
One-day symposium “The Hollywood Turn: Viewing, Theorizing, Deconstructing American Cinema Anew”

Université Paris-Diderot (Paris 7), June 5, 2014

Julien Thibault



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7119>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Julien Thibault, « One-day symposium “The Hollywood Turn: Viewing, Theorizing, Deconstructing American Cinema Anew” », *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2014, Online since 08 March 2015, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7119>

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

One-day symposium “The Hollywood Turn: Viewing, Theorizing, Deconstructing American Cinema Anew”

Université Paris-Diderot (Paris 7), June 5, 2014

Julien Thibault

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Link to the program: http://www.univ-paris-diderot.fr/EtudesAnglophones/pg.php?bc=CHVR&page=fiche_colloque&g=sm&numevent=171

- 1 American cinema as an object of study continues to occupy a special place in academic circles. Far from resulting in a consensual body of texts and concepts, research in this field now encompasses a multitude of approaches, ranging from historical and cultural to socio-economic perspectives and, following the development of new audiovisual technologies, a growing interest for its status as a vast repertoire of continuously remediated images and icons. In keeping with this long tradition of study of American Cinema and Hollywood, the LARCA and CERILAC research groups recently collaborated in the organization of a new academic gathering on the subject, at the university of Paris-Diderot. After a warm welcome from François Brunet (Université Paris-Diderot - Paris 7), chair of the LARCA research group, Christa Blümlinger (Université Vincennes-Saint-Denis Paris 8) and Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris (Université Paris X-Nanterre) presided over the day-long event, which was organized by Martine Beugnet (Université Paris-Diderot - Paris 7) and Jacqueline Nacache (Université Paris Diderot - Paris 7). As the title of the conference indicates, “The Hollywood Turn: Viewing, Theorizing, Deconstructing American Cinema Anew,” the purpose of this academic event was to reflect on the new ways of apprehending Hollywood’s vast cultural legacy and its evolution. Responding to a

desire to offer new readings of Hollywood productions and to re-evaluate the existing academic input, the conference's contributors (Emmanuelle André, Catherine Bernard, Fanny Beuré, Gaspard Delon, Thomas Elsaesser, Clémence Folléa, Ariane Hudelet, Laura Mulvey) have suggested the possibility, nowadays, to consider the subject in a more dynamic framework, beyond the *auteurist* / commercial and television / cinema dichotomies, modernist and postmodernist discourses, or the traditional boundaries between the cinematic object and the various systems it is inscribed in.

Laura Mulvey (University of London), "Marilyn Remix"

- 2 The influential British film theorist Laura Mulvey opened the symposium with a presentation of one of her video works called *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (2013 remix). In light of her latest book, in which she presented her concepts of "delayed cinema," "possessive and pensive spectatorships,"¹ Laura Mulvey explained how she came to return to this work, a three-minute remix of some initial thirty seconds from *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953), on which she had already worked long before the practice of remixes and clips was popularized. Nowadays, in the context of a widespread culture of supercuts, recuts and remixes, Laura Mulvey returned, through this "remix," to the origins of our new forms of spectatorship, enabled with endless possibilities for halting and breaking the drive of the video movement, to free and reveal underlying contents. For the purposes of this talk, Laura Mulvey focused especially on the nature of cinematic gesture.
- 3 In the very short, original excerpt, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell dance symmetrically until the latter drifts out of the frame, leaving the rising star alone to perform a sequence of four gestures leading her directly toward the camera, in an intimate close-up. Laura Mulvey explained how, using the remote control, she froze on specific moments, isolating and crystallizing the gestures, finding their most significant variations, and playing the sequence again and again, at various speeds, in order to break down its initial rhythm and enhance "something that was already there," but difficult to grasp. In doing so, the remix combines an act of "violence" regarding the original text with a form of "liberation," as it allows some "hidden meaning" to emerge from its "wounds." Also arguing for the benefits of retrospective analysis, Laura Mulvey explained how she connects those images to the rise of Monroe and her status of superstar, of popular icon, but also her own fateful demise to the last breath of the studio system. Further in her argument, Laura Mulvey also emphasized the particular nature of the superstar's *photogénie*, a phenomenon overlapping between moving and still images, between cinema and photography, and revealed by the remix's play on halting and freezing movement. Focusing more precisely on the final close-up, Laura Mulvey related those poses and close-ups to Hollywood's everyday use of artifice, including complex make-up techniques. She argued that Monroe's intensive use of cosmetics and her creation of a highly artificial and stylized look prefigured the effect of her later imprints on film and photography, as well as Warhol's embalming of her features—a "mask" conveying a strong sense of vitality and also, already, a death-like quality.

Emmanuelle André (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7), "Montrer 'per via di levare': Walt Disney chez Martin Arnold"

- 4 Following Laura Mulvey's talk, Emmanuelle André's contribution drew on a more anthropological approach to cinema. Pointing to the privileged connection which exists between the making of films and the key parts of our body that are the hands and eyes, Emmanuelle André articulated her reflections around an analysis of several of Martin Arnold's works, all part of a series of works of deconstruction focusing on Disney's early productions. One of the works she presented, a film called *Soft Palate* (3mn, 2011), pictures Mickey's sleeping body, the parts of which seem disconnected as they successively and asynchronously emerge from and disappear into the dark frame, while cadenced by the character's loud snore. Reflecting upon Martin Arnold's deconstruction of the original footage (from *Mickey's Delayed Date*, a 1947 short animation film), performed through digital erasure and looping, Emmanuelle André discussed the role of darkness and its correlated effects of absence and presence. Focusing more particularly on Martin Arnold's process of removal from the original footage, she considered film in relation to the dichotomy formed by the art works created *per via di porre* (through addition), like paintings, and those which result from an act of removal (*per via di levare*), like sculptures. While noting as well the film's strong emphasis on Mickey's hands, she discussed the role of Martin Arnold's work in reintroducing a tactile awareness, pointing at pre-digital, and even early manual aspects of filmmaking, when films were created by the addition of matter. Continuing on this work's connections with early cinema, she also emphasized Martin Arnold's play on alternating images of Mickey's body parts with black frames, evocative of pre-cinema animation devices like the zootrope.

Catherine Bernard (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7), "Inception de Christopher Nolan: Spéculations spectaculaires"

- 5 After a short break, the morning session resumed with Catherine Bernard's paper. Focusing on Christopher Nolan's science fiction film *Inception* (2010), Catherine Bernard discussed the nature of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters as being characterized by a high degree of reflexivity, allowing for ironical discourse and a critical dimension, while continuously striving for more spectatorial immersivity. Catherine Bernard argued that apprehending such films through the traditional frameworks of the modernist dichotomy of "high" and "low" art, and the theoretical oppositions between modernism and postmodernism, or *auteur* and commercial, is not adequate anymore.
- 6 In the case of *Inception*, Catherine Bernard explained how the film develops a hyper-awareness of visual experience well beyond its heist-movie premises, while never advocating a break with Hollywood's aesthetic and cultural legacy. Instead, Catherine Bernard described how *Inception* rather reclaims past influences and acknowledges them reflexively, thus developing an extremely sophisticated form of referentiality, while always opting for a highly immersive reception mode.² In fact, Catherine Bernard argued for a reading of the film as a reflexive *mise-en-scène* of the aesthetics and phenomenology

of contemporary blockbusters, re-semanticizing its references instead of merely rehearsing them, offering narrative analogies and allegories for our cinematic experience, and even incorporating the concepts of sensation and intensity into this very reflexive dimension. Finally, Catherine Bernard discussed the figure of the protagonist (Cobb) as both a fascinating and disturbing repository of existing discourses on cinematic immersivity—evolving somewhere between creativity and destruction.

Ariane Hudelet (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7), “*The Wire* and the Reconfiguration of *Noir*”

- 7 Ariane Hudelet was the last speaker of the morning session. Specialized, among other things, in the study of American television series, she discussed the particular case of the “atypical” production *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008). In the context of a recent reevaluation of TV series, characterized by more and more transfers (actors, cinematographic language, etc.) between the worlds of cinema and television, Ariane Hudelet called for new ways of apprehending this long understudied fiction format. Using for this intervention the case of *The Wire*, a “cop show” which rapidly opted for a strongly sociological discourse and was much discussed for its almost “documentary” portrayal of the city of Baltimore, Ariane Hudelet proposed that we look at it again, but this time from a different angle: as a *noir* fiction.
- 8 *The Wire* shares with *noir* fiction a number of motifs such as the “focus on the banality of evil,” a general pessimism regarding the future, and a sense of “urban claustrophobia.” Ariane Hudelet further explored the implications of the serial format in its contemporary production. She noted, among other things, the “redistribution of *noir* motifs and characters,” and the inclusion of African-American characters, initially omitted in classical *films noirs* due to segregation, and now adding a completely new resonance to the *noir* concept. Throughout her remarks, Ariane Hudelet underlined the academic interest of studying series like *The Wire* not only for its socio-economic perspective or its journalistic value, but also as a cultural object to be accounted for in an extended history of film genres.
- 9 The afternoon session featured four other speakers: Fanny Beuré, Clémence Folléa, Gaspard Delon, and Thomas Elsaesser.

Fanny Beuré (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7), “‘Come out, come out, wherever you are’: relectures gay et *queer* de la comédie musicale hollywoodienne classique”

- 10 Focusing this time on the afterlife of classical Hollywood musicals, Fanny Beuré discussed the particular place they have occupied in *queer* and gay cultures, highlighting new readings of initially mainstream productions such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or Gene Kelly’s musicals. Fanny Beuré offered a series of examples of *queer* and gay reappropriation of the icons of musicals in posters or in language (expressions like “a friend of Dorothy” are connoted in gay culture) before she explored this particular connection in relation to the origins of the productions (the work of Broadway artists was

more sexualized than Hollywood's), pointing out elements, in the very filmic texts, that leave substantial room for interpretation and even encourage non-mainstream readings.

- 11 Fanny Beuré investigated the musical genre itself, arguing that the nature of the intended audiences (families) went with a lack of sexualization of the texts, resulting in a blank area that could easily be invested; she emphasized the role of dancing and singing as activities closely linked to the "stylized and spectacular character" of the *camp* style. Using the works of Steven Cohan and Alexander Doty, she then focused more particularly on the reasons for *camp* readings of Gene Kelly's virility, and for an interpretation of *The Wizard of Oz* as lesbian fantasy. She pointed to the film's lack of romance, the absence of any strong male figure, and the presence instead of several women characters arguably standing in as different ways of expressing a lesbian identity, and acting as potential models for Dorothy. Fanny Beuré eventually argued for a continuation of those non-mainstream forms of interpretation, which allow for renewed, close analyses of texts and their interpretative margins, and which contribute to enriching the films' afterlife.

Clémence Folléa (Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7), "Meeting Viewers' Great Expectations? Dickens Adapted and Adopted by Hollywood"

- 12 Focusing on another form of cultural afterlife, Clémence Folléa's paper reflected on Alfonso Cuarón's 1998 Hollywood adaptation of *Great Expectations* (Dickens). After reminding the audience that the analytical principles of adaptation studies have evolved away from judgmental discourses of "fidelity" toward the source text, Clémence Folléa nonetheless argued that the question of "authority" is still a crucial notion in the case of many adaptations. She thus proposed to address the issue of the specific cultural corpus Cuarón's film relates to, by focusing on the portrayal of female characters, which she identified as the "receptacle[s] of cultural expectations."
- 13 Comparing the modalities of Dickens' and Cuarón's expression of key motifs of the texts, she notably offered a detailed analysis of the ways in which Miss Havisham is depicted as a character stuck in a moment of her past, and Stella's beauty understood and emphasized, highlighting the importance of contextual standards in the reformulation of those features. She thus illustrated the film's replacement of Victorian cultural standards by Hollywood's, in the definition of what an old, eccentric Havisham should be, and of what Stella's beauty should be made of. Clémence Folléa also pointed to the adaptation's own network of references, partly emancipated from the source text's, as it refers not only to previous adaptations but also to a corpus of films not directly connected to Dickens' work.

Gaspard Delon (Université Paris Diderot - Paris 7), " *Back to the Future* à l'épreuve du temps: une franchise hollywoodienne dans la mémoire des fans (1985-2014)"

- 14 In keeping with Fanny Beuré's and Clémence Folléa's discussion of Hollywood and the afterlife of famous works, Gaspard Delon focused on the particular case of a famous

franchise, *Back to the Future* (Rockert Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990). He first offered a detailed picture of its success and strong resonance with the spirit of the *eighties* in the U.S., with its widespread popular desire for a restored national confidence. To do so, G. Delon argued, the first *Back to the Future* artificially created a direct connection between the *fifties* and the *eighties*, omitting the social and political turmoil of the decades in between, and resorting to a growing trend of nostalgia for the *fifties* instead.

- 15 Gaspard Delon then described the journey of the franchise outside of the 1980s, which was never continued or “rebooted” onscreen, primarily due to the impossibility for the lead actor (Michael J. Fox) to play Marty again. However, the franchise was regularly revived not only by the studio’s marketing strategies, with DVD and Blu-Ray editions, as well as by-products (TV, toys, video-games), but also by fan communities who appropriated the franchise, creating their own posters and designs, and even their own stories. Gaspard Delon notably emphasized the particularity of the films’ formula: a systematic narrative pattern, easily reproduced and potentially provided with as many backgrounds as there are periods to explore. Emphasizing as well the role of the Internet in the development of fan communities and reappropriation, Gaspard Delon concluded that the persistence of the thirty-year-old franchise is a good illustration of a phenomenon of emancipation of the fans and the new spectators, away from the initial context of production and exhibition, and even from the authoritative text itself.

Thomas Elsaesser (University of Amsterdam), “The Persistence of Hollywood: Further Thoughts and Afterwords”

- 16 The afternoon session was also marked by the conference of a second guest-speaker, Thomas Elsaesser, whose presentation extended from his last book on “the persistence of Hollywood.”³ After sharing with the audience the story of his own spectatorial and intellectual involvement with American cinema, he insisted on his early advocacy that this cinema should not be overlooked and required specific models of appreciation. He explained that in order to reconcile the two “antinomies” that are the film critic’s love of cinema and the scholar’s academic study of it, one should overcome the *auteur* vs. Hollywood, or *auteur* “despite” Hollywood dichotomies. He further proposed that the Hollywood system and its *auteurs* are now one and the same, and that they both revolve around the blockbuster, as the key format which helped Hollywood “reclaim” family cinema, as well as independent and globalized audiences.
- 17 Thomas Elsaesser argued for a reconciliation of the study of films with that of the system and the history of Hollywood cinema, suggesting that an expanded concept of reflexivity could serve as a new general perspective for the study of both classical and post-classical Hollywood cinema. He identified four types of reflexivity: the *auteurist*, “media-specific” mode of reflexivity, with films marked by an awareness of the connection between director and spectator; the self-reference of the industry, which both regulates itself and celebrates its own achievements, consciously creating and promoting its own canon of “classics”; the studios’ own particular self-referential efforts, with their management of copyrights, and with their logos which they consciously promote and regularly incorporate into the film’s narrative; and finally the self-referencing strategies of communication, by which the “ecosystem” taking the film from production to

distribution is fully aware of existing "feedback circuits" and even uses them for promoting purposes.

- 18 Reflecting on this multifaceted phenomenon, Thomas Elsaesser contended that this complex reflexivity corresponds to a space, in the very filmic object, where "power struggles" have been made visible, ever since the very early conflicts for editorial control between producers and exhibitors. Whether such struggles have set in opposition exhibitors and producers, the industry and the censors, or the industry and the audience, Thomas Elsaesser noted the specificity of Hollywood cinema, for which the "site of the struggle is the film itself." The conflicts are thus accessible, either through allegories or allusions, etc., or via signs of "complicity or knowingness" which contribute to the structured ambiguity of those Hollywood texts. As a whole, Thomas Elsaesser argued that this perspective allows for a new reading of classical, post-classical and contemporary Hollywood cinema, highlighting what makes them relatively similar or different in the nature or degree of their reflexivity.
- 19 Expanding on the relation between the filmic object and the spectator, often comprised in that reflexivity, Thomas Elsaesser also argued for a reconsideration of cinephilia, which seems to be subject to change as well. Referring to his essay "Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,"⁴ he explained his views about two generations of cinephilia—Take One with "the love that never lies" of the special theatrical experience, and Take Two with "the love that never dies" of the undifferentiated access to the cinema of today, yesterday, and before.
- 20 Concluding his discussion of Hollywood's changing patterns of reflexivity, Thomas Elsaesser eventually proposed that we consider it as forms of "feedback" which could be categorized as either positive or negative. Negative feedback would be that which resulted in the self-regulatory practices of classical Hollywood, and positive feedback would consist in the online manifestations of fan communities for instance, which escape Hollywood's control before feeding back into its production system.
- 21 The talks that composed this symposium confirmed several new directions that recently emerged in the study of visual arts. Faced with the ever-increasing amount of Hollywood productions and their enduring influence and legacy, continually renewed through cultural appropriation and digital remediation, the speakers endeavored to propose more inclusive systems of analysis and to allow for interconnected approaches, combining at times economic and aesthetic frameworks, or art historical and philosophical approaches to new technologies, or even the interpretative potential of narratives and icons with an anthropological perception of images, to name just a few of these new theoretical paths.

NOTES

1. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24s a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006.
2. Resorting to Bolter and Grusin's concept of "remediation" (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (MA) & London, The MIT Press, 2000).
3. Thomas Elsaesser, *The Persistence of Hollywood*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

4. M. De Valck and M. Hagen, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love And Memory*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2005, 27-44.

INDEX

Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

AUTHOR

JULIEN THIBAUT

Université Paris Diderot - Paris 7