Introduction

Malcolm Turvey

The articles that follow were originally presented at a symposium celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film*.1 The symposium was the closing plenary session at the Society for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image’s annual conference at Birbeck, University of London in June 2015. The book richly deserved this tribute. Whether or not one agrees with the view (which I hold) that *Narration in the Fiction Film* is the most important work of film theory in film studies since the 1960s, it is without a doubt the founding text of the Society for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image. Much of the work undertaken in this organization on the psychology, aesthetics, theory, and history of the moving image has its origins in this book, and it is, to use a much overused word, seminal.

Bordwell does three things in *Narration in the Fiction Film* that no film scholar had done before him. He develops the fledgling narratology of film as it existed in the work of literary scholars such as Seymour Chatman in the mid-1980s into a systematic theory of film narration; he draws on the constructivist tradition in cognitive psychology to explain how viewers comprehend narrative films; and he makes a historical argument about the modes of narration that have existed in narrative cinema, and clarifies their norms. Along the way, he offers numerous critical insights into the work of major filmmakers, such as Jansco and Bresson (the chapter on Godard remains the best account of narration and style in that filmmaker’s storied work). Any film scholar would be proud to have accomplished one of these things in their careers, but all four, and in the same book? In the study of the visual arts, one has to go back to the writings of Ernst Gombrich and Rudolf Arnheim, two of Bordwell’s intellectual heroes, to find work of comparable sweep and ambition that so seamlessly combines psychology with aesthetics, and history with theory.

I thank the participants in the symposium for accepting the daunting task of offering critical remarks about *Narration in the Fiction Film*; Tim Smith and Sheena Rogers for organizing the symposium; Stephen Prince, the editor of *Projections*, for facilitating its publication; and especially David Bordwell for his characteristically generous response, which offers a fascinating account of the context in which he wrote the book, and a compelling defense of its core arguments. As these contributions show, *Narration in the Fiction Film* remains as relevant as ever.
Malcolm Turvey is Sol Gittleman Professor in the Department of Art and Art History and Director of Film and Media Studies at Tufts University, and an editor of the journal October. He is the author of Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition (Oxford University Press, 2008) and The Filming of Modern Life: European Avant-Garde Film of the 1920s (MIT Press, 2011). He is currently finishing a book titled “Play Time: Jacques Tati and Comedic Modernism.”

Note

1 The presenters at the symposium were Murray Smith, Brian Boyd, Paisley Livingston, Joseph Magliano, and David Bordwell.