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Established, Emerging, or Phantom? The State of the Film Studies Discipline

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Abstract

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Abstract:

Despite decades in the university, the state of the film studies discipline is still much contested. This paper aims to trace film studies—albeit in a limited manner—from the minuscule stirrings of the discipline to its current state of uncertainty. By evaluating the establishment of the discipline’s boundaries and their subsequent shifts, film studies is revealed to have been most unfortunate in its timing. Just as film studies could have emerged as a fully-fledged discipline, the university’s own definition shifted, from an institution centered on culture to one centered on excellence. This shift in the university left film studies struggling to contend with a new objective—one which lacked empathy toward disciplines that cannot bring wealth or status to the university. Thus, film studies became a phantom discipline and its future is uncertain. Film studies may either gain credibility and strength, or it may become broken up into so many fragmented pieces that film will either exit the university in a hushed moment of defeat or be absorbed into various disciplines in the form of topics classes as well as a tool to bolster discussion. If film studies wishes to remain within the university, its best option may be to gradually redefine itself.

Keywords: University of Excellence | University of Culture | Film Studies | Filmmaking | Phantom Discipline | Postmodern | Legitimation | Media Studies | Boundaries | Cultural Studies | Library Service



The status of film studies as a discipline is greatly contested. Much debate exists in film studies literature over the period when film studies became a true discipline. Some scholars—as recently as 2010—assert that film studies is still emerging as a discipline, while others claim its beginnings lie as far back as the invention of film. Still others view film studies as something “beyond” or “other than” a discipline. Furthermore, while the status of a discipline may seem like a peripheral concern—and often is treated as such by many scholars—knowing the current state of the discipline is key in understanding its future trajectory. For forward-thinking scholars, moving ahead of the discipline is one way in which to achieve power and eminence within their field; however, all scholars should be more aware of where their discipline stands in the university structure. Furthermore, academic librarians can also benefit from examining disciplinary structures in depth, bettering their ability to assist students in their navigation of expected practices and knowledge. No matter where one stands on the subject of disciplinary status, the historical beginnings of any discipline are key elements that must be examined in order to fully understand the discipline’s boundaries. These unities and discontinuities, as Foucault calls them in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, are what create a discipline’s discourse and allow it to grow, rather than remain stagnant and eventually die out.

Thus, while this paper focuses on the status of film studies as a discipline, a historical overview of key moments as explored in Grieveson and Wasson’s *Inventing Film Studies* will also be included. In fact, I will begin by examining the minuscule stirrings of the discipline—when film was first studied in a serious manner, although this was a full decade before film first entered the university. I will also explore how film was first studied in a manner closer to a social science before shifting toward classification as a form of art within the humanities, aided by the Museum of Modern Art. Film then became to be understood as an educational tool, at least initially in the form of documentaries, due to the work done by the League of Nations and UNESCO. The discussion continues with a look at film studies as it entered the university and its beginnings as a fledgling discipline. At this point, universities had yet to establish any consensus on film studies as a discipline, and as a result film studies floated freely along a wide-ranging spectrum without much definition.

Once film studies began to “catch on” and many universities followed the trailblazers that originally accepted film studies into their structures, the film studies discipline really began to form. More boundaries were established and the early divisions—such as those between practice and theory—were more clearly set. But the boundaries within a discipline are not the only structures that need to be considered. Instead, one must consider the position of film studies in the entirety of the university structure—namely, how film studies relates to other disciplines. In this discussion, the interdisciplinary nature of film studies comes to light, which is one of the reasons that film studies is so open and its boundaries have become blurred. Another reason, which is then investigated more fully, is that as film studies began to define itself as a discipline, the university was altering its own definition. As Bill Readings explains in *The University in Ruins*, the University of Excellence removed culture as the center of the university and made the university into a consumerist corporation.



The implications of the University of Excellence are then explored more fully in considering the current state of the university, while also speculating as to the university's future. This, of course, is followed by a discussion on the University of Excellence's effect on film studies in particular. By comparing film studies to cultural studies (a symptom of the university's shift toward excellence), the claim arises that film studies is currently a phantom discipline, de-centered by the abandonment of the culture meta-narrative and floating through the margins of the university. The implications for academic librarians assisting students and scholars in film studies research are also explored. Finally, I speculate as to the potential future of film studies as a discipline, which is largely dependent upon the status of the university. Where film studies is headed is yet unclear; however, speculation allows us to consider possibilities while illustrating the significance of considering the status of film studies, especially for scholars in the field and the academic librarians that assist their research.

Beginnings of a Discipline

Discrepancies surrounding a discipline's emergence often arise due to opposing definitions of "discipline," and films studies is no exception. Some scholars believe that a discipline is not fully established until it is recognized as such by an external agency, such as the National Research Council. Others believe a discipline is formed once the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are established within the university. If we are to believe Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, there are three "moments" of a discipline: "a period prior to full academic institutionalization, characterized by disparate agendas; the formalization of an academic discipline; and the ensuing transformations of that discipline into its present multimedia configuration" (xi). Grieveson and Wasson go on to argue that the very beginnings of the film studies discipline, in its period prior to entering the university system, surface in the early twentieth century, "as a political problem in conjunction with the social turbulence of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s" (xvi). During this period, film was studied outside of academic institutions.

While other scholars may claim that this important "moment" of development is prior to the real discipline, film studies, as the contributors to *Inventing Film Studies* claim, becomes a much richer discipline in considering its study outside the university. For instance, in ignoring the history of film prior to its induction into the university, scholars overlook the social science beginnings of a discipline that is currently considered a part the humanities. As Grieveson recounts in "Cinema Studies and the Conduct of Conduct," film became an object of study shortly after its invention and establishment as a form of entertainment for the public due to the idea of mimesis. Mimesis was seen in film's imitation of reality, causing a person viewing the film to seek their identity on the screen. In other words, mimesis in film had the potential to cause great social effects:

Minds 'forced' and 'penetrated' by influences and impressions, hypnotized by the vivid intensity of cinema, were prone to imitative acts and corporeal 'motor' responses that were potentially psychically and socially destructive. Watching pictured scenes threatened individual autonomy and civic responsibility for audiences unable to maintain the specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge. (Grieveson 5)



As a result, studying how a film affected its audience became a concern of the government. After all, in a democracy the government must understand the people it governs in order to be effective in policy making. Discerning film's affect on individuals was just one way in which the government felt it could understand the psychological and social conduct of the governed.

One main method in which the effects of film were first studied was established during the Payne Fund Studies of 1927, as discussed by Grieveson. The Payne Fund Studies used a 'psychogalvonometer' to measure the reactions of children as they were being shown films. Grieveson explains, "The attempts to render through machines the seemingly invisible—the engagement of individuals with cinema—into a form that could be recorded and classified made clear the way that knowledge about cinema was being inserted into circuits of knowledge and power" (20). The Payne Fund Studies concluded that the unconscious effects of cinema have the potential to cause problems of social control and delinquency, especially in children and others who are less capable of distinguishing reality from mimesis. Using science to understand society, the Payne Fund Studies illustrates how the beginnings of film studies as a discipline were within the social sciences. Furthermore, the Payne Fund Studies caused film to become associated with risk and a breakdown of social order in the eyes of the government. Such a view could never allow an academic discipline to arise; yet, with the shift towards humanities, film becomes more of an art form and, as a result, sheds the negative cloak of mimesis and social disorder.

The shift to the humanities allowed new studies of film to come to light, illustrating the disparate agendas that are a symptom of the "pre-academic institutionalization" period of a discipline. In "Studying Movies at the Museum: The Museum of Modern Art and Cinema's Changing Object," Wasson explores the role that the Museum of Modern Art, or MOMA, played in film studies becoming a humanities discipline. The Film Library in the MOMA was established in 1935, and "was taken as an authoritative announcement that film had finally and rightfully achieved status as art" (Wasson 121). Prior to its inclusion in the MOMA and the beginning of the Film Library, films were consistently discarded after use rather than being properly preserved. The Film Library changed this, and by preserving film the Library illustrated film's significance. Furthermore, being included in a museum of art, film was increasingly being understood as a new art form—one that was becoming more attainable to the public at large. And yet, at this time, "a persistent bemusement—still familiar—over the prospect of studying movies, especially popular movies, also took firm hold" (Wasson 122). It seems that in shedding its initial negative view of causing social disorder, film studies became questionable in its value to knowledge outside the public realm of entertainment despite efforts of MOMA and its Film Library. Indeed, this divide in film studies between entertainment for the masses and a wealth of knowledge for scholarly pursuit is still firmly rooted in the discipline today.

The arrival of sound along with a new recognition of the educational value of documentary films also marked the 1930s. While the value of film outside the public realm was being questioned by some, documentaries were becoming increasingly relevant in the argument supporting the study of cinema. Similar to how the MOMA was responsible for solidifying film's presence as an art form, the League of Nations and UNESCO "provided important institutional spaces for the



emergence of discourse about educational film that would set the terms for discussions about documentary—not as film, but as education—for many years to come” (Druick 68). Both the League and UNESCO were invested in documentary film as an international medium, connecting cultures from around the world under a common set of educational standards in both film publications and conferences. Druick explains, “As a predominately educational medium, documentary films were understood as a superior method by which to showcase national cultures through popularizing scientific and social science observations” (81). In fact, the movement to support documentaries as educational films created an even deeper divide between popular films for entertainment and documentaries for education, especially as the study of film began to enter the university.

Furthermore, documentaries became an important part of creating citizens of the nation-state. Both the League and UNESCO “placed a great emphasis on film education in its connection to educational film. A byproduct of this emphasis on education by means of film was the emergence of significant discourse on educational film, which was to be instrumental in establishing the standardization of documentary film as short, national, and didactic” (Druick 87). Thus, studying documentaries from various nations would lead to an understanding of that nation’s culture, if somewhat limited. Through documentaries, film became inextricably entwined with the idea of the nation-state. This notion will be explored further later in this paper, when the current state of the university as an institution of excellence is discussed in relation to film studies.

And yet, despite the historical context provided here, film studies—just like any other discipline—cannot be traced back to a single origin point. While the historical beginnings of a discipline are important to consider, history is not linear. According to Foucault, discourse “is, from beginning to end, historical—a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption [sic] in the midst of the complicities of time” (117). The historical context provided here is, of course, limited to specific moments significant to the development of film studies, and while the word “development” may carry connotations of linearity, this is not necessarily so. As Foucault points out, development causes a discipline to be filled with divisions, eruptions, and periods of unity and discontinuity. These create “variety within the uniformity” (Becher and Trowler 139) and characterize a discipline, rather than the moment-to-moment tracings of historical decisions or shifts in the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. It is important to keep in mind as we delve deeper into the divisions of film studies that the moments discussed here did not necessarily lead to—at least in a strictly cause-and-effect manner—the moments to follow.

Entering the University

While the beginnings of a discipline may be found external to the university, a discipline must enter the university to find structure and, as a result, power. After all, when “a discipline is highly classified, strongly framed and has a strong collection code...academics are empowered” (Becher and Trowler 37) and the research done within the discipline is legitimized.



Furthermore, although many of the people who are positioned outside the university view disciplines as constrained structures that are more exclusive than inclusive, an academic discipline actually “allows room for uncertainties of application” (Becher and Trowler 41). Disciplines are necessarily restrictive, but the boundaries of a discipline, for those familiar with it, are freeing in that they define problems that need to be solved. In understanding disciplinary structures, then, academic librarians can more easily assist researchers in a defined field locate relevant materials and uncover the work of key scholars. As Foucault explains, there can be “no knowledge without a particular discursive practice” (183). But while the discursive practice defines a discipline, it does not cut the discipline off from other territories. Despite the empowerment available through university structure, no discipline is entirely impervious to poachers—nor would we want them to be, for a discipline that is completely separate from others would eventually become stagnant and cease to produce new knowledge. Conversely, boundaries must be formed in order to maintain a disciplinary status, as our survey of the current state of film studies will soon show. But when disciplines first enter the university, boundaries are as of yet unformed and often a solidified concept of discipline is still out of reach.

Turning our attention once again to the specific discipline of film studies, courses on film studies began entering select universities in the early twentieth century; but, no true consensus concerning the study of film was yet formed at this time. In fact, the disparate agendas that characterize a discipline before its academic institutionalization were still present as film studies slowly began to establish a presence in an academic setting. Dana Polan claims that even through the 1930s “the lack of consensus about the ways to study film and, more than that, the lack of dialogue among academic institutions out of which such consensus might have grown, means that we can find in these early ventures a range of possible ways in which film was imagined to be an object worthy of study” (94). Yet, even with the lack of consensus, a bachelor’s degree in film was first offered in 1932 at the University of Southern California (Polan 96), driving the development of film studies toward acceptance as a true discipline—albeit a discipline with an imagined legitimacy—without first establishing boundaries. With a lack of boundaries, film studies fought to define itself while swaying among various influences and disruptors.

One of the great disruptors faced by film studies as it was entering the university was the division between theory and practice. In fact, this division is still found in film studies today, although the necessity of the division has been more clearly defined since boundaries have been constructed. In the early twentieth century, though, such a division merely added to the discrepancies surrounding film as an object of study. For instance, film in the early twentieth century required skilled practitioners to work with the new methods of filmmaking:

Film was a tool-heavy form of production, mechanically and technologically dependent in a way foreign to literary creation....Given the extent to which it was both labor intensive and technology intensive, film was a quite appropriate object for a mode of study that was concerned with the appreciation of human achievement in crafting things. (Polan 104)



The technology behind film lent toward a practice-focused discipline; yet, Victor Freeburg—known as cinema’s first professor—wrote books on film that had “a certain degree of close engagement with the textual makeup of film in ways that resemble grammatical and rhetorical analysis” (Polan 102). In the academic beginnings of film studies, the connection between theory and practice was not clear, and film studies floated along a spectrum of emphasizing one over the other. Polan recounts how USC wavered until WWII caused practice to win out over theory in order to assist the war effort, while Sawyer Falk at Syracuse University privileged “pure” cinema that was independent from other forms of art, mainly instructing his classes on techniques unique to film (97).

Not until the 1950s did film studies really begin to carve itself a position in the university. During this time, “[n]ew curricula came into existence, dissertations were written, a professional society for film was created (the Society for Cinematologists in 1959), and scholarly books and book series began to appear at a regular rate” (Polan 116). These developments, as with any forming discipline, began a culture that became a defining feature of the discipline and its academic populace. Charles Acland explains this phenomenon in his article “Classrooms, Clubs, and Community Circuits: Cultural Authority and the Film Council Movement, 1946-1957”:

Film cultures come into relief not only as a consequence of films produced but also within the context of their use, which includes the energies of critics, censors, policymakers, social progressives, and moral authorities as they argue for particular deployments of film. Film culture is a byproduct of the materiality of writing criticism, constructing arguments, and circulating articles—that is, the brainwork at the root of any discursive enterprise. (152)

One way a discipline is defined, then, is through its culture—the culture that is created by the discipline. Lyotard explains that this culture is what creates a “consensus that permits such [narrative] knowledge to be circumscribed and makes it possible to distinguish one who knows from one who doesn’t” (19). The culture of a discipline is what—at least in part—forms boundaries.

But a unique problem faced by film studies is how relevant the discipline’s object of study is to the general public. Not that other disciplines lack relevance outside the university, but popular films that are also studied in an academic setting are much more accessible as a form of entertainment to the larger public than other objects of study. For example, scientists may study the effects of alcohol in the sleep-deprived, and while such a topic is certainly relevant to all health-conscious people, the study is not as widely available or even as widely sought after as popular films. As mentioned previously, the divide between entertainment and specialized knowledge is a divide that began when film became an object of study and still persists in the discipline to this day. A tension is thus created between applied and pure, filmmaking and theory; yet, as a social medium, filmmaking is as vital to the study of film in an academic setting as is theory. After all, film is intrinsically of a social nature, displaying a mimetic account of society on screen. While this tension will be discussed more fully later on, it is important to consider in relation to the forming of boundaries. The division between the public’s entertainment and the academic’s object of study illustrates the fact that boundaries are



not built to resolve tensions, but rather to construct a space in which each tension may thrive. Conflicting concepts and disparate agendas may still exist within a discipline—and may in fact be central to that discipline’s make-up, as in film studies—without internally corrupting the discipline. What is key to these disparate agendas co-existing in the same discipline is that a connection must be made, meaning a claim to social relevance for each of the disparate agendas. It is important that academic librarians understand these divisions and tensions, or they may not be a great source of assistance for researchers in a specific field.

Establishing Boundaries

Although boundaries have already briefly entered our discussion, this section will explore the establishment and implication of boundaries further, as well as other boundaries found within the discipline. Returning to Foucault’s idea of unity and discontinuity and the role of disruptors in a discipline’s formation, Foucault writes that in order to understand a discipline,

What one must characterize and individualize is the coexistence of these dispersed and heterogeneous statements; the system that governs their division, the degree to which they depend on one another, the way in which they interlock or exclude one another, the transformation that they undergo, and the play of their location, arrangement, and replacement. (Foucault 34)

To Foucault, then, the statement is the smallest unit of a discourse and multiple statements together are what define the rules of a discourse within a discipline—what is acceptable or unacceptable, and, more importantly, what is meaningful. In accepting an archaeology of knowledge rather than the history of ideas, Foucault is rejecting a transcendental subject overarching the entirety of a discipline in favor of discontinuities and disruptors. Statements are what allow discontinuities to exist within a discourse without a transcendental subject governing a discipline’s boundaries. It is in exploring each division within the discipline of film studies, then, that we as academic librarians may understand the rules and statements governing the discourse.

As Timothy Corrigan points out in his guide to writing about film, film studies has many significant divisions within the field. As mentioned previously, the division between entertainment for the masses and film as an object of academic study was felt before film entered the university and is still seen to this day. Corrigan explains, “We go to the movies for many reasons: to think, not to think; to stare at them, to write about them. We may go to a movie to consume it like cotton candy; we may go to a film where that candy becomes food for the mind” (3). Because of the multiple roles filled by film, many divisions are created. And while “[t]here is often an unspoken assumption [that any kind of analysis might interfere with our enjoyment of the movies]” (Corrigan 2), popular film also entered the university and such films are still utilized by faculty in the classrooms of various disciplines. In addition to the entertainment/academic study division, other divisions of film studies include film theory, film critique, and filmmaking. Again, filmmaking and theory have already briefly appeared in our discussion concerning theory and practice. Entering the university has only served to establish



these divisions more clearly—and solidly—by defining how they interact with one another and the reason behind their existence.

Film critique, though, is a new boundary that developed when film entered the university. While critiques and reviews of film were likely written before a discipline arose in an academic setting, film critique took on a new meaning in the classroom. Critiques—or critical essays—are the unique writing style between theory and reviews that are often assigned to film students to test their ability to write for a specific audience (Corrigan 10-12). Critical essays also allow undergraduate students to explore theory while not having to orient an unfamiliar reader with a movie, and allow a critical writer to explore how films extend beyond entertainment and how what one film has to say on a certain topic is unique from another film on the same topic:

The movies are not just about a subject but about the rendition of that subject for particular reasons and to create certain meanings....Any film at any point in history might describe a family, a war, or the conflict between races, but the ways these subjects are shown and the reasons they are shown in a particular way can vary greatly. (Corrigan 20)

In this way, critical essays in film allow a student of film studies to gradually enter into the discipline. Librarians in a university setting must understand the usage of these divisions in their guidance of researchers at different levels of experience. Undergraduates are not expected to comprehend all the technicalities of filmmaking, nor are they expected to know the major theories of film. Instead, a balance is struck between the two in order to create a space for undergraduates—the novices of film studies.

While the divisions discussed above are quite easily apparent to an outsider examining the field, one must also consider how film studies “sits” among other disciplines in the university structure. While film studies is technically a humanities discipline, it also crosses many boundaries. The boundary-crossing nature of film studies will be explored more fully later in this paper, but what is important to consider is how film studies relates to other humanities disciplines, as well as disciplines found in the sciences or social sciences. The limits of this paper do not allow for a complete examination, so the discussion will be restricted to the most significant considerations.

Now let us turn to Becher and Trowler’s hard/soft, pure/applied classification model for disciplines. This cognitive model certainly has its limitations, especially in relation to film studies. Generally, film studies would be found on the soft side rather than the hard, meaning that research in this area is qualitative and interpretive rather than quantitative and progressive. However, if film is studied in a manner similar to how it was during the Payne Fund studies, film studies would be more toward the hard, quantitative side rather than the soft side. Also, the filmmaking area of film studies would be applied, while theory would be pure. Thus, film studies could span the entire model proposed by Becher and Trowler in *Academic Tribes and Territories*. We may be able to conclude, though, that film studies is typically more qualitative than hard science and it even may be argued that it leans a bit more toward pure than applied, although one must recognize how inextricably linked theory and practice are in film studies.



Becher and Trowler's model also creates two sets of divisions with the social realm: urban/rural and convergent/divergent. Where film studies lies in these divisions is not as contested. Film studies is rural in that it is much more spread out and has less overlap in research, which also means less competition. At one time there was a movement to emphasize the 'auteurs' of film—the championed directors whose creativity was stamped onto each of their films despite any interference from the process of filmmaking. Gabbard points out that the devotion to a narrow list of prestigious film directors, or "auteurs," is becoming less prevalent in the studies of film (B14). This results in a less urban environment and, as Gabbard explains, "[i]f the discipline's devotion to the best-known auteurs is narrowing, the global reach of cinema and media studies has become vast" (B14). Film studies is also much more divergent and open to a wider field than some other disciplines. In fact, due to its divergent nature, many scholars believe film studies is currently facing an identity crisis and must decide whether it is going to become an established discipline or accept a status of 'interdisciplinary,' 'pseudo-discipline,' or any one of a number of terms that distinguish it as something not quite a discipline. This paper will soon explore these options under the heading "phantom discipline."

But we have somehow jumped forward a bit too far, since one may wonder why film studies was first successful in entering the academy before losing its identity and being called to defend its disciplinary status. The auteurism that began falling out of favor in the late 1970s actually legitimized film studies as a discipline in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Gabbard B14). While those who study music may focus on Mozart or Chopin, and linguists study the writings of Wittgenstein and Chomsky, Alfred Hitchcock or Fritz Lang may be the focus of film studies. In this manner, a film theorist could argue for the legitimacy of the discipline and, as a result, the legitimacy of their research by appealing to auteurism that defined modern film studies. Furthermore, the departure film studies took from the classics offered a fresh breath of air into the academy, gaining favor among younger students and driving its success:

[A]t a moment when even the most venerable of institutions of higher learning were being forced to demonstrate their relevance to the professional and practical issues of the modern age—rather than to luxuriate in an increasingly outdated commitment to a classical education centered on great books—the cinema brought a certain hipness, a certain newness, to the academic environment. (Polan 111)

In other words, the modern university was one that was questioning the reliance upon the classics as the foundation for the academic institution. Once free from having to defend their necessity, classical education now needed arguments to support their relevance not only to the university system but also to society at large. It is at this moment that film studies could provide a rationale for their institutionalization in the university, securing a place in which to carve out its boundaries more fully.

The Current State of the University

As film studies began to define itself as a discipline, the university was altering its own definition. Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins* presents the university as a shifting entity rather than



stagnant as many presume, moving from a university of culture where literature and a national canon reigned supreme toward a university of excellence:

[I]t is the recognition that the University is not just *like* a corporation; it *is* a corporation. Students in the University of Excellence are not *like* customers; they *are* customers. For Excellence implies a quantum leap: the notion of Excellence develops *within* the University, as the idea around which the University centers itself and through which it becomes comprehensible to the outside world... (22).

Readings asserts that the University of Excellence, where the university currently is, provides no referent, and therefore allows the university to be relevant on a universal scale. However, having no referent also necessarily leads to questioning the driving force of the university (meta-narrative) and the university's role in society (legitimacy). In the university of culture, the university was understood as an institution that created citizens of the nation-state. With the need to create global citizens growing due, in part, to the development of technology that increased global communication, the nation-state fell out of favor and was replaced by corporate consumerism. Thus, the University of Excellence is relevant to society only in its re-defined role of corporation, with students as consumers and performativity the measure of success.

As both Readings and Lyotard affirm, the principle of performativity placed at the center of the university has significant consequences; however, the difference lies in Lyotard seeing performativity as a result of the postmodern status of knowledge and incredulity toward meta-narratives, while Readings focuses more on the ruins of the university (although postmodernism does come into play). Lyotard writes that performativity's "general effect is to subordinate the institutions of higher learning to the existing powers. The moment knowledge ceases to be an end in itself...its transmission is no longer the exclusive responsibility of scholars and students" (50). In other words, students and scholars can no longer let their passions guide their research, and instead must focus on what can be legitimized to the corporation, which is typically research that brings in money or status. While this effect is felt more so in the sciences with the demand to constantly fund one's research with grants, the humanities—film studies included—are not immune to performativity's influence. Where film studies varies from other humanities disciplines, though, is in its experience with consumerism. At least in terms of filmmaking, there is a demand to be met and a product to be delivered and promoted. Yet, while filmmaking in the university teaches students how to create films, the consumerism of the film business exists external to the discipline. Even within the University of Excellence where the university has become a corporation, the university corporation is separate from the film corporation—a distinct difference between the learning amateur and the learned expert. The implications of such a set-up for film studies specifically will be explored further in a later section.

Lyotard also explains the rise of technology within the University of Excellence in relation to performativity. Technology is becoming ever-more present in our daily lives and an academic institution is no exception, especially considering the university's shift toward performativity.



Technology is designed to make the lives of users easier, yet the implications are often overlooked. One such implication concerning the role of professors is explained by Lyotard:

But one thing that seems certain is that in both cases the process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion [in the University of Excellence] are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, no more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games. (53)

With advances in technology, knowledge is readily available to all consumers, removing the necessity of a professor as a learned expert imparting wisdom to a younger generation. The younger generation can simply use a computer to access a database and find the knowledge they seek (provided they know and can successfully evaluate the relevance and accuracy of such knowledge, which is where academic librarians may step in). While Lyotard brings to light an important concern, the true concern is not what will happen to the professor but rather what will the professor become. While students can access information they seek online, students must learn how to access these 'memory bank networks.' If we are to believe Lyotard that the role of the professor will be completely removed—and we are not required to, for this may be easily contested in exploring the other possible roles of a professor—then students are left on their own to navigate the consumerist waters of a knowledge corporation driven by performativity and, ultimately, money and power.

Returning to Readings, we see another effect excellence has on the university—the threat to long-established departments such as philosophy. Due to the corporate, global nature of the University of Excellence,

...no one knows what excellence is but that *everyone* has his or her own idea of what it is. And once excellence has been generally accepted as an organizing principle, there is no need to argue about differing definitions. Everyone is excellent, in their own way, and everyone has more of a stake in being left alone to be excellent than in intervening in the administrative process. There is a clear parallel here to the condition of the political subject under contemporary capitalism. Excellence draws only one boundary: the boundary that protects the unrestricted power of the bureaucracy. And if a particular department's kind of excellence fails to conform, then that department can be eliminated without apparent risk to the system. (Readings 32-33)

As Readings points out, departments that do not conform to the excellence boundary that protects the bureaucracy's power—typically long-established departments like philosophy—may be eliminated to protect the system. Since film studies is such a unique discipline due to its divisions and relevance on a larger, entertainment-based scale, one would assume that film studies should thrive in such an environment; yet, this is not the case. The monetary benefits of film studies exist external to the university system, meaning that film studies fails to bolster the bureaucracy's power. Unlike the classics, film studies does not threaten the power of the bureaucracy, yet "excellence" within the university relates to performativity. Film studies is



unable to “perform excellently” with its divergent divisions and lack of clearly defined boundaries.

In a way, film studies is becoming more like women’s studies, African American studies, and other forms of cultural studies in the University of Excellence due to its weak boundaries—in fact, that is exactly what Chow and Brooks each claim to some degree. We will return to the discussion of film studies in relation to cultural studies in a moment, but first we must consider how cultural studies emerged as a symptom of the University of Excellence. As Readings writes, “Cultural Studies arises...*in* the University out of the predicament of those who are excluded from within, who can neither stay nor leave. And the cry of Cultural Studies that the University must be left behind has proved a particularly fruitful way of staying in the University” (91). Because of the shift from a university of culture to one of excellence, culture has been removed as the meta-narrative of the university. Those within the university who clung to the former meta-narrative were excluded from within, so cultural studies arose as an answer to the shift toward excellence. In other words, because culture was displaced as the meta-narrative of the university, it moved to the margins of the university and became a discipline itself. Furthermore, some scholars view cultural studies as providing a structure in which the traditional disciplines may be abandoned for a more open and interdisciplinary university system; yet, Readings does not view this as an option.

Instead, Readings claims that we must learn to dwell among the ruins of the university of culture (169), while also proposing a new meta-narrative for the university—Thought. Thought should drive the university to reflection and allow space for a new role to emerge. Although the University of Thought does not provide a true solution to the University of Excellence, it does allow the university to critically reflect and evaluate its current flaws. In addition, Readings claims that the time when the university relied on a meta-narrative as a legitimizing principle is now over and “the University will have to become one place, among others, where the attempt is made to think the social bond without recourse to a unifying idea, whether of culture or of the state. In the University, thought goes on alongside other thoughts, we think beside each other” (191). Yet, Readings' proposal of the University of Thought is filled with some flaws. Unfortunately, Readings does not spend as much time exploring the possible implications of the University of Thought as he does the other meta-narratives the university has passed through. Of course, this may be because mere speculation is not enough for Readings, but one must wonder how Thought legitimizes the university to society without producing some sort of results or product. Nevertheless, the University of Thought is simply a proposed solution without proven implications, and we must now turn our attention to the current state of the university in its relation to film studies.

A Phantom Discipline?

As previously mentioned, the current state of film studies is highly debated. Some scholars readily accept film studies as an established discipline, with others claim it is still emerging. Still others claim that film studies is somehow less than a discipline, which may fall under the various terms “interdisciplinary,” “cross-disciplinary,” “pseudo-discipline,” or—the



claim I wish to support—“phantom discipline.” Some degree of crossing disciplinary boundaries is beneficial, as Becher and Trowler explain:

Viewed in collective terms, research on a given topic may be enhanced by intellectual and technological developments outside its confines....[T]heories and techniques generated in one milieu may turn out to be productively applied elsewhere; instrumentation developed in one setting may be the occasion of significant advances in another. (166)

This sort of “boundary poaching” that leads to innovation and growth allows a discipline to change over time without completely abandoning its old structures. Thus, some of the research found within specific disciplines is to some degree interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary. The real difficulty occurs when a discipline is so open and divergent that it is difficult to see where that discipline’s boundaries are located. Film studies is one such discipline, as is cultural studies. The various forms of cultural studies are “pseudo-disciplines” since, as we discussed before, they are a result of the University of Excellence and an abandonment of the culture meta-narrative. Pseudo-disciplines interact with all the traditional disciplines in turn while never becoming an independent entity. While we shall explore how film studies is similar to these pseudo-disciplines, I will argue for a different name for film studies (phantom discipline) despite shared characteristics, since film studies did not necessarily arise in the same manner as cultural studies and may have been an established discipline at one time.

Cultural studies masquerades itself as a discipline, but a problem arises when one tries to theorize cultural studies. Readings shapes the problem by exploring multiple claims of how one can theorize cultural studies, concluding:

Although particular cultural struggles need to be engaged in, particular exclusions also must be combated. Culture is no longer the terrain on which a general critique of capitalism can be carried out. The problem of Cultural Studies is that it attempts to deliver on the redemptive claims of cultural criticism, while expanding those claims to cover everything. This is why Cultural Studies activities find their most fertile disciplinary homes in expanded departments of national literature. (103)

Thus, academics cannot confront the problem of culture since culture has become dereferentialized and no longer provides the meta-narrative at the heart of the university. Since culture is no longer at the center of the university, to talk about culture one must stand in the margins; however, the interdisciplinary nature of culture—its relevance to multiple disciplines—causes it to expand and cover everything. Cultural studies, then, cannot isolate itself in the normal manner of a true discipline. Rather, culture must be studied in each discipline as a topic due to the university’s shift toward excellence and its dereferentialization of culture. Cultural studies is a pseudo-discipline that will either be absorbed into each individual discipline in the form of topic classes, or, as some scholars wish, it will replace the classic university model in favor of a more open, free-flowing system of knowledge production.



In a similar manner to cultural studies, film studies crosses various disciplinary boundaries in the university. For instance, many professors from varying disciplinary backgrounds utilize film in their classrooms. Although they are not film scholars, these professors see the value in film as a tool in teaching; yet, this blurs the boundaries of the film studies discipline. While film studies has managed to carve itself a spot in the university and establish certain boundaries, these boundaries are being crossed by amateurs, both in the realm of pedagogy and publishing. Furthermore, film studies is becoming more influenced by cultural studies. Chow explains this phenomenon in his article “A Phantom Discipline”:

[T]he study of cinema, like the study of literature and history, has become increasingly caught up in the study of group cultures: every group (be it defined by nation, class, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation), it seems, produces a local variant of the universal that is cinema, requiring critics thus to engage with the specificities of particular collectivities even as they talk about the generalities of the filmic apparatus. (1386).

This has not yet caused the discipline to fall to pieces. It does, however, mean that film studies is being weakened and, if nothing is done to reinforce the boundaries, will become a phantom discipline. Increasingly, film will become fragmented and no whole will exist to unite the discussion under the heading of film studies. In other words, the influence of cultural studies is breaking up film studies—and other disciplines such as literature and history—into disparate pieces, currently floating within the film studies blur but increasingly being drawn into the cultural studies framework.

In fact, the fragmentation of the discipline has made it near impossible to discuss film studies as a whole. Chow argues that this is also due to the persistence of the phantomlike nature of film studies, causing film studies to remain marginalized in the university (1391). But Chow continues his argument with a twist, by stating that a phantomlike nature may actually cause a discipline to become more powerful: “Marx taught us that it is precisely as a phantom that the commodity achieves its greatest power. By that he meant the reversal of a certain semiotic hierarchy, a reversal by which what was hitherto presumed to be a mere image and representation, secondary to the real thing, is steadily taking over society with a contagious primacy” (1392). If this is the case, then film studies may still see its day at the center of the university. After all, film offers a critical view of society that allows for reflection and crosses into all areas of life and, arguably, knowledge production. Film is also a global medium, providing views into the culture of humans worldwide. It seems fitting, then, that film could present a way for culture to be incorporated into the university without the fragmenting, destructive pseudo-disciplines of cultural studies.

To consider a tangent briefly, in investigating film studies as a global medium, one must consider how one views other cultures through film. When we view other cultures through film, we view them through our own framework of experiences and knowledge; yet, this may cause us to misconstrue the intended message of the film. According to Yoshimoto, film studies must be careful in a postmodern world from lapsing back into an imperialist mindset. Yoshimoto explains, “[W]e need to carefully reexamine whether, by engaging ourselves in national cinema



studies, we are mechanically reproducing instead of analyzing, the ideological picture of a postcolonial world situation constructed by Western postindustrial nations” (257). The self/Other dichotomy that Yoshimoto discusses is in support of his argument that film studies needs to return to the spirit of radicalism that made film studies a breath of fresh air when it first entered the university. Because the nation-state and the idea of history are called into question in the postmodern university, Yoshimoto claims that “the Other is in fact only a disguise for a legitimization of Western subjectivity” (251). This may, in part, be a driving force behind the phantomlike nature of film studies. Abandoning the radicalism of the avant-garde spirit and experimental films of the 1960s and early 1970s, scholars have become painfully cautious in approaching film as a global medium. This cautiousness has only served to further film studies as a phantom discipline, allowing film studies to move to the margins of the university and remain a weak, underpowered discipline. The question remains whether film studies will revitalize itself with the radical spirit or remain phantomlike, drifting through the margins of the university.

The Future of the Discipline

While to explore the future of film studies we must largely rely on speculation, this exercise is quite important to view possible avenues the discipline may take. First, film studies could remain a phantom discipline. In the University of Excellence, culture has become de-centered and is attempting to define itself as a discipline (gender studies, Native American studies, etc.). With the mimetic nature of film and its visual representation of culture, film studies could very well remain weakened by the de-centering of culture. As a phantom discipline, though, film studies will either remain at the edges of the university or, as Chow wishes to purport, it could use its phantomlike nature to gain strength and return to the spirit of radicalism that, according to Yoshimoto, would again make film studies a revolutionary discipline within the university. Yet, film studies is so divergent that its boundaries are blurred to the point that “it will perhaps always remain an ambiguous object of study with unstable, open boundaries—but therein may lie its most interesting intellectual future” (Chow 1392). As with cultural studies, film studies may become involved in nearly all disciplines; however, film studies may not necessarily fall to the same fate of cultural studies—that of being absorbed or becoming a replacement for the traditional university structure. Because film studies began as a traditional discipline and not as a result of the shift toward the University of Excellence, it may remain phantomlike, gaining power by poaching the boundaries of other disciplines, or it may ride out this phase of the university at the margins. In other words, the boundaries of film studies are weak enough to allow interdisciplinarity, without being so weak as to completely break apart.

Second, film studies could once again become a traditional discipline. By bolstering its boundaries and clarifying its definition, film studies could reassert its presence as an established discipline. Granted, this option may be more difficult in the University of Excellence since each discipline must support the power of the bureaucracy financially and argue for their significance within the university system. Film studies may be unable to perform this necessity, especially since disciplines that have been a part of the university for much longer than film studies are



having difficulty finding their place in the new university. Since film studies can no longer appeal to culture to justify its role in the university, it must find another form of legitimation. According to Brooks, re-defining film studies as cinema and media studies appeals to the visual and technology-reliant atmosphere of the university and, on some level, justifies the presence of film studies through what David Rodowick calls screen theory: “[T]he strength of the discipline [of film studies] lies in its concepts and film theory certainly continues to offer the most developed conceptual frameworks for addressing the relations between technology and cultural form, screens, and our relations to them, and virtual images” (Brooks 795). While culture has been de-centered in the university, visual and screen culture is becoming relevant to all areas of study with the infiltration of technology into our daily lives.

Rather than believing film studies is too lax in its boundaries, though, Brooks argues that the current state of the film studies discipline is changing, and may very well fade away over time due, in part, to the elitist exclusion of certain forms or methods in the study of film. For instance, often times amateur filmmaking and cult cinemas, as well as other less prestigious areas, are included in the study of film as an afterthought. These forms of “bad cinema” fall to boundaries of the discipline and are seldom taken seriously. Brooks believes that furthering the elitist ideologies within the discipline may well be the cause of the decline of film studies within the university. “Bad cinema” is becoming more accessible online, creating a greater interest in this sub-topic. By accepting these forms of “bad cinema” and expanding the idea of film studies to that of screen theory, Brooks asserts that not only will the study of film firmly retain a place within the university structure, but also that an explanation for the relevance of film studies will emerge.

Third, film studies could fragment to the point where no discipline actually exists and, as a result, become incorporated into other established disciplines. Again, this may well be the fate of cultural studies, and if film studies allows itself to fragment further due to the trend of cultural film studies, it may follow a similar path. While arguing that film studies is still just emerging as a discipline, fighting to be recognized as a legitimate discipline, Gabbard also believes that the future of film studies will focus on “identity politics and non-Western cinemas...[which] reveal a centrifugal force away from canonical directors and the old Hollywood, once the comfortable center of cinema studies” (B15). Yet, this movement away from auteurism in favor of identity politics and non-Western cinemas only serves to increase the influence of cultural studies within film, resulting in greater fragmentation. Furthermore, film is becoming increasingly pulled into disparate disciplines as a tool to augment the studies within those disciplines. If film studies becomes too fragmented and the exterior boundaries of film studies remained blurred, film studies may go the way of other disciplines that have vanished from the university structure, such as ancient languages.

Fourth, film studies may become the center of the university, growing and flourishing despite numerous difficulties. As Chow claims, the status of a phantom discipline may actually empower film studies. Also, film studies may provide the university with a center of visual culture and human interaction with technology, despite Readings’ assertion that romanticizing the idea of returning to a university of culture is worthless. Rather than culture of the nation-



state, then, the center of the university would be one of visual and technological culture, which will legitimize the university to society; however, we must consider the implications of such a culture. How would classic disciplines such as literature or philosophy find legitimation in this university? What would the implications be for humanity, centering knowledge around technological advancement and visual culture? Will other forms of knowledge be extricated from the university?

Unfortunately, this may mean that film studies will take on the same nature as cultural studies, possibly looking to break down the traditional disciplines of the university. In the blood bath academy where every discipline must justify its presence and argue for financial support, each discipline must look out for itself, even if this means sacrificing other disciplines in order to gain power. In an ideal setting, each discipline would equally share with and support the others in order to foster a wide-ranging intellectual environment; however, the ideal is not possible in the current university. It would take only one discipline to upset the ideal balance, gaining power and financial support while other disciplines would suffer. The only one who benefits from the blood bath academy is the corporation that the University of Excellence has become. In a way, cultural studies is becoming the discipline that disrupts the romanticized, near-ideal balance of the university of culture. Although cultural studies did not cause the shift toward excellence, it does little to find a solution other than assert its presence in a brash, domineering manner. If film studies is not careful in its attempt to gain a presence in the university, it may very well give cultural studies a run for its money.

Any of the possible scenarios described here will affect the future of academic librarians in their approach to assisting film researchers. We must consider each of these possible futures, urging film scholars to take a stand and evaluate the definition of film studies. If film studies becomes absorbed by other disciplines, it will transform the structures that must be navigated. While librarians cannot define a discipline, much less the university, we can assist scholars in navigating disruptors and solidifying boundaries. Academic librarians are necessarily capable at traversing multiple disciplines, evaluating the terrain and expectations of each field. Thus, we must step forward and offer support to scholars who need it at a time when the fate of certain disciplines, and the university as a whole, are quite uncertain. Librarians must center themselves in the university, making their information skills recognized and available for struggling disciplines.

Conclusion

In considering many of the possible future avenues for film studies as a discipline within the university, it becomes apparent that film studies is at a cross-roads. Film studies must confront its current status as a phantom discipline in order to establish an identity that will fit properly into the university structure. As a phantom discipline, film studies may either gain credibility and strength, or it may become broken up into so many fragmented pieces that film will either exit the university in a hushed moment of defeat or be absorbed into various



disciplines in the form of topics classes (such as “Film and Literature”) as well as a tool to bolster discussion. Unlike the boundaries of other established disciplines which have been influenced by cultural studies but have not become fragmented, the boundaries of film studies have always been more open. As a result, cultural studies disciplines have been able to wreak more havoc. Should film studies have had a chance to strengthen its boundaries more before the university shifted, it may have avoided its current placement as a phantom discipline floating at the margins of the university.

But looking to the past and wondering “what if” will provide no solutions. If film studies wishes to remain within the university, its best option may be to gradually redefine itself, a process in which the skills of librarians are crucial. Film studies has already begun to redefine itself in most universities by broadening the discipline to “cinema and media studies” so that other visual mediums such as television may be included; yet, the discipline’s relevance in the University of Excellence is still in question. Either film studies must attempt to redefine itself, then, in a hostile academic corporation, or it must attempt to wait out this period of the university in hopes that a more supportive meta-narrative—or, possibly, an entirely new university structure—will emerge. If film studies chooses the latter, though, it still must strengthen its boundaries so that it will not fall victim to the fragmentation caused by cultural studies.

One must also realize, though, that film studies is a very unique discipline in that it has not been able to stop fighting for its place in the university. While the classics were secure until the most recent shift, and newer disciplines such as computer science do not need to look hard for a justification of their existence to the society at large, film studies was just beginning to form into an established discipline when the university changed the game. The shift from culture to excellence undermined the work scholars in film studies had done to establish the discipline, and the fighting for legitimation continued before it had barely stopped. Granted, the University of Excellence requires all disciplines to fight the bloody war for financial support and instructional positions yearly, yet it must be acknowledged that some disciplines do not have to fight as hard as others in a corporate university where money and performativity speak louder than any other form of legitimation, resulting in an uneven distribution of not only financial support but also power.

Thus, film studies is currently lacking power and is floating along the margins of the university as a phantom discipline. I choose to agree with Chow in his use of this term because film studies was at one time—even if only for a short while—an established discipline, unlike cultural studies. Thus, film studies is currently a phantom of its former self. But at what point exactly film studies ended up as a phantom discipline is unclear—after all, as Foucault explains in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the history of a discourse cannot be traced moment-to-moment, but is rather filled with unities and discontinuities. It is clear that film studies is currently within a period of disruption due to the university’s shift toward excellence and its loss of legitimation. What is unclear is how film studies—or rather, cinema and media studies—will respond and whether academic librarians are ready to address the needs of crumbling disciplines.



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