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## Welcome to the Viral Future of Cinema (Television)



by John T. Caldwell

When Paramount Studios announced that the president of Fox Broadcasting, Gail Berman, was taking over the creative reins at Paramount's film studios, the news was greeted cynically across Hollywood as a coup by television wannabes, more evidence of stifling interference by conglomerates, or as a supreme corporate miscalculation about how the cultures of television production and film production fundamentally differ. In responding to the question "Can a creature of television run a film studio," no less a source than *Variety* editor Peter Bart publicly educated "Gail" in patronizing terms by recalling Brandon Tartikoff's TV takeover thirteen years earlier:

Make modestly budgeted versions of TV shows such as *The Addams Family*. Use TV talent to shoot quickies like *All I Want for Christmas*. Most important, don't get caught up in the chase for big stars and glitzy projects. . . . Television and film are both entertainment, but they're profoundly different. . . . He lasted only 15 months in his new job.<sup>1</sup>

While Bart delivered his cautionary tale, spurred by anxieties about declining creative quality, other film-to-TV crossovers, such as superproducer Jerry Bruckheimer (maker of the hit series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Without a Trace*, and *Cold*

Case), more perceptively explained the shift in terms of the differing production contexts of the two media: "The daily pressure is much greater in TV because you have to respond every morning to success or failure."<sup>2</sup> Another film-to-TV hybrid, Imagine's Brian Grazer (producer of the commercial and critical successes *24* and *Arrested Development*) furthered the analysis:

The TV business is more brutally direct because there's a time sensitive element to it. . . . In TV, big agents have no problem saying to a network executive, "If you don't pick up our show, we'll move it to CBS. . . . In movies, a lot of time the conversation ends with "let's think about it."<sup>3</sup>

Such talk undercuts conventional wisdom about the film-versus-TV cultural hierarchy. Industry experts may attribute the declining quality of films to business practices imported from television, but television regularly produces work that is better and more interesting. Since the late 1980s (when David Lynch, Michael Mann, Ridley Scott, Spike Lee, Penelope Spheeris, Steven Spielberg, Barry Levinson, and Oliver Stone established a cross-sector precedent), many directors, screenwriters, and cinematographers have asserted that television offers comparable or greater opportunities than the movie studios (as the recent work of James Cameron, Robert Zwick, James L. Brooks, Robert Altman, Quentin Tarantino, and Jerry Bruckheimer suggests).<sup>4</sup> Certainly the Grazer/Bruckheimer series *24*, *Arrested Development*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and *Cold Case* offer far more challenging exercises in cinematography, editing, dramatic structure, and narrative form than the endless, big-budget blockbuster and flat comic-book features that are mindlessly cranked out by the major movie studios. Even Laura Ziskin's *Tarzan* for the WB Network was as nuanced as her *Spider-Man* "franchise" films for Columbia. The cold, hard facts are these: television executives must come up with well over 1,147 hours of primetime entertainment each year, while most studios turn out about fifteen films in the same period.<sup>5</sup> Program development, as a result, is a manic cauldron of experimentation, nightly competition, serial failure, perpetual brainstorming/regrouping, and systematic overproduction. Thus, far more projects are actually developed and produced in television, including pilots, than are ever broadcast or released. Big-budget feature filmmaking, by contrast, involves glacial content development, managerial caution, "development hell," lethargic production schedules, rote market mimicry, and industrial inertia. As a result, despite the inevitable schlock, the content on television is regularly edgier, more cinematic, and more compelling. Yet academic film scholars seldom acknowledge the change. Just like Peter Bart, we have largely gotten it wrong.

My work focuses on how a set of wide-ranging forces—the subcultures of production workers, conglomeration, branding, repurposing, convergence, and shifting economic and labor relations—have altered the object of media and film scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The changes have been so extensive that it is almost impossible to study film today without also studying television. Of course, any serious study of American film in the 1940s and 1950s also inevitably confronts television, as the research of Chris Anderson, Michelle Hilmes, William Boddy, and Tino Balio has shown.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said of American film/television since 1980.<sup>8</sup> Yet I am still regularly met

by blank stares in seminar rooms and at many film and theory conferences when I discuss how integral and sometimes inseparable film and television have become. I regularly joke with colleagues that every other dissertation on contemporary film that is filed at UCLA proves once again that feature film is rapidly approaching the aesthetic significance, cultural stature, and industrial condition of television. I hope in this short essay to highlight some of the ways this confluence has happened and why we need to “converge” the scholarly methodologies of film and television to fully understand the new, synthetic media.<sup>9</sup>

The explosive popularity of the DVD in particular makes methodological convergence both timely and imperative. One more celebration of *onscreen* cinephilia and film studies—style reflexivity posed in the DVD format and its bonus tracks will indeed be a useless academic exercise—unless such accounts at least acknowledge and consider how the onscreen cinephilia and reflexivity have been mainstream economic and industrial practices in television for well over half a century.<sup>10</sup> There is no need, that is, to shoot ourselves in the foot as historians just because a technology hypes itself as new media.

Arguably, film now functions mostly as a subset of television and electronic media, popular assumptions to the contrary, rather than vice-versa. This subordinate relationship is evident, first, in the current function film serves in the business practices of the new media conglomerates; second, because feature films are largely created by the very same production communities in Los Angeles that create prime-time television programs (particularly in the unionized and below-the-line production worlds that produce film/TV); third, because feature films since the 1980s have increasingly mimicked televisual form from an aesthetic and technical viewpoint; and fourth, the viewing conditions of film (especially via DVDs) now incorporate the reception conditions that have defined television for more than fifty years. The U.S. theatrical box office now functions mostly to show feature films as “trailers” or “previews” for the vast and lucrative DVD market, whose sales now exceed domestic theatrical box-office revenues (as video games, television, and home video have for well over a decade).<sup>11</sup> Both factors (marketing/release and domesticity/consumption) represent two of the fundamental ways that theatrical film exhibition serves mostly as an ancillary part of the content of conglomerate electronic media.

A brief outline of the traditional paradigm of aesthetic prestige in Hollywood goes something like this: the prestige and success of any feature film determine the subsequent economic value of all downstream, ancillary markets. This stands as a useful and lucrative institutional mythology for the industrial communities that create film and television. Although overall profits and distribution incomes suggest decreasing stature, feature film is elevated to banner status for the media conglomerates. This works because film (far more than TV, popular music, or merchandising) is constantly judged and positioned (even if negatively) vis-à-vis its potential for artistic distinction, not just for its box-office revenues. With film at the top of the multimedia heap, feature films are able to function as economic loss leaders. Even if features lose money in domestic box office, their artistic status can fuel wide-ranging profits in the many ancillary markets where artistic distinction carries little or no institutional cache.

This strategy is far from new.<sup>12</sup> What has changed since the classical studio era is the extent to which the risk involved in film production can be externalized to other corporate entities, and the degree to which production costs can be amortized across numerous multimedia markets. Whereas the classical studios might amortize costs across first-, second-, or third-run theatrical releases, the new conglomerates do so across domestic television, foreign television, pay cable, cable, direct broadcast satellite, video-on-demand, merchandising, product placement, home video, DVD sales, cross-promotion, music CDs, Mp3 downloads, book publishing, Webcasting, concerts, live venues, and video games. In fact, the potential revenues from these “ancillary” markets—which are dominated by various television and electronic media formats—dwarf the profit potential of the domestic box office for a film. This has been the case for a number of years.

Hollywood’s production communities perpetuate the largely symbolic, hierarchical model of film as artistry versus electronic media as commerce. Practitioners achieve very real benefits when this rhetoric of distinction circulates. In part, such rhetoric creates and maintains the idea that the “center” of U.S. culture is Hollywood. Even though Hollywood media practitioner communities increasingly generate much of their income from electronic media, the urge to symbolically identify oneself as a filmmaker helps legitimize all sorts of craftspeople in television, cable, video games, Webcasting, and so on. Even television and video production personnel regularly refer to themselves as filmmakers.

Identification as a filmmaker serves as a career and institutional “morale” booster for thousands of workers in the “lesser” (and some would say “feeder”) castes of media. However, this identification flies in the face of a growing imbalance between film and television employment in Southern California. Between 1996 and 2003, the total film days worked in the Los Angeles region dropped a precipitous 48 percent, while television production days increased by 53 percent.<sup>13</sup> In almost all the production communities and crafts, television is now the biggest employment game in town.

Maintaining the primacy of the largely symbolic film-versus-electronic media distinction requires tremendous investments of time and resources in public deliberation, analysis, and trade theorizing about film, aesthetic quality, and cinematic artistry. The cultural pressure to establish one’s identity as a filmmaker is a key factor that stimulates a wide range of industrial theorizing. To take one example, many have noted that, starting in the 1970s, the “new Hollywood” resulted from a novel breed of film school-trained or European New Wave-influenced directors who introduced Americans to a smarter cinema. However, films and series that comment on other films, filmic trends, and film history have been a dominant tendency on the small screen since the 1940s. Further, this doctrinaire onscreen reflexivity holds as true today for B-grade horror films as it does for features made by A-list directors. For example, thirteen year olds usually know why they are screaming (and in reference to which films) when watching highly reflexive and intertextual horror sequels.

The nature and mechanics of film (the traditional province of academic film theory) has become a dominant form of primary, mainstream content and entertainment in television, film, and DVDs. The need for an identity defined by cinema

has become a broader cultural preoccupation, given that Hollywood entertainment defines U.S. culture abroad in the post-Cold War world of globalization. Such self-identification also preoccupies many in the industry, where "film" is the branding fantasy for tens of thousands of employees in the vast electronic media conglomerates. For various reasons, film and Hollywood have emerged as dominant cultural preoccupations—for mainstream audiences, insecure production personnel, and risk-averse CEOs alike.

This picture of film as a conceptual, symbolic, and highly public cultural activity for both practitioners and audiences contrasts with a very different picture inside the industry. From an economic or managerial point of view, films are valued as preemptive events that flow toward electronic media markets (including television and DVDs). This is because these markets are better able to fully "harvest" the economic value of loss leaders and box-office duds. Electronic media can convert what is largely artistic and conceptual value into more predictable forms of long-term revenue (with electronic media now offering the primary platforms).

This cultural-economic transposition—from aesthetic capital to financial capital—underscores another inversion in the filmic model: gone are the days when a controlled, lengthy theatrical release prefigured all other ancillary markets in a linear, sequential chain of distribution.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneous distribution strategies have changed the general flow and direction of content. A multipurposed release makes a film only one component in a much larger activity. In essence, films are buzz starters that prepare audiences for primary consumption on television and DVDs, while profits from film-triggered video games and CDs are harvested in the much less distinguished worlds of electronic media distribution and accounting. Underscoring the adage that "all screenplays are also business plans," multimedia conglomerates now provide rational ways to determine a film's value when it is conceptualized, scripted, rewritten, developed, cast, and produced by the studios. In this sense, the media conglomerates (not auteur directors) can be seen as the "authors" of films in the digital age.

Media conglomerates now serve a role much like that of television and broadcasting in the predigital era, and this is one of the ways that films are rapidly seeking the condition and status of television. Television has traditionally been seen as more research oriented than film, in part because broadcasters needed an array of external partners and affiliates (including advertisers and sponsors) to fund their operations and to deliver onscreen experiences.<sup>15</sup> This need for constant external affiliation heightened the value of measurement and analysis, making research departments obligatory parts of TV stations and networks. Omnipresent commercial interruptions, in turn, have reinforced in a public sense what ratings, trend analysis, and audience research have done internally, underscoring for viewers that television is a quintessentially "economic" phenomenon.

The bottom-line merchandising identity of television has helped reinforce the almost Manichean rhetorical dualism between art and commerce within the creative community—with film defined by art and quality and television defined by commerce. In reality, film studios today are as research oriented as broadcasters and have adopted many of the TV industry's research methods (audience demographic research, focus groups, and psychographic, trend, and brand research). The long-standing ratings

referee of the television economy—Nielsen—now compiles daily box-office figures for the motion picture sector as well.

Film has always been concerned with appealing to audiences (via test screenings), but, unlike television, research was never a primary element in a studio's marketing profile. Rather, film has marketed and branded itself by invoking and deploying mystique ("Hollywood"). The brothers Weinstein until recently served this function at Miramax/Disney. But the desperate need to have numbers to justify creative decisions is as widespread in film as it is in television. The conglomerates have forced this numbers fetish on studio heads, even as they have taken back some of the creative community's financial risk. As a result, and perhaps out of necessity, the film industry has become as good at merchandising, repurposing, syndication, sponsorship, product placement, and audience feedback as the television industry was in the 1950s. Studio executives did not discover these strategies in the postclassical, "high-concept," or postmodern age; they merely adopted the tried and proven business strategies that television and broadcasting had successfully developed many decades earlier. These changes have made theoretical claims and counterclaims by the "creative" community (artistry as integrity) and the "business" community (artistry as excess) if not more contentious then certainly more public and self-righteous.

Convergence now stands as one measure of success in the studios. To achieve this end, the conglomerates constantly work to exploit the economic conditions and business practices in film that historically defined television. Fully understanding the role of film in multimedia convergence means framing or defining film in terms other than its own; far from being a discrete form of art or entertainment, film represents but one strata in a complicated multimedia industrial marketing and consumption strategy.

As I have discussed elsewhere, film can be viewed as a "viral marketing scheme."<sup>16</sup> As an institutional strategy, film functions essentially as a semiotic cluster-bomb: several media formats precede a film's release (the electronic press kit, preview DVDs, and cable/broadcast "making-of" specials); and several media formats follow the ever-shorter period of a film's release (the studio/network Web sites that "add value" to the property, and the DVD, which disciplines and "harvests revenue" by locking down interactivity). Each multimedia platform (the Web site and the DVD with extras) serves as a "host body" for the studio/network's mutating content, and various forms of industrial reflexivity (behind-the-scenes, making-ofs, bonus tracks, and interactively negotiated production knowledge) serve as the fuel that drives the endless mutation of this content across proprietary host bodies within the conglomerated world. As a form of constant textual renegotiation, onscreen critical analysis (whether from scholars, publicists, show-biz reports, or industrial marketing departments) facilitates the process of repurposing and mutation.

Far from being bounded or discrete, film should be understood as a component of broader industrial and cultural practices. Adding this industrial perspective to film studies, while an awkward fit in some departments in art and humanities contexts, is nevertheless important. Otherwise, film scholars will keep "discovering" what television scholars discovered long ago.

As DVD practices begin to dominate film form, production, and distribution, two factors will increasingly define the dominant "cinematic experience": merchandising and domestic consumption. Far more accurately than other technical or stylistic characteristics, both factors have long defined television as both a medium and an art. With a few important exceptions, like the work of Barbara Klinger, film scholars have largely ignored domestic consumption. Indeed, many film purists have held their collective noses in the face of the advertising, merchandising, and "home-setting" that has defined and fueled television development over its long history.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, film studio executives monitor the "Tuesday-night" merchandising "shelf space" in DVD departments at Wal-Mart and Costco (as much as opening weekend box offices) as among the most important benchmarks of a film's success. At the same time, film/DVD developers research domesticity and interactivity in the home to enhance a film's ultimate success financially.<sup>18</sup> Cinema, in some odd ways, has become television. Film scholars would benefit from considering how this shift has placed research on television's history at the heart of cinematic analysis as well.

## Notes

1. Peter Bart, "TV Takeover Jolts Film," *Variety* online, March 27, 2005. [www.variety.com/article/VR1117920099?categoryid=1&cs=1](http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117920099?categoryid=1&cs=1).
2. Jerry Bruckheimer, quoted in Claudia Eller and Meg James, "For New Execs, a Culture Clash," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2005, C1.
3. Brian Grazer, quoted in *ibid.*, C5.
4. For examples of stylistic, high-production-value television work emerging in the 1980s, see *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch); *Miami Vice* and *Max Headroom* (Michael Mann); the Chiat-Day/Apple "1984" Macintosh spot (Ridley Scott); the "Air Jordan" Nike advertising campaign (Spike Lee); *Thunder and Mud* (Penelope Spheeris); *Amazing Stories: Seaquest DSV* (Steven Spielberg), *Homicide* (Barry Levinson), *Homicide* (Barbara Kopple), and *Wild Palms* (Oliver Stone). More recent cinema-TV cross-overs and conversions include *Dark Angel* (James Cameron), *Once and Again* (Edward Zwick), *The Simpsons* (James L. Brooks), *The Gun* (Robert Altman), *E/R* (Quentin Tarantino), *Into the West* (Stephen Spielberg), *Arrested Development* (Brian Grazer), *Shootout* (Peter Guber), and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Jerry Bruckheimer).
5. The major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) must acquire, develop, and program at least three hours of primetime entertainment content each night (from Monday to Saturday) and four hours on Sunday evenings. Thus, the networks are required to fill twenty-two hours per week, or 1,144 total hours per year, in addition to scores of hours of network specials.
6. See, for example, John T. Caldwell, "Second Shift Aesthetics: Programming, Branding, and User Flows," in Anna Everett and John Caldwell, eds., *New Media: Digitextual Theories and Practices* (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 127-44; and Caldwell, "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration," in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television after TV* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 41-74.

7. See Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Michelle Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); William Boddy, *Fifties Television* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Tino Balio, ed., *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
8. This integrated approach to film/television is one of the themes of my book. See John T. Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995).
9. Charlotte Brundson made this suggestion during discussion at the "What Is a DVD?" International Conference at the University of Warwick, UK, April 23, 2005.
10. This perspective is the major theme and focus of my forthcoming book. See John T. Caldwell, *Production Cultures: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
11. DVD sales now represent as much as 60 percent of a studio's profit. "DVD Sales Figures Turn Every Film into a Mystery," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2005, A1, A34.
12. Robert Allen and Allen Gomery have shown how, in 1927, William Fox imported "Germanic" artistry, essentially as Oscar bait, in the form of F. W. Murnau, even though the artistic masterpiece that resulted (*Sunrise*) proved to be a box-office failure. The prototype created by the Fox/Murnau experiment now stands as a central assumption and strategic option in the current media conglomerates. Studio executives continue to whine about the high risks and inevitable losses involved in developing features, of which as many as eight out of ten supposedly "lose" money domestically. But this pose has always been the public face of "Hollywood" accounting, where everybody on the lot and in management somehow manages to keep their jobs and pay themselves handsomely despite the assembly line of losses and box-office failures.
13. These percentages are based on measured changes in total days worked in each medium and are cited in Jordan Rau, "Runaway Filming a Challenge for Gov.," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2004, B6.
14. See Caldwell, "Second Shift Aesthetics," and "Convergence Television."
15. George Gallup founded the Audience Research Institute (ARI) in 1939 to provide broadcasters and filmmakers with research reports. While the date complemented studio test screenings, ARI was relatively short-lived. Founded in 1926, AC Nielsen has provided research and analysis to broadcasters continuously since 1936. Audience ratings and response not only became a dominant source of information for television and popular magazines but infiltrated onscreen content (many times via direct address) in various entertainment program formats as well, especially live-comedy variety shows starting in the 1940s.
16. This discussion of film as "viral marketing" was first presented in my plenary paper "Refiguring DVD Bonus Tracks: Making-Ofs and Behind-the-Scenes, as Historic Viral Marketing Strategies," at the "What Is a DVD?" International Conference, University of Warwick, UK, April 23, 2005, and is in chapters 9 and 10 of my forthcoming book. See Caldwell, *Production Culture*.
17. See Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Big Screen: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
18. Elaine Dutka describes how Wal-Mart monitoring has become an important weekly ritual at the Hollywood studios. See Dutka, "Coming Soon to a Theater Near You: Fox Executives," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2005, E1.