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Refiguring the Primitive: Institutional Legacies of the Filmology Movement

Peter J. Bloom

ABSTRACT

This contribution examines how the discourse of “the primitive,” as an institutional point of reference developed by the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), influenced the establishment of the Institute of Filmology at the University of Paris in 1948. Filmology, a term introduced by Gilbert Cohen-Séat, is described as a positive science with its own strategy of systematizing the study of film as object and institution with its own series of emerging methods. The present article describes the formulation of the “filmic fact” as a positive science indebted to Durkheimian methods, but also as a means of engaging with the multiple strands of “primitivism.” On the one hand, this article elaborates upon the significance of Lévy-Bruhl’s discussion of “primitivism” as an effective cosmology for causation and related inferences which asserts a space of difference to be further explored, and on the other, it explains how “primitivism” has been used to designate historical and psychological attributes within the institution of cinema as an emerging structure of producing meaning.

Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article

The most durable and accessible record of the French post-war filmology movement is the *Revue internationale de filmologie*.¹ During the run of the journal from 1947-61, the director, Gilbert Cohen-Séat, published proceedings of two major international conferences and other public events, the ongoing work of research groups and significant academic articles on a wide array of subjects related to the intellectual study of film. Cohen-Séat’s earlier publication, *Essai sur les principes d’une philosophie du cinéma* (“Essay on the Principles of a Philosophy of Cinema,” 1946), introduced filmology as a positive science with its own

strategy for systematizing the study of film as object and institution with its own series of emerging methods.

Filmology was shaped by the philosophical language of debate in the humanities at the University of Paris, particularly the Sorbonne, where the Institute of Filmology was established in 1948. A two-year academic program with a thesis was established and organized around four areas of study: psychological studies, technical studies, general filmology and philosophy, and comparative studies. Cohen-Séat was the mobilizing figure serving as the chief administrator of the Institute, but not within the academic ranks of the Sorbonne. The coursework was in fact defined in relation to working groups whose ongoing research was reported and published in the *Revue internationale de filmologie* (hereafter referred to as *RIF*). Étienne Souriau, Edgar Morin, Henri Wallon and other well-known intellectual figures from a variety of disciplines taught courses at the Sorbonne and published some of their work within the emerging field of filmology.

Cohen-Séat adapted Emile Durkheim's concept of the social fact to establish the filmic fact as it bears directly on questions of signification and film language in particular films. He also posited the cinematic fact as an institutional mode of analysis that embodies the expressive quality of social phenomena. While these definitions were further defined and debated by participants along the way, nearly twenty years later Christian Metz cited Cohen-Séat (1946, p. 31) when he wrote that film constitutes its own form of writing which reveals the nature of unintended and shared meanings through its representation of conventional and more subtle forms of expression.² Metz also claimed that studies associated with filmology which examined the psychology of the film spectator were influential for his own work in that they demonstrated how conventional film language may not be taken for granted as being universally understood, especially by "children or primitive subjects" as he put it. That is, unless the film's plot and diegesis create a context for the syntactic structures at work in the film (Metz 1991, p. 41). Metz's manner of denoting other types of perceptual subjects, in collapsing children with primitive subjects, reveals how the syn-

thetic project of filmology appeared to create an inclusive universal discourse of critical analysis and research, particularly through the insights of social psychology.

This article demonstrates how the filmology movement is indebted to the theme of “the primitive” in three ways. First, I describe how the notion of “the primitive” is inferred by Cohen-Séat’s insistence on the “filmic fact,” which was based on the Durkheimian social fact and fortified by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s formulation of the “primitive mentality.” I argue that the “filmic fact” and the establishment of filmology at the University of Paris are directly indebted to the institutional strategy used to create the Institute of Ethnology in 1925. Second, I explore the use of the term “primitive” as part of an emerging psychological discourse within the filmology movement through a discussion of a developmental discourse as described by British colonial administrators charged with educational cinema on the African continent. Third, I explore the notion of the “primitive” in the sense of “primitive cinema,” or early cinema, as the moment prior to the establishment of institutional narrative codes. Noël Burch’s concept of the Primitive Mode of Representation serves as a basis for a discussion about teleological histories of film form and a conception of a simultaneity of difference. This short intervention is conceived as a semiotic excursion that seeks to reveal how the figure of “the primitive” informs the development of the filmology movement and its legacy.

In Edward Lowry’s informative overview of the filmology movement, which is also one of the few substantive English-language sources, he discusses how Metz describes the amalgam of approaches associated with filmology as initiating three phases within the emerging field of film study. Lowry (1982, p. 3)³ explains that Metz positioned filmology as definitively punctuating this first phase in its focus on the filmic and cinematic fact as eclectic and syncretic, which continues into a second phase with work that specifies the nature of narrative discourse in a language of film, with a third phase still to come. As Metz (1974, pp. 21-22) writes, it is the hope of a synthetic phase “. . . capable of determining the domain of validity of the different approaches and the articulation of different levels” that he

projects into the future. Dudley Andrew (2000), using the same unspoken reference to Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (*New Science*, 1730), which posits the existence of three ages of civilization as part of a recurring cycle, refers ironically to "The Three Ages of Cinema Studies and The Age to Come" to discuss the state of cinema studies and its accomplishments in the year 2000. Referring to civilization and the recurrence of the divine, the heroic and the human, he self-consciously describes film study as an emerging field not merely analogous with the metaphor of a civilizing cycle of discourse, but rather as the maturation of critical methods with which to understand the significance of film in the social sphere.

The developmental logic of cinema studies in North America has always been important to its continued expansion, but I would like to suggest an understanding of filmology in relation to the historical study of narrative conventions in cinema, pointing to assertions about a shift from primitive to classical systems of narration and related questions. Debates about the value of the classical Hollywood system as an industry-driven form of production and narrative regulation have established a number of important and well-considered positions,⁴ whereas the function of "the primitive," as in the idea of primitive cinema, has mostly taken on the form of a belated apology.⁵ The figure of "the primitive" from the perspective of the filmology movement and its advocates may allow us to grasp a discontinuous approach to narrative strategies of film representation. That is, to sense its multiple and simultaneous temporalities, rather than subscribe to a teleological understanding of cognition and film form.

In the third issue of *RIF*, John Maddison, a civil servant with the British Ministry of Information, published an article about the perceptual and psychological capacities of African film spectators based on the history of the British Colonial Film Unit in West Africa. The article also drew extensively on the long experience of William Sellers, a public health officer in Nigeria who was among the first to use film in West Africa to promote his work in the 1920s.⁶ At the conclusion of his article, published in French and translated here, Maddison (1948, p. 309) writes,

There is finally one point that I would like to emphasize: the use of special editing, a slow narrative “tempo” and other techniques necessary to address Africans lacking culture [is of critical importance]. The use of these techniques is not based merely on a difference of mind, but rather on the conviction that they have not yet achieved the same stage of development. Nonetheless, with time, the need for specialized techniques [necessary to address them] will disappear.

Reference to primitive structures of understanding was part of a post-war colonial policy of adult education. Arthur Creech Jones, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, was convinced that adult education was essential to securing the health of populations still under British rule. Employing strategies associated with the Mass Observation Movement, the British Colonial Film Unit developed into a media psychology experiment on the African continent. As Rosaleen Smyth points out in her detailed discussion of the history of the Colonial Film Unit, the initial lacklustre post-war program of “mass education” shifted towards a more dynamic vision of colonial film that included the training of African filmmaker-practitioners.⁷

Maddison’s paper was undoubtedly part of a policy debate associated with the 1948 British Film Institute conference, “The Film in Colonial Development,” and a conference on African Administration, where the paper “The Use of Cinema in African Administration” was presented in association with John Grierson’s belated return as Film Controller of the Central Office of Information (Smyth 2004, p. 430). If Maddison’s article bears the stamp of Grierson’s larger vision of mass psychology and colonial development by way of the idea of putting film into the hands of the colonized as a new instrument for their own development, as Smyth suggests, the inclusion of this article in the third issue of *RIF* is worthy of further exploration.

Henri Wallon, an accomplished professor of psychology at the Sorbonne who embraced filmology as an intellectual and institutional project from its very beginning, claimed that Maddison’s article reflected an important area of research associated with the filmology project, one that focused on psychological and experimental research. This area examined the relation-

ship between filmic perception and mass psychology, which often relied on statistical studies of perception. As an intersecting international field of study within psychology, it encompassed the German and French traditions of physiology in the tradition of Étienne-Jules Marey's Physiological Station and Institute and Wilhelm Wundt's experimental psychological laboratory at the University of Leipzig. It also suggests the influence of more statistically oriented media and mass psychology studies in the United States under the influence of German émigrés, particularly at the University of Chicago, who first arrived at the University of Michigan and worked with John Dewey in the 1890s. Many of these researchers at the University of Chicago were initially interested in levelling a critique against utilitarianism and utilitarian views of freedom and communication, but became directly associated with an American tradition of philosophical pragmatism (Carey 1996). In the case of media psychology, "the primitive" was transformed into the mass as an equation of classification, management and efficiency in which the individual is seen as a docile subject without collective agency.

Maddison's article may also be understood as a statement of British colonial policy during the post-war period. Adult education was seen as the precondition for decolonization and film technique as synonymous with an educational method. Narrative storytelling also refers to an important developmental dimension in our understanding of early cinema, often referred to as primitive cinema. The institution of cinema as a form of variable exhibition practices prior to 1908 typically refers to the presentation of films as fairground attractions, in music-hall parlours, popular urban theatres and nickelodeons, or integrated into vaudeville shows. In fact, the concept of primitive cinema has often been used to refer to that which has been lost through industrial consolidation and the disciplining of the film spectator through increasingly standardized exhibition contexts and the structuring of genres and storytelling conventions in the long march towards cinematic legibility.⁸

An important debate in the early 1980s, following Noël Burch's work on the Primitive Mode of Representation in rela-

tion to an Institutional Mode of Representation, contributed to an ongoing discussion of cinematic narrative form. This form has been described as alternating between the spontaneity of popular consciousness and an industry-driven domination of the public sphere which, in turn, structured popular expectations and became consolidated as classical narrative cinema.⁹ This particular debate also implied a certain universal structuring of the spectator and the processes of production, leaving to the side different perspectives. In other words, cinema became a synecdoche for modernity, such that “primitivism” could be appropriated through its claim to authenticity as in modern art, but the “primitive subject,” and “primitive perception” by extension, was positioned as lacking the ability to seize universal processes of human cognition. The opposition that I am drawing out here rests on the positioning of a primitive state of being within a civilizing or developmental process, and the referencing of primitivism as a critique of this teleological process of nominalization.

Underlying these debates about narrative form is a developmental and teleological narrative of cinema that achieved a certain consistency in its use of narrative methods. These methods turned the experience of cinema into an increasingly identifiable social and perceptual experience within its own historical horizon of producing meaning. This conception of “the primitive” has already been understood as deeply anachronistic given the multiplicity of non-Western media traditions with their own historical trajectories, which much recent scholarship has addressed. The implied opposition between primitive and classical, or the taint of developmentalism, has since come under greater scrutiny.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the term “primitive” carries an important historical and theoretical resonance which I would like briefly to spell out. This is partially because it is less than a clearly articulated presence, one indebted to a theory of mind mediated by the positioning of the filmology movement and an interest in the effects of primitive difference on narrative study as a perceptual question. The question is, how do we watch film, and how does the perception of the same film vary from one group of spectators to another? The more essential question,

however, has always been: who does the work address? That is to say, the work itself, such as a film, implies a mode of perception which attempts to structure the act of reception.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), the French philosopher best known for *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (published in 1910 and translated as *How Natives Think* in 1926) and *La mentalité primitive* (*Primitive Mentality*, 1922), deployed the figure of “the primitive” as a theory of mind based on temporality, opening up a new area of philosophically grounded inquiry by challenging accepted neo-Kantian notions of the universality of mind. *La mentalité primitive* was so influential that a debate was staged at the Société Française de Philosophie in 1923, where Lévy-Bruhl’s work was challenged from a number of quarters—including, initially, his erstwhile allies the Durkheimian sociologists, who questioned his description of a pre-logical mind existing prior to or concurrently with modern Western rationality. Although Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of the primitive mind has been misinterpreted in various quarters as a hierarchical vision of the human mind, he was in fact arguing about cosmologies for causation and related inferences in order to assert a space of difference to be further explored. This perspective challenged the universal fixity of mind and became a means of asserting a position that contrasted with the vanishing point of the scientific mind. As Cristina Chimisso (2000, p. 59) has explained, Lévy-Bruhl’s work provoked passionate reactions among historians of science in particular because they understood the scientific mind as the opposite of the primitive mentality.

Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of the primitive became the symbol of alterity within French philosophy, creating a bridge between philosophy and Durkheimian sociology that was later consolidated with the founding of the Institute of Ethnology in 1925, whose first director was Marcel Mauss. As a student of Léon Brunschvicg, an important late-nineteenth-century French philosopher whose work embodied the terms of “positivisme idéaliste,”¹¹ Lévy-Bruhl not only became established within the French philosophical community, but his work had a decisive impact on the direction of intellectual inquiry at the University

of Paris particularly given that the Institute of Ethnology was founded under its aegis. As Lévy-Bruhl (1925, p. 233) declared, “The University of Paris is about to add, thanks to the generosity of the colonial administration, a new Institute that already exists.” He explained that the Institute of Ethnology would address the need for well-trained ethnologists working from both a practical and a scientific perspective. The expression “total social fact” was first coined by Maurice Leenhardt but was given definitive form in Mauss’ writings on the formation of social bonds created through gift exchange. This formulation recalls Durkheim’s concept of the social fact as an inquiry into the social origins of logic, and of the ordering of time and space. The challenge to philosophical conceptions of mind, as embodied by Lévy-Bruhl, was shared by Durkheim. Durkheim’s work demonstrated how the study of “primitive peoples” could be used to make foundational claims about the nature of collective consciousness. The figure of the primitive could then be used to assert an emergent moral milieu of nations contributing to an ethic of internationalism and educational imperatives under the French Third Republic (1871-1940). It also privileged the study of primitive religion and magical rites and beliefs, inferring that the primitive roots of technology could be rediscovered. It was with this search for the modern self, through an isomorphic and developmental understanding of the historical past as represented by the primitive figure, that the psychological search for fundamental structures began as a response to despair over the effects of modern life.

Precisely this appropriation of the social fact in Durkheim’s work, transformed into what Cohen-Séat called the “filmic fact,” was used to initiate the filmology movement as an institutional project within the University of Paris in the post-war atmosphere of change and hope for a unifying approach to the humanities. In fact, Cohen-Séat self-consciously developed an institutional profile for filmology that closely paralleled the institutionalization of ethnology attached to the Sorbonne. The direct references to Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss were part of an institution-building project creating an intellectual platform for the study of cinema that was a unique intervention

into psychology and the social sciences. For this reason Henri Wallon, whose early work on the mirror stage was so influential for Jacques Lacan (Roudinesco 1990, pp. 67-71), understood that the filmology movement represented an array of approaches to uncovering psychological processes, the very processes that Metz found generative in the study of cinema nearly twenty years later.

As Wallon (1947a, p. 16) explained, “. . . cinema is in the position of catching up with the furthest reaches of historical memory through the ordering of space and time. In what Lévy-Bruhl called the ‘primitive mentality,’ a peculiar co-existence creates inconceivable coincidences of common beliefs.” By evoking Lévy-Bruhl, Wallon was referring to the universality of difference, analogous to the work of montage, suggesting that editing provides contrast and inversion as opposed to an evolutionary model of transformation. Wallon (1947, p. 32) links primitive modes of perception not merely to the advent of the magical but to a language of psychological description that can be best understood through cinema, with its construction of filmic space through the use of the camera and techniques of editing.

As Gregory Schrempp (1989) has suggested, Lévy-Bruhl’s intervention into the philosophical debate about the character and context of logical operations of the mind led him to the question whether there might be systems of thought which operate without the law of contradiction *pace* Aristotle. Aristotle claimed that the law of contradiction is a necessary principle for all other knowledge, whereas Lévy-Bruhl expanded conceptions of the Western anthropological self through his exploration of philosophical dualisms. This led him to conclude that the logic underlying different belief systems may ultimately prove to be as valid—or at least as legitimate—as any other, including Aristotle’s. The interest in Lévy-Bruhl’s work, as I have tried to show, is grounded in his understanding of the co-existence of multiple temporalities, something of great interest to French ethnography. Its interest also lies, however, in its view of the cinema as a means of joining multiple temporalities into a meaningful narrative structure.

As Cohen-Séat (1963, p. 11) later asserted, “We understand the ‘film fact’ [to be] the ensemble at each instant of a projected

movie, [consisting] of two indissoluble factors: the luminous area of the screen as such (sensorio-perceptive stimulus) and the immediate communication of the contents represented by the filmic image.” These explanations refer to an institutional strategy of debate as much as to an intellectual approach to the medium. A key element in the debate over the nature of the film fact relates to the question of ordering space and time. In this sense, as Wallon (1963) explains, “filmology is not the scientific or technical study of the cinema starting from the film achieved ... [on the basis of] an existing fact, it concerns itself with the reactions the film gives rise to.”

The psychological study of cinema as embodied by a tendency within the filmology movement is based not only on the notion of primitive people in a geographically remote location, but differential thinking and the positioning of cinema on the eve of colonial independence as a universal form capable of differentiating between modes of consciousness in search of a universal structure of meaning. It is in this sense that the multiple strands associated with the filmology movement implied a social and aesthetic diagnosis of difference that positioned the apparatus as an arbiter of universal consciousness. The filmology movement was the first to establish enduring structural categories that inform the nature of narrative mechanisms as internal to human cognition and to the modernity of cinema. With the decline of the movement, and a new emphasis on mass communication and questions emphasizing a Marxist-inspired cultural studies approach at the Agostino Gemelli Institute in Milan, the journal was renamed *Ikon* (Cesareo 1978). The movement continued to develop a semiotic approach to mass communications, media effects and strategies for understanding film and media as predictive of an emerging social psychology already present from the inception of filmology. It is the legacy of particular institutional debates in French psychology and the charting of different positions of perception that live on today in current debates now focused on teleological narratives of technology and the proliferation of new subjectivities with their own histories.

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NOTES

1. The *Revue internationale de filmologie* was published between 1947 and 1961, after which time it was continued as the Italian film journal *Ikon: Cinema, Televisione Iconographia*, the official journal of the Agostino Gemelli Institute, starting with volume 12, numbers 40-41.
2. Metz 1991 (p. 41).
3. Lowry was a student of Dudley Andrew who met an untimely death while still an assistant professor at Southern Methodist University. His dissertation, later published as this book, is the only reliable book-length source in English on the filmology movement. In this discussion he refers to Metz 1974.
4. A number of anthologies and multi-authored volumes in the field of film studies have addressed the question of industrial production and narrative regulation from different perspectives. A few key sources include Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985, Elsaesser 1990, Nichols 1976 and 1985, Rosen 1986.
5. As Kristin Thompson writes, "The term 'primitive' is in many ways an unfortunate one, for it may imply that these films were crude attempts at what would later become classical filmmaking. While I use the word because of its widespread acceptance, I would prefer to think of primitive films more in the sense that one speaks of primitive art, either produced by native cultures (e.g. Eskimo ivory carving) or untrained individuals (e.g. Henri Rousseau)" (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985, p. 158).
6. For an extended discussion of William Sellers' work in Nigeria see Larkin 2008 (p. 76).
7. For further discussion of this question see four articles by Rosaleen Smyth (1979, 1988, 1992 and 2004).
8. This argument is inferred by Noël Burch, and further developed by Charles Musser and Tom Gunning in their work on D.W. Griffith, but also developed in the historiography of film reception. Of particular relevance, see Noël Burch 1990.
9. For further discussion of these themes see Adorno 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Hansen 1991; and Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985.
10. For further discussion of this question see Cooper and Packard 1997. See also Bloom 2008.
11. For a short discussion in English of the themes in Brunschvicg's work, see Gutting 2001 (pp. 40-48). In his discussion of "positivisme idéaliste," Gutting refers to Parodi 1919.

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RÉSUMÉ

Reconsidérer le primitif: héritages institutionnels du mouvement filmologique

Peter J. Bloom

Ce texte s'interroge sur la manière dont le discours sur le « primitif », tel que défini dans la pensée du philosophe Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), a influencé la création de l'Institut de filmologie à l'Université de Paris en 1948. Ainsi baptisé par Gilbert Cohen-Séat, la filmologie est décrite comme une science positive visant à systématiser l'étude du cinéma, à la fois en tant qu'objet et institution, tout en mettant en œuvre un ensemble de méthodes nouvelles. L'élaboration de la notion de « fait filmique » procéderait ainsi d'une science positive inspirée de la méthode durkheimienne, mais permettrait également d'examiner les différentes facettes du « primitivisme ». D'une part, cet article cherche à dégager la pertinence des propos de Lévy-Bruhl sur le « primitivisme » en tant que cosmologie capable d'appréhender la causalité et les inférences qui lui sont associées, permettant ainsi d'aménager un espace de débat riche en réflexions. D'autre part, il vise à comprendre comment le « primitivisme » a été utilisé afin de qualifier des attributs historiques et psychologiques au sein de l'institution cinématographique, conçue comme une structure émergente de production de sens.