

A Review of

SCENES OF INSTRUCTION: THE BEGINNINGS OF THE U.S. STUDY OF FILM: PUBLICATION INFORMATION?

Dana Polan, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, Pp. 416.

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Dana Polan's study unquestionably amounts to a remarkable and substantial piece of research. Charting the emergence of film studies courses in American universities prior to World War II, he makes reference to a wealth of primary materials including course documentation, correspondence, newspaper and other articles. The breadth and detail offered by this exhaustive analysis of archival sources is one of the most impressive features of the book. For this reader, however, it is the sustained engagement with film studies as something that has been and continues to be taught that renders the book most valuable. All practicing academics are prone to understand their disciplines as being constituted principally in the pages of the scholarly journals and the landmark volumes devoted to their field. Historical surveys invariably attend to their topics in such a fashion, tracing the lineaments of evolving theories, paradigms and debates. Polan's work reminds us of the inseparability of these concerns from the institutional and political settings in and against which that knowledge is inculcated. Professors (and wannabe Professors), Deans, administrators, industry figures, and politicians all figure in this account of how film studies came to appear as the discipline we would recognize today.

Inevitably, however, this raises the question of the book's intended readership. Practising academics, conscientious graduate students, and those with an interest in the history of pedagogy might constitute the volume's natural constituency, but it seems unlikely to prove a popular choice for the overwhelming majority of film studies majors who want books that will help them pass assignments. Given that its themes include the experiences and voices of their predecessors there is a certain irony at work here; not least since the book offers some illuminating passages on *inter alia* formalism, aesthetics, genre, censorship and media effects; those topics which so frequently form the majority share of undergraduate essays. Faculty and students alike will also recognize the continuing distinction – sometimes blurred, sometimes fiercely maintained – between film as the object of critical scrutiny for reasons ranging from the artistic to the sociological, and as a form of professional practice, whether in terms of script/ 'photoplay' composition, filmmaking practice, or finance, studied in order that graduates may go on to enact that knowledge or craft as industry practitioners. Through many of the early courses examined by Polan, both the short not-for-credit units and the full programmes (these latter mostly envisaged rather than actually being delivered) this familiar distinction may already be discerned.

The book follows an itinerary that is at once historical, geographical and personal; identifying the key individuals (some well-remembered, others unjustly not) who initiated film studies in a number of U.S. universities in the 1920s and 1930s. Occasionally their paths intersect, through the delivery of lectures on another's programme, the recommendation of another's book or article, but essentially this is an account of separate endeavours connected only by posterity, rather than a concerted effort by a networked group to broach and tout a new field of study.

Chapters address, variously: classes in 'Photoplay Composition' as extension study at Columbia University and the work of Frances Taylor Patterson and Victor Freeburg; Terry Ramsaye (author of *A Million And One Nights*) and his twelve lecture film course at the New School For Social Research which is notable, as Polan indicates for "how familiar, and even commonsensical, so many of (its) historical or aesthetic assumptions...appear to us – in large part, no doubt, because Ramsaye set many of the terms whereby the teaching of film history has been conducted up to the present"; Harvard University's entry into film teaching through a strongly industry oriented, and industry endorsed film course in its School of Business, an enterprise enthusiastically endorsed by Will Hays, a figure who recurs in Polan's study, repeatedly endeavouring to encourage academic institutions to deliver film teaching and thereby foster an improved image of the American film business; The University of Southern California and endeavours to render the newly-formed Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences a genuine pedagogical force (before of course, its true calling as the organiser of the Oscars was fully apparent); The never-implemented film curriculum of Harry Alan Potamkin whose document 'A proposal for a School of the Motion Picture' was found shortly after his early death at thirty-three in 1933 – although his envisaged four-year Bachelor of Science programme never materialized he did offer a radical and internationally-focussed lecture series at the New School in N.Y.C.; Sawyer Falk's Rotha-influenced strongly formalist Cinema Appreciation class at Syracuse in which the famous experimental filmmaker Maya Deren had been a student (earning a 'B'!) – Polan observes how Falk argued for the medium specificity of cinema, railed against the domination by actors that emerged as a consequence of the star system, valorized a disjunctive rather than realist approach to image-sound relations, and expected his students to analyse and appreciate movies according to such precepts; The work of Frederick Thrasher at New York University in which the sociologist came to teach film in increasingly aesthetic terms notwithstanding his own disciplinary background (which included the study of juvenile urban delinquency), and who argued for film's particular affective force as a positive rather than negatively consequential quality of the medium. Finally, the last chapter considers the never-commenced plans for an Institute of Cinematics at St. John's, a place of learning conventionally associated with a Great Books canon and an approach to scholarship that might be expected to adopt a less-than-favourable stance to the study of film. On the contrary, Polan charts how key individuals connected with St. John's had through the early thirties considered the potentialities that cinema might have for a liberal education.

Practitioners of Film Studies and readers of *NeoAmericanist* should find much of interest in *Scenes of Instruction*. The description of an early-formed East Coast/West Coast divide as it relates to both academia and the industry is intriguing, as is the sustained attention to the interaction between Universities and the film business (a relationship that to this day continues to be littered with false dawns and exciting new proposals that fail to come to fruition as the stakeholders realize that their interests are not as convergent as first believed). As already indicated, there is also much of interest here to the reader focussed on film theory; whilst he does not labour the point (this not being his primary focus) Polan is nonetheless effective in teasing out and signalling the many significant connections between the contemporary analysis of film as art and the first iterations of film pedagogy.

However, for this reader, it was the final chapter that proved most satisfying in a volume which, at times, did feel rather like hard work as a consequence of the extent of research presented. Polan states in this chapter that it has been much of his goal to chronicle 'the tradition of middlebrow cultural mediation' and his analysis of the St. John's plans indicates his success in this ambition. He is right to remind us that

'the popular culture of film had a much greater favorable reception among 1930s proponents of the Great Books tradition than the neoconservative defenders in a later period would have us believe.' The insights this chapter offers into the history of education in the U.S. and especially of its associated philosophical positions are considerable. Of more particular importance is that they still prevail today; how is the U.S. to treat and regard the works of Western Civilisation? How are pragmatic and quintessentially American traditions of doing, action and accomplishment to be reconciled with abstract and imaginative humanistic enquiry?