
General Introduction: Cinema as Event

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A dozen years ago, I edited an issue of *Yale French Studies* entitled *Cinema/Sound*. Featuring essays on the role of the sound track in film theory, history, and analysis, *Cinema/Sound* served as a catalyst for further work on film sound. Though *Cinema/Sound* is now out of print, many of the individual articles have gone on to influence scholars in the United States and around the world. The introduction and almost half of the articles have been reprinted, with several translated into a number of languages, including Russian.

As influential as *Cinema/Sound* may have been, a decade's distance reveals the limitations of the articles that it contains. With few exceptions, these articles treat cinema as a series of self-contained texts, divorced from material existence and the three-dimensional world. Heavily marked by the project of semiotics, most of the articles aim at describing the properties of sound, the relationship between image and sound, or the functioning of sound in a particular textual situation. Treatment of the audience is limited to the experience of film-viewing; contemporary culture is alluded to only when it constitutes a film's specific subject matter; sound technology is treated as if it were used only for films. Published in 1980, *Cinema/Sound* clearly bears the stamp of its text-oriented era.

In retrospect, the cost of *Cinema/Sound*'s text-based strategies becomes clear. Though the volume was conceived as a rehabilitation of the sound track, in all its diversity, *Cinema/Sound* actually stresses only a very narrow range of sound-oriented concerns. The sounds of silent films are hardly mentioned; sound technology is almost entirely neglected; no attention is paid to non-narrative, non-feature, or non-western films. More important still, sound itself is most often treated as if it were an ideal conveyor of linguistic or musical information, received by an ahistorical

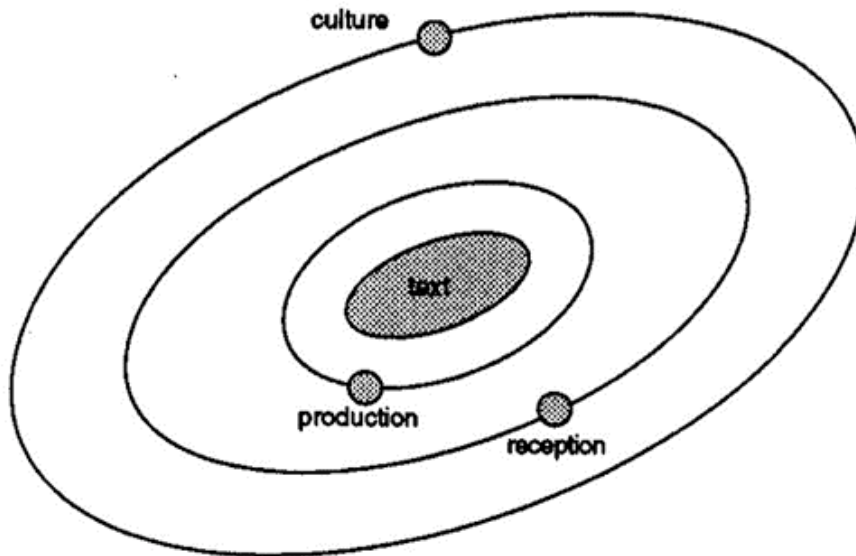
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audience in a generic viewing situation, with no particular moviegoing purpose. While it sensitized film scholars to the importance of the sound track, *Cinema/Sound* masked certain very real problems of the period's film scholarship.

For the present volume, I propose a different model, a new way of thinking about cinema in general and the sound track in particular. Building on recent theoretical developments, this new approach radically extends the range of critical discourse appropriate to film studies, while offering a new coherence among the various types of scholarship currently devoted to cinema.)

For decades, film has been regularly defined as a text, an autonomous aesthetic entity most closely related to other autonomous aesthetic entities. During this period, film theory stressed relationships internal to individual films or characteristic of cinema as a whole. Film history typically sorted films according to textual similarity and assessed the evolution of the resultant generic or thematic categories. Film analysis was built on the tacit assumption that differing audiences nevertheless shared the same basic film-viewing experience, regardless of differences in gender, class, or viewing situation. In recent years, this text-oriented model has begun to waver in the face of discursive approaches, feminist theory, cultural studies, and other critical methods sensitive to a broader notion of what film is and how it affects human activities. Considered as a text, each film appears as a self-contained, centered structure, with all related concerns revolving around the text like so many planets.

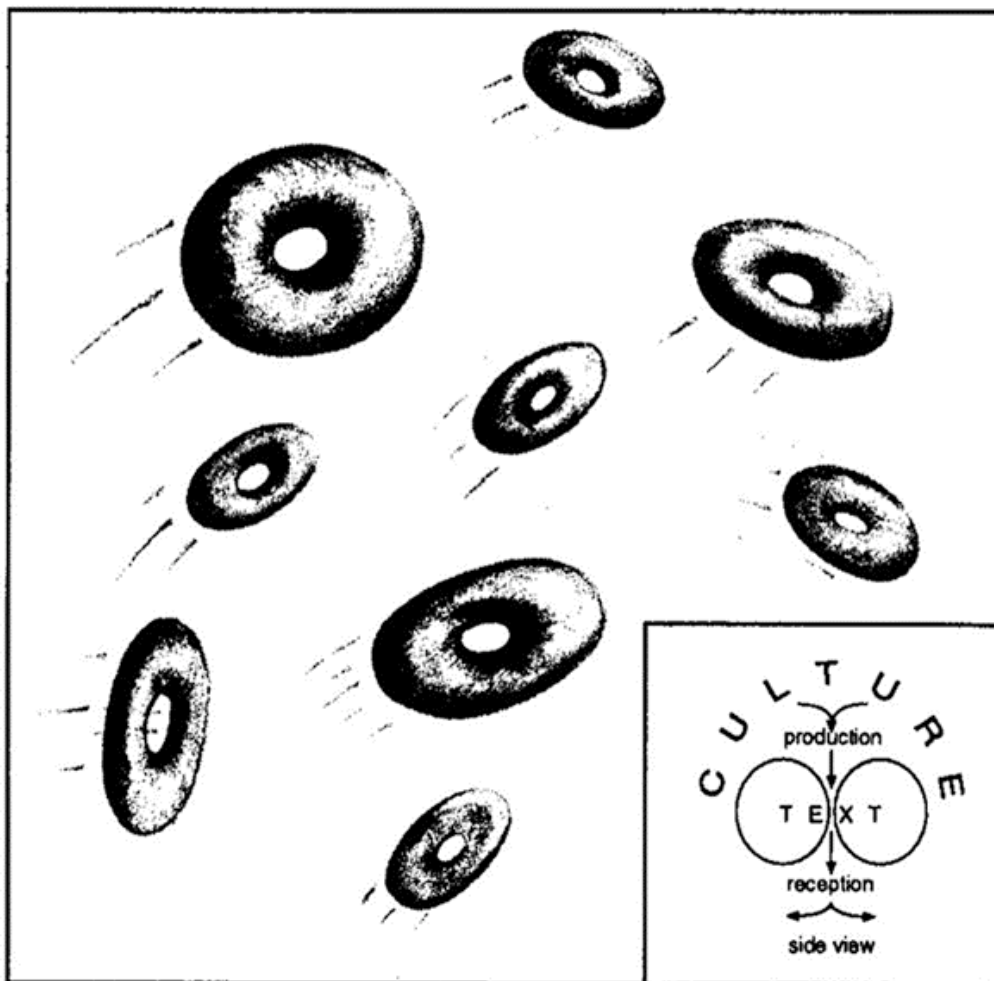
In opposition to the notion of film as text, I have found it helpful to conceive of *cinema as event*. Viewed as a macro-event, cinema is still



The text-centered universe of traditional film studies.

seen as centered on the individual film, but according to a new type of geometry. Floating in a gravity-free world like doughnut-shaped spaceships, cinema events offer no clean-cut or stable separation between inside and outside or top and bottom.

In this three-dimensional Moebius strip world, the textual center is no longer the focal point of a series of concentric rings. Instead, like the pinhole at the center of an hourglass, it serves as a point of interchange between two "V" shapes, one representing the work of production, the other figuring the process of reception. Beginning as a subset of culture at large, one "V" progressively narrows as the work of film production runs its course, first broadly, with diverse ideas and scripts, sets and rushes, technicians and rewrites, until eventually the work of production has been resolved into a single narrow product: the text. The process of reception then broadens out again, eventually reaching the point where it



The geometry of cinema events: Doughnut holes in gravity-free space. |

motion

is indistinguishable from the culture in general. In a gravity-free world, however, this hourglass system is entirely reversible. Just as production flows through the text toward reception, so reception regularly influences production.

Each "V" opens out onto an infinite cultural space, containing other cinema events, that eventually bends back around toward the opposite "V". In other words, this Moebius vessel fails to distinguish between inside and outside, though it does have two distinct domains of interchange: the narrow textual isthmus connecting the two "V"s, and the indeterminate peripheral culture which offers any number of avenues of interchange between the open ends of the two "V"s.

Because this new type of geometry does not allow for clear distinctions between inside and outside, between top and bottom, the event that is cinema cannot be identified as privileging one particular aspect of the system. Instead, the cinema event is constituted by a continuing interchange, neither beginning nor ending at any specific point. No fixed trajectory characterizes this interchange, nor is it possible to predict which aspect of the system will influence which other aspect.

Seen as a macro-event, cinema is conveniently characterized by an even dozen attributes: multiplicity, three-dimensionality, materiality, heterogeneity, intersection, performance, multi-discursivity, instability, mediation, choice, diffusion, and interchange. In the paragraphs that follow, while treating in greater detail these various aspects of cinema as event, I will show how the study of film sound in particular is affected by this new approach to the phenomenon that we call cinema.

Multiplicity

By concentrating on cinema's major product, the individual film, traditional approaches to cinema have sought to bring a semblance of unity to a complex phenomenon. Ignoring differences among release prints (both planned and accidental), critics have fastened on the film itself as cinema's common factor. If we consider for a moment the lengthy process of conception-investment-production-distribution-exhibition-reception, we recognize that the completed film constitutes the only step in the progression representing apparent unity. Until completion, the film is characterized by the multiplicity of its conceptors; after distribution, the film is characterized by the multiplicity of its receptors.

By stressing the single moment of apparent unity between two periods of multiplicity, critics have effectively neutralized much of cinema's complexity. In doing so, they have systematically concentrated on the uniformity of the image (itself compromised by the difference between film and television formats), thus neglecting such essential variations in

the sound track as 1) three decades of live, unstandardized accompaniment of "silent" films, 2) simultaneous release of silent and sound versions during the late twenties and early thirties, and 3) parallel distribution of magnetic and optical track versions during the fifties and sixties, as well as mono, stereo, and surround versions in the seventies and eighties.

Three-Dimensionality

Symbolic of the attempt to base the definition of cinema on the coherence of the individual film is the care with which film theaters have concentrated attention on a two-dimensional screen. As in Plato's cave, movie theaters hold our bodies in a fixed position in relation to the screen; complemented by carefully arranged lighting, this reduced mobility serves to convince us that film-viewing is limited to the experience of the two-dimensional rectangle before us. Even before 1910, newly built theaters were often engineered to include a ground-floor projection room, thus avoiding a keystoned image and the resultant recognition that the image is the product of a three-dimensional projection system (rather than an automatically produced replica of the seemingly two-dimensional celluloid original).

While the prestige of the image may be enhanced by this emphasis on two-dimensionality, sound is poorly served indeed, for sound cannot exist in a two-dimensional context. Though conventional speaker placement attempts to identify sound sources with the two-dimensional area of the screen, sound occurs only in the three-dimensional volume of the (theater) at large. Because sound is always recorded in a particular three-dimensional space, and played back in another, we are able to sense the spatial cues that give film sound its personalized spatial signature.

Materiality

Rather than conceiving of cinema as a unified chain of film images, we might instead stress cinema's material existence. Though the material history of painting and sculpture provides ample models for this type of approach (due to the material nature of their medium), note that the publishing history of literature and music offers little encouragement in this direction (since their medium has usually been judged, wrongly, not to be material). Lyric poetry may well have been written for oral delivery to a specific group on a set occasion, but critics have for centuries treated poems as texts made up of words alone. However dependent the novel may have been on developments in the printing industry, critical discourse has systematically abstracted the novel's aesthetic existence from its materiality, overtly privileging the former over the latter while actively neglect-

ing reception conditions. When critics read the filmic text ideally, as music scholars typically read the musical score or literary scholars regularly interpret the literary text, they break all ties with the text's material conditions of existence.

Conceived as a series of events, cinema reveals rather than dissimulates its material existence. From the complexity of its financing and production to the diversity of its exhibition, cinema must be considered in terms of the material resources that it engages. From the standpoint of sound, this shift is of capital importance, for it removes cinema from the customary, purely visual definition. As a material product, cinema quickly reveals the location and nature of its sound track(s), the technology used to produce them, the apparatus necessary for reproduction, and the physical relationship between loudspeakers, spectators, and their physical surroundings. Such an approach encourages us to move past the imaginary space of the screen to the spaces and sounds with which cinema must compete—the kids in the front rows, the air conditioner hum, the lobby cash register, the competing sound track in the adjacent multiplex theater, passing traffic, and a hundred other sounds that are not part of the text as such, but constitute an important component of cinema's social materiality.

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Heterogeneity

For many years the film image/text has been the source of a fundamental paralysis in cinema studies. Ostensibly analyzing *the* film, cinema critics have been at pains both to homogenize the lived experience of film-viewing and to avoid undermining that homogeneity. Rather than recognize the legitimate existence of multiple versions of a film, based on diverse social and industrial needs (censorship, standardized length, colorization, foreign-language dubbing, etc.), critics have regularly made a fetish of locating the "original" version. Instead of attending to the variety of exhibition spaces where a given film is projected, or to the diversity of audiences present, or to the various social contexts in which the film is seen, critics typically mold a film's reception to fit a single mode, apparently "neutral" in nature, but typically covertly reflecting each critic's particular reception stance. Text-based criticism often finds a place for decisions and personnel deemed to have contributed to producing the image, but it has rarely known what to do with the non-filmic components of film exhibition: live acts sharing a film program, commercial tie-ins, ticketing policies, seating practices, theater acoustics, intermission activities, popcorn availability, sales of residual products (sheet music, records, videotapes, T-shirts, etc.), and many more.

Recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the cinema experience not

only opens the field to consideration of a broad spectrum of objects, processes, and activities, but has an especially direct impact on the study of sound. As soon as we move away from film as a single, homogeneous phenomenon, we become aware of the heterogeneous chain of objects and spaces which serve as a vehicle for sound. What kind of sound head is installed? On what sort of projector? What type of amplifier is used? With what speaker system? Where are the speakers located? How are they aimed? What are the characteristics of the house acoustics? Do they change according to audience size? Can they be modified? Throughout the history of cinema, exhibitors have paid close attention to these problems, but their concerns have rarely been shared by the scholarly community. Without attention to these matters it is not possible to explain why theater seats evolved from hardback uprights to plush armchairs, why theater architecture and outfitting changed radically shortly after the conversion to sound, or why Tomlinson Holman and Lucasfilm felt the need to develop the THX theater sound system.

Intersection

Just as Foucault proposes replacing history by an archaeology in which the individual strands making up any single event are teased out and separately followed up, we can usefully conceive of cinema events as the intersection of many separate lines of endeavor, throughout the production, reception, and cultural spheres. In the past, little attention has been paid to a film's technical credits; the laborers have systematically been passed over in favor of the architect and contractor. Conception has been preferred to execution, to the point where critics have apparently convinced themselves that film technicians do no more conceiving or take no more initiative than ditchdiggers. Belied at every point by the intellectual quality of cinema's technical journals, the assumption that technicians execute rather than conceive has led critics to neglect the collaborative nature of film production.

Yet the cinema experience results from the intersection of more than just production personnel. For any given film exhibition to take place, the activity of many groups and individuals is required, from cinema architects and screen manufacturers to film distributors and projectionists. Conceived as an intersection, each viewing event involves *lines* of activity, intersecting during the event but beginning beforehand and continuing afterwards. The theater is not there by chance; it was conceived by a firm experienced in designing concert halls or multipurpose recreation centers (the difference between two such firms going a long way to explain the disparity in the acoustical dimension of two cinema events). The musical accompaniment does not happen in an instant separated from time; on the

contrary, it is the result (in sound as well as silent film) of an entire industry with evolving ties to other music industries and cultural precedents. To understand the event is to understand the complexity of this contribution.

Even the spectator must not be conceived as present by chance. While recent theories of subject formation typically posit a single, specific explanation of spectator presence or desire (often psychoanalytic in nature), they rarely attempt to take into account the multiplicity of motives that bring diverse audience members to the theater. While it would be absurd to treat all viewers as separate individuals, sharing no common interests or cultural positions, the notion of the cinema event as intersection has the definite virtue of emphasizing the trajectory bringing each spectator to the theater. And not just to the theater, but away from the theater as well. For an understanding of cinema depends just as much on a knowledge of the activities that cinema engenders or promotes as it does on the desires that bring the audience in. The vogue of the theme song, for example, especially strong in the late twenties and early fifties, cannot be explained by reference to textual evidence alone (although theme songs certainly do have textual ramifications); to understand this phenomenon we need to investigate at least three intersecting lines: the purchase of music companies by Hollywood studios, the growth of a hit-parade approach to radio programming, and the tendency of spectators to perpetuate their experience of a particular film by purchasing sheet music in the twenties or a record in the fifties (the difference between the two revealing the disparity between the active nature of singing around the piano and the passivity of listening to a record).

Performance

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Textual approaches to cinema are based on the notion of an unvarying text, thus negating the scandal of variety, neutralizing cinema's need for a spatio-temporally specific projection, and effacing cinema's heritage as a performing art. While standardized presentation has long been the dream of cinema producers, it has never been fully realized in practice. One of the reasons for this is that exhibitors have every reason to employ presentational differences as a prime method of product differentiation. This strategy was especially salient throughout the silent period, when differences in accompaniment (piano, organ, orchestra, lecturer, voices behind the screen, effects, etc.) served as an important method of individualization, along with the other films, acts, and music on the program, not to mention the ushers' costumes, the theatrical décor, giveaway programs, and what have you. However much producers would like to think of film as an ideal image, automatically conveyed to the ultimate ideal consumer, we all know that the film must pass through the hands of a projectionist,

whose performance is constantly open to criticism. While current theaters tend toward what we might call the zero degree of performance (standardized spaces, automatic projection, a program limited to the feature film), even the drab multiplex theater usually constructs the marquee or the lobby as a performance space, featuring still photos, cut-out stand-up characters, and other presentational devices.

Instead of considering the elaborate showmanship and diverse accompaniments of the silent era as an anomaly, or the presentation acts of the thirties as an outmoded practice, we need to recognize that film is always the product of performance (more or less self-conscious, more or less complex, more or less commodified). Basing their conception of cinema on a consistent attempt to dissimulate cinema's performance orientation, critics have regularly neglected important aspects of earlier film exhibition. Silent films are interpreted without reference to their musical accompaniment; feature films are treated independently of the full program of music, shorts, and newsreels that originally accompanied them; the conversion-to-sound practice of switching the sound from one speaker to another (music to the pit speaker, dialogue to the screen speaker) is consistently forgotten; the difference between projection practices in Latin America and New York is entirely bypassed; the problematic location of surround speakers receives no commentary; the reverberation differences between television sets with speakers on the front or on the side are elided. Cinema will recover some of its richness when we learn to remember that for most of its history it was a performance-oriented medium—less spectacularly so than vaudeville, perhaps, but performance-oriented nevertheless.

Multi-Discursivity

After the story-oriented sixties and early seventies, the "discovery" of cinema's discursive nature was one of the most important theoretical processes of the late seventies and eighties. Following Metz and others, recent critics have been quick to recognize the discursive investment of cinematic texts. Typically conceived as addressed by a cinema industry to an undifferentiated audience, films are considered as employing discursivity to construct subjectivity, to propagate ideology, or to create a situation of hegemony. As compared to the cinema-as-text approach, this recognition of discursivity clearly constitutes an improvement. However, the current notion of discursivity, typically collapsed into the singular, fails to capture the complexity of cinema's existence as event. Who addresses the audience in cinema? Is it the culture? the industry? the writers? the director? the actors? the exhibitor? Certainly no single answer is appropriate here, nor will the same answer be appropriate for different

films, or even for the "same" film exhibited in divergent ways in differing places.

On the contrary, the complexity of the cinema experience derives from cinema's extraordinary ability to serve as the intersection of a variety of discourses, framed by diverse groups and addressed to populations varying from single individuals to the entire culture. Sharing the same space and time, these discourses commonly hide one another, with a given film-viewing thus successively revealing little bits of each individual discourse. A film does not carry a single message, unified, unilinear, and univocal. Instead, it is more like a *scarred palimpsest*, at various points revealing diverse discursive layers, each one recorded at a different point in time.

This recognition of the text's layered, potentially contradictory nature offers a new opportunity for attention to sound's discursive contributions. Much ink has flowed recently over the development of narrative images during the nineteenth century and the early teens; perhaps it is time now to recognize that the contemporary rejection of short, coherent musical forms (primarily the lapidary popular song) contributes heavily to the development of a unified narrative editing style. In many filmmaking styles, differing types of sound make contradictory discursive appeals. Throughout the thirties, in Europe as well as the United States, films merged rough regional or lower-class speech with the newly popularized, mellifluous radio accents. Hollywood regularly contrasts hyper-intelligible dialogue lacking any spatial markers with point-of-audition sound carrying appropriate volume and reverberation shifts. Television sound often transfers into its narrative programs the volume differentials that typically exist between commercials and public service announcements (or other strictly informative messages), thus splitting the program itself between informer and advertiser of its own information. In a world where sound is commonly taken as an unproblematic extension of the image, within a comfortably unified text, the concept of multi-discursivity is bound to enfranchise sound, concentrating attention on its ability to carry its own independent discourses.

Instability

In spite of cinema's historical connections to theater and the performing arts in general, critics have preferred to emphasize cinema's debt to the novel. Treating a film as the heir apparent to novelistic prose has made it easy for critics to construct cinema as a minimally material object that easily maintains its identity from decade to decade. But film is not made of language, nor is it printed with movable type. Cinema will never have its Gutenberg, because its very existence depends on its multi-discursive performance orientation. Standardization of print made the novel appear to

escape from its material grounding; eventually, standardization of theaters, projection, seating, advertisement, and so forth could possibly reduce cinema's debt to the material differences of performance. For the time being, however, differing discursive investments maintain cinema's material dimension and its performance base. Because of this aspect of the cinema event, what we refer to as "the film" is fundamentally unstable in nature.

It's not just that we almost never see and hear a film as it was originally seen and heard; in fact, we would be hard put to identify what the phrase "originally seen and heard" actually means, since there never was a single original. For silent film music, do we mean Manhattan's Rialto, with its standing orchestra and staff of arrangers, or Thomas Brown's Iowa City Nickeldom, with the first Wurlitzer unit orchestra west of the Mississippi? Is it the proper Eastern style, eschewing rag and comic effects, or is it the broader Western approach, with its syncopated rhythms and aural jokes? Is it the downtown theater with a four-man orchestra, or the rural week-ends-only theater with a young girl practicing her recital pieces at the piano? However similar the image in all these cases, the cinema events involved are anything but stable. Surprisingly, the conversion to sound changed little of this. Just because the sound track happens to be inscribed down the side of the film, there is no guarantee of standardized performance. Add to this equation the radical changes in dynamic and frequency response between a first-run theater and a portable television, and the instability of the cinema event (and thus of the cinema text) becomes all too clear.

Mediation

As long as cinema scholars were laboring to establish cinema as an autonomous art and cinema studies as an independent intellectual domain, there was good cause, rhetorically speaking, to play down cinema's debt to other media. Consequently, there has been a regrettable undertheorizing of the relationship between cinema and the extraordinary variety of media to which it is related. Because the cinema event includes the spectator and, by extension, the spectator's experience of other media, we must conclude that one measure of a film's success derives from spectator evaluations based on a set of preestablished notions about what constitutes reality, acceptable ending points, moral behavior, entertainment, and so forth. In other words, the values and standards associated with cinema cannot be described independently of the models through which they are mediated.

The mediation factor is especially important in the case of sound, because sound technology has changed so often over the past century.

Whereas the film image has undergone little more than successive tinkering (along with the more important developments in color and image shape), film sound has been revolutionized many times, each time in connection with contemporary developments affecting other entertainment and communication industries besides cinema. Once we recognize the mediated nature of the cinema event, film appears caught up in a complex web of potential models. Besides vaudeville and melodrama, the late nineteenth-century concert hall provided a model for silent film's handling of music and effects. In the early and mid-twenties, radio served as a regular model for cinema sound, while later on in the decade the phonographic record provided an ineluctable model for a film sound technology which is based, after all, on phonographic records. (For an overview of mediation in the U.S. film industry during this period, see the introduction to Section Two, "Historical Speculations.") If musicals in the fifties were constantly criticized for slavishly imitating Broadway plays, it is partly because Hollywood was actually emulating the original cast albums of the resurgent long-playing record industry. For years, critics have discussed cinema's tendency to imitate its own previous successes, yet the intertextual motif within film is far more prevalent on the image side; sound, on the other hand, regularly finds its models outside the film medium, whence the necessity to expand the definitional limits of the cinema event.

Choice

Just as the mediation factor expands our notion of the cinema event, so does the phenomenon of choice, whether operative on the production side or the reception side. When a financier chooses to back a show, where is the money *not* going? When a sound man selects a microphone, what types is he implicitly rejecting? When an exhibitor purchases a sound-filtering screen, what were his choices? When a spectator chooses to spend an hour's wage on a film, what were the alternatives? The road not taken is just as much a part of the cinema event as cinema itself. Would the exact "same" movie really be the same in 1915, 1940, 1965, and 1990? No, because its rivals would respectively be vaudeville, radio, television, and video, or perhaps barbershop singing, Bing Crosby ten-inch 78-rpm records, Top 40 seven-inch 45s, or music videos (among others), with each bringing out a different aspect of the film.

Now, while this example is simplified in the extreme, it does serve to highlight the importance of cinema as part of a differential system, in the strong sense of Saussure's semiotics: there are no positive terms, only differences. The same logic applies, then, to the spectator's choices about whether to spend money on the cinema or on baseball, fast food, a new tie, or a Saturday night special. To be sure, we can hardly analyze all

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spectator choice patterns, even for a single showing of a single film; we must, however, find some place for these choices in our theories about how cinema works and what it means.

Diffusion

What does cinema facilitate? What are its residual effects? What kind of afterlife does the cinema event have? Sheet music and sing-alongs or Smurf glasses and trips to Disneyworld? For too long, assuming that cinema constitutes a world of its own, we have turned a blind eye to cinema's impact on the urban landscape or living room design, and a deaf ear to its influence on music preferences and dialogue delivery styles. In the concluding chapter of my book on *The American Film Musical* (Altman 1987), I labeled this aspect of cinema its "operational" component. Especially strong in the musical, which achieved diffusion throughout the culture in the form of various operational strategies, cinema's operational aspect leads in a number of largely unexpected directions. As we can see from any Hollywood pressbook of the twenties through the fifties, diffusion of the cinema event hardly took place by accident.

Indeed, some of Hollywood's most successful strategies involve attempts to capitalize on cinema's ability to be diffused throughout the culture. When Erno Rapée wrote his first two hit theme songs in the late twenties ("Diane" and Charmaine"), he was simply carrying out his role as music director and intermittent composer. Soon, however, every studio was looking for the shot in the arm that could be provided by a hit song. When the major studios snapped up all available music publishing houses, the circle was closed; now the publishers could provide publicity for the films, and vice versa. It is through strategies such as this that the culture is marked by the diffusion of cinema's residual effects.

Interchange

It is tempting to assume that all cinema events take place in a predictable downward direction through the center of the cinema event hourglass: production distills multiple inputs into a single text, which is in turn received by an expanding set of spectators. Indeed, this is the way that cinema has traditionally been studied. However, this approach neglects the cinema event's gravity-free Moebius strip nature. The production-text-reception continuum appears to be the "inside" of cinema, with everything else on the outside, yet the unexpected construction of the cinema event suggests that "outside" and "inside" are so continuous as to be indistinguishable. We are accustomed to analyzing the interchanges that take place through the intermediary of the text; we must now become more

attuned to the interchanges between the production-text-reception system and the culture(s) at large.

While this interchange is too large a topic to cover in any detail here, we easily note the important role that sound is destined to play in this area. Sound's ability to diffuse the cinema event throughout the culture is matched by sound's equal capacity to infuse cinema with elements of the culture's soundscape. Through the mediation of the culture's other sound technologies—live and recorded music, radio, television, and many others—film sound is in a constant state of interchange with the culture at large. Standards of intelligibility developed for the telephone invaded Hollywood by the early thirties; Hollywood frequency response and dynamic range set expectations for the radio and record industries; film music now fills our living rooms and shopping malls. Radio-enforced standardization of speech around a middle-class, non-regional model has had an enormous impact on the social ramifications of speech patterns, while cinema has given increased meaning to the smallest sound events of everyday life. Today, political writers learn their trade from cinema scriptwriters; the politicians try to deliver their one-liners with the panache of movie comedians; and now television and cinema have begun to edit dialogue in imitation of political sound bites. Everywhere we turn, we find sound providing a perpetual and highly charged interchange between cinema and its culture(s).

Cinema as event, replacing cinema as text: this will be the watchword of the nineties, as we shall see in many of the essays that make up this collection.