In most arts, academic study isn’t considered the enemy of journalistic criticism. A newspaper’s music or architecture critic likely studied the discipline in college and applies that training to reviewing current work. When it comes to cinema, though, the relations are cool, even adversarial. When I started grad school in the Seventies, I was startled to find that my new friends looked down on essays I’d written for *Film Comment* and other magazines. Academics didn’t indulge in what one in my seminar cohort called “film buffery.”

On the other side, cinephile critics, though bona fide intellectuals, were hostile to the developments in academe. As Grand Theory took over the humanities, it seemed...
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http://www.filmlinc.com/film-comment/article/never-the-twain-...
My argument doesn’t replace Jones’s account, and it can’t compete as arresting writing. Some readers will find my concern with technique bloodless or esoteric. (I’d hope they’d read the whole piece, though.) In any event, my chapter tries to provide a causal and functional explanation for some effects of pictorial precision and density that Jones describes. The effort exemplifies what I’ve called a poetics of cinema, the study of the principles by which art works are shaped to achieve particular effects. This middle-level approach allows us to merge critical analysis and interpretation with a degree of theoretical reflection, but one that remains close to the contours of film history and filmmaking practice. Artistry depends on craft, and craft is something both cinephile critics and academics have neglected.

I don’t mean to suggest that my own line of thinking is the only one worth considering. You can find other researchers who go beyond Theory-driven interpretation to work at the middle level: Kristin Thompson, Noël Carroll, Rick Altman, Murray Smith, Malcolm Turvey, Robert Spadoni, Jeff Smith, Scott Higgins, Yuri Tsivian, and many researchers on early film. These writers show the benefits of formulating precise aesthetic questions about movies, their makers, and their spectators, and proposing answers in lucid prose.

In sum, there are research programs that complement cinephile criticism. The critics can evoke the elusive qualities that make the film what it is and can point toward larger issues of artistry and cultural significance. But tight deadlines and narrow word counts often keep critics from exploring anything in greater detail. Academics have more elbow room to study how those qualities came into being, how they work together, and what roles they play historically and culturally. Academics can also contribute new ideas that critics on the front lines can try out. Readers who enjoy cinephile criticism should sample the academic work that stays close to the sensuous surface of a movie. Meanwhile, academics should recognize how cinephile criticism can alert us to the movie’s unique identity. Perceptive appreciation and analytical explanation can enhance one another.

Today every article about film criticism must end by mentioning the Internet. It certainly makes cinephile criticism more accessible, but it has special advantages for academics. Readers who would never pick up one of my books have engaged with ideas on my website. The more enthusiastic responses to the blog entries that Kristin Thompson and I post have convinced me that the Web can help us mandarins illuminate the art that stirs so much ardent intelligence in its audience.

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