Film as Cultural Performance

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This thesis is in its entirety my original work.

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In Memoriam Professor Anthony Forge
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how Victor Turner’s concept of ‘cultural performance’ can be used to explore and analyse the experience of film. Drawing on performance theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology and Bakhtin’s dialogism, Sections One and Two develop this investigation through a theoretic discussion which relates and yet distinguishes between three levels of ‘performance’ in film: filmmaking performance, performances as text and cultural performances. The theory is grounded within four films which were researched for this thesis: Once Were Warriors (Lee Tamahori, 1994), Rats in the Ranks (Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, 1996), beDevil (Tracey Moffatt, 1993) and Link-Up Diary (David MacDougall, 1987). Section Three undertakes the close analyses of the latter two films. These analyses address specific cultural performances that are performed ‘across’ cultures and which are concerned particularly with Australian society’s relationship with indigenous Australians.

Section One locates Turner’s concept of ‘cultural performance’ within his wider theory of ‘social drama’ and introduces the three-tiered mode of analysis which is developed throughout this thesis. His concept of ‘liminality’ is also investigated in order to consider specific relationships between performances which take place in film and theatre. Performances which take place in film are located in this Section within the theatrical understanding of performance as ‘for an audience’. I describe this relationship between performances in film and theatre through Kristeva’s interpretation of Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as intertextuality, especially through her distinction of a ‘transformative’ intertextuality. Three specific concepts from theatre and performance theory are interrogated for their relevance to film theory:

1. Brecht’s theory of ‘gest’,
2. ‘direct address to the audience’ in relation to the ‘gaze’ in film and
3. Rebecca Schneider’s conceptualisation of ‘the performance artist’.

Using these three tropes of performance, Section Two develops a theory of performance in film. Besides Turner’s concept of ‘cultural performance’, this theory draws on aspects of several other substantial bodies of work. These works include Richard Schechner’s performance theory, Michael Taussig’s understanding of ‘mimesis’, Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenology of film, Paul Ricoeur’s theory of text ‘as meaningful
action’, Gadamer’s concept of ‘meaningful play’, Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of a ‘dialogic’ text and Catherine Bell’s theory of ‘ritualised behaviour’. The two analyses in Section Three do not rigidly follow the three-tiered process of analysis which is developed in the previous two Sections. They rather focus on the films as sites for particular cultural performances which are specific for each film and which need for their description, different aspects of the theory that is offered through this thesis. These analyses especially draw on my interpretation of David MacDougall’s ‘transcultural cinema’ and Jodi Brook’s conceptualisation of a ‘gestural practice’ in film, which she positions both in terms of Brecht’s theatrical concept of ‘gest’ and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘shock’ of modernity.

The film analyses are of one fiction film, beDevil, and one non-fiction film, Link-Up Diary. Both films use audiovisual images of Aboriginal Australians as content. According the terms of this thesis, these people must also be considered as filmmakers. Although this role may constitute varying degrees of authority and power, a film analysis which considers the filmmaking roles of people whose images are present in the filmic text also allows a particular consideration of the social relationships which exist between people who ‘film’ and people who ‘are filmed’. My focus on the cultural performances of these two films allowed an even closer description of this relationship for two reasons. Firstly, both Moffatt and MacDougall respectively present their own images in the films. Secondly, my analyses of these films as cultural performance draw out and describe the different ways in which the two films address the same ‘social drama’: the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. My analyses expose how a description of these differences in address can extend beyond the distinction between one film as ‘fiction’ and the other as ‘non-fiction’ towards a description of the different ways in which people relate to each other, at both the individual level and at the level of society, through the production and reception of a particular film. While locating these films as cultural performances within in particular sets of social relationships, my consideration of film in this thesis in terms of theatrical performance also enables a description of the experience of film which draws on the social experience of live theatre. The theory developed in this thesis and its application in the analyses of these two films suggest further areas of research which might look more closely at whether or not, or how much people draw from the social practices of live theatre as they live their lives with film – a signifying practice which has existed just over one hundred years.
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