

**A Note on the Proper Study of Film:  
a Response to C.B. Hunt**

**Evan Wm. Cameron**

**Professor Emeritus  
Senior Scholar in Screenwriting**

**Graduate Programmes,  
Film & Video and Philosophy**

**York University**

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## **A Note on the Proper Study of Film: a Response to C.B. Hunt<sup>1</sup>**

An academic program, as Dean Hunt insists, is no better than its faculty. Administrators, therefore, must locate and retain superior teachers.

Why, then, as the Dean observes, is it difficult to find and keep effective teachers of film?

Because to teach film well one must avoid a pervasive academic pretense shared by many administrators.

The liberal arts, especially the sciences and history, have anchored academe for much of the 20th century, sharing a common goal and hence common criteria of faculty achievement. The goal is to uncover those permanent aspects of reality having more than parochial interest: to construct, disseminate and test conjectures that will prove useful, as tools of explanation or prediction, anywhere in the world at any time thereafter. (Scientists, for example, seek regularities – laws and principles – that are universally true and applicable; historians seek to represent past events of broad significance.)

Searching for the permanent and unparochial is an honorable and difficult task. We mustn't quarrel, therefore, with the goal of disciplines whose subjects 'hold still' for analysis, nor with the primary criteria they have promulgated for assessing faculty achievement therein – the publication and dissemination of innovative and testable conjectures of the widest possible interest to the widest possible audience, and the training of students to do likewise.

As successful as the disciplines of permanence have become, however, they do not exhaust the rational methodologies. There is more to the reflective life than the permanent and unparochial. Surprisingly, however, such disciplines constitute the sole paradigm of academic expertise within many university communities. 'Knowledge', 'research', 'publication' and 'theory' have come to mean, for many, knowledge of, research into, publication of, and theory about the permanent and unparochial.

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<sup>1</sup> The remarks within this commentary were published within the *Newsletter* of the American Film Institute in November-December 1980, having been provoked by a contribution within a previous issue by Dr. C. B. Hunt, Jr., Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication at Southern Illinois University.

So pervasive is the prejudice that few bothered to ask, prior to World War II, what would happen to academe if disciplines of change were to emerge (disciplines dedicated to the thoughtful creation of events that were essentially transient and parochial – events such as political happenings, therapy sessions, acts of musical composition and performance, filmmaking, stock-market evaluations or classroom encounters that could be predicted in context in the short run, but which, upon occurrence, would initiate unique problem situations unamenable to previous patterns of analysis).

By the 1950s, however, the new disciplines of communications, sociology, political science and urban design, to name a few, had burst upon the academic scene, joining the remnants of applied music, drama and the fine arts (that Harvard, for example, had never managed to assimilate). Soon 50, 100, even 500 students were demanding entrance into courses entitled (e.g.) the American Film, 20th Century Political Processes or the Sociology of the Family.

The older disciplines of permanence, facing declining enrollments and revenues, invented myths of self-defence – myths founded on confusion.

**Myth 1:** The newer disciplines are 'soft', having lesser intellectual substance and attracting students of lesser ability (confusing the study of transient subjects with the study of no subject at all);

**Myth 2:** The newer disciplines may someday become respectable, but only upon incorporating traditional methods of research and publication (confusing methods appropriate to the study of the permanent and unparochial with those appropriate to the study of the transient and local); and

**Myth 3:** The newer disciplines are only crafts, like sewing or cabinetry (confusing skills having blueprints with activities – like filmmaking, musical composition or psychological counseling – for which there are none).

The myths were stillborn, for they presumed falsely that theorizing must be directed toward the permanent and unparochial.

But what is a theory? A conjecture that makes possible a falsifiable prediction. Theorizing, in the newer disciplines of change, is simply inseparable from the act of constructing a new and unique event in the world. To theorize within such disciplines is to engage in the act of construction, and to construct a different event is to create new and unique theories.

One, consequently, does not apply 'theories' of sociology when doing social work, nor 'theories' of film when making films. (That would misconstrue the disciplines of sociology, and film study, as sciences.) Rather, theorizing in sociology occurs in the act of assisting a client in a unique historical situation, as theorizing in film occurs in the act of making the choices that fashion a film. Apart from such acts of creation there is no theorizing, only pseudo-science.

Such theorizing is genuine, for it follows upon careful research and results in conjectures as falsifiable as any prediction in the sciences or history. The research, however, is directed toward comprehending the possibilities and probabilities of the unique situation in which the client, or the film, momentarily exists, so that one can make a parochial prediction about the immediate consequences of doing this rather than that – a prediction that will prove true or false in the near future (unlike scientific or historical conjectures, that are unverifiable though falsifiable), but which, in return for its known truth, must prove irrelevant to future conjectures. The richer the prediction, the more parochial; the more parochial, the less applicable to other situations.

Within each of the newer disciplines are matters amenable to research and testing under the older paradigms: each discipline has a history; each has a component founded on theories of experimental psychology, physiology, and (ultimately) quantum physics. These matters, however, are trivial with respect to the unique truths of the moment that must be sensed if a fruitful prediction is to be made about an event under construction.

What, then, can we say about the teaching of film? A student, to understand what film can do, must design and make unique films in unique existential situations. A teacher, to be effective, must assume the problems of design and construction of each student film as if they were his or her own. Such assimilation requires an intuitive grasp of the parochial nature of film construction that comes only from recurrently designing and producing films. But that, given the syphon of full-time teaching on time, talent, and income, implies that effective teachers of film – the very best of them, in my experience – will be producing films of commercial intent and parochial interest, hardly the sort of 'publication' to impress administrators accustomed to the pomp and circumstance of academic chatter.

If the study of film is to survive, film must be taught well. If it is to be taught well, administrators of film programs must protect their best teachers from those within and without our discipline who, through inexperience and incompetence, would reduce it to history and whatever scraps can be gleaned from the tables of science. Science and

history have important work to do, but it must not be confused with our own. We are not appendages to them; we predict but cannot explain. We, with the other disciplines of the transitory, are methodologically distinct from the disciplines of permanence, and our importance – indeed our viability – rests on the separation.

If we fail to recognize where the focus of research and theorizing in our discipline lies – if, for example, we lose our most sensitive and productive teachers while retaining those inexperienced in the arts of film design and construction but having intuitions honed within the counter-disciplines of permanence – we shall find our inquiries fruitless, our students disaffected and the scorn of the cronies of academe well-merited.