use value

of aesthetic objects in a historically specific sense. Distinguishing between institutional and social functions thus not only emphasises the necessity of employing different methodologies, it also highlights the fact that assumptions about the social function presuppose a notion how the field of art and other fields or, as Jürgen Habermas would say, other subsystems like science and morality are interrelated.⁴²

This brings me to three final concluding remarks about this revised approach: First, the three levels are interrelated and interdependent: How we classify and assign the functions is predicated on our theoretical assumptions concerning the form and quality of this interdependence. More specifically, we should distinguish between theoretical assumptions about the interrelation of, on the one hand, text design and institutional context; and on the other hand, of the cultural field as a whole and other social subsystems. Bourdieu, for example, favoured structural homologues; Adorno retained the field of art as an autonomous, and indeed oppositional sphere; Raymond Williams, many years ago, argued for a democratic system of communication and exchange. Whatever we make of these different assumptions, the point I want to stress is that if we talk about functions, we should be clear about the form and quality of the presumed interdependence of the three levels that is guiding the analysis.

The second remark goes back to Jan Mukařovský's theory in which he convincingly shows that if we are using the terminology of aesthetic functions we must also acknowledge two complementary concepts: on the one hand the concept of aesthetic norm, on the other that of aesthetic value. Thus, the notion of a function implies a historical norm that governs the rules of its application, and that also serves as a gauge with which the effectiveness of the individual parts creating the whole are judged. The historical norm in turn implies not just the question of how successful the norm is being adhered to but how those parts that do *not* adhere to the norm are to be evaluated: The functions are judged against certain norms, and the object as a whole, with elements adhering to or diverging from the norm, is seen to possess a certain value.⁴³ In principle I would argue that distinguishing between function, norm and value should be applicable to all of the three levels that I have outlined.⁴⁴ Finally, it should be clear that, following Mukařovský, concepts such as function, purpose, use, norm or value are not understood to be static categories. Rather, they are seen to be dynamic and in constant historical transformation.

In conclusion, my proposal to draw on an analytical framework of functions for a heuristic model of historiographic research has different goals. It aspires to combine text-oriented, midrange questions with 'culturalist' questions, to overcome the opposition between text-based and archive-based forms of research, and to problematise productively the empirical foundation and validity of cultural studies arguments. To be sure, the proposal needs to be elaborated and refined, and it may create new

42 Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity."

43 Cf. Jan Mukařovský, *Kapitel aus der Ästhetik* 7–112.

44 On the importance of norms for questions of narration and style cf. Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* 11–55.

problems. The scope of research is enlarged rather than made more local and concrete. Furthermore, theoretical and methodological approaches for the three levels differ and may even be incompatible. Yet, as this proposal hopefully suggests, a framework of functional levels may help to create a model of historicising moving images that regards as equally legitimate and relevant the areas of film aesthetics, institutional or industrial histories, and cultural studies – thus aiming to overcome the clash between ‘culturalism’ and ‘empiricism’ that, to my mind, has become increasingly detrimental to filmhistorical scholarship.

In the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, a recent publication can be seen as an excellent example demonstrating a fruitful synthesis of textual analysis, archival research, and cultural history that is at the heart of my revised functional model. In his book-length study from 2007, Melvyn Stokes provides an in-depth examination of the film that is not just sophisticated at the ‘design level,’ it also manages to illuminate, in exemplary fashion, the intricate interplay between the film’s production, reception, and the broader historical context. In the spirit of the pro-breadth arguments mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Stokes criticises the dominance of the ‘masterpiece discourse’ on the film, stating that “most analyses of *Birth* have been grounded in an examination of the movie itself. Film scholars have at times seemed unaware of both historical research relating to aspects of the film’s career and the existence of archival materials.”⁴⁵ By a careful investigation of textual characteristics, archival sources, and historical discourses, Stokes then goes on to reveal how multifarious and richly complex the cultural functions of a single film may be – and how they can be historicised accordingly.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1: Text and context based theories of function.

Illustration 2: A three-layered model of functional levels.

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unter Mitarbeit von
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