

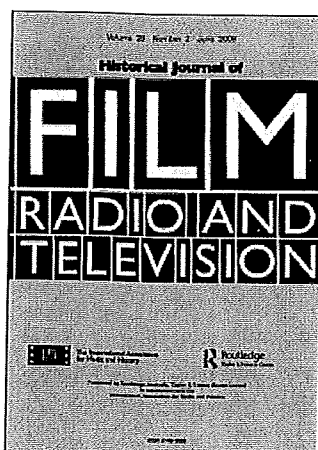
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Book Reviews

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Film und Stereotyp

JÖRG SCHWEINITZ

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There is definitely more to stereotypes than meets the eye, as Jörg Schweinitz shows in this important study. He not only explores the complex theoretical status of the

concept, but also discusses the ways in which it functioned historically, and, in the third part of this book, demonstrates its productivity for the analysis in case studies dedicated to films by Robert Altman and the Coen Brothers. If, in first instance, the term 'stereotype' seems to have mostly negative connotations, Schweinitz explains in his painstaking analysis that, in fact, it is used in a wide variety of ways. He distinguishes four facets that are extracted from the use of the term in different disciplines such as literary studies, linguistics, psychology and art history. Stereotypes thus function as (a) schemata or formulas reducing complexity and creating stability; (b) automatisms and conventions; (c) deformations of complex singularities, loss of originality; (d) backgrounds that allow the perception of differential qualities. Consequently, as a complement to the 'negative' side of stereotypes—the cliché, the unoriginal—they also appear as necessary constructs that are at the basis of processes of communication and (re)cognition.

In films, stereotypes can appear at various levels, from codified poses and gestures to conventional images such as the hands of a clock moving rapidly or calendar leaves flying away to convey the passing of time, from generic patterns such as the show-down in a Western to the narrative clichés of chance encounters, last-minute rescues or happy endings. In accordance with the complex functioning of stereotypes, these can operate as means of efficient story telling and representational economy, or appear as worn-out with a deplorable lack of originality. Historically, with regard to film, the institutionalisation of the medium, and the increasing level of organisation in the production process, cinematic stereotypes were first and foremost addressed as aspects of *standardisation*. In Europe, particularly in Germany, this concept was connected with modernisation, and more specifically with what was perceived as the *Americanisation* of industrial production, but also of culture and especially all forms of mass produced popular culture, or even as affecting the traditional way of life in general. A process thus, seen by many as a menace to established cultural values. Consequently, cinema was considered an industrial product almost from the beginning and thus as non-art—or worse.

In the second part of his study, Jörg Schweinitz first discusses the way in which eminent representatives of classical film theory positioned themselves with regard to stereotypes. These explorations into the history of intellectual debates about film, where Schweinitz presents writings of, among others, Hugo Münsterberg, Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, Erwin Panofsky, Theodor Adorno or René Fülöp-Miller focus mainly on authors writing in German, but they nevertheless demonstrate the value of reading them in terms of the role that stereotypes play in their theoretical arguments. Thus similar analyses of other 'classical' theorists—such as Jean Epstein, Sergej Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and even the *auteurists* whom Schweinitz also treats in passing—could provide additional instances of the way stereotypes assist in the formation of theoretical concepts. In the writings of the French *Ecole de filmologie*, and in particular in those of Gilbert Cohen-Séat, stereotypes serve a clearly positive function as, so to speak, shorthand images that are constituents of filmic communication. Similarly, in the early film semiology of Christian Metz, the conventional constructions of, for instance, syntagmatic units do in fact constitute the very basis for the cinematic codes, and thus also the cinematic language, that semiologists aim to explore. In post-classical cinema, conventions at every level can be used in a reflexive way that makes them still function within the framework of the

narrative, but at the same time they are, to use this term of the Russian formalists, 'baring the device' by foregrounding their conventionality. As Schweinitz shows in an analysis of the reception of Sergio Leone's *Once upon a Time in the West* (1968), such auto-referentiality—the film revealing its constructional principles—could either be celebrated as a post-modern, 'camp'-like construction, or criticized as a sterile play using empty formulas. Among the most recent critics of stereotypes, as Schweinitz points out, one can count Gilles Deleuze, who sees the cliché as one of the symptoms of the crisis the *image-action* undergoes in the 1970s, and he criticizes Robert Altman for parodying the cliché '*au lieu de faire naître une nouvelle image*'. Deleuze, in other words, calls for *new images* going beyond the stereotype—that is, as Schweinitz puts it, for an aesthetic utopia.

In the final part of the book, Schweinitz analyzes two films by Robert Altman—*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976)—as well as the Coen Brothers' *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). While Altman critically deconstructs the genre stereotypes of the Western, the Coens present a joyful embrace of the patterns that classical Hollywood cinema, and in particular the films of Frank Capra, offer them. In both cases, however—and this is an important point that Schweinitz makes—the spectator is in fact supposed to be able to recognize, to identify, to understand and to adequately read these stereotypes as they actually are a central part of her or his media competence. Moving from the theoretical exploration of the concept to its historical functioning in various discourses on cinema and demonstrating in the third step its analytical productivity, Jörg Schweinitz' book offers a fascinating discussion of an often neglected, or overlooked, but fundamental idea in cinema studies.

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