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Untranslated Thoughts on Teaching Film (in LA)

Szerző

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Film Studies as a Response to the Crisis of the Humanities

I work at the University of Southern California, a large private university in Los Angeles, which runs largely on corporate donations and tuition revenue. Within the university, I teach in a film school that prioritizes media making, primarily for the commercial market, over the study of media. This is an environment where the relevance of the humanities, or what is commonly called a *liberal arts* education in the US, is constantly questioned and is in constant need of justification. On the one hand, this creates an extreme version of the pressures most humanities professors around the world experience. On the other hand, this relentless sense of accountability also keeps one honest about the value of the humanities, since that value can never be taken for granted. Such an environment forces one to articulate – to students, parents, deans, colleagues and the broader public – the contributions film and media studies can make in a climate where getting a job in a competitive job market is students' primary goal and where STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) is the guiding acronym for the education of the future.

Within what is otherwise a trade school for Hollywood, I constantly find myself in a battle to break down the false opposition between film study and film practice and refute the condescending simplifications that relegate film and media studies to “background,” “historical context,” or film appreciation based on unexamined canons or aesthetic judgments. Rather than these approaches, which may have once been central to film studies in order to legitimate itself in relation to literature and other arts, the real value of film studies is not simply in accumulating information about film. Rather, it is in that intangible added value that cultural analysis and a critical understanding of the mediated environment can provide. I believe this understanding has three major pillars: (1) the ability to navigate media culture in the broadest sense, which involves understanding the relays among institutions, media forms and platforms, aesthetics and ideologies; (2) developing communication, critical thinking and analytical skills; and (3) embedding the study of media in media-making practice.

In other words, a film and media-focused liberal arts education today needs to join specialized film study with a broader training in thinking skills, which yields the kind of innovative, transformative and creative approach that is increasing demand in most professions. While digital technologies and data are routinely fetishized, we are now also seeing a backlash against the power of big data to solve all problems and a reversal of the earlier arguments against the relevance of

the humanities. Numerous recent articles and books have proposed a shift of emphasis from *acquiring skills* to *smarter ways of thinking*. (see, for instance, *Cents and Sensibility* by Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro, professors of the humanities and economics, respectively, at Northwestern University; *The Fuzzy and the Techie: Why the Liberal Arts Rule the Digital World* by venture capitalist Scott Hartley, and *Sensemaking: The Power of the Humanities in the Age of the Algorithm* by strategy consultant Christian Madsbjerg). ^[1]

Tech companies themselves, leading with Facebook and Uber, have moved beyond looking for tech skills, recognizing that a humanities degree better prepares their hires for innovation, imagination and communication. Silicon Valley employs a large number of graduates with degrees in history, psychology, gender studies, communication and media studies for jobs in education, consulting, business development, and other specialties. ^[2] These trends evidence a widespread realization among the most successful and impactful companies that a vocational, job-centered education is useless without expansive, large-scale, critical thinking.

In the US, educational policy is a slowly-churning bureaucracy, mostly still stuck in a kind of techno-euphoria as the ticket to success, heavily promoted in primary and secondary education, making otherwise underfunded public schools invest disproportionately in iPads as the magic path to success. Far from becoming smarter, young children create powerpoints instead of drawing by hand, are being assessed by multiple-choice tests in game-based apps, and mandated to take tech ed instead of critical media literacy. Even President Barack Obama repeatedly called for more investment in tech in high schools as a “huge priority” for “everyone”. ^[3]

Closer to the concerns of film studies, a STEM-based, data-centered education tends to eclipse or de-prioritize some crucial factors: the cultural effects on decision-making in understanding people’s motivations and actions, issues of ethics, and the role of storytelling. More and more voices call for adding an “A” for “Arts” into STEM and turning it into STEAM. Universities are at the forefront of these shifts; and it is certainly easier to argue for the pragmatic, transferable value of the humanities and arts in a film school than in, say, in a literature program. Everyone is a media consumer, at the very least, so it is not that hard to generate interest in the subject. In addition, students who are training to be media practitioners in production, animation, screenwriting, or interactive media, are already passionately interested in storytelling, which aligns them well with humanities-based textual approaches. But it’s not enough to analyze texts or draw up a historical or biographical context around stories. In order to keep humanities-based approaches relevant, one must dive deep beyond the text level into the technological and narrative fiber; into the images, gestures, words, and histories sedimented within the text. One must break texts down and put them together again to explain how they make meaning across space and time.

The meaning thus *extracted from* the text – rather than *injected into it* in a pre-determined fashion – will be something in excess of the makers’ and often the instructors’ intention. It will resonate in

and across different places and times and in different communities. It is in the space of this critical and theoretical excess that the continuing relevance of the humanities resides. It is the higher-level thinking they are expected to perform in the course of this work that helps practitioners put their stories together more smartly, more introspectively, more imaginatively, more freely. It is also in this space that film and media studies questions and expands its own boundaries in directions that cross into disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, art history, and the digital humanities.

Film Studies IS Interdisciplinary

I don't think "film studies" has ever not been interdisciplinary. From the outset, it has drawn on neighboring arts and disciplines, from psychology through philosophy and literary studies to gender and sexuality studies, communication, sociology, art history, etc.; and it has always readily absorbed the perspectives of filmmakers working outside of academia. To me, therefore, a more important question is what the impulses and imperatives have been, in particular places and times, to do institutional gatekeeping around film studies. So instead of seeing film studies as "dissolving", I consider the current convergence of the study of film and media with other inquiries as a necessary and beneficial process that is slowly following the convergence of media, platforms, audiences and methods. Whatever designations we arrive at are, therefore, not so much imperializing "supersciences" but, at best, loose, baggy containers for a wide variety of interests and a much greater variety of identities than those traditionally welcomed by "film studies".

Structuring Dualities are not Neutral

The dichotomies of art vs. popular, national film history vs. film as social practice both strike me as artificially imposed in our times. I find applying different assumptions and methodologies to "art cinema" and "popular film" reductive and hard to justify. While of course we all have our own preferences, these are not always pre-determined by genre or canon; nor should they be forced on others, especially those we are in charge of educating. E.g. I think the reality formats *Gogglebox* or *The Great British Baking Show* are extremely valuable, enjoyable and well-made shows, and all makeover formats have a great deal to teach us about cultural value, aesthetics, nationalism, labor in the screen industries, media globalization, gender and race, spectatorship and the culturalization of pervasive neoliberal dogma – compared to, say, the recent HBO production *The Romanoffs*, a quality TV anthology drama spearheaded by a celebrity auteur, made with complete creative freedom and a near-unlimited budget, which teaches none of those things. The same principles of evaluation go for films. In a similar way, I don't see how the practices studied under the titles "national film history" and "cinema as a social or medial practice" can ever

function distinctly and would thus warrant separate discussion.

Directions for Moving Image Studies

Given the global interconnectedness of media industries and experiences and the convergence among technologies and platforms, it seems inevitable that film studies move towards further broadening its scope and integrating an increasing range of approaches and interests. A good indication of trends is the name change of the Society for Cinema Studies (SCMS), the flagship organization for the study of film in the US and the largest one worldwide, which added “Media” to its name a few years ago. SCMS’s journal, *Cinema Journal*, renamed itself *Cinema and Media Journal* a month ago. In a similar vein, the largest European counterpart to SCMS is called the Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) and its journal is called *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*. I sit on the editorial boards of both of these journals and have watched with great excitement how their scopes have opened up in the past few years. Recent and forthcoming special issues of NECSUS, for instance, have been dedicated to exploring “Crisis”, “Waste”, “Green”, “War”, “Tangibility”, “Traces”, “Mapping”, “Animals”, “Home”, “Small Data”, etc. While such concerns would have been inadmissible for film studies “purists” of previous times, they signal the field’s capacity to follow new generations of scholars towards what count as urgent issues for them.

I think there will always be room to pursue the questions that dominated film studies in its heyday, such as theories of medium specificity, film history, national cinemas, genres and directors, etc. However, the flexibility of moving image studies to respond to and offer explanatory matrices of new social, economical or technological developments is evidence of their strength and a guarantee of their continuing relevance rather than a cause for alarm.

Jegyzetek

1. See also: Jessica Shepherd: I think, therefore I earn. *The Guardian*, 2007. November 20. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/nov/20/choosingadegree.highereducation>;
2. George Anders: That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket. *Forbes*, 2015 August 17. URL: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeanders/2015/07/29/liberal-arts-degree-tech/>
3. [3] See Anders loc. cit.

Irodalomjegyzék

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