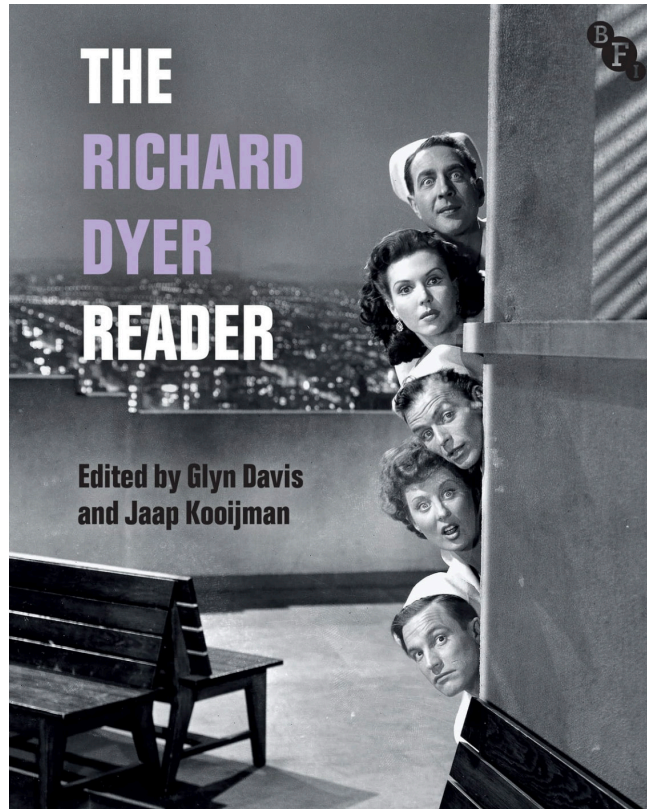


INTERVIEWS

Richard Dyer on interpretation, aesthetics and textual analysis; a dialogue with James MacDowell

Note: The following is a transcript of a conversation between Richard Dyer (Emeritus Professor, Kings College London) and James MacDowell (University of Warwick). It was conducted and recorded via video call, and originally made available to Warwick undergraduates taking the third-year module 'Film Aesthetics'. As well as touching on issues studied on that module, prior to the conversation James MacDowell invited students to submit their own questions for Professor Dyer. These questions punctuate their conversation. Ranging widely over numerous aspects of Dyer's work, the discussion maintains a consistent focus on theoretical questions concerning the practice of interpretation – within film studies, aesthetic criticism, and cultural studies. Two of the key pieces mentioned during the discussion ('The Persistence of Textual Analysis' and 'Fond of Little Tunes: The Sissiness of Music in *Rope* and *Tea and Sympathy*') have since been collected in *The Richard Dyer Reader* (2023), edited by Glyn Davis and Jaap Kooijman.

James MacDowell: Thanks so much for agreeing to speak to me and the students, Richard. As you know, Warwick's 'Film Aesthetics' module was begun many years ago, and it's remained a staple of film and television studies undergraduates' final year. It used to be taught by Victor Perkins,



among many others. The way I currently teach it is to have students wrestle with some fundamental issues in the philosophy of aesthetics, often placing these questions in relation to different approaches to film interpretation and evaluation encountered elsewhere on the degree. Throughout, there's an ongoing concern with the different interpretive assumptions underlying different approaches to textual analysis. And one reason I've asked you to address this year's cohort is because I always think of your close textual analyses as striking an unusually delicate balance between what we might crudely call 'cultural' and 'aesthetic' criticism, which are sometimes opposed to one another.

But let's begin with this student question, which I thought it could be interesting to start with: 'Would you describe yourself as a theorist?'

Richard Dyer: No.

JM: And why not?

RD: I guess it's partly because the term was quite contaminated by the capital 'T' theory in the 'Screen Theory' years, as it were. If I'm speaking with somebody in an art school context, say, then of course I *am* producing 'theory', comparatively speaking, because I'm not producing practice. But I don't feel I'm producing 'a theory' of film or culture, or whatever. So yes, my work is theoretically informed, but I suppose I think theorists *produce* theory, and I think I produce – studies, or something; I don't know what word to use exactly.

JM: Would you call yourself a critic?

RD: Well, probably not. I've got no word for what I am!

JM: A scholar?

RD: Yes, scholar actually, probably. Not 'critic', necessarily, because I feel that always implies evaluation, and I've never come to terms with evaluation. I accept that we all evaluate all the time, and it's important always to think about the criteria for evaluation; but I've somehow always backed off from taking responsibility for saying, 'This is better than that', or, 'This is more important than that'; so that's why I tend to resist the term critic. Although, in the sense of Victor Perkins (and I certainly wouldn't compare myself to Victor) – that sense of an engagement with *a* film, and with reflection upon it in itself – I would recognise that as something I do. But I feel that the term critic always implies evaluation, in everyday usage; and I'm a great believer in bearing everyday usage in mind.

JM: That's interesting. But do you not think that that when you write about a film partly in terms of, say, its politics of representation, that's a form of evaluation?

RD: Yes, it is, undoubtedly. I think sometimes I have been explicitly saying, 'This is an acceptable representation, within some political project, and *that* isn't.' So, obviously, that is a

judgment. But whether it's an *aesthetic* judgment is an interesting question. I used to think it would be interesting to teach a course on which one showed all sorts of films of which one disapproved – but which one couldn't help thinking have aesthetic merits. I mean *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffiths, 1915) and *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935) are obvious films that are, in their own ways, politically disgusting yet aesthetically remarkable. I remember once asking Victor Perkins about this, and he said of films like these, of which you disapprove morally: the fact that they have such disgusting politics (and he used that term, 'disgusting') means that they *can't* be valuable aesthetically. But I'm not sure if that's true ...

JM: It's great that you bring that up, because the matter of moral versus aesthetic value is one of the questions students will be engaging with next term! For now, let's continue with another student question. This one is about an issue we've kept coming back to this term: the role that the concept of intention should or shouldn't play in interpretation. We started the module by reading Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1977), before considering some ways that we might somehow answer Barthes. We've thought about whether textual analysis might need to maintain some concept of intention, and – if so – what approach to it could seem most helpful: whether it be actual artists' stated intentions, or Umberto Eco's 'intention of the text' (1992), Wayne Booth's 'implied author' (1961), and so on.

So, this student asks: 'Throughout my degree, I've become very aware of the problems with the concept of the author. In addition to the fact of the collaborative and industrial nature of movie making, the author has also historically been identified with the figure of the straight white male. Thus, I understand the appeal of abandoning this concept, because it is arguably restrictive and oppressive. Nevertheless, how can we reconcile the "death of the author" with the simultaneous need to have spokespersons for underrepresented groups in art and media?'

This question reminds me of a lovely thing that you write in your chapter 'Believing in Fairies' (2001) about authorship (which I quoted for my students). You speak there about being happy to teach a 'John Ford film' as a 'John Wayne film'; but

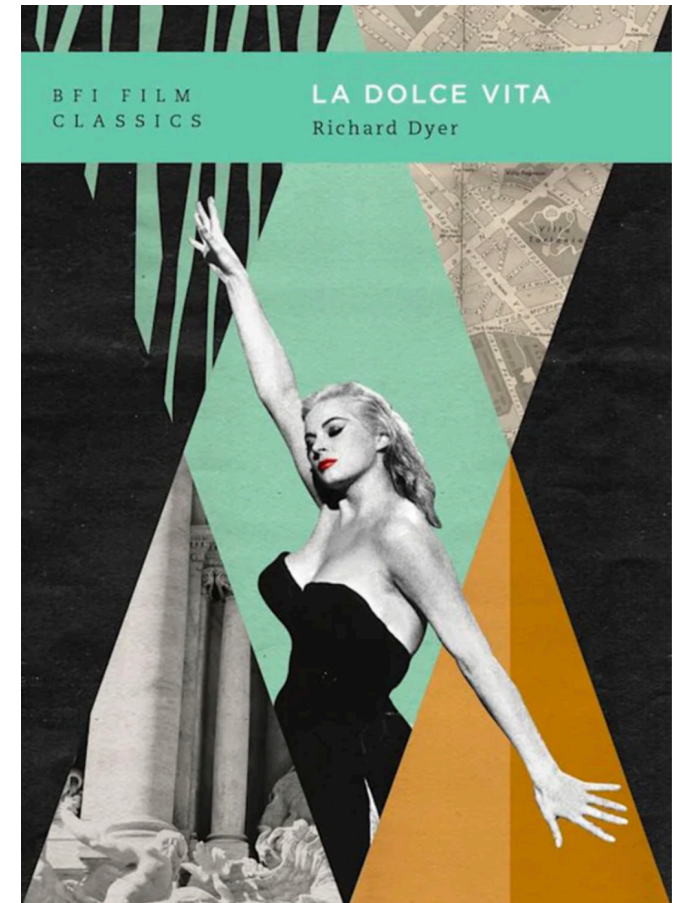
that when you're talking about – for instance – films directed by women, or non-white directors, you often become much more interested in directorial authorship.

RD: Yes, though of course that itself is a somewhat limited as a criticism of authorship as a general concept. It's true that it's been overwhelmingly associated with white and male authors. But there's that very good article by Linda Nochlin, 'Why are there no great women artists?' (1971) in which she said that there is, of course, a good reason why there have historically been fewer great women artists, and that's obviously to do with how many fewer women have been able to be artists overall – thanks to the structures of the cultural industries, and education, in relation to the politics of gender, and so forth. And it's clearly the same with the history of cinema.

But then the interesting thing about the collaborative nature of film is what I try to talk about in *Stars*: about not seeing the director as the only begetter, to use the Elizabethan term. I don't think you can just write-out authorship altogether, but you *can* have a more complex model, which de-centres the director alone (I think Victor in *Film as Film* [1972] is actually quite aware of this). Though then you also have to address another point, which is about who had what power. The only director I've ever actually taught a whole course on is Fellini. If you look at the history of Fellini's career, by the time of *La Dolce Vita* (1960) – because of winning Oscars and one thing and another – he had, not absolute power, but an enormous amount of clout, and he was very manipulative. So, if you take such things into account, in many ways you can attribute a great deal of what's in the film to him. Not everything, of course, and you can see how his films differ when he loses certain of his collaborators; nonetheless, you *can* attribute a great deal to him. However, that's to do with knowing the circumstances of production.

JM: It's something of an empirical question.

RD: Yes, it is. Also, for textual analysis I make no assumptions about Fellini as a person. One is tempted by gossip, of course. Fellini was famously a womaniser and yet famously married; but I also think one should usually avoid that. I'm always



surprised when scholars want to go into the question of what a director was really like as a person. I don't care what Fellini was like, or any of the people I admire, as a *person*. What are the *films* like? That's what matters for textual analysis.

JM: That goes back to that other canonical anti-intentionalist piece, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946), which we actually also began the module with, alongside 'Death of the Author'. In that article Wimsatt and Beardsley suggest that trying to read the poet from the poem is just a different discipline: it's biography – which is not necessarily uninteresting, it's just not aesthetic criticism.

RD: Yes, it's an explanatory discourse. It may explain why the text is like it is – but then, why should one necessarily be interested in that? Also, the trouble is – two things. One: on 'the death of the author' – well, it's clearly just not true! You've only got to look at everyday newspaper writing, which is obsessively about the author. Auteurism is film studies' greatest hit! But I also do think the argument was always a bit in bad faith, even in that piece; because the 'death of the author' was the birth of the author-Barthes: the birth of the author-critic. So there's something rather problematic about it, though it's clearly an important piece to engage with.

JM: And, coming out of a similar tradition, theorists quite quickly latched onto Foucault's answer, the 'author function' (1984), which was in some ways a work-around.

RD: Yes! The other thing is: at the level of intention – where the question is 'What did the author mean when they dressed the character in these clothes?' – I don't think intention is very interesting. On the other hand, does it rule out saying, for instance, 'This is *meant* to be funny'? This is something I grappled with in writing about pastiche: when is something *supposed* to be a pastiche? I think that is a legitimate thing to ask, because it's a question about genre, and cultural production, and so on. Some things *are* meant to be funny; which doesn't preclude that one can find things funny that *aren't* meant to be, which is a whole other issue. But I don't think one can leave out intention at that level.

JM: Yes, at that general kind of level the question is, what kind of thing does this want to be? In the philosophy of art this is sometimes called a work's 'categorical intention' (Levinson 1996). It's great that you raise the issue of things being funny that aren't meant to be, because on the module we actually first read those canonical anti-intentionalist pieces alongside a 'so bad it's good' film; and that's because 'so bad it's good' is a concept that I think logically causes problems for anti-intentionalism. The movie was Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003) – I don't know if you've seen it or know of it?



RD: I know of it, I've never seen it.

JM: It's an interesting case. I co-wrote a piece about it with James Zborowski, which we called "The Aesthetics of "So bad it's good"" (2013) because it was about how – despite cult film studies being often focused predominantly on reception – the concept of 'so bad it's good' also seems, perversely, to involve some quite traditional presuppositions about aesthetics, intention and value. For example, it assumes that viewers and critics can tell what the *original* intentions of a work were – namely: that it wasn't intended to be a parody of bad filmmaking! Because we can't laugh at something in a 'so bad it's good' fashion unless we assume it wasn't *asking* us to laugh.

RD: Yes, that's right.

JM: Also, if a 'so bad it's good' film *is* bad then doesn't that suggest that one criterion for artistic value is that works should, at a minimum, achieve their aesthetic intentions?

RD: Victor Perkins talked about evaluation – I think it may be in *Film as Film* – in terms of trying to judge a film by the degree to which it succeeded in doing what it set out to do. That obviously is an important dimension – though quite a bit of the problem lies in deciding what something set out to

do. It's one thing to say it set out to be comic; it's another thing to say it sets out to offer a certain philosophy of the world, or even to create this degree of irony or not (which I know is something you have an interest in). These things are quite difficult to pin down as intentions. It does also leave out of the account films that, as it were, achieve something which they manifestly were *not* trying to achieve. So you also have the category of inadvertent intention, and perhaps that's the type you might be interested in with *The Room*.

JM: Yes, you're intuiting my logic! We ended the term with a couple of weeks on 'symptomatic readings' – ideas of unconscious ideology, and these sorts of questions. And one reason I started the module with *The Room* was to flag up these issues. Because I think that the sort of appreciation associated with *The Room* almost forces one to read symptomatically, in a way. Almost all its audience members engage with it on the level of, 'I can tell what this is trying to do, and it's also doing these *other* things – some of which are quite *dubious*, but rather interesting, or entertaining', and so on. It appears to have been made by someone with quite a misogynistic worldview, for example; but because it's all done so ineptly it becomes fascinating, partly because it seems unintentionally to present the ideology up for ridicule, in a way.

RD: Yes, but one thing that always worries me about that kind of reading is that there can be a kind of clever-dickery to it. I've thought about this in relation to the sing-along and the *Sound of Music* (1965) (Dyer 1992). It's not necessarily the case, and I think audiences can genuinely reappropriate something as camp; but camp can involve a kind of clever-dickery too. I think there's an interesting issue about readers positioning themselves as 'cleverer' than the text.

JM: Yes and, for the most part, what I would tend to call aesthetic criticism tries to avoid exactly that; whereas much 'symptomatic' reading by its nature tends to position the critic as 'seeing through' the text's façade. It can potentially breed a kind of false confidence.

RD: Yes, it may also mean that you avoid issues such as, ‘Why is this funny?’ Or, ‘Why is this entertaining in these sorts of ways?’ I often thought that about much criticism on the western, for instance; people would often say, ‘Well, you may *think* it’s all about excitement, but *really* it’s about x or y ...’ And I sometimes think, ‘Well, yes, but that means we’re not actually addressing, say, what exactly *is* this particular form of excitement’ – or whatever it might be.

JM: The challenge is often to account for both simultaneously, isn’t it? I was recently rewatching your lecture, ‘The Persistence of Textual Analysis’ (2016; 2023), which is so good.¹ And in that you say something to that effect: that a lot of criticism can adopt an attitude of, ‘This is what something *appears* to be, but don’t you see actually what it’s *really* about is this?’ And your point is, ‘Well, if it *appears* to be a certain way, there are probably good reasons *why* it appears that way, and we need to account for that as well.’

RD: Yes, that’s right.

JM: I’d actually like to come back later to a concept you share in that talk: your definition of the meanings that a text ‘makes available,’ which I think is worth probing (in relation to ‘symptomatic’ reading, in fact). But for now let’s continue with the student’s questions.

This next one is again explicitly about the problem of intention; the student asks: ‘Do you believe that we can decipher the actual intentions of a director through the film alone?’ You seemed to suggest earlier that perhaps we *could*, but that this alone isn’t necessarily that *interesting*?

RD: I just think there’s a limit to where you can go to with that kind of question. A lot of the time when an artist says, ‘Let’s dress them in red,’ for example, it’s because that just *feels* right; it’s not necessarily tied to a precise intention – ‘It should be red *because...*’ It’s often intuition. I think that what we’re often doing in interpretations is, if you like, unpacking intuition. That is fraught with problems too, and to some extent you have to ask yourself, ‘How much does doing this tell me about

the *film*?’ Because in the end what I want to know about *is* the film.

JM: This is precisely one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you, Richard: because of the way your work embodies these tensions between aesthetic and cultural criticism, and always wants to do justice to both approaches equally.

RD: Well, you have certainly understood my *intention*! That is very much what I try to do, but I think it’s very hard to pull off. I think most times one falls too far on one or other side of that equation. To actually *really* synthesise them is very difficult. One of the only pieces that I feel did it fully is not actually that good of a piece, I think, and it’s my piece on music in ‘blaxploitation’ films (2011). That’s one of the times where I feel I somehow managed to talk about aesthetics, entertainment, affect *and* the politics in equal measure. But I also think it’s not a very good piece – perhaps because being a white person writing about it probably meant I didn’t get in deep enough; or maybe I lost patience, because once you’ve got beyond *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, 1972), and one or two others, I find many of them so unsatisfactory as films.

JM: Speaking of the approaches you take in your readings, the next student question relates to a particular strand of your research. So, they ask, ‘What is your stance on the “death of



queer theory”? As a student learning about queer theory, its having been repeatedly defined by its “radical unknowability” has been daunting. As well as this, 15 years ago, Sharon Marcus argued that, due to its proliferation and broad use, the term queer was becoming meaningless (2005). Yet the volume of literature on queer theory has only continued to grow since. I would love to know your opinions on the state of queer theory.’

RD: I didn’t know it was dead! Maybe it is, I honestly just don’t know. My problem with queer theory is the word ‘theory,’ and with what I often felt was its investment in impenetrability. It can sometimes fall into that category of things about which you often hear people say, ‘Oh, it was absolutely brilliant; I didn’t *understand* it, but it was absolutely brilliant!’ I’ve found myself saying that myself. But then one thinks, ‘How can I be saying that? If I don’t *understand* it, how can I possibly think it’s brilliant?’ Certainly there have been many times when I’ve grappled with things that I didn’t initially understand and, once I did, I thought, ‘Is that all there is?’ Or, ‘Didn’t we know that already?’ There can also be a certain tone to some modes of theory – and a politics to that tone and mode – that makes me resistant. So, I’ve never seen myself as part of queer theory. Though I do think there are plusses to the term queer, even though I don’t in personal terms see myself in that use of it. I do think it has loosened things up: it’s queried the whole issue of fixed identities, and that is excellent; I completely share that. So, I try to run with it, although I’m probably unable quite to adapt fully to it.

JM: I can’t claim to be an expert in queer theory, but one way into it via some of the ideas we’ve already touched on is potentially via ‘symptomatic reading,’ and issues of intention. Of course, a ‘queer reading’ can sometimes involve re-reading what could be seen as an apparently ‘heterosexual’ text *as* queer. Just the other week in my teaching I was using an example you’ve discussed: *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955). Now, this is a film that – however we interpret it – simply would not have been able to say almost anything that it might have wanted to say about sexuality, because of

the Production Code. In the case of a film like that, we might also bring in biographical details: there certainly were a number of queer people involved in that production. But in class I used a clip from the great documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, 1995), in which you appear, where you say that, ‘We know the Sal Mineo character is gay, partly because he’s got a portrait of Alan Ladd in his locker.’ Then they cut to the screenwriter, Stewart Stern, saying that the intention *wasn’t* to have us understand Plato as gay. Of course, however, he’s only the screenwriter! In the finished film there’s also the performer, Mineo; then there’s Nicholas Ray, the director; there’s the set designer, and so on. In any case – regardless of any individual person’s intention – the way that I’d ask the question, using some of the terminology we’ve been using, is: given all the choices visible on screen, can we argue that it’s the ‘*intention of the text*’ (in Eco’s terms) that Sal Mineo’s character should be interpreted as gay?

RD: Right, yes; although I always remember Charlotte Brunsdon teasing me, and herself, for speaking in similar terms – because, in a way, of course intentions are things that *people* have; so there’s that kind of problem with the ‘intention of the text’. Nonetheless, I do always find I want to say things

like, ‘What the *text* wants us to see is this or that.’ In that particular case, I might say, ‘The text *allows* us to see it.’ But can we find another way of putting it?

JM: Well, one other way of putting it that some people use would be Wayne Booth’s concept of the ‘implied author’ – or some other version of talking about the *apparent* intentions, seemingly *perceptible* intentions, which are implied by the way the work is constructed.

RD: Yes, and in *Rebel Without a Cause* there’s the sheer unlikelihood of the filmmakers not being aware of the meaning implied by Alan Ladd appearing in the locker – of it being complete chance. People who appear in lockers are always coded as objects of desire, so it simply beggars belief that someone, somewhere, didn’t intend this – even if not Nicholas Ray – despite it being virtually impossible to recover that information. But you see, there I’m drawing on a matter of *convention*: in films, and possibly in life, photos put up in school lockers represent objects of desire. So that’s making a statement about a cultural tradition, and that’s where the cultural studies side comes in to ground it. I’ve just written something about *Tea and Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956)



and *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), which are both really quite interesting in terms of intention (2023b). Are they *meant* even to address homosexuality? I particularly focused on the music, and a whole history of assumed associations between gay men and certain kinds of music, which we can see being drawn upon by these films. I remember when *Rope* was in the ‘Images of Homosexuality’ season at the National Film Theatre in London in 1977, I overheard two people saying to each other as they left the cinema, ‘Why was *that* shown in this season?’ Now, they may have meant something like that it was homophobic and wasn’t positive representation; but they may have meant, ‘There’s nothing gay there: why should one even make that assumption?’ I thought the music was a very interesting way to address this question.

JM: Yes, because in *Rope* isn’t the piano piece that Farley Granger plays by Poulenc, who’s known to have been gay?

RD: Yes, and the soundtrack of *Tea and Sympathy* is based on Ravel. That film, of course, is much more consciously suppressing the gay reference, but it sort of comes back – partly through the music, and through other things as well. So this is a cultural argument and, looking at this music throughout history, I was so pleased by how overwhelming was this tradition of associating a particular kind of late Romanticism



with a gay 'sensitivity', as it would have been called. Of course, these arguments are based to some extent on the assumption that the people involved could have known these cultural references. The Poulenc reference being consciously intended is likely, because he's much more widely known, and Hitchcock was a sophisticated person – as well as Arthur Laurents, the screenwriter, who was himself gay. But, even without that, or even without people knowing a particular piece of music, it's about a particular *genre* of music. It's about rhythm and tone – rather uncertain, rather flowing, but not hard-line or modernist either; there is just such a long tradition of that association being made. Even Liberace: there's this lovely bit in one of his first film appearances, *South Sea Sinner* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1950), where he says, 'Isn't it wonderful, the way the harmonies *blend into* one another?' That's so much the way people talked about that kind of music.

JM: This sounds like the perfect piece to demonstrate what I was saying about your work marrying cultural criticism and aesthetic criticism. You condense this point on the actual form, style, and affect of the music – suggesting that we can somehow actually feel it *in* the music's tones and the rhythms.

RD: Yes, that's what's important, I think: we *can*; we're not obliged to, but it makes that available.

JM: In terms of the balance between cultural background and aesthetic analysis, I often think of a moment in Victor Perkins' article 'Must we Say What They Mean?', where he interprets a series of gestures that Barbara Bel Geddes makes in *Caught* (1949), when her character is speaking about learning etiquette in finishing school. He writes about all the different ways that aspects of her performance suggest various meanings and attitudes, and then he writes, 'My interpretation of [this] moment tries to define a set of internal relationships in the light of beliefs about the appropriate viewing perspective, which are grounded inevitably in history [...] and values' – then he puts in brackets, '(about which I have said nothing)' ([1990] 2020: 255). So this brilliantly acknowledges that, while he hasn't focused on these contextual matters, his reading is plainly based partly upon assumptions about history,

cultural attitudes – about what, in that moment and place, would have been *likely* to have been meant by these details. Yet, at the same time, this also shows his awareness that, if he were to talk much more about that, this would probably have to become a different kind of writing.

RD: Yes, that's right, and some of it is simply practical: you just can't talk about everything all of the time.

JM: I actually think that so much of our identities as critics effectively comes down to that. You've got *x* number of words in an article, *x* number of minutes in a lecture or conference paper: what kind of scholar do you want to spend most of your time being? And often the question becomes about what you think you are looking at the work *for*: is it primarily to tell

you about a *context*, or is context primarily used to tell you about the *work*?

RD: Yes, that's absolutely right. I used to give a lecture at Warwick about text and context – about needing both, and the difficulty of getting the balance right. Obviously, we need context to understand texts; but then, in fact context itself in practice only consists of further cultural texts, so it's kind of infinite once you start. And, if your interest is the *film*, then how do you use the context while not getting into irrelevancies? So, does one need to study the history of etiquette in order to be able to understand Barbara Bel Geddes' gestures in that scene in *Caught*? Probably not. Although, if someone said, 'No, that probably *isn't* what her gestures would have meant in this historical context,' then that *is* what you would



have to do – and it could be a big job. But, on the whole, often one can simply say that one's able to recognise meanings based on background assumptions about context. That's one reason why *Tea and Sympathy* and *Rope* are interesting, because in a way you *have* to delve into that history to see the significance of the music, because these are no longer associations that most people know about. But, at the same time, you don't want to *overwhelm* the text with context. I find sometimes people do huge amounts of work on context, plop it down, and then don't really show what it tells us about the text. So it's quite a hard thing to get right.

JM: Absolutely, and in a sense this was one of the challenges of deconstruction, wasn't it? One of its insights was that 'context' is potentially infinite, potentially ever-multiplying.

But let's move on for now to the last student question I have, which is a very interesting one. This student asks, 'Would you consider your work on sexuality and race a form of activism? Did you ever see it that way, or do you see the role of the critic as a completely different thing than activism?'

RD: That really is a fantastically good question. Yes, I *have* thought of it as a form of activism – but I also want to be *modest* about it. I don't think merely writing about something political makes something political *happen*; it has to then be used, and I haven't always been good at the second bit. In relation to gay politics, I did used to organise film seasons and discussions, leaflet films, and so on; so it wasn't that my work was never engaged in that way. But most of my professional life I haven't really engaged explicitly in activism; I've merely made these ideas available and hoped that someone else would do the activism, as it were. It's a *form* of activism, I think, because it's offering different ways of seeing the world, different perceptions – or ways of more clearly seeing what you might already know, which I think is what I'm doing much of the time. These can all be important as parts of a process of... making the world better, or however one wants to put it. And I do think that culture has an effect on how people's lives are circumscribed or liberated; also, an important aspect of culture is how we *feel* about other people, which is an important part of how both art and politics work. So, all

of those things are true; but I still think that one should have modesty. I remember thinking this about the title of a journal called *Theoretical Practice*: on one level it simply meant the practice of writing theory, which is fine. But this way of thinking can also slide into saying that somehow writing theory is itself a practical intervention in the world. I think it can *enable* certain kinds of practical intervention, but I think one should realise that it doesn't quite do that in and of itself. So, yes, I do think critical analysis can be a kind of activism, but quite a limited one – or something like that.

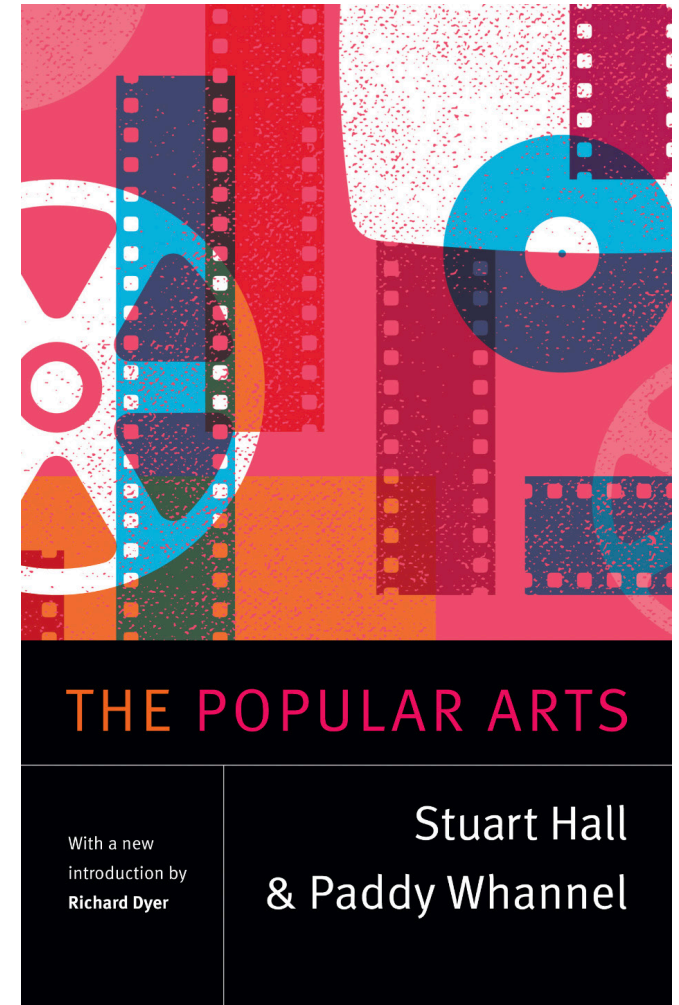
JM: Yes, we can believe in the cultural significance of criticism while not believing that it is in itself political action. Because, for one thing, if you fool yourself into thinking that cultural criticism itself is political action, then you might not do anything else politically – believing, 'I've done my bit!'

RD: Yes, yes.

JM: I'd be interested to get your take on this quite famous Stuart Hall quotation, which I've used a few times in my lectures. In a way I think Hall is probably somewhat joking here; but I find it interesting as a provocation. Addressing why he's interested in popular culture, he says it's because popular culture is 'one of the sites where struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged. It's an arena of consent and resistance. That is why it matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it.' (1981: 239)

I'm interested in what you think about this. Because I think it's useful as an extreme example – probably overstated even in Hall's own mind – of one way of conceiving the importance of art in almost exclusively cultural and political rather than aesthetic terms, if you see what I mean. I wouldn't imagine, at least, that you'd think that what Hall lays out here are the *only* reasons to give a damn about popular culture or art?

RD: No, they aren't. I mean, in one sense art and popular culture *are* places where power and all the rest are battled out. But they're battled out at the level of *feeling*. That's true of all art, I think, not just popular art. (I think it's been one potential fault of some cultural studies that it can focus too much on



meaning rather than feeling; but that's another issue.) Affect is much more obviously realised through formal qualities – and not just formal in the sense of colour and camera movement, but the way a person moves or smiles, you know, all those sorts of qualities. These are the things that *carry* all the politics. So in that sense the distinction is wrong to make. But I do wonder if there's a certain bad faith in Hall's answer, or a teasing; because enjoyment *was* important to him. I don't

think he was someone who did not enjoy art as art. At least in life (to be a bit intentionalist here), he certainly did take aesthetic pleasure in all sorts of popular art, including soap opera and all sorts of things. And if politics is not also partly about increasing enjoyment then that's a problem too; that is a problem with some politics.

JM: Yes, what's that famous quote – 'if I can't dance, it's not my revolution'?

RD: Yes, that's Emma Goldman. But then – while you certainly want there to be enjoyment, you also want enjoyment itself always to be *considered*. So, for instance, at whose expense is that enjoyment? I recently wrote a letter to *The Guardian*, which they haven't published (I understand: they get 200 letters a day – I say, trying to pretend I don't mind!). But it was about a Republican politician, who was testifying about what she believed was the fraud involved in the vote against Trump in the 2020 election. There'd been a piece in *The Guardian Online* about it that used a bit from an American comedy show, which made fun of her, and where *all* the laughter is around the fact that she couldn't pronounce the word 'frightening'. And I thought, 'That's not the reason to laugh at her'. I mean, I'm not at all thinking she's this poor woman, but there was a definite class dimension to the joke and the laughter. There's actually a similar thing with the style of Trump's *hair* that's very interesting – where there's potentially something quite problematic about laughing at this. You might say it has dimensions that are well worth laughing at: a particular sort of whiteness, and maleness, and vanity. But there's also a whole assumption about how nice middle-class men are supposed to be (like you!) honestly balding, so they have short hair. Whereas there's a whole tradition of working-class signifiers to do with 'bling' hair styling, you could call it, which is being mocked. So, I was trying to make that point. But then I thought, 'Well, I bet I'm coming across as someone who I don't want to be': someone who can't laugh, a sort of killjoy. So, it's so hard to get that balance right.

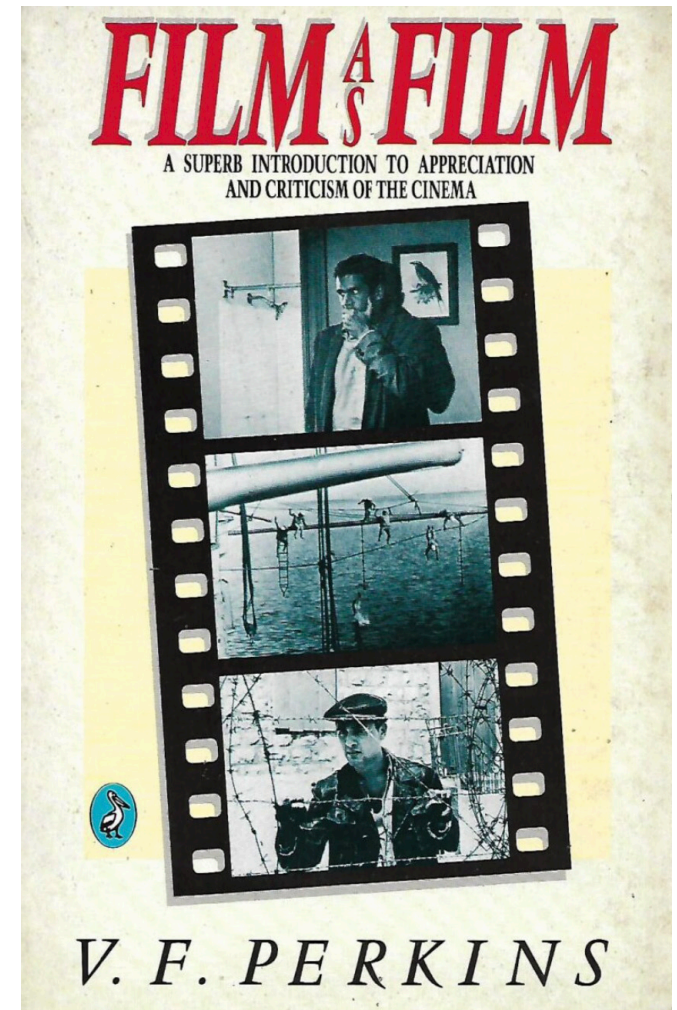
But, in relation to Stuart Hall's quotation: it's partly that you can't understand the politics without understanding the enjoyment; but it's also that the nature of the enjoyment is

part of the politics. I tried to talk about this in my book about serial killing, for instance: what is it that is so enjoyable about all this nastiness? (2015). But, 'at whose expense is this enjoyment?' is an easier question, in a way. It's one that has to be asked, along with fully engaging in and with enjoyment.

JM: In terms of enjoyment and feeling, and the politics of feeling, I do think Raymond Williams and his 'structure of feeling' remains such a useful concept for trying to talk about aesthetic and cultural dimensions at once (1977).

RD: Yes, though I've always wished it wasn't *structure* of feeling. There's something about the concept of 'structure' that I think is problematic in relation to considering, say, colour or rhythm – or perhaps affect generally. In a way there's something a bit too architectural, or too linguistic, about 'structure'. But that's a minor detail, and of course I agree that how he elaborates the idea is absolutely terrific. Just going back the Stuart Hall quotation for a moment: the other thing that matters about popular culture is that it is *popular*. It's not just that it's *an* arena of consent and resistance – because that's also true of the avant garde, for example. And I'm certainly not saying that the avant garde is not itself important. But one thing that is very important about popular culture is that lots and lots and lots of people engage with it. Victor Perkins makes this point too. That's one of the things that always used to annoy me about Victor: every time I thought of something that I thought was a great new idea I then found it in *Film as Film*! He talks there about the importance of grounding one's theories in films that are popular; I don't think he uses that word, but he emphasises the importance of thinking through ideas in relation to movies that were part of most people's ordinary experiences of going to the cinema.

JM: Well, that tees me up quite nicely for something else I wanted to raise, which is something Victor has said, and which I've related to definitions of what's usually taken to be involved in responding to an artwork aesthetically. Victor has this nice way of putting it – again in *Film as Film*, where he writes, 'One cannot analyse, or understand, an experience which one has refused. [...] To recapture the naïve response



of the film fan is the first step towards intelligent appreciation of most pictures. [...] One cannot profitably stop there; but one cannot sensibly begin anywhere else.' (1972: 157). This is very reminiscent of some strands in the philosophy of art, which emphasise that responding aesthetically must involve in some sense attempting to participate in the experience that the work *invites*. This is part of what Noël Carroll calls 'sympathetic attention' (2000: 195), which he regards as one

bedrock of aesthetic appreciation.² It involves almost *submitting* yourself to the work; and, of course, in certain strands of film theory and cultural studies it's precisely *submitting* yourself to a work that's regarded as having dubious connotations, and which can become viewed as something to be resisted. This position can then take you either to *resisting audiences* or *resisting critics*. As an audience member you could have what Stuart Hall would call an 'oppositional' reading (1980); or, for critics or theorists, this might produce a 'symptomatic' reading. I'm interested in asking you about these ideas in relation to what it is that you think you do in your writing. Because I would say that, again, you seem to be always trying to do both – trying to have ...

RD: ... Have my cake and eat it!

JM: Well – somehow trying both to pay a work sympathetic attention *and* put this attention in the service of a reading that is nonetheless revealing something about a broader culture. And perhaps your work suggests that you can only reveal these things about the broader culture *through* submitting yourself to the work – paying it sympathetic attention – in the first place.

RD: Yes, I think perhaps that's true. Obviously, there's a difference between what one actually does and what one thinks one *should* do. I think mainly I have tried to be sympathetic. Though, with some things – maybe in writing about Fassbinder or Pasolini – I've probably been more hostile, in a way. It's almost like I felt more happy to be hostile to so-called 'art cinema'.

JM: That's interesting; I can actually relate!

RD: Though of course I *love* a lot of art cinema; the last few days we've been watching only Marguerite Duras, who I think is wonderful. So it's not that I don't *like* art cinema!

JM: But I do know exactly what you mean, and doesn't it come partly from that impulse of not wanting to condescend? This is a strong vein running through so much of your work:

basically, not wanting to condescend to the work, not wanting to condescend to its audience ...

RD: That's really important, yes. In terms of sympathetic attention and giving oneself over to the work, I was just thinking about the whole thing about *surrendering*. This is of course very interesting in terms of gender. I remember during the time when *Screen* was at its most rebarbative: the critique was often so much about how awful it was to be *seduced*, to allow oneself to *have things done to one* – in a way that was so obviously so gendered.

JM: Well, that refusal was explicitly a part of the project of some 'Screen theory' – like Mulvey's line about the 'Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon' (1975: 7).

RD: Yes, but you also get it in a lot of work on the 'classic realist text' (McCabe 1974) – that what's so awful about it is that you're caught up in it, you have to surrender to it, and so on. But I do think that in order to understand a work you have to give it that sympathetic attention.

JM: Yes, even if what you ultimately want to do is a symptomatic reading – because, as with 'so bad it's good', before you can read against the grain, you have to know in which direction the grain lies.

RD: Yes, you perhaps need to be sympathetically attached first. I suppose I'm interested in paying a bit more attention to the grain itself. There can be something very exciting about saying, 'Well, yes, that's the grain, but *actually* ...' Whereas I think that one should often resist this pleasure of knowing better, and perhaps you need that sympathetic attention in order to *see* the grain in the first place.

JM: Exactly. And, although a lot of humanities scholarship seems now to have an *assumed* anti-intentionalism, I think it's actually unavoidably presuming things about intention all the time – whether it's 'oppositional' readings presuming 'preferred' readings; or presuming that one can see the grain itself, and so on.

RD: Yes, and then – what claim is one actually making for a reading 'against the grain'? So, for instance: camp. I've written about the phenomenon of gay audiences reading texts in camp ways, and of course I think people are entitled to do whatever they want with a text. I remember Andrew Britton was very upset with me when I talked about the camp perception of John Wayne – whereas I thought at that time it was a politically valuable thing to do (1992b).³ So one can absolutely study camp as a reception strategy; but I do think there is a question about whether camp reading itself is actually a very good model for scholarship. The question is the status of the 'against-the-grain' within one's work. So, when I wrote about Judy Garland I was analysing the way in which a culture had, as it were, appropriated her star image and read it in a certain way (1987). But that wasn't *me* reading against the grain of Judy Garland; it was me saying, 'This is the way in which her image has been read.' Whereas, when a scholar themselves reads a film as camp, I can often feel it runs into the category of being clever at the expense of the text.

JM: This reminds me of Umberto Eco's distinction between *interpreting* a text and *using* a text (1992: 68-9). There's a certain kind of criticism that quite self-consciously *uses* texts; often, it's for the purpose of being combative against it.

RD: There's that point that Tania Modleski argues for, about one purpose of feminist criticism being to produce audiences that read texts differently (1982). So that's a slightly different thing again. She wasn't necessarily arguing there for insights into what the intention of the text was, nor was she making a claim about the way people actually do read texts; she was suggesting that she is trying through her interpretations to produce a different kind of critical audience, with a different way of looking at texts.

JM: I suppose one way to talk about an approach like that while continuing to focus primarily on the text itself is via the idea of the 'implied reader' – asking, 'Based on close analysis, what kind of reader does this text seem to assume, or want?' Once you've answered that, of course, you can then choose to compare this implied reader with the readings of actual

readers; or you could self-consciously acknowledge as a critic that you *aren't* the implied reader for this text, and choose to read it differently.

RD: Yes, though there is an interesting question about the knowledge value of that. If you're neither telling me about the text, nor telling me about how people *actually* read the text, then you're telling me instead only about how *you* read it, or how you feel it would be good for others to read it.

JM: That's true – although isn't there a sense in which we could say that's what all criticism is doing? I think even Victor says something close to, 'I am suggesting to you a particular way of understanding this.'⁴ Isn't criticism in some way always suggesting a way of looking at something?

RD: Yes, it's true; but I do think there's something slightly different going on with a symptomatic approach like Modleski's – or perhaps something like Alexander Doty's queer readings. For someone like Perkins – and certainly in terms of my *intention* for my own work – I think one is usually trying to say, 'Here's a way of understanding what you may already know,' in a sense. When I used to teach the subject of music and film one very common thing that students said in feedback was, 'It's made me notice things I hadn't noticed before.' And a bit of me wants to say, 'Actually I think you *did* notice it, you just couldn't *articulate* it.' Or, put another way: 'You've now paid *attention* to it.' Which is not quite the same as saying, 'I'm asking you to read this *differently* from the way you initially did.'

JM: In relation to that, perhaps we could finally return to this formulation that you use in your 'The Persistence of Textual Analysis' lecture: the matter of the meanings that a work 'makes available.' I'm very interested in this formulation, because 'makes available' at once suggests certain limits on what can be usefully said about a text, but at the same time it isn't the same as *encourages* or *invites*. Some particular detail in a text might 'make available' a wide variety of meanings to any number of different readers, or critics; and if they're so inclined it might make available to them meanings that run very much 'against the grain.' For example, Victor has a lovely

moment in *Film as Film* when he acknowledges that one can *choose* to watch a Marilyn Monroe film in any number of ways – including, say, for documentary evidence of a location, or as a documentary image of the actress Norma Jeane, rather than of the character she's playing (like that Godard point about every film being a documentary of its actors) (1972: 68). But of course, while a film may make that way of watching available, it can be very far from what it seems to be inviting or encouraging. So, I suppose I'm asking: when you refer to what a film 'makes available,' do you mean 'offers *willingly*'?

RD: Clearly it's an idea that needs to be unpacked. One thing is that everything one does carries with it meanings that are made culturally – from whatever language you use, and so on



– and much of this you'll be unconscious of. (I don't mean that in a psychoanalytic sense, but simply things that you're not aware of, or not thinking of.) So that's why context is so important, because context allows you to talk about what meanings were available in a particular context. Now you might say, 'Well, something that in one context meant one thing can now mean something else.' For instance, the word 'gay'. Obviously there's the famous, much-discussed case in *Bringing up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), where Cary Grant says, 'I just went gay all of a sudden!' Did that just mean, 'I suddenly became

fun'? Or did he – or someone involved in the production – know that this could have another meaning? It's debated; but certainly, at some point in time, that word would definitely *not* have carried that association – even though it might now look as if it does.

JM: It's funny you use that example: Eco actually uses the appearance of the word 'gay' in a Wordsworth poem to make a similar point about the 'intention of the text' (1992: 68-9), and the differences between interpreting texts and using them. With *Bringing up Baby*, as I understand it, there's a *chance* that it had a conscious double-meaning, because I think the term was starting to be used in that way at around that time?

RD: Yes – and, after all, he is dressed in women's clothes; so it's actually a very interesting example to try and unpick. But the general point is that I'm interested in what in the text is impacted by virtue of being made at a particular moment in a particular place. If you say what you're doing is a history of reception, and for that purpose you want to go *beyond* the meanings that were available at the time, that's fine. There's nothing at all wrong with studying meanings created through reception; you just need to be clear that that's what you're doing – and it's no longer textual analysis. In terms of my concept of what a text 'makes available,' I think that textual analysis should probably stay with what was made available – what something meant, or felt like – at the time.

JM: Or could *conceivably* have meant or felt like?

RD: Yes, and this is what I tried to catch in my idea of 'structured polysemy' (1979), which is about the only bit of jargon that I released into the world that stuck (though sometimes I think it's misunderstood). My idea was that a star makes available lots of meanings and effects – but not just in a free-for-all, take-any-one-you-want, kind of way; because it *is* encouraging you to take some more than others. So, it's related to Victor's Marilyn Monroe example. The text is encouraging you to treat her as a fictional character in a fictional situation; of course, that's also made complicated because you know it's Marilyn Monroe, which may affect how you read

her character; but you're certainly *not* being encouraged by the film to think of her as an actress trying to remember her lines, or whatever. Incidentally, I once had the experience of watching *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) for something like the hundredth time and suddenly thinking, 'This isn't Laura coming into the buffet and looking upset because she just nearly threw herself under a train; this is Celia Johnson, an actor.' And it was awful! I thought, 'Oh my God, I hope I'm not going to keep thinking this, because it's completely spoiling it for me!'

JM: That's so interesting, because in another sense that matter of being simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the text actually feels somehow fundamental to criticism. In a way, the job of the critic is always going to be to ride that line a little, isn't it?

RD: Absolutely. But, on the broader point: in general, I think that 'making available' – for textual analysis – would always need to keep in mind, 'makes available *when*?' And I think the 'when' is finally when the film was being made. I think everything else is reception – which can be very valuable, but it's a different thing. And the other thing is that this *isn't* a matter of all potential meanings being equal. I think that an analogy with weaving is interesting: all the strands are there, but the way they're arranged and gathered together encourages you to see some connections and not others. Now you *could* see others, because they're visibly there, so they are in that sense available. But they're not made *so* available.

JM: There's a lovely Wayne Booth quotation, which is something to the effect that: you can't ever reasonably say that it's only what's in the text that's important because – at every moment, when understanding the text, you're making assumptions about what the implied author is referring to in the world, and what they assume or think about the world; and you're also needing to take into account what you think they assume *you* know or think about the world.⁵

RD: That's right.

JM: I suppose – to kind of wrap up and somewhat oversimplify: if you're interested in approaching film primarily 'aesthetically', you'd likely be using such references to the wider world primarily to understand the work; whereas, if you're approaching it primarily 'culturally', you'd be using the work primarily to understand the thing it's referencing in the world.

RD: Yes, that's right – although, if you're interested *primarily* in discussing the broader world, then, in a sense, why would you even bother to look at a particular film?

JM: Yes, I would tend to agree; one doesn't want to do what you call 'Film Studies without films' (2023a: 405).

RD: Yes, that can be a problem!

A videographic piece inspired by one strand of the conversation is available [here](#); it is titled 'Reading With the Grain: Queer Theory, Interpretation & the Hays Code'.

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¹ This talk was given as part of the Kracauer Lectures in Film and Media Theory at Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany, 26 January 2016; video online: <https://www.kracauer-lectures.de/en/winter-2015-2016/richard-dyer/>. Now published in *The Richard Dyer Reader* (2023: 400-11).

² Carroll adapts his use of this term from Jerome Stolnitz (1960).

³ The piece in which Britton articulated his critique of Dyer was 'For Interpretation—Notes Against Camp' (1978-79).

⁴ Perkins writes of an interpretation constituting 'a description of aspects of the film with suggested understandings of some of the ways they are patterned' ([1990] 2020: 250).

⁵ The relevant quotation is: 'it is impossible to say that only what is "in the work" is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about what his [sic] reader will likely assume or know—about both his [sic] factual knowledge and his experience of literature. And the reader depends on inferences about what the author could assume' (1974: 99–100).