

Notes Towards a Theory of Cyclical Production and Topicality in American Film

In one way or another, I have been reaching for a theory of film cycles since work began on my first book.¹⁾ That research attempted to understand the reasons behind the ebb and flow of Western films during the 1930s. Those enquiries sought to explain Western film cycles as they related to the explicit needs of film producers, exhibitors, and audiences. My more recent studies into the linked post-war/post-studio cycles of boxing, social problem, gangster, rock 'n' roll, and hot rod movies has continued this line of investigation, but as I stretch out from research on a single-genre to considering the inter-relationships between film cycles, particularly around the issue of topicality, I find the need to understand and to explain the methodology that will shape my enquiries.²⁾

To meet this challenge, I have drawn from the ideas of the literary historian Franco Moretti. "Countless are the novels of the world", he observed, "[s]o, how can we speak of them?"³⁾ His

question poses a radical break with literary theory based on a canon of acclaimed works, and his observation presumes a need for a quantitative historical account of literature. Moretti is not interested in the isolated text but in the manner in which texts are related to each other. His focus is on the many, not the few; a history of literary genres in which quantification poses the question the literary historian must answer — why this genre appeared at this particular moment in history and then faded? Moretti intends to produce an account that is responsive to literature in history and that is sensitive to the history of literature. His history is not a record of the extraordinary, but the ordinary, not the unusual forms of literary production, but the everyday forms. I want to propose a similar account for film, one that considers movies through a theory and history of cycles and trends. My study will propose that film is examined in its complexity, not in its singularity, as

1) Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

2) Published work on film cycles by Peter Stanfield includes: 'A Monarch for the Millions: Jewish Filmmakers, Social Commentary & the Postwar Cycle of Boxing Films', in Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (eds.), *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics & Film in the Blacklist Era* (2007), pp. 79–96; 'Crossover: Sam Katzman's Switchblade Calypso Bop Reefer Madness Swamp Girl or "Bad Jazz," Calypso, Beatniks, Hot Rods, and Rock 'n' Roll in 1950s Teenpix', *Popular Music*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Autumn 2010), pp. 437–456; 'Punks! Topicality and the 1950s Gangster Bio-Pic Cycle', in Kingsley Bolton and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Media, Popular Culture and the American Century* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2010), pp. 185–215; "'Got-to-See': Trends in Social Problem Pictures and the Postwar Cycles of Juvenile Delinquency Movies", in Roy Grundmann, Cynthia Lucia, and Art Simon (eds.), *Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film Volume III 1946 to 1975* (New York: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 220–40; 'Intent to Speed: Cyclical Production, Topicality and the 1950s Hot Rod Movie', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (forthcoming 2013).

3) Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. ix.

Moretti also proposed for his study of literature. He writes:

Do cycles and genres explain everything, in the history of the novel? Of course not. But they bring to light its hidden tempo, and suggest some questions on what we could call its internal shape.⁴⁾

I share his understanding on the limits and the possibilities of such an endeavor.

Moretti looks for answers to the question of how he can speak of the many and not just the few in literature's formal arrangements. His method is therefore still open to literature's rhetorical devices, but no longer are these devices isolated from the mass. He proposes an historical account of rhetoric, which is faithful to the empirical data that deals with the evolution and decline of literary genres. Moretti's approach is therefore radical — the move away from an individuated text — and, at the same time, conservative — the cleaving to formal analysis once the quantitative work has been carried out. A study of commercial cinema, however, should have the ambition to go beyond the collection of data and its formal analysis; it must also be attentive and responsive to the role of the industry, of invested institutions, and of creative agents in shaping its particular rhetorical devices.

Moretti's study will produce an account of the oxymoronic concept of "regular novelties", a concept that could have been coined by the British art critic Lawrence Alloway. Alloway's theories on film seriality, iconography, incremental modification, obsolescence, and temporary creative alliances can be aligned with Moretti's "regular novelties", and will form the foundation of my analysis of cycles and trends.⁵⁾ Alloway refused the idea that the study of film should privilege the individual artifact — the

unique art object. Like Moretti, he resists and rejects the lure of the canon. Alloway argued that if we only pay strict attention to the single film or to the creative individual, the object of study will inevitably become divorced from the contexts in which it was produced, so that the study of film becomes analogous to the study of fine art. This is not to say there is nothing interesting or meaningful to be said about isolated films or auteurs, but, as Alloway contended, to use the vocabulary and techniques developed in analysis of the fine arts will do more to hide the ostensible object of study than it will assist in bringing it into the light.

Following Alloway and Moretti, the subject of my critical enquiry is the process of repetition marked by incremental innovation or readjustment. I propose to examine films in terms of sets and runs, to study temporally defined clusters of films. In sum, the object of attention is to consider a film's commonality with other films. This commonality will be considered not just in terms of content, form, and style, but also through enquiries into production, distribution, and the consumption of repeatable experiences. The aim behind the study of film cycles is to set aside the unique, the extraordinary, and the distinct — texts removed from history — and instead turn to recurrence, overlap, and fusion, which form the associations that in turn create the liaisons and connections within and between historically located cycles. As I define it, a cycle is a series, run, or set of successive and related films that are produced over a measurable period of time, the duration of which is marked from a beginning, through productivity and development, to dissipation, fade, and ending.

Mapping the repetitions, overlaps, and fusions that form the associations that link individual films within a cycle, and in turn the liaisons and connections between various cycles, will produce a better understanding of film production

4) Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 29.

5) See, Peter Stanfield, 'Regular Novelties: Lawrence Alloway's Film Criticism', *Tate Papers* #16 (Autumn 2011), pp. 1–9. Peter Stanfield, 'Maximum Movies: Lawrence Alloway's Pop Art Film Criticism', *Screen* vol. 49, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 179–93.

trends than can be achieved by traditional genre analysis. This is because cycles are inherently historical, while genres tend to be conceived as a-historical. Genre theory too often presupposes that films belong to exclusive fixed groupings, which can readily be conceived as existing outside of time. The concept of cycles; however, is fixed inside time. Cycles belong to history. The study of cyclical production allows for the recognition and identification of films with shared characteristics and enables the scholar to see how a cycle merges and blends with other cycles. The scholar thus becomes interested in film's inherent seriality, with its dual focus on repetition and modification. This process of the production of regular novelties — film's institutional particularity — is located within a historical continuum, which is sensitive to the conjunctures between film and the public sphere.

The study of cycles reveals uniqueness to be little more than a re-articulation of existent components. In the process of re-articulation, the form, style, and content of films become modified. Changes in films' social contexts, in production, in distribution, in exhibition, and in reception can account for these modifications. Runs of films, so it will be argued, can act as indices of shifts in the production and consumption contexts of movies, and they can also make legible the time in which the films were produced and consumed. A study of film cycles is therefore also a study of the topical nature of film. This form of analysis can elucidate a film's life within the public sphere without resorting to vague notions such as evoking a zeitgeist, or to generalized symptomatic readings, in order to explain the changes in what was watched and the way people lived.

As used in film trade journals, the terms "fads" "cycles" and "trends" are interchangeable, suggestive of the transitory state of audience interests, which appear to live fast and die young, and

of the industry's attempts to prophesize and to influence shifts in consumption habits and taste; however, scholars should consider these terms as each defining a distinct time frame. Moretti has discussed the "temporary structures" that constitute the particular temporal arrangements that govern serial production and consumption of literature.⁶ Drawing upon the work of historian Fernand Braudel, Moretti explores three time frames: "event", "cycle", and "longue durée". He draws the conclusion that "the short span [event] is all flow and no structure, the longue durée all structure and no flow, and cycles are the — unstable — border country between them".⁷ In this context, temporal structures become visible to the literary historian because repetition is introduced into the equation — hence he or she is able to "map" regularity, order, and pattern. In his refiguration of Braudel's tripartition of temporal structures, Moretti re-names longue durée "genre", that is "morphological arrangements that *last* in time".⁸

Braudel understood all historical work to be involved in "breaking down time past, choosing among its chronological realities according to more or less conscious preferences and exclusions".⁹ This basic principle informed his proposed dialogue between history and the social sciences. He argued that the social sciences were beleaguered by their being overly fixated on the event. This short time span is noisy and explosive, and more a matter of the moment than a means to explicating historical forces. The event's "delusive smoke fills the minds of its contemporaries, but it does not last, and its flame can scarcely ever be discerned".¹⁰ The economist's preference for a longer time span than the event, i.e. the cycle, as an object of study, provides a valuable key to the orchestration of conjunctures out of which a history can be written.¹¹ The problem facing the historian is how to make use of cycles, which are often little more

6) Moretti, *Graphs*, pp. 13–14.

7) Ibid.

8) Ibid [italics in original].

9) Fernand Braudel, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 27.

10) Ibid.

11) Ibid., p. 30.

than sketches and hypotheses.¹²⁾ The answer, he proposes, is found in the manner in which these cycles are structured, how they are organized into a “coherent and fairly fixed series of relationships between realities and social masses”.¹³⁾ This “structure” is what forms the *longue durée*.

For us historians, a structure is of course a construct, an architecture, but, over and above that, it is a reality which time uses and abuses over long periods. Some structures, because of their long life, become stable elements for an infinite number of generations: they get in the way of history, hinder its flow, and in hindering shape it. Others wear themselves out more quickly. But all of them provide both support and hindrance. As hindrances, they stand as limits (“envelopes” in the mathematical sense) beyond which man and his experiences cannot go.¹⁴⁾

Contiguous events form cycles, which in turn are limited by the structures within which they are produced, but which also help shape that structure. Identifying these structures (and structural changes) produces a history defined in terms of the *longue durée*. Braudel’s theory shares a number of elements with the business cycle theory first popularized by the economist W. C. Mitchell and developed by him from the ’teens through to his death in 1948. The theory had a predictive function, using abstract models in order to forecast change and regularity within an economic system. Like Braudel and Moretti’s versions, the business cycle theory has a tripartite structure, made up of fluctuations, cycles, and trends. Fluctuations are localized, short-lived, expressions of economic activity — a ver-

sion of Braudel and Moretti’s “event”. The volatility of economic systems, of which fluctuations are a symptom, can be better understood, and hence change can better be predicted, if a structure, i.e. the cycle, is used to identify the general characteristics of change. The cycle, then, provides a model from which general tendencies in economic activity over time can be identified — tendencies that are not obscured by dramatic fluctuations, fast moving, or attention grabbing, events. The variation in cycles, both in terms of duration and amplitude, are in turn held within trends. According to the economist Stanley Bober, “the trend is represented by a monotonic movement, which is the result of the longer-run underlying forces that affect the series [of cycles]”.¹⁵⁾ Cyclical changes are then determined by “departures from a calculated trend line”.¹⁶⁾ These changes have four phases: “Starting at a trough or low point, it (1) traverses through an expansion phase, (2) rises to a peak or high point, (3) declines through a contraction phase, and (4) reaches a trough.”¹⁷⁾

There are two core principles involved in a cyclical economy model. The first principle is that each cycle must be considered as “a unique series of events, which has its own particular explanatory forces and its own particular effect on the economy”.¹⁸⁾ The second principle is that “although each cycle has its own different experience, it is an outgrowth of economic processes that were occurring during the preceding unique cyclical experience”.¹⁹⁾ A universal model for business cycles is unattainable, because duration and amplitude differ from cycle to cycle, and although business conditions repeat themselves: they do so always with an element of difference. Paraphrasing Mitchell, Bober writes, even

12) Ibid., p. 31.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid.

15) Stanley Bober, *The Economics of Cycles and Growth* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), p. 21.

16) Ibid., p. 25.

17) Ibid., p. 27.

18) Ibid., pp. 44–45.

19) Ibid.

though it may be possible to offer a valid explanation for a particular cycle, it is quite unlikely that the particular conditions that made this one explanation valid would necessarily exist again, or for that matter, did exist in the past.²⁰⁾

Hence, the historical specificity of cycles and the value to the economist of identifying trends across cycles of activity produces a long-lived account. Despite the particularities of any given situation, this theory, so it is argued, allows for an accurate prediction based on past cyclical examples of when expansion will turn to contraction and when contraction will turn to expansion. According to Mitchell, this process of repetition and difference means that a "theory of business cycles must therefore be a descriptive analysis by which one set of business conditions transforms itself into another set".²¹⁾ My aim is to adapt the theories of Mitchell, Braudel, and Moretti, and, in doing so, write a history of cinema that is orchestrated in terms of fads, cycles, and trends, which constitutes my revision of Moretti's event, cycle, and genre.

The study of fads, cycles, and trends allows for a particularly responsive account of small but significant shifts in how Hollywood conceived, produced, distributed, and exhibited its films. Thinking about films in terms of genres, directors, or stars tends to favor similarity in productions over and above difference. In genre studies, the critic searches for an ideal, in star studies he or she attempts to define a paradigmatic performance, while the auteurist critic looks for the repetition of motifs to link otherwise disparate films. On the other hand, the critical study of fads, cycles, and trends does not privilege repetition over novelty or stasis over change, but instead seeks to examine and to explain patterns of reiteration alongside innovation. In this sense, conventions are never entirely fixed, but

are mutable. A generic ideal can never be realized, only imagined.

Architectural critic Reyner Banham, a contemporary of Alloway, wrote that in "engineering a standardised product is essentially a norm, stabilised only for the moment, the very opposite of an ideal because it is a compromise between possible production and possible further development into a new and more desirable norm".²²⁾ The industrial art of Hollywood is based upon the fetish of the norm, its confirmation and disavowal: change and stasis, or minor modification masquerading as innovation, characterize Hollywood's film production. Linking the movies to the automobile industry, Alloway wrote: the "annual style changes were sufficient to entertain us with a comedy of newness but not radical enough to disrupt continuity with earlier models".²³⁾ But, just as in car design, films do change over time, however incrementally and hesitantly those shifts are realized.

One determinant of change is the need for productions to respond to topical issues and to maintain a dialogue with contemporary culture through the incorporation of everyday objects into a film's mise-en-scene. Style of hair, the cut of a jacket, the line of a coat, the model of automobile, street furniture, and branded goods, all help to signify a film's contemporaneity. As much as Hollywood drives fashion changes (magazine spreads on the latest styles worn by the top stars, say) it is also at the mercy of fads, vogues, and seasonal changes. This is why movies, regardless of developments in technology, fast become dated.

Discussing the "zeitgeist fallacy", Moretti notes how readily literary scholars move from an interpretative analysis of rhetoric to making generalizations about social history in light of their readings. The textual insight may be more or less illuminating, but the version of history produced is authoritarian, always producing

20) Ibid., p. 45.

21) Cited in Ibid., p. 45.

22) Barry Curtis, 'From Ivory Tower to Control Tower', in David Robbins and Jacquelyn Baas (eds), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 224.

23) Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 1946-1964* (New York: MOMA, 1971), p. 25.

a corresponding fit between the text and its contexts; however, he notes, "[w]hat becomes arbitrary when it is generalized may perfectly well not be so if it aims for a more restricted sphere of validity".²⁴⁾ This more localized approach means that it is possible to test the validity of the claims made against the evidence presented. Similarly, my studies of fads, cycles, and trends do not claim to elucidate the spirit of the times, to prescribe an overarching social reading of the multitude of films produced in the post-studio era, that romantic comedies, say, somehow reiterate the notion of social conformity as generally ascribed to the years of the Eisenhower administration, or that some genres, film noir for instance, subvert and attack compliance to that same field of convention. But my study does claim to show just how cyclical film production and events and concerns within the public sphere coincide, or not, as the case may be.

Forsaking an inappropriate search for cinematic masterpieces, or a concentration on the supposedly unique features of the medium, Alloway argues that we need to consider

the crossovers among communicative forms. Only then can we chart the forms that topicality takes in the movies, often oblique but definitely present as a predisposing factor in the audience's attitudes.²⁵⁾

This position is akin to that taken by Christine Gledhill in *Reinventing Film Studies*, wherein she discussed the difficulties facing the discipline in the aftermath of the fragmentation of the engagement with "grand theory". She writes:

If, post grand theory, film studies is not to diminish into a conservative formalism or a conceptually unrooted empirical historicism, the question of how to understand the life of films in the social is paramount.²⁶⁾

Gledhill's particular concern is with genre theory and the need to maintain an open-ended understanding of how film genres work as modalities, in which ideologies "provide material for symbolic actions and the aesthetic process hands back to the social affective experience and moral perceptions".²⁷⁾ Genres, she argued,

construct fictional worlds out of textual encounters between cultural languages, discourses, representations, images, and documents according to the conventions of a genre's given fictional world, while social and cultural conflicts supply material for renewed generic enactments.²⁸⁾

Although I replace genre with cycles and trends, my study supports and builds upon Gledhill's directive.

In an account of low-budget films in the 1950s, Blair Davis quotes AIP producer James H. Nicholson on how his company approached the issue of formulaic production with the contradictory need to suggest the new. Blair writes "Nicholson believed that while certain audience tastes never change, they could always be updated 'by use of modern expressions such as 'Hot Rod,' 'Drag Strip' and Rock 'n' Roll,' etc."²⁹⁾ Charting and identifying patterns of recurrence and change in the movies — Moretti's "regular novelties" — and examining production cycles

24) Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 25.

25) Ibid., p. 43.

26) Christine Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies*, (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 240.

27) Ibid.

28) Ibid., p. 239.

29) Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 108.

and their mutual relationship with topical issues of the day — Nicholson's "modern expressions" — scholars can arrive at a set of conclusions about the life of films within the public sphere which are verifiable against the evidence mustered before the reader.

My ambition is to match my research with that currently being carried out under the banner of "new cinema history", an approach exemplified by the work of Richard Maltby. Maltby argues that such a history must be written "from below" so that the social experience of film going is recognized alongside histories of production and the textual reading of film. The axiom of the new cinema history is that it is based on the empirical study of the circulation and reception of cinema, and the industrial, institutional, political, legal, and cultural forces and policies that help determine that movement and consumption. The best of this work is a long way from the "conceptually unrooted empirical historicism" that Gledhill feared. Indeed, like Moretti's quantitative approach, it can determine the questions that can be asked of film that free the scholar from textual readings which only honor the uniqueness of film while ignoring that which is shared with other films and with other media.

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