

# INTELLECTUALIZATION AND ART WORLD DEVELOPMENT: FILM IN THE UNITED STATES

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*The social history of film in the United States is examined to illuminate the ideological and organizational foundations of the valuation of art. Attempts to valorize film as art began in film's first decades. Thereafter, a series of key events and actions in the late 1950s and 1960s, both inside and outside the film world, resulted in a shift in audiences' perception of film—from a form of entertainment to a cultural genre that could properly be appreciated as art. This shift in perception was made possible by the opening of an artistic niche brought about by changes outside the film world, by the institutionalization of resources and practices within the film world, and by the employment of an intellectualizing discourse by film critics.*

**T**HE CONCEPT of film as art is intriguing because during film's first decades, at the beginning of the twentieth century, film in the United States was considered popular entertainment and was strongly identified with working-class audiences. From its beginnings as a "suspect" entertainment medium fraught with technological, financial, and reputational difficulties (Canby 1971), the cinema has been transformed (Giannetti 1981; Lounsbury 1973; Mast 1981; Sinyard 1985). It is now widely recognized that a film can be appreciated and evaluated as a serious artistic endeavor and that filmmakers can be full-fledged artists (e.g., see Basinger 1994; Bordwell and Thompson 1986; Quart and Auster 1984; Sult-

anik 1986).<sup>1</sup> Many organizations are now dedicated to the appreciation of film, and academic programs for the critical study of film also support this notion.<sup>2</sup>

My goal here is to explain the legitimation of film as an art form. Through an examination of the history of film in the United States, I highlight the major developments within the film world that contributed to this change. In addition, I explore social forces in the wider society that helped to shift perceptions of film. Although attempts to valorize film began in film's first decades, major advances in the promotion of film's artistic potential occurred through a series of inter-related events that coincided in the United States in the 1950s and particularly the 1960s. In explaining the promotion and diffusion of this idea, the role of a legitimating ideology for film as art merits particular attention. A second goal here is to provide a

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<sup>1</sup> Stones (1993) dates the transformation: "Beginning in the 1960s a wholesale shift in attitude about American films occurred. Movies were somehow taken more seriously and elevated to the status of 'film literature'" (p. 201).

<sup>2</sup> A search of Associations Unlimited, an on-line resource, reveals dozens of film critics' associations and many dozens of film societies and film clubs at the local, regional, and national levels.

method for measuring subtle, long-term changes in critical discourse.

Not all film is considered art, just as not all music (e.g., country music or a commercial jingle) and not all painting (e.g., finger painting by children) are indisputably art. The important development, however, is the popular acceptance of the idea that film *can* be art and that it has certain recognizable characteristics that justify the honorific title of “art.” Although the idea that film can be art was conceived soon after the advent of the cinema, this idea was not taken seriously by the vast majority of American film critics or American audiences for approximately the first 60 years. I explain the acceptance of this idea in the post-1960 era.

### CREATING ARTISTIC STATUS: OPPORTUNITY, INSTITUTIONS, AND IDEOLOGY

Sociologists of culture rely on three main factors to explain the public acceptance of a cultural product as art. The first factor is the *changing opportunity space* brought about by social change outside the art world. DiMaggio (1992:44) contends that whether a cultural genre succeeds in earning recognition as art “has depended on the shape of the opportunity space,” which is defined by the appearance of “competitors,” “substitutes,” and the formation of a pool of high-status “patrons” who can act as sponsors. A newly popular substitute or competitor can act as a foil against which a cultural genre’s artistic status is enhanced. In addition, a cultural product’s association with a high-status audience can help to legitimate the product as art. These developments, which are essentially rooted outside the art world, help explain the timing of “aesthetic mobility” (Peterson 1994:179).

The second factor crucial to explaining the creation of artistic status is the *institutionalization of resources and practices* of production and consumption by members within the art world. Becker (1982) provides a thorough analysis of the importance of organizations and networks in art. Although the artist is at the center of the art world, the participation of many different collaborators is essential for art to maintain its status as art. In this light, Becker (1982:301) explains the

creation of an art world as an instance of successful collective action, of winning “organizational victories” and creating the “apparatus of an art world”.

The third main factor is the grounding of artistic worth in a *legitimizing ideology*. Ferguson (1998) makes the case for the crucial role of the intellectualization of a cultural product in the development of a cultural field.<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu’s (1993) concept of a “field” of cultural production focuses on the relations between cultural producers and consumers. A cultural field (also applicable to intellectual endeavors outside the boundaries of art) comes into being when cultural production begins to enjoy autonomy from other existing fields in the type of capital available to cultural producers. In any given field, actors engage in competition for capital. To the extent that there is a distinct form of symbolic capital available to consecrate cultural products of a particular genre, the field is more autonomous. For example, the literary field has achieved a high degree of

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson (1998) argues for a distinction between “field,” as elaborated by Bourdieu (1993), and “world,” as developed by Becker (1982), as they pertain to cultural production. Ferguson (1998) characterizes an art “world” by its “cooperative networks,” which “can exist only in fairly circumscribed social or geographical settings endowed with mechanisms that promote connection” (pp. 635–36). A “field,” on the other hand, offers “the acute consciousness of positions and possibilities for social mobility in a circumscribed social space” (p. 634) and is “structured by a largely textual discourse that continually (re)negotiates the systemic tensions between production and consumption” (p. 637). However, the differences between field and world are differences of degree rather than of type. For instance, Bourdieu (1993) illustrates his concept of field through a study of the *French* literary field—fields, too, need to be bounded both geographically and socially to be analytically useful. Moreover, Becker (1982, chap. 11:339) identifies the role that reputation and “critical discussions” play in art worlds. Although they are not central, they are nonetheless important to the dynamics of an art world. Ferguson (1998) seems to emphasize the ideological foundation of a field and the organizational foundation of a world. However, in their original formulations, both field and world allow for ideological and organizational elements, albeit to varying degrees. I use the terms “world” and “field” interchangeably.

autonomy—it offers prestigious prizes and critical successes that constitute the symbolic capital that may serve as an alternative to economic capital for authors. Ferguson (1998:600) argues that it is through texts that a field of cultural production is established and a cultural product is transformed into an “intellectual phenomenon.” The development of a field-specific set of aesthetic principles provides a rationale for accepting the definition of a cultural product as art and offers analyses for particular products.

Several studies of the generation of artistic status refer to one or more of these three factors. DiMaggio (1982) argues that through trustee-governed nonprofit enterprises, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts, well-placed “cultural capitalists” and artistic “experts” with upper- and upper-middle-class support, achieved the organizational separation of high culture from popular culture. DiMaggio (1992) also argues that, to varying degrees, the model established by classical music and the visual arts was adopted by practitioners and patrons of theater, opera, and aesthetic dance. In the case of theater, DiMaggio claims that the advent of film altered the market for dramatic entertainment and facilitated the elevation of theater. Levine (1988) argues that the establishment of separate groups of performers and separate theaters and halls for drama, opera, and symphonic music was a necessary step in the elevation of these forms of entertainment to the status of art, while concurrently academics and aesthetes developed a valorizing ideology to legitimate these cultural products as high culture.

Other authors cite the importance of events outside the art world in explaining the aesthetic mobility of subfields of literature (Beisel 1992) and “serious” classical music in Vienna (DeNora 1991) and the United States (Mueller 1951). The development of a critical discourse is likewise cited as important to the legitimization of jazz (Peterson 1972) and Impressionism (White and White 1965).

In general, studies of aesthetic mobility successfully demonstrate the structural underpinnings of change in art worlds. In these studies, the claims for the role of a changing opportunity space and the institutionalization of resources and practices enjoy empiri-

cal substantiation. Evidence for the third factor, a legitimating ideology, is virtually absent. Shrum (1996), for example, argues that critical discourse is key to the creation and maintenance of cultural hierarchy. Although he notes that “the ideology of standards is a key feature of highbrow discourse” (1996: 203), Shrum is not more specific about the content or the guiding principles of the discourse. Likewise, Becker (1982), DiMaggio (1982, 1992), and Levine (1988) make no claims about the specific characteristics of critical output.<sup>4</sup>

I first demonstrate how changes in the wider society and within the film world brought film closer to existing conceptions of art. Next, through a content analysis of 468 film reviews over a 65-year period, I explore the creation and dissemination of an artistic mode of analysis in film. Content analysis is useful for documenting change over time in particular elements of intellectual discourse. Through a careful accounting of the means by which critics developed a legitimating ideology for film, I show how critical discourse played a crucial role in the creation of the art world for film.

Analyzing intellectualizing discourse, as a mode of inquiry, may facilitate understanding of an array of cultural and intellectual activities; there is an aesthetic dimension to the production and consumption of products ranging from the high arts to fashion, from architecture to wine. In addition, the sociology of art has generally neglected the social history of American film and film criticism. In this article I hope to increase the understanding of the classification of film in the United States over the past century and hence to understand some of the ideological and organizational foundations of the valuation of art.

<sup>4</sup> Several studies that focus on critics in literature (Janssen and Leemans 1988; Van Rees and Vermunt 1996; Verdaasdonk 1987), drama (Levo 1993), and film (Eliashberg and Shugan 1997) are mainly concerned with the link between critical and economic success. But this research sheds no light on the question of how the nature of criticism contributes to artistic status. Although film scholars have asserted that the nature of film criticism has changed (Blades 1976; Denby 1977; Murray 1975), this assertion is a subjective evaluation.

## EVENTS EXTERNAL TO THE FILM WORLD: SETTING THE OPPORTUNITY SPACE

Opportunity space is defined by the existence of competing or substitute cultural products and the availability of patrons who can bolster a cultural product's prestige. Two major developments contributed to the opportunity space for film—the advent of television and the expansion of post-secondary education.<sup>5</sup>

### *THE ADVENT OF TELEVISION*

In 1945, before the success of commercial television, an average of 90 million people attended the cinema each week (Brown 1995). In 1952, average weekly cinema attendance stood at 51 million, while 21 million households owned a television set (Brown 1995). As television ownership increased, average weekly cinema attendance continued to decrease—to 40 million in 1960 and to 17.7 million in 1970 (Brown 1995) when 95.3 percent of American households contained a television (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979:587). Just as film stole mass audiences away from theater, television lured mass audiences away from film. Stones (1993:179) writes that, despite technological innovations (e.g., color, wide-screen projection, and 3-D projection) designed to win back audiences, “movie attendance continued to decline.”

This reduction in profitability provided an opportunity for a change in the previously tarnished image of the film industry. Bourdieu's (1993, chap. 1) theory of the dynamics of a cultural field is helpful for understanding the consequences of the diminished profits of the film industry. He contends that

<sup>5</sup> DiMaggio (1992) places a heavy emphasis on the imitation of cultural genres. In the cases he studies, institutional support for the genres is modeled on existing organizational forms of high art sponsorship, namely trustee-governed non-profit organizations. Therefore, the timing of the transformation in prestige for those cultural genres is significant precisely because it allows for imitation. As a profit-oriented cultural genre, film production has failed to imitate earlier models, and so I do not discuss the imitative aspect of the opportunity space.

a natural division exists within fields of cultural production between large-scale and restricted production. In fields of restricted production, cultural goods are produced for an audience whose members are primarily cultural producers themselves—a relatively small audience with a great deal of cultural capital available for appreciating art. In contrast, fields of large-scale production create cultural goods that will appeal to nonproducers of cultural goods and to as large a market as possible. These two categories represent ends of a continuum along which all cultural production is situated. Bourdieu contends that restricted fields of cultural production are governed by a logic in which economic capital and commercial success oppose symbolic capital (prestige, recognition, cultural authority): Success on one dimension usually comes at the expense of success on the other. Following the subordination of the economic success of film to that of television, bestowing symbolic capital on film assumed a central role as film, relative to television, came to more closely resemble a field of restricted production.<sup>6</sup> Television, thus, played a key role in altering the opportunity space for the artistic claims of film.

### *THE INCREASE IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION*

The patrons of high status from whom film's claim to art could draw support were made available through dramatic increases in levels of post-secondary education. These increases occurred when returning World War II veterans went to college and when enrollment swelled in the 1960s as a result of large baby-boom birth cohorts. Although only 4.9 percent of 23-year-olds held a bachelor's degree in 1925, the proportion of people receiving a post-secondary education has

<sup>6</sup> Patrice Petro (1996) argues that the prestige of film has benefited from the introduction of television and notes the irony of this situation: “What is surprising is that some film scholars assign a place to television outside the domain of legitimate culture, outside the arena of academic respectability, particularly since this was (and in some cases, continues to be) precisely the ‘place’ assigned to cinema by educators, intellectuals, and artists” (p. 6).

grown steadily since then (U.S. Department of Education 1993). By 1975, 24.9 percent of 23-year-olds held a bachelor's degree.

In the early decades of commercial film's enormous popularity, film-going was primarily a working-class activity (Stones 1993: 22) and was disdained by American intellectuals and the upper-middle and upper classes (Hampton [1931] 1970:61; Mast 1981:4). As television grew in popularity among middle- and low-income households (Boddy 1998:27) and film declined in popularity, film's shrunken audience became less heavily working class. Sklar (1994:270, 325) notes that the studios first became aware in the late 1940s that educational attainment was positively correlated with cinema attendance, and 1960s film audiences, which included large numbers of college students who were "primed for artistic rebellion," became known as the "film generation".

There are at least two mechanisms through which the increase in post-secondary education influenced the status of film as art. First, as DiMaggio (1982; 1992) and Levine (1988) note, the association of art forms with the socioeconomic status of audience members has contributed to the rise and fall in prestige of various cultural products. According to this view, perceptions of what is art are directly affected by the status of audience members. As the overall socioeconomic status of the audience for film increased, the status of film increased, thereby assisting claims that film was art.<sup>7</sup>

Second, as education levels of film audience members increased, audiences were more inclined and more able to appreciate film as art. Gans (1974:84) argues that an "upper-middle taste culture" became prevalent in the United States as a result of the increase in the college-educated public. This "taste culture" relied extensively on critics and reviewers to categorize culture and to validate its tastes. Film critics worked hard to review films as art. Looking to cultural experts as opinion leaders, the growing upper-middle taste public was more receptive to an ideology of film as art as it was presented in the film reviews they read.

<sup>7</sup>Lieberson (2000:126-30) describes the sharing of prestige in tastes and fashions as "symbolic enhancement."

Television, as a more popular form of entertainment, was film's main competitor and quickly became the main substitute for dramatic entertainment. Rising education levels provided a pool of more highly educated film patrons of higher status. Both these developments, external to the film world, influenced the position of film in society by altering the opportunity space for an ideology of film as art.

### **BUILDING AN ART WORLD: CHANGE FROM WITHIN**

There is a long history of efforts by those involved in the film world to make film a respectable medium.<sup>8</sup> A major step was taken in 1927 when members of the film industry created the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; the Academy Awards followed a year later to promote the industry as ethical and seemly.<sup>9</sup> A number of other isolated efforts laid the groundwork that further institutionalized resources and practices in the 1950s and 1960s that were to be influential in making film not only respectable but also plausibly artistic to a wide audience.

### **FILM FESTIVALS**

Because they are competitive and because prizes are awarded by juries who have some

<sup>8</sup>Uricchio and Pearson (1993) detail attempts by the film industry in the first two decades of the twentieth century to "reposition itself in American society as a mass entertainment acceptable to all social formations rather than a cheap amusement" (p. 41); Lynes (1993:111) notes the benefit for film of the creation of a film library in the Museum of Modern Art, the first of its kind, in 1935; and Mast (1981:43, 98) describes the importation of productions by the French Film D'Art and Famous Players's Class A pictures.

<sup>9</sup>Shale (1993) cites the Academy's 1929 *Annual Report* concerning the impetus behind the new organization: "But more than this and of greater importance as some of us viewed it, the screen and all its people were under a great and alarming cloud of public censure and contempt. . . . Some constructive action seemed imperative to halt the attacks and establish the industry in the public mind as a respectable, legitimate institution, and its people as reputable individuals" (p. 2).

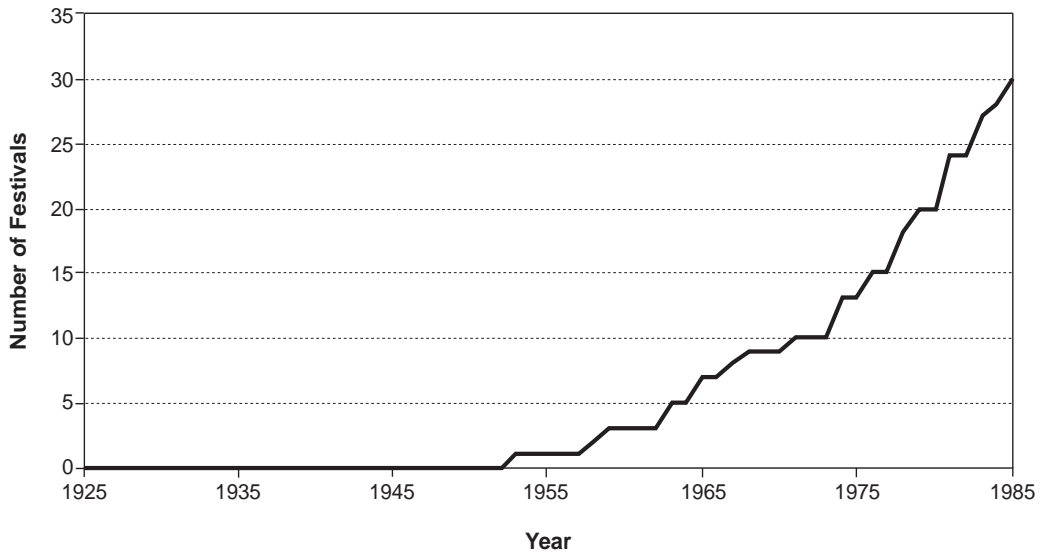


Figure 1. Number of Competitive American Film Festivals, 1925 to 1985

claim to expert status in their field, film festivals bestow artistic merit on films. The vast majority of competitive film festivals in the United States were founded post-1960. See Figure 1. The data for Figure 1 come from two sources—*Compact Variety*, a CD-ROM database published by *Variety* (1996), and the American Film Institute's list of current festivals (available from the author on request). Of course, current lists of festivals exclude festivals that no longer occur. However, the list supplies valuable evidence concerning the history of competitive film festivals, specifically concerning the timing of the expansion in their number. The earliest festival listed is the Columbus International Film and Video Festival, held for the forty-seventh time in 1999.<sup>10</sup> It was first held in 1953, more than 50 years after the advent of the cinema. The San Francisco Film Festival was founded in 1958, the New York Film Festival in 1963,<sup>11</sup> the Chicago International Film Festival in 1965, the Seattle International Film Festival in 1974, and the Boston

<sup>10</sup> All festivals of film were included in the list; it is assumed that the festival was modified to include video sometime after the festival was founded. Festivals that did not specify the judgment of film were not included.

<sup>11</sup> The New York Film Festival is used as an example of the starting date of a major city's film festival. However, it is not included in the data for Figure 1 because it is not competitive.

Film Festival in 1985. Only 3 of the 73 festivals founded before 1985 predate the 1960s, and even these three date back no earlier than the 1950s.

Commercial cinema in the United States began near the end of the 1890s, and by 1950 approximately 22,000 films had been released in the United States (Brown 1995), but no competitive festivals had yet been held. The fact that film festivals in major cities were all founded after 1958 is significant. Being cultural centers, it is unlikely that cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, which held some of the earliest festivals, would have lagged behind other parts of the country in organizing film festivals. These data indicate that festivals emerged as part of a formally organized effort to celebrate the artistic potential of film in a public manner. Post-1960 critics (as well as studios and filmmakers) could now refer to the awards that a film had won as testimony to its artistic worth. In addition, the existence of a variety of juried festivals created an atmosphere in which film as a genre could enjoy increased prestige.

#### TIES TO UNIVERSITIES

Like film festivals, academic study also bestows "artistic worth" on its object. The founding of film studies departments began in the 1960s and, like film festivals, their

number continues to grow. The *College Blue Book* series, beginning in 1923, lists all institutions of higher education and details what programs they offer. Prior to the late 1960s, no degree programs related to the study of film were recorded in the *Blue Book*.<sup>12</sup> Today's most renowned degree programs in film studies were established in the 1960s or later. The program at New York University, for instance, became one of the first academic departments for film history and theory in the United States. In 1970 it was still in the process of being formed and its Ph.D. program was not yet accredited (Carroll 1998:1). Other examples include the American Film Institute's graduate program, founded in 1967, and the program at the California Institute of the Arts, created in 1971. Columbia University first offered a Master of Fine Arts in Film, Radio, and Television in 1966. Thus, the vast majority of film departments were founded after the post-World War II growth in higher education.

With the support of universities, the idea of film as art enjoyed greater legitimacy. As centers of cultural authority, universities helped redefine a range of cultural products as high art (DiMaggio 1992). In addition to the increase in film studies programs, film scholars claim that the legitimacy of film studies within the academy has steadily grown (Blades 1976; Bywater and Sobchak 1989; Easton 1997), further facilitating the legitimacy of the intellectualization of this form of entertainment.

#### **THE TRANSITION FROM THE STUDIO SYSTEM TO DIRECTOR-CENTERED PRODUCTION**

Until the 1950s, Hollywood films were made according to the studio system whereby directors (as well as actors) were signed to a contract with a studio that obliged them to make the films that the studios (which retained creative control) were interested in making (Staiger 1985; Tuska 1991, introduc-

tion). The studio system began to dissolve following the 1948 Supreme Court ruling that the studio's incorporation of production and exhibition facilities was monopolistic (Mordden 1988:367). The studios were forced to divest themselves of their theater holdings. "With no guarantee of exhibition, fewer movies could be made" (Mordden 1988:368). Faced with legal troubles of vertical control, shrinking potential profits, and uncertainty about which films to make, the studios changed their production method and began leasing studio space to independent directors to make their own films (Phillips 1990:16).

Shortly after this transition, a new school of thought regarding film migrated to the United States from France. Film criticism in Europe, particularly in France in the *Cahiers du cinéma*, had developed along different lines. In the mid- to late 1950s, the French *nouvelle vague* elaborated an approach to the appreciation of film that by the 1960s had stimulated a new form of American film criticism (Sarris 1968). This approach was *auteurism*. The *auteur* theory posits that "the director alone can confer artistic unity on a motion picture . . . [and] is the single controlling influence during the production of a motion picture" (Phillips 1990:11).

The importation of *auteurism* was set in motion by Sarris's (1962) seminal essay, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." *Auteurism* came to enjoy general acceptance among both journalistic and academic critics (Kapsis 1992:13). It provided film criticism with a powerful tool for connecting with existing beliefs about the nature of art and artists (Bywater and Sobchak 1989:53; Zolberg 1990:7). Critics, who were interested in establishing their reputations as influential intellectuals, were able to provide a rationale for film as art that countered mass culture objections (cf. Adorno 1991).

*Auteurism* was originally conceived to explain how films made within the studio system could be art. It identified the creative imprint of (American) directors whose artistic impulses survived the homogenizing influence of the studio system (Stoddart 1995). However, its adoption by American critics came at a time when a change in production practices encouraged a view of directors as independent creators, allowing a perception

<sup>12</sup> The organization of the *College Blue Book* changed over time, making it difficult to confirm this. Furthermore, the categorization of different programs under a common rubric can be troublesome. For example, grouping film studies with media studies or with visual arts makes it difficult to get an accurate count.

of film as art to be applied to standard Hollywood fare.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, Europe had its *auteurs* (e.g., Jean Renoir, Sergei Eisenstein, Rene Clair, G.W. Pabst) as early as the 1920s and 1930s. Of course, the film industries in Europe had never been fully oriented toward commercial interests, and filmmakers had never been constrained by a studio system. In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, European (and other foreign) films grew in popularity among American audiences. This growth was facilitated by the distribution of foreign films by American studios, which were producing fewer films of their own (Balio 1998:63). The reduction in domestic production also meant that many small and second-run theaters, without the usual supply of "B" movies, began to show foreign films (Sklar 1994:293). Furthermore, at a time when mores were changing, foreign films were advantaged because they were not required to conform to the moral requirements of the Production Code. The Code was a set of restrictions on themes and images which the American studios agreed to abide by until 1968. More "sensitive to intellectual and social questions" (Mast 1981:278) and with a "more sophisticated treatment of sexuality" (Sklar 1993:422) than American films, foreign films apparently resonated with American audiences. Famous foreign *auteurs*, then, were available as models for how filmmakers could be artists. The change to director-centered production in Hollywood aligned American filmmakers, even the most mainstream of them, with their European counterparts.

### FILM CRITICS PROVIDE AN INTELLECTUALIZING DISCOURSE

A classification as art rather than entertainment implies that the artistic value of a cultural product can be justified according to a

<sup>13</sup> How much control directors had under the studio system and whether they gained from the system's collapse is debatable (e.g., see Sklar and Zagarrío 1998). While they surely gained some autonomy, directors also now enjoyed the *appearance* of a significant amount of freedom and autonomy.

set of conventions. The intellectualization of film involved the application of aesthetic standards and so was a crucial development in the promotion of film to the status of art. Film reviews available to the public in popular periodicals provide evidence for the evolution of an aesthetic in the field of film. Film reviews are therefore an ideal data source. Not only do they document the intellectualization of film, they also explain how the new aesthetic for film was disseminated to the public.

Content analysis of film reviews is well suited to identifying the important elements of an ideology of film as art and showing that this critical aesthetic became prevalent in the 1960s. My sample of film reviews consists of reviews beginning in 1925 and ending in 1985. By 1925, film had existed as a medium for more than 25 years, giving critics and audiences time to become familiar with its basic characteristics and potential. Furthermore, film technology now allowed filmmakers to make films that were long enough to maintain a narrative structure and that had sufficiently good picture quality that reviewers could focus on interpreting the films as art rather than as merely technical works. The end date of 1985 allows ample time after the change in the opportunity space for critics to develop a new film aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> For every fifth year from 1925 to 1985, the first film reviewed each month by 3 popular periodicals (the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Time*) was selected because: (1) They are among the few periodicals that published film reviews continuously during the period under study; (2) they are mass-circulation periodicals that are widely available and reach a large public, targeting a wide middle-brow audience; and (3) they are thought to be trendsetters and hence other film critics are likely to adopt their practices. This method generated 13 time periods, with 36 film reviews in

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, 1985 is a suitable end date because it is necessary to observe the variables of interest well past the period of change to show that the increases are enduring trends rather than statistical anomalies. Moreover, the values of the variables plateau after the period of change and further data collection would not add significant information or alter the conclusions.



each period, yielding a total of 468 film reviews.<sup>15</sup> Two variables serve as evidence that a change in film reviewing has occurred: (1) the use of specific terms associated with artistic criticism in other highbrow artistic genres; and (2) the use of critical devices and concepts that facilitate an analytical, interpretive approach to film rather than a facile, entertainment-minded approach. For example, the following passage is from a 1931 *New Yorker* film review of *City Lights*, directed by Charlie Chaplin, a film currently considered a "classic" of great artistic value:

Occasionally, you know, strange and unfortunate things occur to persons of such acclaimed place when they settle back for a while to enjoy their triumphs. There is the constant headiness, anyhow, of the great public's applause, and also so many excited little articles appear in various select journals spiced richly with such terms as "genius" and "artist" that the reading of them may cast a sad spell over the subject. To be sure such journals have a small circulation as a rule, yet I suspect that the persons so dealt with usually contrive to unearth them and ponder on their arguments. The results may be disastrous. There grows an inclination to be more dramatically an artist, one with a mission, a significant message, an interpretation, and that aspiration has killed many a delightful talent. . . . I might wax eloquent about the meaning of his clowning, its relation to the roots of human instincts, had I at all the official vocabulary for that kind of thing, and did I not suspect that it tired many people the way it does me. (*New Yorker*, February 21, 1931, p. 60)

The reviewer's comments show that the idea of film as art existed in 1931, but that this idea was mainly confined to avant-garde journals with a "small circulation" waiting for filmmakers to "unearth" them. For a reviewer in the *New Yorker* to ridicule the idea of film as art, the idea could not have had wide currency. The more mainstream opinion, as represented by this *New Yorker* reviewer, was opposed to the notion that Charlie Chaplin could be an "artist," that words such as "artist" and "genius" could be

<sup>15</sup> Because not all issues of the *New Yorker* for 1925 were available, the sample includes reviews from several issues from the same months for that year in order to get 12 reviews.

applied to a filmmaker, and that films should attempt to convey a message or allow for interpretation. Films, the reviewer is saying, do not serve that purpose, and are better for it.

The following quotations from *Time* magazine provide a glimpse of the approaches taken by mainstream reviewers at different points in time and show that reviewers in 1940 could be hostile to films that provoked thought rather than entertained:

Unfortunately, Hollywood has now got the idea that "social significance" has something to do with the amusement business. (*Time*, January 1, 1940, p. 29)

"Class picture" is a trade term for films with a better than average cast, a resolutely esthetic director, and uplift. They are aimed at people who want ideas with their entertainment. Often they are made from second-rate novels with a purpose. Usually they are bores, frequently they are flops. (*Time*, April 1, 1940, p. 70)

A film critic for *Time* magazine in more recent decades would hardly argue against "social significance" or the inclusion of "ideas" in films. For example, the following statements appeared in a 1980 film review in *Time*:

The movie delights in the play of ideas and in its own unsuspected ability to play fast, loose and funny with them. It is refreshing to see a movie that sends ideas instead of autos crashing head-on. (*Time*, September 1, 1980, p. 58)

These examples illustrate the approaches that critics take toward culture and how an approach can change markedly over time. Although there is some variation among reviews from any given period, the examples presented here are largely representative of their respective periods.<sup>16</sup> Content analysis

<sup>16</sup> Although reviewers for the three publications sampled did not treat film as art in the early periods, such reviews did exist elsewhere. For example, Robert Sherwood and James Agee are two reviewers who treated film as art in other publications, however, such reviews were exceptions to mainstream critical opinion. The argument here is that wide acceptance among the public awaited a *broader consensus* among reviewers along with a *justification* for film as art expressed through reviews that reached a fairly wide audience. I make no attempt to catalogue the early

follows to document with more precision just how representative they are.

### CHANGING LANGUAGE

A vocabulary of criticism is a common feature of artistic commentary. Measurement of the changing language used in film reviews requires identifying a manageable number of elements of that vocabulary. Reviews from the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Time* of classical music performances and recordings and of painting exhibitions from the year 1925 provided a sample vocabulary from which a list of "high art" terms was drawn. Using the first music review and the first painting review from each month in 1925, a primary list was compiled for each publication. (Only the first six months of music reviews were available for the *New York Times*, but their music reviews were, on average, twice as long.) Each primary list included any term considered to be characteristic of highbrow art criticism from that publication. The final list of terms was created by including any term that appeared on at least two primary lists (i.e., at least two publications' reviews of painting and/or music in 1925). The list of terms was then pared down to include those words thought to have the strongest "high art" connotations. (The list of terms is available from the author on request).

Using reviews from 1925 avoids the tendency to generate a list that includes terms that resonate with a contemporary knowledge of critical terminology, which would have led to finding more such terms in later periods independent of any change or lack of change in the nature of film reviews before that. If there is any bias, it is against finding these terms in later periods. Three additional terms pertaining to the interpre-

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proponents of the notion that film is art because I do not seek to provide a detailed historical account of the origins of film criticism. Rather, my aim is to provide a causal-analytic account of the factors involved in the changing perception of film among the American public. Although these two modes of analysis are complementary (detailed cataloguing and causal analysis), the goal here is to elucidate the pattern of growth of the idea of film as art and acceptance of film criticism rather than their precise origins.

tive analysis of a narrative structure were added to the list: genre, irony, metaphor. Two other terms were also counted: the mention of a proper name followed by the suffix "ian" (e.g., Hitchcockian) or by the suffix "esque" (e.g., Felliniesque), as an indication of setting an academic tone. Appearances of these terms were then counted in the film review sample. Accurate counts of each term were achieved by scanning the reviews into a computer and then using the "find" function in a word processor. Each review was, of course, corrected for spelling errors that occurred in the scanning process. All variants of a term were also counted. For instance, "art," "artist," "artistry," "artistic," and "artistically" would each be counted as "art." A term was counted only if it was used in a sense that relates to art commentary. If a film as a whole or some aspect of the film was described as "brilliant," the term "brilliant" was counted. If a bright light, something shiny, or any concrete object was described as "brilliant," the term was not counted. The term "work" was counted only if it applied to the film as a production, not if it was being used to denote labor or in any other nonartistic sense, and so on. The terms were divided into two groups. The first group is designated as "high art" terms and includes words that have a rhetorical effect in the context of the evaluation of cultural products. They imply an erudite assessment and expert judgment. These words are: art, brilliant, genius, inspired, intelligent, master, and work. In addition, as mentioned above, the use of a proper name followed by the suffix "esque" or "ian" was counted. Such usage indicates the tendency to set a serious, weighty tone. The second group is designated as "critical" terms and includes words that are used in the analysis of texts. These words are: composition, genre, irony, metaphor, satire, symbol, and tone.

Table 1 reports the total number of "high art" and "critical" terms by year. (The results for each term by year are available from the author on request.) There is a statistically significant tendency for occurrences of these terms to increase over time, which supports the view that it became more common for reviewers to incorporate a more sophisti-

**Table 1. Analysis of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms Used in Film Reviews: 1925 to 1985**

| Year | Total Number of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms Used | Mean Number of Words per Review | Number of Terms Divided by Total Number of Review Words |
|------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 1925 | 19   | 337.2                           | .0016   |
| 1930 | 18   | 395.8                           | .0013   |
| 1935 | 21   | 414.0                           | .0014   |
| 1940 | 5  | 339.1                           | .0004   |
| 1945 | 21   | 434.1                           | .0013   |
| 1950 | 9  | 371.4                           | .0007   |
| 1955 | 12   | 396.8                           | .0008   |
| 1960 | 31   | 450.5                           | .0019   |
| 1965 | 32   | 447.0                           | .0020   |
| 1970 | 107  | 898.2                           | .0033   |
| 1975 | 69   | 978.3                           | .0020   |
| 1980 | 103  | 1,132.3                         | .0025   |
| 1985 | 78   | 950.4                           | .0023   |
| Rho  | .88***   | .86***                          | .70**   |

Note: Twelve reviews were sampled for each year from the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Time* magazine; N = 468.

\*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$  (one-tailed tests)

cated and analytical vocabulary in their reviews in more recent decades.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to using specialized terms, critics who take film seriously will also write lengthier reviews. Long reviews allow them to provide fully elucidated analyses, as opposed to the more superficial treatments. The second column of Table 1 confirms that the fewest words per review were written in 1925—a review in this year averaged 337.2 words. This amount remained relatively constant until 1955, followed by a slight increase in 1960 and 1965. After 1965 the average number of words per review increased dramatically, peaking in 1980 at 1,132.3, and then decreasing somewhat in the final time period to 950.4. Spearman's rho for the average word count and year is significant,

<sup>17</sup> One-tailed tests are appropriate here as there is a directional hypothesis concerning the relationship between year and the rank order of the counts.

demonstrating a strong tendency for more recent time periods to include progressively lengthier reviews.

Is the increase in "high art" and "critical" terms a result of change in the length of the reviews? More of these terms might be present because longer reviews provide a greater opportunity for them to appear by chance. The ratio of the number of "high art" and "critical" terms appearing in all the reviews sampled for a given year divided by the total number of words in all the reviews provides evidence that this is not the case. Between 1925 and 1960 the ratio does not exceed .0016. In 1960, the ratio rises to .0019 and in 1970 it is .0033. Thus, there is a sharp increase in the density of this specialized vocabulary. Spearman's rho between year and the ratio is significant, indicating that in those years when the specialized terms and the total word counts were highest, there are relatively more specialized terms. Thus, in later periods critics tended not only to discuss the films more thoroughly, more studiously, and in greater depth, but they were also more likely to use a specialized "high art" and "critical" vocabulary when doing so. The post-1960 increase is observed in each of the periodicals separately. Because only 12 reviews were sampled from each periodical in a given year, it is easier to see whether there are systematic differences in the rate of "high art" and "critical" terms combined if several time periods are grouped together. Table 2, which compares the rate of these terms across the three periodicals, shows that despite differences among the periodicals, the post-1960 increases are nearly identical.

The use of a specialized vocabulary is not merely a reflection of the increase in the length of reviews. Instead, the data suggest that the proportionate increase in the number of "high art" and "critical" terms is the effect of a nascent tendency to treat film as an art form, and that the use of a specialized vocabulary necessitated contextualization and more explanations, resulting in lengthier reviews.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The alternative, that editors demanded increased output from reviewers and that reviewers then filled that space with a highbrow artistic vocabulary by chance, is less plausible.

**Table 2. Number of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms Divided by Total Review Words, by Source: 1925 to 1985**

| Year      | <i>New Yorker</i> | <i>Time</i> | <i>New York Times</i> |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| 1925-1940 | .0009             | .0013       | .0013                 |
| 1945-1960 | .0010             | .0014       | .0013                 |
| 1965-1985 | .0021             | .0031       | .0028                 |

### CHANGING TECHNIQUES AND CONCEPTS

The second measure of the change in film reviews is the use of critical devices and concepts. These devices and concepts are the comparisons and distinctions that critics use and the thought modes that critics employ when reviewing films. Eight techniques were defined.

**(1) POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMENTARY.** It is thought that high art is complex and does not lend itself to easy interpretation or appreciation. The first technique is the appearance of both positive and negative commentary in the same review. Reviews that address film as art are expected to have a more complex, in-depth approach to film involving evaluation of many aspects on different levels, resulting in more mixed reviews. Such a mixture of commentary exists, for example, when a reviewer praises the actors for their interpretations but finds fault with the tone that the director gave to the material.

**(2) DIRECTOR IS NAMED.** The second technique is referring to the director by name in the review. Serious art forms require recognition of the artists by name, and in film this means the director (Blewitt 1993). Furthermore, occurrences of this technique are expected to increase in the 1960s, due to the introduction of auteurism.

**(3) COMPARISON OF DIRECTORS.** The third technique in the content analysis is the comparison of one director to another director. Discussion of high art very often places a given work in the context of other works so that the work can be evaluated in a more sophisticated and informed manner (Eitner 1961).

**(4) COMPARISON OF FILMS.** Comparison of the film to other films is also expected to increase. Making connections between different works allows critics to justify their

analyses and to display their cinematic erudition.

**(5) FILM IS INTERPRETED.** A defining characteristic of "art" as opposed to "entertainment" is that art is thought-provoking and a form of communication through metaphor. Examples include, "It seems reasonably clear that she means her movie to be a wry and sometimes anguished parable of political corruption and betrayal" (*Time*, October 6, 1975, p. 65) or "she bends this material onto a statement about how women are trapped and self-entrapped in our society" (*New York Times*, November 1, 1975, sec. 1, p. 17). Such statements are subject to debate and require creative inference on the part of the critic. Bordwell (1989), considering the role of interpretation in film criticism, explains that when film criticism became an academic endeavor, it was adopted by intellectuals in the humanities. "As a result, cinema was naturally subsumed within the interpretive frames of reference that rule those disciplines" (Bordwell 1989:17). "Interpretation-centered" criticism prevails in film studies because of its association with other types of cultural criticism.

**(6) MERIT IN FAILURE.** Viewing a given aspect of a film in different ways indicates a complex, multifaceted approach to film. A multifaceted approach is typical for high-brow art, which relies on resolving tensions between beauty and harshness to achieve its effect (Eitner 1961). Seeing merit in failure, requiring evaluation on two levels, is the sixth technique. An example of this is, "If Pontecorvo's film is flawed throughout, it is nevertheless an amazing film, intensely controversial even in its failures" (*New Yorker*, November 7, 1970, p. 159).

**(7) ART VERSUS ENTERTAINMENT.** Critics develop a canon and then must justify why a film is good (serious art) or bad (commercial entertainment). A fault line appears between "real art" and film that is motivated by profit or obviously and intentionally oriented toward a mass market (Bourdieu 1993, chap. 1).<sup>19</sup> "There are times when the movie

<sup>19</sup> Verdaasdonk (1983) discusses the importance critics place on the incompatibility of commercial and artistic values and the consequences for aesthetic legitimacy as applied to the literary field. Verdaasdonk refutes the validity of this dichotomy.

Table 3. Percent of Reviews Using Specific Critical Techniques, 1925 to 1985

| Year | Technique <sup>a</sup> |        |      |      |        |        |       |        | (9) <sup>b</sup> | (10) <sup>c</sup> |
|------|------------------------|--------|------|------|--------|--------|-------|--------|------------------|-------------------|
|      | (1)                    | (2)    | (3)  | (4)  | (5)    | (6)    | (7)   | (8)    |                  |                   |
| 1925 | 36.1                   | 47.2   | 2.8  | 8.3  | 2.8    | 0      | 11.1  | 0      | 8.3              | .000686           |
| 1930 | 33.3                   | 33.3   | 2.8  | 8.3  | 2.8    | 0      | 0     | 0      | 2.8              | .000195           |
| 1935 | 52.8                   | 19.4   | 0    | 16.7 | 13.9   | 0      | 2.8   | 2.8    | 5.6              | .000373           |
| 1940 | 33.3                   | 50.0   | 0    | 5.6  | 16.7   | 0      | 2.8   | 0      | 5.6              | .000455           |
| 1945 | 52.8                   | 36.1   | 2.8  | 5.6  | 25.0   | 0      | 5.6   | 0      | 5.6              | .000356           |
| 1950 | 61.1                   | 50.0   | 0    | 16.7 | 19.4   | 2.8    | 2.8   | 2.8    | 11.1             | .000831           |
| 1955 | 50.0                   | 52.8   | 2.8  | 2.8  | 13.9   | 2.8    | 0     | 8.3    | 11.1             | .000778           |
| 1960 | 63.9                   | 72.2   | 0    | 5.6  | 41.7   | 11.1   | 5.6   | 5.6    | 30.6             | .001884           |
| 1965 | 52.8                   | 80.6   | 0    | 16.7 | 41.7   | 2.8    | 11.1  | 8.3    | 36.1             | .002244           |
| 1970 | 52.8                   | 86.1   | 16.7 | 30.6 | 69.4   | 16.7   | 13.9  | 5.6    | 58.3             | .001804           |
| 1975 | 63.9                   | 97.2   | 11.1 | 33.3 | 72.2   | 11.1   | 8.3   | 11.1   | 66.7             | .001893           |
| 1980 | 77.8                   | 100.0  | 11.1 | 41.7 | 69.4   | 25.0   | 19.4  | 8.3    | 80.6             | .001976           |
| 1985 | 52.8                   | 100.0  | 16.7 | 27.8 | 55.6   | 5.6    | 22.2  | 13.9   | 50.0             | .001461           |
| Rho  | .67**                  | .95*** | .54* | .61* | .91*** | .88*** | .66** | .89*** | .90***           | .80***            |

<sup>a</sup> Techniques 1 through 8 are defined as follows: 1 = presence of both positive and negative commentary in review; 2 = director is named; 3 = director is compared with another director; 4 = film is compared with another film; 5 = presence of interpretation; 6 = merit is seen in failure; 7 = opposition drawn between serious versus commercial film or art versus entertainment; 8 = film is criticized for being "easy" or for lacking subtlety.

<sup>b</sup> Column 9 shows the percentage of reviews in which at least 3 of the techniques are used.

<sup>c</sup> Column 10 equals column 9 divided by total words in all reviews.

\*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$     \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (one tailed tests)

teeters on the edge of commercial cuteness" (*Time*, February 3, 1975, p. 4) is an example of such a distinction. Distinguishing between "popular" film and "serious" film allows critics to define a canon that excludes standard Hollywood productions. Creating a canon delineates a subgroup of the art form that critics can refer to as representative of their ideas concerning what is good art (DiMaggio 1992). The canon provides a set of exemplary works to which critics can appeal to defend their ideological ground. The identification of these "serious" works also allows critics to dismiss other films as a different kind of cinema, thereby maintaining the artistic integrity of "real" cinema.

**(8) TOO EASY TO ENJOY.** A distinction similar to "art versus entertainment" should appear more often in later periods based on a "disgust at the facile" (Bourdieu 1984: 486). Real art requires effort to be appreciated and cannot be enjoyed on a superficial level (Canaday 1980). Treating film as art

encourages disdain for films that are "too immediately accessible and so discredited as 'childish' or 'primitive'" (Bourdieu 1984: 486), while finding value in complexity and subtlety. Two reviews appearing 45 years apart in the *New Yorker* show how critics at different times differed in how they held films to this standard:

I don't like movies about people who work, and I don't like movies about people who have things the matter with them. (I work and all my friends work, and we all have things the matter with us. We go to movies to forget). (*New Yorker*, April 6, 1935, p. 77)

I don't mean it as a compliment when I venture . . . that it will prove to be her most popular picture so far. It is an easy movie to enjoy, which is the whole trouble. (*New Yorker*, March 3, 1980, p. 112)

Table 3 presents the percentage of reviews in each year that include each of the eight techniques. Results for technique 1 show the

increase in the use of mixed, rather than exclusively positive or negative, commentary. Spearman's rho between year and the number of reviews using mixed commentary is .67 and is significant. Results for technique 2 show that the director is named in 100 percent of the reviews in the last two time periods, an increase from less than 50 percent in 1925. The high rank-order correlation ( $\rho = .95$ ) attests to the increase in the practice of naming the director in reviews. The substantial increase of approximately 20 percentage points between 1955 and 1960 conforms to expectations concerning the influence of *auteurism*. Results for technique 3 show that comparisons between directors is not common in film reviews, reaching a high of 16.7 percent in 1970 and 1985. However, a moderate correlation exists ( $\rho = .54$ ). Similar results obtain for technique 4—comparisons between the film under review and another film. Although this device never appeared in more than a minority of reviews in the sample, peaking at 41.7 percent in 1980, there is evidence of a moderate increase over time ( $\rho = .61$ ).

Is there evidence of an increase in attempts to find an implicit message in films as a whole or in certain aspects of films? Results for technique 5 show that the interpretation of film is associated with later time periods ( $\rho = .91$ ). Starting at merely 2.8 percent, interpreting film became the dominant mode of review by the 1970s, peaking in 1975 (72.2 percent). This result provides strong evidence for the shift in the nature of film reviews. Despite the existence of other types of interpretive criticism such as literary criticism, early film reviewers were not likely to find a message in the films they saw. Such a development apparently awaited the adoption of film as subject matter by academic-minded critics.

The increase in viewing a given aspect of a film as both a success and a failure (technique 6) is statistically significant ( $\rho = .88$ ). Although the device was not widely used, it was most popular in reviews from 1980 (25.0 percent). The increase over time in drawing a distinction in film between serious art and commercial entertainment (technique 7) is statistically significant ( $\rho = .66$ ). There is a slight but significant increase over time in reviews distinguishing

between films that are too easy or too obvious in their intentions and films that are subtle, difficult, or complex ( $\rho = .89$ ). While not used at all in the beginning of the study period, the distinction was drawn most often in 1985 (13.9 percent).

Although each of these techniques can contribute to an intellectual, sophisticated approach to film review, the use of multiple techniques changes the nature of reviews to a greater extent. Column 9 presents the percentage of reviews in which at least three of the techniques were used. Until the 1960s, relatively few reviews used at least three of the critical devices. After 1960, the percentage steadily rose, reaching its highest value in 1980 of 80.6 percent. Apparently, critics were using multiple critical concepts and techniques in their reviews beginning in the 1960s ( $\rho = .90$ ). Column 10 shows that, despite writing lengthier reviews, critics were also using these eight techniques at a greater rate on a word-by-word basis in later time periods. This column shows the percentages in column 9 divided by the total number of words in all reviews for a given time period. There is a considerable difference between the pre- and post-1960 time periods, with a large increase occurring in the later period ( $\rho = .80$ ). Critics were not only using more of these techniques but were also more likely to use them within a given number of words. This now-familiar pattern attests to the changes that occurred in the 1960s in the field of film criticism.

The content analysis demonstrates the changing goals and methods of film reviewing between 1925 and 1985. The findings are consistent with recent work by Shrum (1996) that seeks to determine the role critics play in creating a distinction between high and popular culture. Shrum (1996) concludes that the difference between high culture and popular culture is defined by "those works about which critical talk is relevant" (p. 9). Although there is no direct measure of the relevance of critics, the increasing length of reviews after 1960 may indicate increasing concern with critical commentary. According to Shrum's argument, this increase in relevance would indicate an acceptance of film as high culture.

Although it is possible to find early reviews that treat film as art, these isolated in-

Table 4. Number of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms in First and Later Reviews of 20 Films

| Period                   | Total Number of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms | Mean Number of Words per Review | Number of Terms Divided by Total Review Words |
|--------------------------|---|---------------------------------|---|
| First review (1915–1949) | 20  | 503.2                           | .0020   |
| Later review (1960–1982) | 103   | 1,499.7                         | .0034   |

Note: See footnote 21 for a list of the 20 films reviewed.

stances are deviations from the general trend. Moreover, some reviews from later periods treat a film as strictly entertainment—reviewers sometimes acknowledge that film is big business and that not all films aspire to the status of art. Occasionally they even forgive a film for its "base" aspirations. However, this kind of forgiveness was never called for in earlier decades when the art/entertainment opposition in film was not clearly defined.

#### WHY HAVE FILM REVIEWS CHANGED?

Although the characteristics of film reviews have changed, it is possible that the relationship between the work of critics and the status of film is a spurious one. Do both result from a shift in the nature of films themselves? If films became more artistic, this may have caused both a shift in the content of reviews and an elevation in the status of film. Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide here an objective measure of whether films have become more artistic over time. However, an examination of reviews of the same films from two different time periods for a given set of films will help to establish whether critics were merely responding to the changing qualities of film.<sup>20</sup>

The first volume of the *Film Review Index* (Hanson and Hanson 1986), a resource for film scholars, provides references to film re-

views from a variety of sources for films made before 1950. A sample was collected including all films for which two reviews from popular periodicals could be located, one from the year the film was released and the second after 1960. Most often, these pre-1950 films earned a second review because they were being shown at a film festival or because it was the anniversary of the film's original release. Or the second review indicated that the film deserved to be discussed because it had been neglected at its initial release. This method generated 20 films, each reviewed at two different times, producing a group of 20 reviews published between 1915 and 1949 and a later group of 20 reviews published between 1960 and 1982.<sup>21</sup>

Table 4 shows how the language used in the first group of reviews compares to that of the later group. The first reviews contained 20 "high art" and "critical" terms, whereas the later reviews contained 103 "high art" and "critical" terms. The total number of words in the 20 initial film reviews was 10,064 words, while the total number in the 20 later reviews was 29,993 words. For initial reviews, the total number of "high art" and "critical" terms divided by the total number of words is .0020, and for later reviews the figure is .0034. Thus, the pattern found in the larger sample is repeated—not only did reviews contain a more specialized vocabulary, but critics were also

<sup>20</sup> The data in this section address the relationship between the nature of film reviews and the content of films. However, there are reasons aside from the content of films that may account for the observed trends in the larger film review sample, such as the sampling method, the changing pool of films, and changing editorial practices at the sampled publications. The data in Appendix A demonstrate that the observed trends are not an artifact of the sampling method, the changing pool of films, or of changing editorial practices.

<sup>21</sup> The 20 films in this sample are: *A Woman of Paris*, *Best Years of Our Lives*, *Casablanca*, *City Lights*, *Fantasia*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Modern Times*, *Napoleon*, *Olympiad*, *Orphans of the Storm*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *That Hamilton Woman*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Dictator*, *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, *The Rules of the Game*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Zero Conduite*. The reviews come from the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Time*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Nation*.

**Table 5. Percentage of Reviews Using Specific Critical Techniques in First and Later Reviews of the Same 20 Films**

| Technique  | First Review<br>in 1915–1949 | Later Review<br>in 1960–1982 |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| (1) Presence of both positive and negative commentary in review              | 40.0                         | 55.0                         |
| (2) Director is named  | 85.0                         | 90.0                         |
| (3) Director is compared with another director                               | 0                            | 35.0                         |
| (4) Film is compared with another film                                       | 0                            | 75.0                         |
| (5) Presence of interpretation   | 30.0                         | 85.0                         |
| (6) Merit is seen in failure   | 0                            | 5.0                          |
| (7) Opposition drawn between serious vs. commercial or art vs. entertainment | 15.0                         | 20.0                         |
| (8) Film is criticized for being “easy” or lacking subtlety                  | 5.0                          | 0                            |
| At least three of the above eight techniques are used                        | 20.0                         | 75.0                         |

*Note:* See footnote 21 for a list of the 20 films reviewed.

more likely to use this vocabulary more frequently. This finding is important because it demonstrates that given films were reviewed differently at different points in time.

Table 5 compares the two groups of 20 film reviews according to the techniques used in reviewing. Like the larger sample, comparing the director to another director and comparing the film to another film occur only in the later time period. Also, explicating the implicit meaning in the films jumps from 30 percent in the initial reviews to 85 percent in later reviews. Although there was often no effort to find a message in the films when they were first reviewed, it became standard in the later reviews to treat the films as a form of communication. However, use of some of the other techniques is not as strongly linked to time period. Using mixed commentary and drawing a distinction between serious art and commercial entertainment are only slightly more likely to be part of a later review, as is finding merit in failure, although it appears only once. Finding fault with an easy or obvious film also appeared only once, although unexpectedly in the earlier time period. Interestingly, 17 of the 20 film reviews in the early period named the director, while 18 of the reviews in the later period did so. Possibly, those films made by renowned directors are more likely to survive over time.

The two groups of reviews differ greatly in the use of at least three of the enumerated techniques. Whereas only 20 percent of ini-

tial reviews use at least three techniques, 75 percent of the later reviews do so. This finding is important because it illustrates the change in the overall style and goal of the reviews. Given films received a critical treatment much different in the post-1960 era.

This evidence supports the argument that the change in film reviews is not merely a reflection of change in the films.<sup>22</sup> Critics were acting as influencers rather than as mirrors. Although reviewers cannot write anything they wish, there are options open to them in how they critique culture. Following the creation of a favorable opportunity space, film reviewers chose to treat film as an art form rather than merely as entertainment. The act of analyzing and consecrating older works within an art world has the effect of creating a canon of “classics.” Canon formation is an important step in creating a coherent aesthetic regarding an art form. The increased attention to and more rigorous re-

<sup>22</sup> The findings strongly suggest that a legitimating ideology does not solely depend on the content of art. Although the sample films are probably not representative of the content of film in general, the finding from the sample is relevant for a general understanding of the constitution of a legitimating ideology. A legitimating ideology never arises simply as a reflection of artistic qualities. The sample, however, does not describe the artistic nature of films in general and cannot speak to the question of the relevance of any changes that occurred in film content to film’s elevation to art.



views of these films indicate canon formation in the field of film. However, the canonization occurs retrospectively rather than at the introduction of the cultural product.

## CONCLUSION

Film was valorized through the institutionalization of various resources and practices by a range of actors in the art world for film, beginning soon after film's emergence and intensifying in the late 1950s to late 1960s. Between the 1920s and the early 1950s, this process occurred only in isolated instances. But in the 1960s the coincidence of factors described above created the thrust necessary for a major turning point in perceptions of the artistic status of film.

The coincidence of these factors highlights the reciprocal influences among them. The changing opportunity space not only facilitated the success of efforts to valorize film but also encouraged the movement to treat film as art. The increased population with a post-secondary education provided a larger potential audience for film as art as more film patrons read the new criticism, attended the newly founded festivals, and enrolled in the emerging field of film studies in universities. The financial troubles of American studios caused by the popularity of television and by industry restructuring in the 1950s and 1960s allowed festivals to play a larger role in determining which films and directors succeeded in the United States (Mast 1981:333). Film festivals granted prestige and exposure to many foreign and independent films whose popularity had increased among a more educated audience for film at a time of decreased Hollywood output. Financially troubled Hollywood studios, eager to participate in and profit from the trend, hired many foreign directors to make films for American distribution. The film companies encouraged a view of film as art by entering festivals and promoting their films as artistic products. The growth in the number of academic courses and programs on film not only helped legitimate the idea of film as art, but also aided in the development of a more sophisticated language and style of reviews. Although most critics writing for major publications in the 1960s and 1970s (including those writing for the publi-

cations sampled here) attended college before the emergence of film programs and thus did not have academic backgrounds in film, they had the opportunity to read academic work and to communicate with like-minded admirers of film. A developing art world gathers momentum, cooperation begets further cooperation, and the seizing of opportunities creates further opportunities.

Some of the factors that contributed to the recognition of the artistic possibilities of film, such as the advent of television, the demise of the studio system, and the increase in post-secondary education, cannot be linked to actors who had an interest in promoting film as art. However, an identifiable group of symbolic capitalists can be credited with the creation of film festivals and academic programs for film study and the criticism of films using an aesthetic that treated film as art. Academics, journalists, and other believers in the artistic value of film undertook film's promotion in a social environment in which film's image was more malleable. The symbolic capitalists seized the moment when those qualities consonant with existing norms defining art could be emphasized. Relative to television, which strayed further from the field of art as it was then defined (and as it is now), many films *were* artistic. The new social context of film appreciation promoted a focus on the existing artistic characteristics of films and "forgotten" masterpieces were reevaluated. To understand how art forms are situated within a cultural hierarchy we must recognize the importance of both structural factors and human agency.

As was the case with other art forms, critics have played an important role in creating a legitimating ideology for film. While they were the primary disseminators of the discourse, they were not its only creators. The legitimating ideology for film as art was the product of many participants in the film world including critics, academics, filmmakers, and other intellectuals involved with the organization of festivals, programs, and institutes. Film reviews, while the most visible and influential, were not the sole site for the development of this ideology.

Although many scholars point to the key role of a legitimating ideology, few have documented and analyzed the emergence of

that ideology. The present analysis provides a general model for analyzing discourse in other cultural and intellectual fields. Critics influenced how film was viewed and whether film could be discussed as art after they began using a sophisticated, interpretation-centered discourse in film reviews. This discourse employed a vocabulary that resembled the vocabulary used in other high-brow artistic criticism. No critic would claim that all films merited the status of art. However, by devoting serious attention, analyses, and a specialized discourse in their writing on film for a popular audience, critics, in conjunction with academics and other intellectuals in the film world, asserted that artistic value was possible in films. While I argue that the intellectualization of film did not *require* an increase in the artistic nature of film content, it is impossible to prove that such an increase did not occur and did not encourage the development of a legitimating ideology. The evidence suggests that the content of films is not the only determinant of whether and to what degree it is intellectualized. Further research may establish the nature of the link between the changing aesthetic features of film as a genre and film's intellectualization.

The medium of film does not rank among the highest arts in the cultural hierarchy. One reason for this may be that there has not been a purification of genres as there has been in music or in literature. There has been some purification in film; for example, foreign films are often set above the rest. Importation from Europe may have substantiated film's artistic claims. But the presentation of "serious" dramas in the same theaters with lighter Hollywood productions has hindered a clear conception of film as art. Few art theaters exist. This lack of genre distinction has suppressed artistic claims because many films do not possess the qualities that audiences believe are characteristic of art. Many films are not challenging or difficult—they

are designed to appeal to a wide audience. Furthermore, films have not enjoyed the near-exclusive elite patronage typical of opera and symphonic music. DiMaggio (1982, 1992) and Levine (1988) point to the sponsorship of wealthy patrons in elevating the status of a variety of art forms, but this was not a factor in the case of film. Finally, the image of film as a business is pervasive. Unlike art that is under the direction of trustee-governed nonprofit organizations, profit-oriented studios and executives are deeply involved in film production. Even independent filmmakers are often portrayed as vitally concerned with securing large box office results for minimal financial investments. To be credible, artists should profess a degree of "disinterestedness" in economic matters.

Because most films are made within the Hollywood system, tension exists between the claims of film's artistic status and the norms concerning the appropriate conditions of artistic production. Although some Hollywood films could be labeled art, it is difficult to convincingly argue that blockbuster action films should be interpreted for their social significance. Critics who try to find messages and meaning in commercial films are often mocked, but new films by respected directors are often approached on the level of art. Prior to the 1960s, such an approach would have been seen as a strained application of a legitimate disposition to an illegitimate field. Today the approach is acceptable because of the critical and institutional maturation of the film world.

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#### APPENDIX A. FURTHER ANALYSIS OF OBSERVED TRENDS IN FILM REVIEWS

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Although the content analysis reveals some strong trends, it also raises questions about how those trends should be interpreted. The results may be influenced by the method of data collection and by

concerns that the data represent organizational or social phenomena and not a real increase in intellectualizing discourse.

*(Continued on next page)*

**Table A-1. Number of "High Art" Terms in Reviews of English-Language versus Foreign-Language Films, 1925 to 1985**

| "High Art" Term                          | 1925-1940 |         | 1945-1960 |         | 1965-1985 |         |
|--|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|  | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign |
| Total high art terms                     | 44        | 9       | 36        | 15      | 181       | 73      |
| Number of reviews                        | 125       | 19      | 122       | 22      | 127       | 53      |
| Number of words                          | 47,241    | 6,258   | 50,147    | 9,352   | 120,763   | 37,855  |
| Mean words per review                    | 377.9     | 329.4   | 411.0     | 425.1   | 950.9     | 714.3   |
| Total high art terms/<br>number of words | .0009     | .0014   | .0007     | .0016   | .0015     | .0019   |

Note: Counts allow for variants of the terms (e.g., "masterpiece," "masterful," "masterwork," etc.).

One alternative explanation for the observed change in film review is that the trends are a result of an increasing tendency for publications in recent years to emphasize the importance of the lead review. Are the observed trends in the primary sample merely due to the fact that the sample is composed of lead reviews? The years 1935, before the period of change, and 1975, after the change, are used as benchmarks. There does not appear to be a stronger emphasis on the lead review in the later year compared with the early year. In 1935, the lead review of each month was on average 79 percent longer than the second review published each month; in 1975, the lead review was on average 73 percent longer than the second review published each month. Furthermore, second reviews in 1975 were 37 percent longer than lead reviews in 1935, and 145 percent longer than second reviews in 1935. Thus, the data apparently are not significantly distorted by the prominence of the lead review. Therefore, the observed change in film reviews is not an artifact of a change in orientation toward lead reviews rather than toward film review as a whole.

Are changing reviews a response to changing editorial demands to fill a "news hole?" A measure of column-inches of total space dedicated to reviews reveals that film coverage does not increase. The measure of column-inches in 1935 and 1975 comes from all the reviews in the first four issues in Janu-

ary and July in *Time* and the *New Yorker*, and all the reviews in January and July in the *New York Times*. Measured to the nearest quarter of an inch, the columns total 912.5 inches in 1935 and 900.3 inches in 1975. Furthermore, in 1935 the number of film reviews published in the first monthly issue of *Time* and the *New Yorker*, and in the first seven days of each month in the *New York Times*, averaged 5.2 film reviews. In 1975, the three periodicals published an average of 2.9 film reviews in the first issue/first seven days. This represents a decrease of more than 40 percent in the number of reviews published. Brown (1995) reports that while 766 films were released in the United States in 1935, there were 604 domestic releases in 1975, enough for more than 11 film reviews per week and far in excess of the average of 2.9. Thus, neither the size of the "news hole" nor the number of films released explains the changing length of reviews.

Do the results reflect changes in the kinds of films being reviewed? Because the sample is composed of first reviews, perhaps "artier" films were getting the lead review beginning in the 1960s. However, there is no reason to assume that editors at three publications at the same time would move reviews of artier films from the middle or end of the reviews section to the front. Rather, beginning in the 1960s arty films often were the big hits, and "Hollywood" films

(Continued on next page)

**Table A-2. Number of "Critical" Terms in Reviews of English-Language versus Foreign-Language Films, 1925 to 1985**

| Critical Term                              | 1925-1940 |         | 1945-1960 |         | 1965-1985 |         |
|--|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|  | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign |
| Total critical terms                       | 9         | 1       | 10        | 4       | 106       | 29      |
| Number of reviews                          | 125       | 19      | 144       | 22      | 127       | 53      |
| Number of words                            | 47,241    | 6,258   | 53,499    | 9,352   | 120,763   | 37,855  |
| Total "critical" terms/<br>number of words | .0002     | .0002   | .0002     | .0004   | .0009     | .0008   |

Note: Counts allow for variants of the terms (e.g., "symbolic," "symbolically," "symbolism," etc.).

**Table A-3. Percentage of Reviews Using Specific Critical Techniques: Reviews of English-Language versus Foreign-Language Films, 1925 to 1985**

| Critical Technique                        | 1925-1940 |         | 1945-1960 |         | 1965-1985 |         |
|---|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|   | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign | English   | Foreign |
| (1)                                       | 38.4      | 42.1    | 55.7      | 63.6    | 59.8      | 60.4    |
| (2)                                       | 38.4      | 31.6    | 49.2      | 72.7    | 94.5      | 88.7    |
| (3)                                       | 0         | 10.5    | 1.6       | 0       | 11.8      | 9.4     |
| (4)                                       | 11.2      | 0       | 8.2       | 4.5     | 31.5      | 26.4    |
| (5)                                       | 9.6       | 5.7     | 23.0      | 36.4    | 62.2      | 60.4    |
| (6)                                       | 0         | 0       | 3.3       | 9.1     | 14.2      | 7.5     |
| (7)                                       | 4.8       | 0       | 3.3       | 4.5     | 15.0      | 15.1    |
| (8)                                       | .8        | 0       | 2.5       | 13.6    | 10.2      | 7.5     |
| At least 3 techniques used                | 5.6       | 5.3     | 11.5      | 31.2    | 59.1      | 56.6    |
| Number of reviews                         | 125       | 19      | 122       | 22      | 127       | 53      |
| Number of words                           | 47,241    | 6,258   | 50,147    | 9,352   | 120,763   | 37,855  |
| At least 3 techniques/<br>number of words | .0001     | .0002   | .0003     | .0007   | .0006     | .0008   |

Note: For definitions of critical techniques 1 through 8, see notes to Table 3.

often received highbrow critical treatment. One way to investigate if the kinds of movies being sampled changed is to compare the number of foreign language versus English language films in the sample (see Appendix Tables A-1, A-2, and A-3). Although the number of foreign-language films increases post-1960, there is still great change in the content of reviews of English-language films after 1960. Furthermore, the artistic vocabulary and techniques observed before 1960 in the sample were primarily from reviews of foreign films, suggesting that foreign film may an appropriate basis for comparison because literature, especially that reviewed in the *New York Times*, *Time*, and the *New Yorker*, has long

been established as art. The book review sample consists of reviews of fiction books from the same three periodicals from which the film review sample was drawn. Four time periods were chosen to illustrate how the two sets of reviews compare initially (1935 and 1940), just prior to the major changes in the film world (1960), and immediately following the major changes in the film world (1970). The first available review from each month from the three periodicals provided 36 reviews for each of the four selected years. The content analysis here replicates the analysis of film reviews, first counting the use of specific terms, and then counting the use of criti-

*(Continued on next page)*

**Table A-4. Comparison of Number of "High Art" and "Critical" Terms in Film and Book Reviews: 1935, 1940, 1960, 1970**

| Source | Year | Total Number of Words in All Reviews | Mean Number of Words Per Review | Total Number of High Art and Critical Terms | Number of Terms Divided by Total Review Words |
|--------|------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Film   | 1935 | 14,903                               | 414.0                           | 21  | .0014   |
| Book   | 1935 | 25,828                               | 717.4                           | 87  | .0034   |
| Film   | 1940 | 12,206                               | 339.1                           | 5   | .0004   |
| Book   | 1940 | 28,512                               | 792.0                           | 65  | .0023   |
| Film   | 1960 | 16,218                               | 450.5                           | 31  | .0019   |
| Book   | 1960 | 34,234                               | 950.9                           | 91  | .0027   |
| Film   | 1970 | 32,334                               | 898.2                           | 107   | .0033   |
| Book   | 1970 | 36,430                               | 1011.9                          | 93  | .0026   |

Table A-5. Percentage of Reviews Using Specific Critical Techniques: Film and Book Reviews, 1935, 1940, 1960, 1970

| Source | Year | Critical Technique |       |      |      |      |      |      |     |      |       |
|--------|------|--------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|-------|
|        |      | (1)                | (2)   | (3)  | (4)  | (5)  | (6)  | (7)  | (8) | (9)  | (10)  |
| Film   | 1935 | 52.8               | 19.4  | 0    | 16.7 | 13.9 | 0    | 2.8  | 2.8 | 5.6  | .0004 |
| Book   | 1935 | 58.3               | 100.0 | 30.6 | 33.3 | 75.0 | 13.9 | 16.7 | 0   | 69.4 | .0027 |
| Film   | 1940 | 33.3               | 50.0  | 0    | 5.6  | 16.7 | 0    | 2.8  | 0   | 5.6  | .0005 |
| Book   | 1940 | 66.7               | 100.0 | 30.6 | 36.1 | 63.9 | 11.1 | 8.3  | 5.6 | 63.9 | .0022 |
| Film   | 1960 | 63.9               | 72.2  | 0    | 5.6  | 41.7 | 11.1 | 5.6  | 5.6 | 30.6 | .0019 |
| Book   | 1960 | 61.1               | 100.0 | 38.9 | 44.4 | 55.6 | 27.8 | 11.1 | 5.6 | 72.2 | .0021 |
| Film   | 1970 | 52.8               | 86.1  | 16.7 | 30.6 | 69.4 | 16.7 | 13.9 | 5.6 | 58.3 | .0018 |
| Book   | 1970 | 63.9               | 100.0 | 41.7 | 33.3 | 66.7 | 8.3  | 5.6  | 0   | 61.1 | .0017 |

Note: For definitions of critical techniques 1 through 8, see notes to Table 3.

cal techniques. Early film reviews were much less likely to use a "high art" vocabulary and critical techniques than were book reviews of the period (see Appendix Tables A-4 and A-5). By 1970, film reviews and book reviews converge in their use of these terms and techniques as well as in their overall length. The last column in Appendix Table A-5

must be interpreted cautiously because the coding is for whether each of at least three techniques appeared at least once in the review, not the total number of times each appeared. Therefore, controlling for the total number of words in the reviews reduces the ratio as the length of reviews—for both books and films—increases.

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