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Trouble on Screen

Introduction

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Introduction

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TEXTE

1 It is a truth universally acknowledged that film and television productions allow people to escape their everyday troubles. And yet, from their inception, these media have been a locus of trouble on all sides of the screen, from production and aesthetics to reception.

2 From the outset, screen representations in the English-speaking world have walked a fine line between simple entertainment for the masses — as in the early silent-era "cinema of attractions" (Gunning, 384) — and catalyzer of troubling undercurrents within society (D.W. Griffith's stunning, racist epic *Birth of a Nation* [1915] and Tod Browning's magnificent *Freaks* [1932] come to mind). Equally though differently disturbing, on the small screen (and in living rooms everywhere), broadcast television in the past century hammered notions of conformity into the general public in sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), and subverted those very norms in series like *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *Star Trek* (1966-1969).This interplay between onscreen representation and public reaction has fueled every major attempt by English-speaking studio systems and governments to regulate, channel and control the film and television industry, in an effort to enforce a universal, heteronormative, capitalistic vision of society. Nevertheless, in every era (including our own), trouble on screen has persisted.

3 While the notion of "trouble" has not been explicitly theorized in film and television studies, art criticism specialists have long recognized its worth. The French art critic Guy Scarpetta uses the term "trouble" to describe a trend in contemporary art that navigates between the artistic avant-garde (art explicitly conceived as combat, commitment, a means of fighting against the dominant social order, of subverting mainstream aesthetics, even of transforming individuals and society) and post-modernism (seen as an aesthetic of acceptance): "Trouble is neither subversion [...] nor resignation [...] It is what introduces into

the very field of art (and its perception) a coefficient of impurity or destabilization, that which cheats with codes, which disrupts orthodoxies, which cracks conformism"(134). Scarpetta's comments bring to mind how, following industry controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's decision in 2019 to make a movie for Netflix, the filmmaker highlighted his vision of cinema as a destabilizing agent, arguing that films should be more than "perfect products manufactured for immediate consumption" (*Landmark Cinemas*). Cinema, Scorsese contends, "is an art form that brings you the unexpected." As viewers, we can all attest that some of the most powerful experiences of film spectatorship involve being shocked, agitated, or driven out of our comfort zones: in a word, troubled.

4 Following Scarpetta's definition, this volume aims to apply to film and television studies the notion of trouble as a critical tool to analyze "that which cheats with codes, which disrupts orthodoxies, which cracks conformism" (Scarpetta) on screen. *Trouble on Screen* thus encapsulates the ambivalence of films and television series that explore troubling themes and issues either to exploit or to transcend them, as a source of dismay or excitement, or even of comfort, relief or vindication when overcome, paradoxically turning trouble into a source of pleasure. Our aim is to broaden critical understanding of this ambivalence beyond what is most frequently referenced in film and media studies (studies focusing on pornography and the representation of extreme violence, for example)[1].

5 Indeed, from this perspective, trouble encompasses seemingly opposite trends of cinema and television: on the one hand, representing trouble on screen can help document the complexities of a troubled world, strive for psychological authenticity, and convey characters' physical or moral states; on the other hand, tapping into disturbing themes and devices can provide a framework for film and television to depart from drab realism, plunging viewers into generic and spectacular formulae.

6 Thus, exploring onscreen narratives through the prism of trouble raises questions about the powers and limits of representation. Trouble on screen can both strengthen film and television's power of immersion and call into question the onscreen medium itself: can we trust what we see on screen? — a question we ask ourselves more and

more as technology races forward. Accordingly, approaching these narratives through the prism of trouble questions audiences' reception of disturbing themes and effects, not to mention the troubled (and troubling) reception of controversial or marginal works.

7 Our contention here is that the notion of trouble proves to be a particularly fruitful critical tool in film and television studies insofar as it is at the crossroads of three major recent trends of film theory.

8 The first reflects a turn towards embodied theory that has recently been emerging across the humanities. After a long period of critical perspectives dominated by structuralist theories and analyses, this trend has endeavored to consider feeling as a valuable critical concept. This innovative approach of film history can be found in Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2012) which claims to reconsider cinema, its technological and aesthetic dimensions, as "an affective and affecting aesthetic experience" (172), involving both the material body of the film and the sensory body of the spectator. Another telling example is the work of French critic Antoine Gaudin about filmic space. Referencing Deleuzian terminology, Gaudin uses the notion of "space-image" to think of space in films not as a given environment, setting or landscape that becomes a representation but as a dynamic phenomenon produced by the film's intrinsic operations and aesthetic choices. In other words, the perception of filmic space is not only an optical and intellectual operation but also involves a genuinely phenomenological and affective experience.

9 Within the scope of affects and their effects, it is worth noting that so far one feeling has overwhelmingly dominated the literature. Since watching a film is, for most, synonymous with entertainment, it is not surprising that pleasure was the notion that first came to the fore. It is significantly used in the title of Graham Greene's collection of film criticism (*Pleasure Dome: The Collected Film Criticism*, 1935-1940, 1980), books about the history of film theatres and their audience (Brian Murphy's *The Pleasure Palace: A History of Wigan Cinemas*, 1999) or in relation to Hollywood (Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema*, 2017). However, the main reference remains Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", written in 1973 and published in 1975 in the influ-

ential British film journal *Screen*, which inaugurated the intersection of film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism. Mulvey's contention has since been much discussed and contested but this seminal essay highlights the often troubled — and troubling— experience of film reception.

10 This critical turn is closely related to another key area for film scholarship which also focuses on film as an experience, but within a social or historical context. In this relatively recent perspective of reception studies, film is no longer a mere text to interpret but the site of an encounter, whereby meaning is coproduced by the viewers. Janet Staiger, whose chapter opens this issue, has been one of the pioneers of works in this broader trend which participates in what can be called a "historical turn"[2]. While audiences have long been taken for granted or theorized as an abstract entity (when they have not been ignored altogether), many recent studies have shown an expansion of their objects of study beyond the films themselves, shifting emphasis from textual analysis to evidence-based investigations into film production and consumption[3].

11 Considering viewer experience leads to a third interconnected trend of recent critical perspectives characterized by what has been termed the "turn to ethics". In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1992), Wayne C. Booth thus "argues for the relocation of ethics to the center of our engagement with literature" (cover note). Since the late 1980s, major critical works in art and literature have thus engaged with ethical issues that bring to the fore notions of values, responsibility, and engagement with otherness, building on the work of ethical philosophers such as Levinas, postcolonial studies, feminist critical theory and gender studies.

12 As Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton have noted in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (2009), compared to literary theory and cultural studies, film studies have been slower to embrace this "turn to ethics". While historical debates about the morality of cinema and the regulations of film content (in particular recurrent concern about the representation of violence, sex and other taboo subjects) have long been the objects of sustained research, most of the properly ethical issues in films have focused on the documentary genre, in particular the filmmakers' positioning as regards the subjects they are

filming. However, according to Downing and Saxton, this "has perpetuated the misleading assumption that ethical issues are somehow less important or urgent in narrative cinema" (12).

13 Indeed, ethical issues in film and television cannot be reduced to philosophical dilemmas embedded in narratives but arise directly from the film apparatus. They not only involve questions related to the "politics of representation", investigating how filmmakers respond to the challenges of representing identity, difference, the relationship between self and otherness, but also how films ascribe a position to their viewers, thus questioning the viewers' agency and responsibility. In other words, ethical issues in film are bound with experiential phenomenology and film aesthetics.

14 As Downing and Saxton aptly encapsulate:

> … in order to think through these questions of identity and representation, it is essential to take account of the registers into which cinema translates power relations. This is to avoid the pitfalls of reflection theory and its assumption of the possibility of straightforward mimetic replication of social reality. These registers include the manipulation of generic and narrative codes, the organization of cinematic space […], the ascription of optical and figural point of view to a given character, and the means of spectatorial position. More generally, we argue that any formal decision (e.g. a fixed camera, a tracking shot, or a cut) functions as an imprint of the film's ethical valances (18).

15 The notion of trouble thus questions the epistemological dimension of film and television – offering to witness troubling phenomena, characters or events, while raising ethical issues about the processes through which agency and responsibility are ascribed to spectators. It also delves into ontological investigations, questioning the basis of gendered, racialized or sexual identities. As such, analyzing trouble calls for both textual-based and contextual based approaches.

16 The present issue focuses on how films and television series can create multitudes of troubled spectatorship and reception. The articles in this issue delve into the recurring moot question of the potential impact of films and television series on viewers, how they

play with viewers' engagement with their fictional worlds, and how they may affect controversial social issues beyond the screen.

17 Part I, entitled "Troubled Spectatorship and Reception," examines questions of reception in 20th and 21st-century film and television through a variety of perspectives. **Janet Staiger**, who was among the first media scholars to explore reception studies, starts by recalling the terms of the debate that has characterized the question of the possible effects on the audience of troubling scenes on screen. Her contention is that there is no "linear consequence of representations to people with pure mimicry as an outcome." Rather, reception is determined by the audience's social context and pre-exiting knowledge which lead them to "make use" of the films in a way that may seem problematic. Such was the case of Stanley Kubrick's groundbreaking science-fiction film *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968) which Staiger uses as an emblematic case study since it was associated with drug use by its early spectatorship.

18 Focusing on early spectatorship, specifically the silent era, **Patrick Adamson** discusses Will Rogers's *Two Wagons-Both Covered* (1924) which, long before the first revisionist westerns, debunks the official historical myth of the Frontier. Adamson analyses how the film uses parody as a source of troubling reception, mainly thanks to the persona of its director and star, Will Rogers, a.k.a. "the Cherokee Kid." "At once a member of a marginalized group and a widely idolized media personality", Will Rogers was able to "[poke] fun at the excesses of his mainstream audiences and drew attention to his own complicated positionality with rare liberty."

19 Significantly the next two articles deal with films directed by Stanley Kubrick, which have often broken new ground and attracted controversy. **Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris**'s article deals with *The Shining* (1980) and how Kubrick's adaptation provides "a corrective dimension" of Stephen King's novel, which in return was "corrected" by Mick Garris's 1997 mini-series. Paquet-Deyris argues that these "palimpsestuous" corrections account for the wide divergence of strategies as regards the inscription of trouble and abnormality in the film and mini-series. While both foreground psychological and historical troubles, they also inscribe formal crises through

generic hybridity and "transformative levels of manipulation" of the viewer.

20 For his part, **Vincent Jaunas** focuses on Kubrick's last film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). As Jaunas recalls, the film caused much disappointment upon its release, as many expected a highly provocative exploration of eroticism. This very disappointment, Jaunas argues, stems from the film's purposeful frustration of viewers' scopophilia, leading them instead into a state of trouble and hermeneutic bewilderment that ultimately allows the film to develop "an ethics of unrest". For Jaunas, the film's "strategy of generic troubling, far from the playfulness which characterizes the mixing of film genres in the postmodern era, asks the audience to accept misdirection and even frustration as a necessary part of their cinematic experience"; in other words, there can be no cinephile paradise without trouble on screen.

21 **Chris Horn** turns to another American film director who seems to have had an "unerring ability to attract trouble". While William Friedkin's career was defined by the momentous success of the films he made in the early 1970s, both *Cruising* (1980) and *Rampage* (1987) throw significant light on the way public objections were mobilized against films in the 1980s, a decade which American film historians define in terms of blockbusters and right-wing ideology. To better understand the controversies that surrounded these two films, Horn interrogates the filmmaker's intentionality in tackling sensitive subject matter through an examination of archival material garnered from Friedkin's papers. While offering a reappraisal of both films, Horn contends that the use of archival material can provide an alternative perspective on troubling works and document "how media accounts can sometimes distort our understanding, in retrospect, of contemporary attitudes."

22 In the next chapter, **Sébastien Lefait** focuses on theoretical considerations about troubling reception. Drawing from Stuart Hall's seminal concepts of encoding/decoding, Lefait argues that Hall's theoretical model bears updating to consider recent trends of communication strategies whereby the very possibility for an oppositional stance by the decoding party are encoded by the producers of the text. Lefait's main argument is that this ever more sophisticated interplay with reception patterns comes from the palimpsestic over-

lapping of three culturally dominant notions: surveillance, reality TV, and intermediality. To illustrate his point, Lefait analyses three instances of media transfer and interference that induce the viewers to relate to real-life political issues in the United States.

23 **Emilie Cheyroux** also investigates the troubling line between fiction and reality, this time turning to the documentary genre or, more precisely, the liminal space of hybrid documentary. *The Infiltrators*, directed in 2019 by Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera, is a docu-thriller that combines documentary filming and staged re-enactments to relate the story of two undocumented activists who purposefully got arrested to infiltrate a detention center in Florida. Cheyroux highlights how the film's use of a troubling hybrid form is part and parcel of its purport to trigger troubling responses in viewers since "the performance portrayed in their film mirrors their own". Indeed, the filmmakers not only used media coverage but also participated in the infiltration to partake in the debate about immigration and security enforcement that divides American society.

24 Concluding this first part, **David Roche** examines the troubled characters of Lynne Ramsey's films, with an aim "to determine to what extent Ramsay's project can be seen as an attempt to develop a poetics of troubled subjectivities that operates on the levels of both cognition and sensation." He deconstructs the opposition between objective and expressive realism initially posited by Bordwell, proposing instead the notion that the difference between the two cinematic tradition is, in the works of Ramsey, largely a question of emphasis: "ultimately both traditions aim to capture human experience: expressive realism by objectifying the subjective, objective realism by subjectifying the objective, which, in our post-modern, post-structural world, is already subjective in the first place."

25 In Part 2, "Troubling the status quo: interrogating race, class and gender on screen," the authors examine the power and limits of film and television and investigate social issues related to the ideological constructions of either a nation, in this case the (dis)United States, or the patriarchal order.

26 **Claire Dutriaux** explores how some "professional Southerners" were hired by the Production Code Administration as mediators between the Southern states and Hollywood. As Dutriaux demonstrates, these

"professional Southerners" had to walk a tight line to champion the specificity of the South while acknowledging its troubled history. In this regard, as Dutriaux puts it, "they were all, in various ways, most concerned with the notion of 'trouble' and its paradoxes, as movies about the South could not completely ignore the region's troublesome past and present. Concomitantly, these Southerners needed motion pictures to be not 'troubling' or 'troublesome' for the South's audiences, because the industry needed exhibitors to pick up the movies and show them in the South.

27 After recalling the notorious impact of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), **Delphine Letort** focuses on films that investigate the workings of the Ku Klux Klan, from Walter Colmes's *The Burning Cross* in 1947 to Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* in 2018. While adopting different narrative and representational strategies, the films all endeavor to show the inner workings of the organization and how its members negotiate their identity as white supremacists. Letort shows how each film thus challenges the nativist rhetoric of the Klan, and provoked some trouble on the level of reception, either raising concerns about the possible impact of the film, lest it might stir racial violence, or creating discomfort as regards the tone and provocative style the film adopts. For Letort, these controversies both show how the terms of the debate have evolved and persisted at the same time, and may very well account for the fact few directors have been inclined to portray the KKK.

28 By examining the *topos* of intoxication on screen in three different films from the silent era to the mid-1960s, and how it directly troubles the protagonists' – and the viewers' – apprehension of reality, **Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard** argues that this figural representation of trouble conveys the male protagonists' transgressive behavior and inadequacies as regards the idealized figure of the hero. For Costa de Beauregard, the insertion of the troubling *topos* of intoxication underscores a critique of modernity in general and of the American Dream of wealth and glory in particular.

29 Turning her attention to gendered representations of women, **Marguerite Chabrol** turns to one emblematic trope of the musical genre that showcases the female body as performative. She retraces the ambivalent relationships between Hollywood and burlesque

theatre that provided a stock element in Pre-Code musicals and reappeared in the 1950s with stylized mock striptease acts but remained a highly sensitive subject, strictly regulated both by the PCA and local censorship boards. Delving into the PCA archives, Chabrol purports to "analyze the ideology at stake behind the moral condemnation of burlesque in films." Chabrol's main contention is that even if the burlesque was turned into safe comedy acts through distancing and "decoding", this transformation did not preclude some sort of trouble to emerge. But this trouble was not so much due to moral consideration as for being "provocative in the way they empowered some female performers."

30 Female empowerment and sexuality are also at the center of **Anne Sweet's** essay that focuses on the figure of the witch in the recent television series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020). Sweet recalls that the witch is a key figure in feminist movements and discourse, used as a symbol of empowerment and defiance to the patriarchal order. Like former TV programs, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* appeared at a significant cultural moment for feminist consciousness, namely in the wake of #MeToo. It was also conceived by the streaming platform Netflix as part of a marketing strategy that was termed "young-adult push", aiming at exploring teen sexuality in a more explicit way than what has prevailed so far and including a number of non-heteronormative gender roles, presenting itself as a "woke," inclusive series. In this respect, Sweet also points out that the series adopts a somehow ambivalent narrative strategy as it resolutely focuses on the issues of a white privilege heroine, which led some critics to argue that its position about "wokeness" and intersectionality was hollowed out. Still, Sweet argues that the series is significant in the overall TV series landscape evolving "to feature representations of women that are increasingly subversive and transgressive, even if imperfectly progressive."

31 **Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot** carries on investigating female stereotypes, this time through gendered representations of mental health issues. Her study is based on two television series that feature young female professionals who have trouble controlling their emotional lives. Studying the two series that were produced some twenty years apart allows for an appraisal of how representations of psychologically unstable female characters have evolved on screen. For Le Fèvre-

Berthelot, *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) can thus be read as "typical of the post-feminist perspective that tends to dismiss political readings of the main character's situation." On the other hand, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) attests to the re-emergence of a feminist outlook along with intersectional concerns, allowing for marginalized groups to be better represented on screen. What *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* ultimately demonstrates, Le Fèvre-Berthelot argues, is that "far and inclusive representation should not be put in opposition with creativity and that humor does not have to rely on oppressive tropes."

32 In conclusion, we cannot help but remark on the fact that this issue was conceived and at long last birthed during what can only be seen as troubled and troubling times. In September 2019, when the SERCIA [4] conference which served as inspiration for this volume took place, the United States was in the final throes of a fractured presidency and the United Kingdom was on the brink of officially leaving the EU. Five years later, US democracy has undergone repeated attacks (including an insurrection and the reversal of Roe v Wade), the world experienced a global pandemic, and the terms "Film" and "Television" refer to materials now largely extinct in the digital age. And yet, if this foray into the implications of trouble on screen has taught us anything, it is that trouble begets art. As Harry Lime famously says in Carol Reid's 1949 film, *The Third Man*:

> Don't be so gloomy. After all, it's not that awful. Like the fella says, in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock [5].

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NOTES

1 See, for example, the works of Linda Williams (*Porn Studies*, 2004; *Screening Sex*, 2008) or James Potter's *Media Violence* (1999).

2 See Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, 1992; *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, 2000.

3 See, for example, Christophe Gelly and David Roche (dir.), *Cinéma et théories de la réception - Études et panorama critique.* Presses Universitaires de Clermont-Ferrand, coll. "Littératures", 2012.

4 Société pour l'Enseignement et la Recherche du Cinéma Anglophone, http://www.sercia.net/index.php/fr/ ; *Trouble on Screen* conference, https://sercia2019.wixsite.com/troubleonscreen?lang=en

5 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041959/quotes/?ref_=tt_dyk_qu (Accessed in October 2024).

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