INTRODUCTION (I)

The rationale behind the encyclopedia

Warren Buckland

The difference between a novice and a professional researcher is that the novice sees research simply as an exercise in information gathering. Too many students in the humanities just gather information when writing. A more fundamental activity in the humanities is the pursuit of understanding. In their discussion of intellectual virtues, R.C. Roberts and W.J. Wood locate 'understanding' in the practice of reading – the need to turn students into careful, critical readers. Commenting on Locke's *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, they argue that excellent reading

> is digestion, critical assessment, and systematic assimilation of what is read to a coherent view of things … knowledge is not just a collection of facts; [the good reader] critically insists on good reasons for affirming what he affirms and denying what he denies. He does not just seek support for his prejudices but is open to learning, willing to take a critical look at his own preexisting views. Insofar as tutoring can teach these things in the course of a curriculum of reading, it is not just skill purveyance, but an education, a nurturing in the intellectual virtues.
>
> (Roberts and Wood 2007, 123)

When first encountering film theory, students are confronted with and confounded by a dense, interlocking set of texts full of arcane terminology, inexact formulations, sliding definitions, and abstract generalities (I give an example below). Students find it difficult to assimilate film theory concepts into their pre-existing understanding. Our aim in this *Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory* is to guide novice readers through the dense, interlocking concepts that form the core education in film theory. Our guidance, which is aimed at facilitating the novice's reading of film theory, involves a threefold process:

(1) to make explicit the implicit assumptions and presuppositions behind each film theory by defining and contextualizing the theory's terminology;
(2) to rewrite and clarify the inexact and variant formulations; and
(3) to avoid abstract generalities.

The major technique the editors encouraged contributors to employ throughout the encyclopedia was to avoid making broad, sweeping summaries of huge amounts of information. Novice readers are unable to grasp the generalities necessarily found in sweeping

and schematic summaries. Instead, the editors asked contributors to anchor and re-anchor their discussion in a few well-known (canonical) texts. To a major extent, each entry is grounded in a comprehensive discussion of just *one* or *two* pieces of work (essays, books), followed by a short critique or development of that work, usually found in another essay or book (in one instance we asked an author, Adrian Martin, to summarize his own canonical text; see the entry on MISE EN SCÈNE). Edward Branigan mentions in his Introduction that the focus of this encyclopedia on specific essays and books results in an assessment of 'a concept within a specific moment of its use, at a moment when a specific argument is being aggressively generated to serve a project'. These essays and books were therefore chosen carefully, since in many cases they represent an entire tradition of thought: they are parts that stand in for the whole, a rhetorical move based on the recognition that the whole cannot be adequately represented. The exceptions to this technique are a series of 'survey entries' that act to provide context for the entries that examine specific concepts (I discuss these survey entries at the end of this Introduction).

A second technique we employed to make film theory accessible was to ask contributors to forthrightly address the difficult formulations and propositions in a theory, and to reduce these difficult formulations to straightforward propositions. While not proposing to reduce film theory to the 'basic' or 'elementary' statements of logical positivism, we none-theless asked contributors to avoid making vague metaphysical statements. This is a demanding task and can only be carried out by experts who already know the theories well. Many writers make film theory unnecessarily complex because they do not under-stand it adequately (a little knowledge of something large can be a dangerous thing). We therefore chose scholars who were sufficiently versed in the film theory concepts they undertook to clarify.

A third technique involved contributors discussing their selected texts in some detail using ordinary vocabulary and short sentences. Schopenhauer said that 'an obscure or bad style means a dull and confused brain'. We went back to basics, offering our contributors advice from Strunk and White's influential *The Elements of Style*: 'Use definite, specific, and concrete language'; 'use the active voice'; 'omit needless words'; 'do not construct awkward adverbs' – plus advice from Gowers's equally influential *Complete Plain Words*: 'Be simple, be short, be human'; 'be correct'; 'choose the precise word'.

For example, my entry on CONTEMPORARY FILM THEORY was limited to commentary on a single but influential 15-page essay by Stephen Heath ('On Screen, in Frame: Film and Ideology'), followed by an outline of critiques Heath received (from David Rodowick, David Bordwell, and Noël Carroll). By offering a careful summary and clarification of Heath's seminal essay, the entry presents to the novice reader the core information relating to contemporary film theory, defines the necessary terms and concepts using definite, specific, and concrete language, and untangles Heath's difficult propositions to better understand contemporary film theory's agenda. Students can then use this explica-tion to read and understand other seminal essays and critiques of contemporary film theory.

Of course, no reference book written by over 50 authors will be completely uniform in its language and style; nonetheless, authors generally followed and interpreted the same advice in their own way. A few did query the advice of Strunk and White, and Gowers, arguing that some concepts are complex for they exceed our common sense understanding. And I encountered difficulties in adhering to this advice when writing a particularly demanding entry devoted to Slavoj Žižek's concept of the 'interface'. But Strunk, White,

and Gowers served as a useful point on the horizon to aim at when writing such difficult entries.

The encyclopedia contains 83 entries on the essential ideas and concepts at the centre of film theory from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. These ideas and concepts constitute the core knowledge of film theory: familiar concepts such as apparatus, classic realist text, diegesis, enunciation, gaze, genre, ideology, and identification, combined with less well-known but, in our opinion, equally important concepts such as pixel/cut/vector, mimetic innervation, Alain Badiou's concept of inaesthetics, and Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of evidence. A few entries are, unfortunately, missing because some authors were unable to deliver, and we were not able to re-commission those entries without delaying the publication of the encyclopedia further.

Each entry, limited to the explication of a few key texts, as mentioned above, is a mini-essay ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 words. Because the entries are narrowly focused, most contributors have included a list of further reading. Most entries are cross-referenced (with the cross-referenced terms in SMALL CAPS) – for concepts are not isolated chunks of knowledge and information, but are interrelated in a web of knowledge. That web has become increasingly complex, technical, and specialized, with film scholars working in great depth on narrowly focused issues. We represent this web (along with additional concepts and names that appear within the entries) in a cluster map on the book's cover. (The cluster map can be viewed in full at www.routledge.com/9780415781800.) The large names and circles represent the actual 83 entries in the encyclopedia, and the lines between them represent conceptual links. The smaller circles and names, and their fainter lines, represent secondary concepts (found within the entries) and their conceptual links – to each other and to the main concepts. This map is not, therefore, a general map of film theory *per se*, but of film theory as represented in this particular encyclopedia (with thanks to Thomas Felder for generating the map).

This encyclopedia attempts to overcome two problems that hinder students' comprehension of film theory as an academic discipline: it is becoming less accessible and more fragmented. This volume is designed to be a reference book for undergraduates in film studies as well as for graduate students new to the discipline. One of the volume's strongest selling points is an ability to present a notoriously arcane discipline in straightforward, non-mystifying terms.

This is where the encyclopedia overcomes the weaknesses of similar books. *The Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory* (edited by Roberta Pearson and Philip Simpson, 2000) is at times difficult to read. It is a useful and informative handbook for scholars *already familiar* with film theory but, for this reason, it may put off the novice coming to film theory for the first time. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (Susan Hayward, 2006) is much broader (it is not limited to film theory, but includes film studies concepts). It is aimed at an undergraduate audience, but is well known for being uneven. Some entries – such as 'feminist film theory' – are clear and detailed. Others, such as the one on 'subjective camera', are too short to be of use to students. Other entries are dense and uninviting. For example, the discussion of 'suture' opens with a feminist polemic (the entry could have ended on this). It then begins the discussion of suture with the following sentence:

> Lacan used the term *suture* to signify the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious which, in turn, he perceived as an uneasy conjunction between what he terms the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders—two orders which, after infancy, are always co-present.
>
> (Hayward 2006, 355)

This opening sentence is too long, complex and dense; it tries to say everything at once by piling on the concepts instead of explaining them. The opening, and the entry as a whole, accumulates a series of words and elliptical phrases without really defining the main concept. This accumulation of words simply circles around the main concept and ends up alienating the novice reader, for it does not relate and map out each facet of this complex idea. In subsequent paragraphs, the entry continues to pile on the concepts (mirror phase, pre-Oedipal, pure *jouissance*, narcissism, Oedipus complex, and the Other), offering only cursory definitions, before quickly moving on to the next set of concepts. (This indirect, roundabout activity – defining concepts in passing as if to rush towards something else that is more important though never reached – is a fundamental problem that we have tried to avoid.)

The entry ends the way it began (355–6):

> The Symbolic now becomes the Other (which Lacan signifies with a capital 'O'). The subject represents itself in the field of the Other (language)—capital 'O' because the Law of the Father. To this first sense of fragmentation comes another, felt by the fact that the subject can never fully be represented in speech since speech cannot reflect the unconscious (the repressed, unspeakable desire for the mother or the father). The subject, in representing itself, can only do so at the cost of division (conscious/unconscious; self/Other). The difference for the two sexes is of course the degree of division or fragmentation.

This is a jumble of concepts that requires unpacking and more careful exposition. The author reifies, isolates, and decontextualizes the concepts; she gives the impression of randomly plucking them out of the air, especially fragments such as: 'capital "O" because the Law of the Father' and 'the unconscious (the repressed, unspeakable desire for the mother or the father)'. In fact, this entry on 'suture' reads like a first draft, a series of notes hastily jotted down. We have endeavoured to avoid such a writing style by using the techniques mentioned above: employing straightforward, clear language, and grounding the discussion in a few specific texts. Sean Cubitt's entry on SUTURE follows these guidelines and offers an alternative account of this notoriously difficult concept.

The majority of entries in this encyclopedia conform to the threefold format spelled out above, and limit their discussion to one or two canonical film theory texts. But in a number of entries – most notably ANGLO-AMERICAN FILM THEORY, APPARATUS THEORY (PLATO), BLENDING, CONCEPT, EUROPEAN FILM THEORY, FEMINIST FILM THEORY (both entries: CORE CONCEPTS and HISTORY OF), ILLUSION, MONTAGE (I and II), SPECIFICITY II, and THIRD WORLD CINEMA – the authors have provided a broader overview of the concept and, at times, have developed the concepts in new directions. These entries are meant to contextualize the more narrowly focused entries (the majority of the encyclopedia), thereby complementing them. Edward Branigan's Introduction also offers a broad, comprehensive presentation, analysis, and development of film theory from the perspective of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Works cited

Gowers, Ernest. 1987. *The Complete Plain Words*. 3rd edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Hayward, Susan. 2006. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge.

Pearson, Roberta, and Philip Simpson, eds. 2000. *The Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*. London: Routledge.

Roberts, Robert C., and W. Jay Wood. 2007. *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Strunk, William, and E.B. White. 1999. *The Elements of Style*. 4th edition. London: Longman.