



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Film Theory: An Introduction
Author(s) / Editor(s):	Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake
Publisher / distributor details:	Manchester University Press
Publication / release date:	2006
ISBN number (if applicable):	0 7190 7375 8
Technical details (if software – see note below):	n/a
Price:	£16.99

Review:

This is the second edition of, what has become, a standard work on the subject since the publication of the first edition in 1988. This new edition has been significantly updated and expanded. The book is now split into three sections. The first is a general background to cultural theory. The second covers particular areas of cultural theory as applied to different areas of film studies. The new, third section, “A Retrospect” comprises various readings which provide particular perspectives on the main content of the book.

The book contains the forward to the first edition which establishes a rather apologist tone and begins by quoting a remark made by film director Alan Parker, “Film needs theory like it needs a scratch on the negative” in a television interviewⁱ. This clearly indicates the regard in which film theory is held among some members of the film making fraternity.

This book reflects others in identifying 1968 as a pivotal time in film theory but recognises the work of earlier theorists such as Eisenstein, Bazin and Kracauer albeit as being generally marginalised by their contemporaries who adopted a more practically critical approach to the analysis of film. It identifies 1968 as the point from which “Not only was it necessary to demystify commonsense thinking about cinema, it was also necessary to develop new, more adequate theories”ⁱⁱ.

The forward to the second edition expands upon the reasons for a detailed examination of film theories and identifies three main possibilities for theorists. These are the emergence of new ideas that challenged existing notions and the inclusion of

evidence that these new ideas were being examined by a wider group of readers beyond traditional intellectuals reflecting the growing importance of film. Lastly, there was a recognition that film theory was incomplete and that it had to encompass the theorisation of a new generation of directors, actors and spectators.

The first section of the book incorporates a very useful overview of cultural theories. This provides the reader with a broad understanding of these theories; sufficient for most general studies requiring this level of engagement, and directs the reader well to more detailed study. However, there is very little direct reference to film in this section and film students would probably become quite frustrated at this lack of reference and apparent irrelevance of this to their specific areas of study.

The second section deals with more specific areas including authorship, narrative and realism and makes more direct reference to film. Again, this is very useful to the general reader with clear direction to further in-depth study. The main criticism of this section is that, although it is concerned with applying cultural theories to film, the direct references to specific films or filmmakers are rather sparse and those that are made are to either obscure or old films. This could further alienate the general undergraduate reader as the films are outside their normal field of reference. The book would be far more useful to this readership if it applied theory to more contemporary films with which students are more familiar. This reliance on older films to exemplify theory does pose a number of questions. Is it possible to apply film theory to contemporary films most of which were made by a generation of filmmakers who grew up with and studied film theory? Is it only possible to apply film theories, which were developed in the 1960s, to older films and filmmakers who were practicing their craft without the 'benefits' of formal film education and theoretical study? Are films made by the 'film school generation' too knowing and aware of theory in their realisation to be suitable subjects for direct application of these theories? If that is the case, does this mean that conventional film theory as developed from the late 1960s is no longer relevant to contemporary cinema? These questions are neither asked nor answered in this book. Perhaps there is now a need for a new book that does address these questions. Has Alan Parker's view been vindicated by this book?

The other question to be raised is: would this book make anyone a better filmmaker? Probably not. However, it does provide students of film or media production with all the theories they will ever need. It provides an excellent digest of major theories which the student or graduate can dip into whenever they need to refresh their knowledge. This could be particularly useful for those studying media production or those working in the media industries. These theories are presented, explained, considered and questioned in a very accessible way that does not treat them in the precious and infallible manner of some theorists. This book takes a critically evaluative view of theories and encourages the reader to do the same. This critical view is brought to an effective conclusion in the new, third section of the book; the Retrospect. This section offers a number of different readings and presents an objective, reasoned debate. It reveals the writers' personal opinions and their passion for cinema that has a life far beyond theory, "In contrast to Theory in its non-dialectical form, the experience of cinema, rather than being pre-programmed, can be transformed into adventure and invention."ⁱⁱⁱ

The value of the book and the intentions of its authors are summed up in the final paragraph "Cinema enables its lovers to enter and participate in the worlds it creates, and as such opens the way to new and different modes of being. If this Retrospect has likewise contributed to the reader's understanding of the diversity of ways of thinking about cinema, thereby opening up new conceptual horizons, it will more than have served its purpose."^{iv}

ⁱ Alan Parker, *British Cinema: A Personal View*, 12 March 1986, Thames Television.

ⁱⁱ Robert Lapsley & Michael Westlake *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester University Press 1988) forward to first edition p vii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Lapsley & Michael Westlake *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester University Press 2006) p 274.

^{iv} Robert Lapsley & Michael Westlake *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester University Press 2006) p 276.