

# Theory, Post-theory, Neo-theories: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects

## Théorie, post-théorie, néo-théories : changements dans les discours, changements dans les objets

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La théorie du cinéma, enfin en crise

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### Article abstract

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# Theory, Post-theory, Neo-theories: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects

Francesco Casetti

## ABSTRACT

Over the past ten years, film theory has been openly challenged by the tenets of film history, cultural studies, aesthetics and philosophy. The decline of so called "Grand Theory" has made possible the emergence of a new paradigm. This relative eclipsing of film theory is the sign of a three-fold problem within cinema studies. First, film in its new formats and with its new supports is no longer a unique and consistent object which can be subjected to specific forms of research. Film theory's weakness is thus a sign that "film," as an object, is now dispersed. Second, cinema has always been at the crossroads of a great number of different fields. Its history is an amalgam of the history of media, the performing arts, visual perception, modern forms of subjectivity, etc. Film theory's weakness is symptomatic of the urgent need to rethink a history that was never unique or unified. Third, in our post-modern era any recourse to rationality seems to be a trap, the object of study itself being refractory to any kind of schematization. Film theory's weakness is indicative of the need to maintain an open approach to the subject. Through these three issues, we are witnessing the emergence of a new theory, both informal and dispersed, which is manifested in a variety of discourses that are content to gloss the phenomenon in order better to understand the cinema and facilitate its social recognition.

## 1. Theory and Post-theory

Film theory has always been a kind of discourse meant to comprehend what cinema is, what it could be, and why it is what it is. The title of the volumes which collect André Bazin's (1958-62) writings, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, is in this respect exemplary: in its dryness, it reveals the fact that theoretical discourse is intended to explore, define and generalize. We have to be aware of the existence of "theoretical styles," and even "theoretical paradigms," that are very different from one another: after the Second World War, film theory moved from the purpose of finding the very "essence" of cinema to that of exploring a set of "themes" connecting cinema with the cultural field. Whatever the differences, at the core of film theory there is always the attempt to provide "comprehension." In this sense, film theory may be confronted—and compared—with other sorts of discourses. It might be compared, for example, to scientific theories (even though it is hard to imagine a film theory with the same level of formalization). Or to literary theories (even though this choice frames film as a purely "aesthetic" fact). Or even to the "practical explanations" that we use in our everyday life, which are intended to explain the way in which we must "take" an object or event and what we must expect from it. This third aspect highlights the very fact that a theoretical discourse is largely designed to define, not just an object or an event, but the way in which this object or event is seen within a society, and therefore how it reveals itself to members of that society. Functioning as a sort of "gloss" to the cinema phenomenon, film theory brings to light the way in which cinema makes itself recognizable and is recognized by a community. Theory thus has not only a defining power; it also has an "acknowledging" power.

Over the past ten years, theory lost its relevant place amid the discourse on cinema. Today this situation is changing. Theory, after this period of eclipse, is returning in diverse and often contrasting ways. Varying factors contributed to this crisis. Above all, there was the exhaustion of the paradigm of subject positioning which dominated the discourse of the 1970s and 80s and which became victim to its own rigidity and repetition. During the 1990s, it became clear that this paradigm gave rigid responses

to diverse and fluctuating situations. It was not able, in other words, to provide responses to the questions which began to be posed. The crisis of this paradigm was accelerated by the polemic put in motion by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996) in their book *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Against the unifying paradigm of “Grand Theory,” Bordwell and Carroll contrasted the use of piecemeal theories tied to case studies and based on empirical research. Notwithstanding this focus on the piecemeal, Bordwell and Carroll continued to argue that theory has a useful moment in which it might “generalize” its acquisitions. This “generalization,” however, should emerge from observation, pass through a hypothesis and then be verified in concrete terms. Hence Bordwell and Carroll were not against film theory per se: they wanted a theory which would adopt scientific procedures and not pretend to or promote comprehensiveness. And yet, their polemic did not produce its desired outcome: it went to the heart of a way of theorizing which had already been overturned and, rather than favouring the growth of light theory at the expense of hard theory, it opened theory up to a series of *ad hoc* studies which enabled cinema to be understood in its specificity but not in its generality. Film studies accordingly acquired knowledge but lost its referential framework.

Before attempting to understand the development of post-theory it might be useful to pose a question which is, perhaps, perverse. Is the retreat of film theory attributable only to a crisis in a paradigm which dominated film theory for over twenty years? Or is it instead due to more profound transformations? I would like to advance a hypothesis: if during the 1990s theory met an impasse, it was not only because it had exhausted a model and did not immediately propose another. It was because there were fewer presuppositions which could be brought to theory and, more radically, there were fewer reasons to defend and define its subject of study on the social scene.

## 2. Vanishing Cinema

What the eclipse of theory might reveal, first of all, is the vanishing of cinema. There is no more theory because there is no more cinema.

Since the second half of the 1990s, it has become evident that cinema is undergoing a deep transformation, one more profound than the numerous changes it encountered earlier in its life. The shifts are so radical that cinema seems to be on the point of disappearance rather than transformation. On the one hand, cinema is re-articulated in several fields, too different from each other to be kept together. On the other hand, these fields are ready to be re-absorbed into broader and more encompassing domains. Cinema has subsequently “exploded” and no longer boasts its own territory. Although synthetic, let’s think for instance of what emerges from media convergence and the digital revolution. What we have is a plurality of supports (photographic image/digital image), a plurality of industrial branches (cinema, entertainment, TV, news, etc.), a plurality of products (fiction, documentary, archival materials, etc.) and a plurality of modes of consumption (in a film theatre, in a multiplex, at home, through cable TV, exchanged on the Internet, or seen on a mobile phone). Film fits all these situations. At the same time, films can also be enclosed as a supplement to newspapers and magazines; they can be treated as TV shows and placed into the flow of TV programming; they can nourish forum discussions among passionate cinephiles or be the subject of correspondence among hackers; they can find their place in a DVD collection; and so on. Cinema is everywhere and nowhere.

In other words, beginning in the second half of 1990s, the film landscape changed—to the point that it seems to have evaporated. A film can have a composite origin (Hollywood as well as home-movies, but also the re-editing of work exchanged through peer-to-peer networks); it can travel through several channels, each of them enabling it to model itself in a different way (an image projected on the screen, a videotape, a digital disc, a background for multimedia shows, etc.); it can be part of different communities, performing a specific social function in each one of them (as an object of entertainment, as an object to rent or to purchase, as a piece of a collection, as an element of an artistic installation, as an object of desire, etc.). If cinema had just one face for a long time, this new scenery multiplies its features, connecting each trait to broader, global situations, widen-

ing and confusing an identity that had been considered stable for years. What was once cinema—the feature fiction film based on the photographic image to be seen in a movie theatre together with other movie-goers—now has to deal with many other “formats,” with many other physical supports and with many other consumption environments. Besides entertaining, cinema also belongs to the fields of performance, collection, individual expression, TV market, media events, etc. In all these different domains, cinema can either be comfortable or become lost. *One, None and a Hundred Thousand*: Luigi Pirandello’s line is perfectly applicable to contemporary cinema.

The retreat of theory could be indicative of this new status of cinema. Cinema is no longer theorized (at least: not theorized as it previously was) because it no longer has an identity and a place (it has many identities and places, and no one at the same time). Silence is a symptom of loss. In this respect, some reactions are quite interesting. On the one hand, there is a more general landscape into which film is finally inserted: the book *Cinema Effect* by Sean Cubitt (2004) is an attempt to take into account the entire media system as a point of reference. On the other hand, the concept of cinema is being re-articulated: Janet Harbord (2002) in *Film Cultures* claims that today cinema responds to different “film cultures,” established through different practices, different institutions and different discourses. Theory is where we may recognize a “dispersed”—and likely lost—object.

### 3. An Object that Never Existed

The eclipse of film theory reflects not only cinema’s “disappearance” but also the awareness that it has never existed as such. Cinema has always been a multifaceted object, rooted in several territories. It is true that it has been labelled with a univocal and unifying definition; but it is also true that now, after the fact, as it were, it could be much more useful to think of it as a plural and disseminated entity, free of a single identity. In this respect, the retreat of theory may be considered indicative of the difficulty in recognizing cinema and its history as a “specific” field.

New historicism strongly insisted on the fact that cinema has always been entwined with many other social institutions. It is not easy to understand how cinema was born and developed. In order to do so, we have to think about it as a link in a net that joins the history of scientific discoveries with the theatre, modern forms of entertainment, narration, mass media, public opinion, urbanization and so on. In this regard, it is extremely significant that in a recent issue of *Cinema Journal* both Charles Musser (2004) and Janet Staiger (2004) question the appropriateness of the concept of the “history of cinema.” As a consequence of this questioning, Musser prefers to bring cinema back to the history of theatre culture and moving images, while Staiger relates it to media history. This seems to be a shared tendency and we can find it in the work of scholars such as Tom Gunning, Dudley Andrew, etc. For them, cinema is a sort of gateway, a crossroads in which different aesthetic, cultural and social processes are connected. Thereby, due to this gateway role, cinema does not constitute a bound and determined field. What matters here are not its internal affairs, but the ways in which cinema helps to recall, connect and re-articulate surrounding fields. In this sense, cinema does not have its own history; it shares others’ history. It has never had an identity, other than an illusory one: what has been called from its birth “cinema” was in fact the intersection of broader and deeper forces.

Of course, in an after the fact kind of way, someone may claim that a gateway also has its own identity. If the roads leading to it take a certain direction after passing through it, it is clear that the crossroads has specificity. Cinema’s ability to condition social and cultural processes can thus be considered evidence of its status as an identifiable entity. I believe this awareness, although somewhat unclear, justifies the early idea of cinema as something that can be thought of and discussed in itself. In any event, for the scholars of 1920s and 30s, film provided evidence; for the new historians of the 1990s film is a component—even a decisive one—of some other field. It can be theorized only as a “residual element.”

In other words, in this new historiographic vision—where there is no more “history of cinema” but many “histories” in

which cinema participates in a secondary role (and often in disguise)—cinema tends to be replaced by the “cinematic.” The recent (and controversial) book by Jonathan Beller (2006), *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention, Economy, and the Society of the Spectacle*, is in a certain sense a good example of this shift from cinema to the cinematic. In a more general way, the success of social history seems to support this route, the end of which might still be theory, but a (critical) theory of the cultural and social processes which form a distinctive sign of modernity.

#### 4. The End of Explanation

The third reason for the weakening of film theory may be found in the weakening of the social need for “explanation.”

Theory has always been an attempt to explain cinema—to explain what it is and how it works. Such a task presupposes that we deal on the one hand with an object definable and defined by general laws and stable processes, and on the other hand with a discourse able to foreground the rationality of this object. Both aspects are now jeopardized.

Let’s take Bordwell and Carroll’s (1996) *Post-Theory*. Their decision to prioritize “case studies” over general analysis, to build “local” and “localized” models, has two consequences. The first is an implicit—yet absolute—eradication of the idea of cinema as a unique entity and peculiar unit. In other words, there is no longer something that can be enveloped in a single definition, but only “cases” with their specific conditions of existence. The second consequence of their prioritization of localized case studies is the risk of ad hoc interpretations, capable of describing a single feature or a single phase of cinema, but unable to catch both the connection of the analysed phenomenon to a broader context (whatever this might be: history of cinema, history of mass entertainment, history of media, etc.) and its actual meaning. We appear to be condemned to investigating fragments without being aware of their specific role in the larger framework of which they are a part. In such a situation, it is quite hard to “theorize” what film is and how it works. Nothing really authorizes us to enlarge our evidence or our



discoveries. Of course, Bordwell and Carroll are still confident that film studies can provide a “generalization.” But because we are dealing with a “fragmented” object with no “unity” and with “single” interpretations with no extensions, nothing guarantees the validity of a “general” statement. Post-theory thus sees the burial of film theory.

The difficulty in locating a unifying explication has to do not only with the investigated object, but also with discourse itself. In particular, what is questioned is film theory’s ability to offer a rational description of film form without misrepresentation. Beginning in the 1970s, there has been an increasing conviction that rationality and rationalization are based on real violence towards the investigated reality, because they apply external observational parameters and thus force it into narrow borders. Any discourse which implies a rationalized picture of its object is, accordingly, innately disrespectful. In return, rationalization guarantees a “grasp” on the world in both a cognitive and pragmatic sense. Notwithstanding the clarity it thereby facilitates, this grasp is not useful for an understanding of reality. Theory, inasmuch as it is built on “rationalization,” claims to grasp the meaning of the investigated phenomenon while actually disregarding it.

Roland Barthes (1981), in *Camera Lucida*, approached the world’s complexity without reducing it to uniformity. His choice of pursuing a *mathesis singularis* (that is to say, a science concerning a single object), together with his “loving detachment” (instead of critical distance), offers us a valuable example. On the other hand, analytic philosophy inspired contradictory yet paradoxically convergent approaches. These scrutinize the consistency of a discourse and, in this way, try to re-establish room for rationality. Richard Allen and Malcom Turvey (2001) are, without a doubt, far from any Barthesian position, but the concerns from which they start are, interestingly, not that far from those of Barthes.

## 6. From Theory to Social Discourses

Let me summarize what I have been arguing. There is an enigma. Theoretical discourse has conventionally been used to

comprehend the investigated phenomenon, highlighting its conditions of existence and the modes in which it has been “thought.” Since the mid-1990s, when it might have been presumed that film theory was necessary, we find instead that film theory is vanishing. This “disappearance” of theory may be indicative of many things. First of all, it signals the possible “disappearance” of its object: cinema is no longer what it has been; its changes are so radical that they are equivalent to a death. Second: as historical investigations propose, cinema has never been a “unique” and “identifiable” object; it is at the crossroads of many other histories (the history of art, the history of entertainment, the history of media, etc.), and the weakening of theory underlines this fact. Third: there is an increasing delegitimization of rationality and rationalized discourses. They violate their object; theory “grasps” reality but also betrays it.

It is true, however, that theory has not completely disappeared. It continues to constitute itself as a possible reference. The paths which might be followed are many. One hypothesis is suggested by Bordwell and Carroll themselves: two broad areas exist, the “history of style” (which studies the way cinema represents) and cognitive psychology (which studies the way cinema produces meaning). Another path is constituted by cultural studies, which inherited—among other discourses—aspects of semiotics and critical ideology. This area is therefore focused on both the way in which filmic representation is socially constructed and used and the varying ways in which social subjects and subcultures alike appropriate film, some running distinctly counter to the dictates of the “text.” A third and influential path is that proposed by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze offers a definition of cinema which is at once theoretical and historical: cinema is a form of thought which first presents itself as a movement-image (classical cinema) and subsequently as a time-image and, in particular, as a crystalline sign (modern cinema). I would add that Deleuze’s comprehensive model is not dissimilar to our “Grand Theory” and that, accordingly, it is not surprising that it has generated more repetitions than questions—more “deleuzianisms” than real investigations. Finally there is the path constituted by a return to analytic philosophy and, in particular, by

a return to Wittgenstein. This presents itself as moment of theoretical “rehearsal,” in which the main concepts of film studies are clarified and redressed.

Film theory, therefore, continues to live. I would like to conclude, however, with a final question. What if theory, instead of having vanished only to reappear now through new paradigms, is somewhere else, even in disguise? What if it is still living in a skin which is not, of necessity, its traditional one?

Two things are accepted as facts. First, theory does not exist anymore, at least as we knew and practised it from the 1920s onwards (with Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Eugenio Giovannetti, Roger Spottiswoode, Siegfried Kracauer and then, in the post-war period, via André Bazin, Edgar Morin, Jean Mitry, Christian Metz—the only authentic period in French theory . . .). Theoretical assumptions were based on a core of strong hypotheses and on some exemplary models whose purpose was to explore, define and legitimate cinema in its essence, possibilities and entirety, together with all its peculiarities. This kind of discourse reached its final expression in Gilles Deleuze’s *L’image-mouvement* and *L’image-temps*: a gigantic effort to build an encompassing approach to cinema in order to say everything about cinema and to consider cinema as everything. This phase is definitely over. However, there is a second thing accepted as a fact: cinema is still an object of investigation. In fact it is analysed by historical, aesthetic and cultural studies, as well as by cinephile or promotional discourses. Therefore, cinema is still something to be explained, even if these explanations arrive tangentially, through ideas that do not involve it directly or are merely occasional remarks. This raises some more questions: did theory end up somewhere else? In whose company does it reside? What does it look like now?

Going over the most important thinkers who wrote on cinema in the first two decades of the 1900s—Blaise Cendrars, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Ricciotto Canudo, Enrico Thovez, Oscar Freeburg, Vachel Lindsay, together with the multitude of brilliant reflections often signed with a pen name (for instance Fantasio, who was active in Italy and France at the same time, and who was probably several personalities hiding under one

name)—it is clear that they do not need to define themselves as film theorists in order to construct theory. They were simply doing it through their approach to a phenomenon that at the time was novel. They were thus doing theory in an attempt to define cinema's outlines and strengths. These thinkers built theory, then, through their participation in a rich debate, in which the "definition" of cinema advanced through on-going approximations, internal confrontations and cross-references to the traits of an originating modernity. Through glossing, in the name of a "pragmatic rationality," their work aimed to "define" what was before them: it was in this way that they built theory. After that (and this begins in the 1920s), theoretical discourse assumed more formal and abstract features. After the Second World War it became a true "genre," recorded by Guido Aristarco (1951) in his *Storia delle teoriche cinematografiche*. In the meantime, however, theoretical discourse maintained its original sense of being a sporadic, informal and dialogical observation.

My impression, therefore, is that theoretical discourse today is moving in the same direction that it travelled in its early history (in a parallel and related move, cinema is now resuming its early status as a "cinema of attractions"). Being a sporadic, informal and dialogical discourse, theory is not recognizable as such anymore. In other words, rather than offering a controlled model that investigates and ratifies *qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, theory has now become a social discourse which attempts to give an answer to this question without facing it in its specificity. Theory is a shared knowledge that owes its birth to the early intellectual enthusiasm it generated but which operates, in particular, in the folds of the debate. According to Raymond Bellour, it is an "entre-deux"; it falls in-between. After all, cinema is an *entre-deux* as well, lost in-between different forces, suspended among diverse ways of expression, divided between art (whose reasons became invisible) and the world of mass media (whose reasons are too overt to be plausible).

Consequently, theory is not (with the obvious exception of university classes in film theory) a "definite" discourse anymore. It is a discourse without an identity or homeland. It emerges

like an echo in a network of discourses. Nevertheless, it also responds to a need for comprehension that has never been completely fulfilled.

Theory has not vanished: it is in disguise. It plays hide and seek. And it might be through this game that we—we who still persist in calling ourselves theorists, knowing that we might be considered anachronistic and slightly pathetic—are invited to consider the loss of cinema and the terms of its re-articulation.

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#### RÉSUMÉ

### **Théorie, post-théorie, néo-théories : changements dans les discours, changements dans les objets**

Francesco Casetti

Au cours de la dernière décennie, les tenants de l'histoire du cinéma, des « cultural studies », de l'esthétique et de la philosophie ont ouvertement mis en question la théorie du cinéma. Le déclin de ce que l'on a appelé la *Grand Theory* a permis l'émergence d'un nouveau paradigme. Cette relative éclipse de la théorie du cinéma est l'indice d'un triple problème au sein des études cinématographiques. Premièrement, le film, qui se manifeste désormais par l'entremise de nouvelles modalités et de

nouveaux supports, n'apparaît plus comme un objet unique et consistant, susceptible de se prêter à des recherches spécifiques. La faiblesse de la théorie du cinéma indique donc que l'objet « film » est maintenant une entité dispersée. Deuxièmement, le cinéma a toujours été, au fil du temps, au croisement d'une grande variété de domaines et son histoire est un amalgame d'histoire des médias, du spectacle, de la vision, des formes modernes de subjectivité, etc. La faiblesse de la théorie du cinéma est symptomatique d'un besoin pressant de repenser une histoire qui n'a jamais été unique, ni unifiée. Troisièmement, en cette ère postmoderne, tout recours à la rationalité apparaît comme un piège, l'objet de recherche lui-même étant réfractaire à toute forme de schématisation. La faiblesse de la théorie du cinéma témoigne, en fait, de la nécessité de maintenir une approche ouverte du sujet. À travers ces trois problématiques, c'est à l'émergence d'une nouvelle théorie que nous assistons, une théorie à la fois informelle et dispersée, qui se manifeste par l'entremise d'une variété de discours se contentant de gloser sur le phénomène, en vue de mieux comprendre le cinéma et de faciliter sa reconnaissance sociale.