Miriam Hansen and the Legacies of Critical Theory

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The loss of Miriam Hansen (1949–2011), who succumbed to her long battle with cancer earlier this year, is mourned by all of us engaged in the study of film and media aesthetics, the visual arts, literature, and public cultures at large in our contemporary world.


She had, in fact, studied with Adorno and Jürgen Habermas at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität in Frankfurt am Main, where she received her Ph.D. in English and American literature in 1975 with a dissertation on Ezra Pound’s avant-gardist poetics. When she moved from Germany to the United States and from writing in German to writing in English, she also moved from literature to film studies.

Pivotal for Hansen’s early work on American silent film was the inspiration of German filmmaker, theorist, storyteller, and producer Alexander Kluge (himself a friend and close associate of Adorno), with whom she shared a long and collaborative friendship and whose film work rests on a creative transformation of the legacies of those three German exiles. Her first book in English, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship and American Silent Film* (1991), set a new standard for the history, analysis, and theory of early film. Her focus on historically documented female spectatorship and the public sphere challenged then-popular theories of the cinematic apparatus and the male gaze as well as psychoanalytic readings of film, all of which were predicated on ideology critique (Marxist and feminist) and on the binary of classical Hollywood cinema vs. avant-garde, especially Brechtian/Godardian, film practices.

But it was the focus on early cinema’s anarchic and materialist beginnings in the context of popular entertainment, acrobatic performance, the circus, and sen-
sory spectacles of all kinds that led her to reread the media aesthetics of Kracauer and Benjamin as an attempt to address a later, largely marginalized if not betrayed potential of film as a politically radical medium. Kracauer’s privileging of distraction, clowns, slapstick, fairy tales, and the circus is as crucial here as Benjamin’s considerations of animation, Mickey Mouse, Chaplin, and concepts such as mimesis, the optical unconscious, innervation, and Spiel-Raum (room-for-play), all read in their complex intertextuality and interdependence. Without giving up on ideology critique, she read film, including classical Hollywood cinema, as a training ground for the new types of sensory experiences created by industrial and urban modernity.

In a stunning reversal of standard, even Adornian critiques of Hollywood, she has taught us to see classical narrative cinema as engaged in what she called the mass production of the senses, new modes of organizing vision and shaping sensory perception, including aurality and tactility—central concerns in Benjamin’s work and again today in a very different media world. What emerged from the early-to-mid-twentieth century, with its mass production, mass consumption, and mass annihilation, was an international cinematic culture she felicitously described as “vernacular modernism.” American movies resonated transnationally, not just as a result of Hollywood hegemony but also because they articulated an experience of modernity that, despite all cultural differentiation, was becoming increasingly global.

With this approach to American film as a global vernacular, Miriam reached well beyond film studies, arguing for a breakup of the stultifying and often provincial hierarchies of high vs. mass culture, high modernism vs. kitsch, Soviet avant-garde vs. Hollywood cinema, modernism vs. realism, and so forth. Of course, this work on the cinema parallels the rethinking of modernism and modernity initiated by the postmodernism debates that have flourished since the 1990s in several of the journals in which she published her influential essays. It speaks to the breadth of her interests and her intense curiosity in film cultures across the world that more recently she engaged with Chinese and Japanese film in the context of debates about alternative modernities and expanded geographies of modernism, work that will now have to be further developed by some of her students.

Her career led her from Yale and Rutgers to the University of Chicago, where she was the Ferdinand Schevill Distinguished Service Professor in the Humanities in the Department of English and the Department of Cinema and Media Studies, which she founded in 1990, and guided and shaped ever since. But her main legacy to us will be her just-completed, marvelously rich and imaginative study Cinema and Experience. Here she gives us subtle readings of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno, weaving often disconnected threads into a tapestry of common concepts and concerns that highlights the closeness and distance between them in unexpected and novel ways. The triangulation of Adorno and
Benjamin with Kracauer permits us to think beyond the annoyingly persistent accounts pitting the Eurocentric mandarin against the progressive film and media theorist, a reductive cultural-studies view that ignores questions of aesthetics and fails to understand Benjamin’s reflections on media as part of his anthropological materialism. Triangulation also guarantees that the inspirational role of Kracauer for Benjamin is finally acknowledged and that Kracauer is freed from the widespread misunderstanding of his work on photography and film as a naive realism. Hansen’s reading of Kracauer’s essay on photography as the “go for broke game of history” provides a persuasive backdrop to Benjamin’s later investments in film as the “go for broke game” of politics during the ever more desperate days of the anti-fascist struggle.

Who but Miriam Hansen would have been able to link Benjamin’s notion of aura—explicated in a much-broadened discursive and political context—to Adorno’s aesthetic of natural beauty? Who but she could have mobilized Adorno’s thought on rhythm, temporality, mobility, and tempo in post-1945 music for a consideration of what Adornian theory could have been had he translated his reflections on modernism in music into the medium of film? Thinking with Adorno beyond Adorno in modernist aesthetics, with Benjamin beyond Benjamin in media theory, with Kracauer beyond Kracauer on mass culture, she keeps the legacy of critical theory alive for an analysis of human experience and cultural practice today. The work of these three figures is not presented as canonical or as offering solutions to the media problematic of our time. But it is given credit for asking the right kinds of theoretical and political questions, which need to be rigorously set in their own time before they can be appropriated and rearticulated for our contemporary world of digital media and their impact on everyday life experience.

Cinema as Experience is a rich source for further developing the legacies of critical theory, which now include, sadly, the legacy of Miriam Hansen herself.