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# Film Theories and Living Heterogeneity

By Dominic Leppla

Unlike empirical knowledge, a theory does not divide people into those who know and those who do not, for it is a form of sociability that allows those who are willing to ask questions to relate to one another. [Valentina Vitali] (1)

The [Permanent Seminar on Histories of Film Theories](#) (2) is an open online network of film and media scholars interested in excavating and re-discovering texts and debates in the study of cinema, *then and now*. If these two timeframes suggest something of a gap in knowledge, the opposite is true; what connects them is Film Studies. To date, the timeline of this discipline has apparently been well filled. Yet all too often the gathering of knowledge excludes what lies beyond disciplinary and geographical borders. By *then* I mean the study of cinema prior to film theory being institutionalized as a discourse (including the *where* of its institutionalization), while *now* implies the present digital frontier of shifting materials and informational fragmentation at which we, as film and media scholars and art workers, find ourselves.

*Permanent Seminar* wants to unravel the threads of past knowledge and unite lost or unheard theoretical voices. In addition to organizing conferences and symposia on a variety of film theory-related topics (3), it seeks to open up a virtual space for research collaborations. In this way we hope not simply to counteract the felt loss of the analog, but to work towards the creation of a more inclusive and dynamic research community, one made possible by the digital. A better way to put it might be: *then in now*.

Entering a PhD program this past year in Film and Moving Image Studies at Concordia University, I was lucky to be at the point of inception for *Permanent Seminar's* online home. I am currently working on web content for the project and coordinating a team of graduate researchers under supervising board member Masha Salazkina. As our project and team grow, new possibilities arise for each individual researcher's scholarly output, as a natural consequence of building a new kind of research community. The initial wave of giddy enthusiasm within academe for "liberation technologies" may have faded, but, like many of my politically engaged young colleagues, I strive to eschew cultural pessimism about the onward march of media cultures. Their potential for what Alexander Kluge calls "counter-production" (4) - opening up a way

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to an alternative public sphere - remains too great to be overlooked. In the past year, of course, significant glimpses reached our media-lit Western stage with the (famously socially-networked) "Arab Spring". Siegfried Zielinski framed the problem thus: "Today, the task is to process artistically what remains of reality with all the technical means at our disposal in such a way that its resistance and autonomy remain intact." (5) It is this critical space of exchange in which *Permanent Seminar* wishes to intervene. In the brief notes that follow I will further elucidate its mission, and use my own, still-developing, intellectual and geographical trajectory to understand the strengths and limitations of the traditional scholarship and cultural production that *Permanent Seminar* seeks to engage and help transform.

The [Translation Project](#) is both the centerpiece and the 'long arm' of *Permanent Seminar*. My work on it over the past year, along with that of my colleagues, has focused on developing it as a virtual, working research environment. The intent is to locate and mobilize a worldwide network of scholars, critics and translators in order to identify and make available a wide range of critical and theoretical film and media texts from underrepresented geographical and historical areas, placing them in conversation with existing institutional paradigms. In the long run, this will allow for and enable cross-cultural comparisons and both close and "distant" readings. So far our texts center on writing from cinema's early days (including translations of Italian and Russian sources), but, as we develop, we will take contributions and discoveries from new and surprising locations and time periods. It is very important, then, for us get the word out to all interested parties to further expand the contours of film theory ("We want YOU!").

Direct scholarly participation is further enabled through instantaneous open source platforms on our website which allow for on-line annotations of the texts and exchange through blogs. *Permanent Seminar* makes use of open access technology that can enter nearly every classroom and research center, including those without ready access to a well-stocked library. Once texts have been selected and translated, the goal will be to place them in the context of the current debates on film and media theory, treating them as interlocutors in introducing a broader, global cinematic discourse into the traditional narrative of the history of film theory. At issue is not the rejection of the canonical model, but rather the need for its engagement with analytical tools and conceptual categories developed elsewhere in an increasingly digital global community, meeting the research and pedagogical challenges of a changing discipline.

If this digital brandishing of texts from unrecognized sources and locations is the only way to dispatch the doubting Thomases, it may have something to do with the lingering divide between history and theory that

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has characterized Film Studies. Increasingly, however, a new generation of film and media scholars unscarred by the combative polemics of the late 1970s and 1980s move vigorously to close that gap. Following their lead, graduate students – potentially possessed of a more organic, if you will, relationship to the technological – can find new ways to push the field toward historically omnivorous, theorized work and its pedagogical dissemination.

As a Masters student at Birkbeck College, London, in the mid-2000s, I had firsthand contact with the activists and, later, scholars who, at the British Film Institute Education Department in the 1960s, played a key role in the vast pedagogical and research project that was to transform film education in Britain, and which led to the subsequent development of the field's most lastingly influential organ of theory, the journal *Screen*. At the same time I contributed as an intern and, later, staffer at the film and television resource [BFI Screenonline](#), a worthy digital successor to 1950s grassroots popular arts trailblazer [The Film Teacher](#). All these publications (6) would not have been possible without, as then BFI Education Officer Paddy Whannel saw it, a refusal to “separate ideas from their implementation” (7); they were possible only with *theory*, and with the kinds of radical epistemic break early *Screen* theorists had made with their past. (8) Such refusals and ruptures helped to shake loose the still-young medium and paved the transition to Film Studies. Yet this foundational base eventually became detached from the screen education BFI activists had sought to champion, both within the academy and without. Just like what came before, it suffered from a limiting, Western European, horizon.

*Permanent Seminar* looks to make amends. Part and parcel of its de-centering directive is the need to rethink the concept of “film theory” itself. I recall a trip to Wrocław's New Horizons Film Festival in 2010 in which Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's formidable and underrated cinematic oeuvre played to sell-out crowds of mostly Poles and Germans. It was curated upon the launch of a new book translating sixteen of Mulvey's essays into Polish. (9) This was an engagement with living cinematic history and theory, and yet our Anglosphere institutional response to what may be produced from such feedback (as in the fate of the recent publication of early film theory from the neighboring Czechs (10)) is often to relegate it to “area studies.”

In opposing this trend, film and media scholars increasingly see as vital an expansion of our understanding of film theory to include relevant cultural practices in relation to film and media as an object of theorization. (11) From Quebecois microcinema (12) to Japanese media theory (the former as resolutely analog as the other is digital), Turkish cinephilia to Persian poetry, practice in/around cinema takes varied forms

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globally (to say nothing of new globalized forms, like the video essay (13)). Finding and translating texts is impossible without the aid of field workers and scholars knowledgeable in local screen cultures to corral an increasingly dispersed cinematic object. *Permanent Seminar* sets its sights on activating these hopeful new bridges and avenues. Local theory to be redistributed globally; the digital tarrying with the analog – Zielinski’s ‘living heterogeneity’ (14) is alive and well.

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### **Endnotes:**

(1) Valentina Vitali, “Film Historiography as Theory of the Film Subject: A Case Study,” *Cinema Journal* 50, No. 1 (Fall 2010), p.141.

(2) Online at: <http://filmtheories.org>; *Permanent Seminar*’s coordinators are Francesco Casetti (Yale University) and Jane Gaines (Columbia University).

(3) *Permanent Seminar*’s next conference, organized by Mark Abe Nornes, is entitled Histories of Film Theories in East Asia and takes place at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor from September 27-30, 2012.

(4) For example in Kluge’s own 1980s TV work; see Miriam Hansen’s overview of Kluge in her introduction to Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, Peter Labanyi, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* ( Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xxv.

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(5) Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television As Entr'actes in History* (Amsterdam; Amsterdam University Press, 1999), p. 290.

(6) Legacies, perhaps, of the national-popular cultural impetus that fuelled the British Labour government in the immediate post-World War II years.

(7) Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, with Lee Grievson, "From Cinephilia to Film Studies," *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 218.

(8) For example, with both the conservative Leavisite critical tradition and pre-Althusserian, national-popular Marxism.

(9) Kamila Kuc and Lara Thompson (eds.), *Laura Mulvey: Do utraty wzroku*. (Krakow: Korporacja Ha!art Press, 2010).

(10) Jaroslav Andel and Petr Szczepanik, eds, *Cinema All the Time: An Anthology of Czech Film Theory and Criticism 1908-1939* (Prague/Ann Arbor: National Film Archive/University of Michigan Press, 2008)

(11) See Charles Acland, "Curtains, Carts and the Mobile Screen..."

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*Screen* 50:1 (Spring 2009), and especially the writing in *Cinema Journal* 50:1 (Fall 2010) from Valentina Vitali, Ravi Vasuvedan, and the introduction by Ahmet Gurata and Louise Spence.

(12) See Kyle Conway's excellent account of Montreal's Kino movement in Conway, "Small Media, Global Media: Kino and the Microcinema Movement," *Journal of Film and Video*, 60: 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2008), pp. 60-71.

(13) The guest editor of this volume is a key exponent and practitioner of this form. See [Film Studies For Free](#) and [Filmanalytical](#).

(14) E.g. Zielinski, 'Conclusion: Good Machines, Bad Machines; For Living Heterogeneity in the Arts of Picture and Sound - Against Psychopathia Medialis', *Audiovisions*, op. cit., p. 273.

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