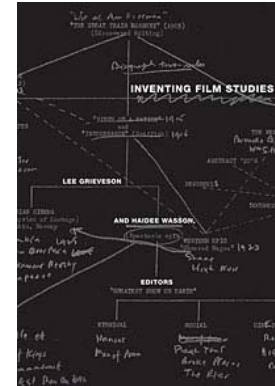


Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Eds.), **Inventing Film Studies**, Duke University Press, 2008, 446 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
 Stephen Michael Charbonneau  
 Florida Atlantic University

Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson's anthology, *Inventing Film Studies*, represents a necessary and overdue attempt to bring greater institutional reflexivity and historicization to the discipline of film studies. Along with works such as Dana Polan's *Scenes of Instruction* (2006) and Peter Decherney's *Hollywood and the Culture Elite* (2005), this collection traces the historical development of Anglophone film education and film studies. Belying the book's title, the editors are conscious of the need to avoid reconstructing a clean narrative of the discipline's "invention." Rather, the effect of this anthology is that it situates film studies within a complex tapestry of states, universities, museums, film clubs, and journals. The use of the gerund in the title is ultimately appropriate, given that the collection reminds us that the discipline has been and always is as in flux as the medium itself.



The editors have organized the book around four themes: "Making Cinema Knowable," which includes essays that address the institutional contexts for early film study; "Making Cinema Educational," which considers particular film pedagogical and cinephilic formations; "Making Cinema Legible," a section that addresses the constitutive role played by film journals and other publications; and "Making and Remaking Cinema Studies," which presents a pair of essays addressing the impact of new media on the direction of the field in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the first section, one of the standout contributions is "Reaching the Multimillions: Liberal Internationalism and the Establishment of Documentary Film," an essay by Zoë Druick. Here, Druick reviews the entrenchment of documentary film within a liberal discourse of education and citizenship over the course of three decades, from the 1930s up until 1960. In particular, the author charts the "constitutive and normalizing" impact of Western liberal institutions—the League of Nations and UNESCO—on the perception of nonfiction films, tethering them to an apolitical and educational discourse (p. 68). Backed up by a wide-ranging review of primary and secondary materials, the article reconfigures traditional film historiography by foregrounding the emergence of a particular *episteme*, identifying nonfiction film with national identity, education, and expertise. The accompanying articles in this first section also touch on the theme of expertise by highlighting, for example, the persistence of mimetic questions in the study of the cinema by an array of social scientists ("Cinema Studies and the Conduct of Conduct" by Lee Grieveson), the emergence of the *media expert* ("Taking Liberties: The Payne Fund Studies and the Creation of the Media Expert" by Mark Lynn Anderson), and the evolution of film study in the academy up until 1960 ("Young Art, Old Colleges: Early Episodes in the American Study of Film" by Dana Polan).

Grieverson's article is heavy on description as it surveys research into the cinema's impact on both individual psyches and social groups, particularly from the late teens to the late '30s. In the process, the author notes that the emergence of radio and television contributed to a declining social scientific interest in the cinema, which gradually became more situated within the humanities. Anderson targets the historical emergence of the media expert in North America, seeing this as a "decisive development within modernity and a necessary precondition for consolidating film studies as an academic discipline" (p. 40). Central to the establishment of the figure of the media expert, Anderson argues, were the Payne Fund Studies (1928–1933), a collection of reception studies that established the terms under which the cinema would be incorporated into the academy. Polan's essay opens by reviewing the historiographic problems of tracing the origins of film pedagogy in institutions of higher learning, specifically citing the "randomness" and the "lack of consensus" prevalent at the time (p. 94). After reviewing this resistance to historical narration, he highlights a commonly held sense of anxiety over modernity and its apparent resistance to older humanist values. In this context, the study of motion pictures enabled the conjoining of an "American ethos of craft" (p. 115) in a new "machine age" (p. 95).

The second section upholds this institutional emphasis, while also branching out to address broader cultural formations. Haidee Wasson's contribution, "Studying Movies at the Museum: The Museum of Modern Art and Cinema's Changing Object," highlights the critical role played by MoMA in establishing a supportive infrastructure for film study. Central to Wasson's argument is the notion that MoMA engendered a critical and studious gaze by presenting "cinema as an assemblage of enduring objects that could and should be seen, and therefore known" (p. 124). Wasson's work (she also authored *Museum Movies*) compliments the scholarship of Decherney, for example, and is a welcome reminder that notions of film study taken for granted today have historical and institutional roots. However, the article raises a tension present in the anthology as a whole: Namely, the attempt to historicize and narrate the little understood history of Anglo-American film study risks overstating the role of certain institutional and organizational agents. For instance, Wasson claims that MoMA's "Film Library programs and notes fundamentally changed the material conditions in which film watching and both formal and informal film study evolved in the United States" (p. 135). It's possible that—as new research into the history of film study explores new localities, formations, and institutions—claims about the centrality of any one player will need to become increasingly moderated.

Charles R. Acland's illuminating chapter, "Classrooms, Clubs, and Community Circuits: Cultural Authority and the Film Council Movement, 1946-1957," surveys the role of the Film Council of America (FCA) in the management and coordination of the postwar nontheatrical film market. Key to his argument is the notion that the FCA—while overseeing an "extraordinary level [and range] of activity of even the smallest local branches"—helped situate educational film exhibition within a broader discourse of modern citizenship and civic duty (p. 166). Toward the end of the essay, Acland pointedly states that the FCA and its motivations were "never just a question of how we know film but also how we know people and communities" (p. 173). Michael Zryd's essay, "Experimental Film and the Development of Film Study in America," picks up where Polan left us, with the development of academic film study in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Here, the author highlights an historical alignment between the growth of film studies in the academy and the period of experimental cinema's greatest "visibility" (p. 184) and "broadest cultural exposure" (p. 183). Zryd expertly reviews the motivations for this dovetailing; his

analysis traverses institutional and broader cultural factors in the process. Specifically, he notes that experimental cinema evoked an ethos of “individual youth expression,” while also representing the “most viable model of filmmaking instruction” for universities given its low-budget, artisanal character (p. 184). This second section concludes with a transcription of an engaging conversation among Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen, and Grieveson. In particular, the discussion is particularly effective in foregrounding the role of overlooked personalities, such as Paddy Whannel, in supporting film studies in the United Kingdom. Over the course of the conversation, many facets of film studies in the 1960s and 1970s are discussed, including the institutional role of the British Film Institute, as well as the unique cocktail of cinephilia, auteurism, structuralism, and film production that colored the participants' experience of these years. Certainly, much of this anthology could be used as supplemental reading for a course on film theory, provided the emphasis is on the cultural and material bases for many of the theories discussed.

The third section of *Inventing Film Studies* focuses on the historical role of film journals and other sorts of overlooked publications in defining and refining the field. “Experimentation and Innovation in Three American Film Journals of the 1950s” by Haden Guest reviews the work of *Films in Review*, *Cinemas*, and *Film Culture* during the postwar era to demonstrate the ways in which these journals established lines of inquiry into film that are still standard today. The question of cinephilia raised in Mulvey and Wollen's discussion persists here as Guest advocates for a critical look at postwar American film culture, whose desire for discerning the “larger underlying structures and patterns of film history” demonstrates a stronger lineage within our discipline than is generally acknowledged (p. 258). Philip Rosen's chapter, “*Screen* and 1970s Film Theory,” is an overview of that period's theoretical confluence of Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis as it was articulated in the pages of the British journal, *Screen*. While Rosen's narrative is a helpful summation of the discursive shifts of the field during this time, it is—at the end of the day—a narrative that has been reproduced many times elsewhere and seems to offer very little in the way of new insight into the pedagogical history of the field. The editors' comment that Rosen “demonstrates the interconnections between *Screen* and the proliferating film programs at universities” is not clearly borne out when the reader reaches this particular chapter (p. xxv). Next up is a collaborative piece authored by four editors of *Camera Obscura*. Here, the editors take advantage of the seminal journal's 30th anniversary to reflect on the evolution of their collective theory and practice, noting both the journal's increasing consideration of a wider array of texts, media, and methodologies, as well as its fundamental commitment to a critical feminist film culture. This third section concludes with Mark Betz's contribution, “Little Books.” In this essay, the author critically assesses the underexplored phenomenon of the “little book,” which he describes as “a small-format publication . . . published in series, often by a trade publisher, and purchased more or less cheaply by an audience not primarily, or at least not exclusively, academic” (p. 319). For Betz, such publications convey a “more expansive sense of film culture,” address readers with a higher degree of informality, and prefigure the return of a “repressed film culture” in the age of the Internet (p. 320).

That the two concluding essays vary in their quality may say something about the challenges that remain in charting the future of film studies within the context of new media ecologies, particularly the need to temper enthusiasm for the “new” with a critical skepticism. Alison Trope's “Footstool Film School: Home Entertainment as Home Education” addresses film's clear entrenchment in the domestic sphere and considers what she calls the “overlooked extratextual arena” of special features and audio commentaries

frequently included on DVDs (p. 353). Her argument is that these particular components of the home viewing experience contribute to the “popularization and mainstreaming of film study,” even as they service the profit needs of the entertainment industry (p. 353). Certainly, Trope’s analysis of the DVD’s role as a kind of promoter of cinephilic discourse is welcome, but, unfortunately, her characterization of the effect of special features comes off as too romantic and uncritical. The clearest example of this is her claim that behind-the-scenes featurettes for Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* DVD sets “literally walk the viewer through the filmmaking process . . .” (p. 365). Trope fails to highlight the manner in which the production process is narrativized in such a way that controversies over tax breaks given to the producers by the New Zealand government, as well as class tensions between the local workers and American crew members, are glossed out of the filmmaking experience for the viewer. To not acknowledge such ideological exclusions diminishes Trope’s overall assessment of the “educational” impact and import of such special features.

Finally, the collection concludes with D.N. Rodowick’s excellent piece, “Dr. Strange Media, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory.” Here, Rodowick reviews the anxieties felt within film studies over the medium’s increasing subordination to and replacement by electronic and digital media. At one point the author asks: “So what becomes of cinema studies if ‘film’ should disappear” (p. 375)? Ultimately, Rodowick suggests that, even if celluloid fades, something persists, and that something is “a certain mode of psychological investment—a modality of desire, if you will” (p. 388). For the author, film theory presents us with the best tools to decipher the continuities and disparities between old and new media. Deploying film theory in this manner, Rodowick suggests, will temper overly romantic claims of novelty while also serving to reinvigorate classical ontological and ideological questions.

*Inventing Film Studies* goes a long way toward redressing claims by historians such as Eric Smoodin that film studies is one of the most under-historicized disciplines in the humanities. In conjunction with other recently published works, the pluralistic history of motion picture study is beginning to be mapped out by Grieveson and Wasson’s excellent anthology. Of course, such beginnings are accompanied by high stakes. The manner in which film studies becomes historicized may entail the mapping out of a finite terrain, where some actors and emphases are included and others are excluded. In the spirit of Rodowick’s contribution, it is critical that further research on this front becomes increasingly intermedial and transnational, willing to explore the messy connections between film and other media, including television, while traversing national borders. Interrogating and historicizing the persistence of language metaphors across multiple media pedagogies, for instance, remains an important task for historians. Even as the semiotic turn of the 1970s faded, an obsession with various forms of literacy, applied to all kinds of visual media, has continued in industrial, academic, and activist discourses up to the present day. The general lack of an historical understanding of these ways of teaching and talking about film and other media should be cause for concern. With this in mind, *Inventing Film Studies* not only contributes to efforts to historicize the discipline but will hopefully initiate historiographic work on a variety of fronts, which will interiorize film studies within a more transnational media studies.