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978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

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This book explores the political significance of aesthetic analysis in the context of cultural studies. It applies the theories of Adorno, Derrida, and Lacan to film studies, and asks how political responsibility can be reconciled with the concept of the university as a democratic institution. Art and the university, Patrick McGee claims, share a common feature: they are usually regarded as autonomous realms that resist the determination of economic and political interests, while they still play a crucial role in ethical and political discourse. Through detailed reference to Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, McGee shows how film can be both a product of the culture industry and a critique of it. He goes on to analyze the function of the university in producing interpretations of political art-forms and in determining the limits of critical discussion. McGee links Adorno with popular culture and film studies to provide new ways of thinking through the claims of political criticism. He reconfigures Derrida's theory of undecidability, which has been criticized by Habermas and others as politically irresponsible, to address some of the most crucial debates on freedom and the ethics of intellectual work in social institutions like the university.

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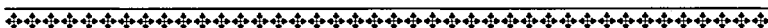
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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521581301

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First published 1997

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-58130-1 Hardback

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Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

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For Joan and Sean

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Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
1 Redeeming contradictions: from critical theory to cultural studies	
Adorno, culture, and film	1
Analyzing <i>It's a Wonderful Life</i>	7
<i>Aesthetic Theory</i> and political responsibility	15
The method of cultural studies	20
Lacan, sublimation, and <i>The Age of Innocence</i>	26
Derrida and the responsibility of interpretation	33
2 Art as the absolute commodity: the inter-subjectivity of mimesis in Adorno's <i>Aesthetic Theory</i>	
<i>Aesthetic Theory</i>	38
The aesthetic thing	38
Instrumental and communicative reason	43
Mimesis	51
Dialectical reason	59
Appearance, apparition, and history	66
Art's negative truth	70
3 Sexual nations: history and the division of hope in <i>The Crying Game</i>	
The culture industry	79
The symptom	84
Cinematic sutures	89
Context and contradiction	94
Aesthetic politics	101
Misogyny, racism, and the death drive	112

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

Nature, nation, and mimetic identification	118
Subjectivity and narrative displacement	126
The gaze, the mirror, and the masquerade	132
Deconstructing the sexual difference	137
Sexual nations	149
Desire and hope	155
4 Deconstruction and responsibility: the question of freedom in the place of the undecidable	161
Derrida and his critics	163
Deconstructive politics and the university	199
<i>Bibliography</i>	224
<i>Index</i>	232

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Preface



On a rainy afternoon in late December 1992, I walked from one side of Manhattan to the other in order to see *The Crying Game*. I had been attending a meeting of the Modern Language Association and wanted to escape the chaos of the academic marketplace for a few hours by sitting in a dark theater with other moviegoers. I have loved movies all of my life and believe that the pleasure one takes from the cinematic process derives in part from being with others and participating in their most intimate fantasies without violating them or being violated by them. In the darkness of the movie theater, our fantasies somehow manage to coexist, perhaps because the community of moviegoers is so absent-minded. In any case, something happened as I watched the movie that afternoon. It was nothing mystical or mysterious but more like an experience of concentrated distraction. Yet when I left the theater, I could not get the experience out of my mind. Though it started as a distraction, it soon became an obsession; and out of my need to say something about it, I began to write this book. Though I can never convey to the reader what the experience was (and have not ruled out the possibility that it is a myth), I know that in some form it has entered into the intellectual process that lies behind this work.

With the increasing normalization of cultural studies within the university (and, despite their disclaimers, I would include new historicism, recent versions of poststructuralism, and the new theories of gender and race in this category), it is important that we return to the question of reading and the place of interpretation within contextual research. Reevaluating the theories and the objects of literary and cultural study in this way enables us to avoid the inevitable tendency toward routinization that plagues any intellectual field. Precisely because of the new and utterly necessary emphasis on history in English and the other humanities, we need to pay attention to what actually constitutes the text–context

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

relationship in order to avoid the reductionism that limited earlier versions of historicism, including Marxism. As I argue in the following chapters, Theodor Adorno's concept of the aesthetic monad and Jacques Derrida's speculations on intellectual responsibility offer crucial models for understanding the political and ethical functions of critical work, including close reading as a form of contextual analysis.

I discuss Adorno's relation to the general field of cultural studies in chapter 1 and analyze aspects of his *Aesthetic Theory* in chapter 2. However, the goal of my reading of Adorno lies in chapter 3 on *The Crying Game*. The experience of this film somehow suggested to me the importance of Adorno's work and called into question the usual understanding of his cultural theories. In effect, I argue that *The Crying Game* is both a work of art and a product of what Adorno called the culture industry. Though this may be true of any contemporary work, *The Crying Game* illustrates this duality in unusually powerful ways. It unabashedly seduces its spectators through an overt deception and organizes itself structurally around a series of narrative ruptures and displacements. This film, as Adorno said of the work of art in general, is a system of contradictions. Though it may seek to transcend the social context that determines its commodity form, it also projects onto the spectators an experience of disappointment that requires what Adorno called a *second reflection*. This involves a reading that must adapt itself to what is singular in the work as the articulation of a specific historical context.

Not every art work is plugged into its context in the same way. *The Crying Game* indirectly responds to Irish history, colonial and postcolonial Caribbean history, British history, the histories of sexuality and race, and, most important, the history of the concept of the nation. My analysis does not want to subordinate the work to a stable context but to situate it in relation to the social processes of which it is a part. The work as symptom or windowless monad is not a reflection that can be adequate or inadequate to its context. *It is the context*. It is a cultural commodity that nevertheless discloses its commodity form as the fetish that defetishizes itself. It articulates the fundamental experience of art as one of disappointment, that is, of our disappointment in the failure of art to transcend history. Through that failure, art discloses its unconscious historiography as a symptomatic formation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

After passing through Adorno and *The Crying Game*, I return, at the beginning of chapter 4, to the work of Derrida and to the question of responsibility that haunts all of contemporary criticism and the culture wars that have been waged, in the view of some, over the grave of deconstruction. Specifically, I try to elaborate a deconstructive concept of freedom and autonomy through a reading of, and response to, some of the critics of Derrida's work who have been influenced by Jürgen Habermas. At various points, this discussion brings me back to Adorno and requires me to clarify the relationship between his concept of critique and deconstruction as a form of political intervention. While Adorno is not a deconstructionist, his theory of the autonomous work of art presupposes a concept of undecidability that finds its fullest elaboration in Derrida's work.

Chapter 4 concludes with some speculations on the university as the site of literary and cultural studies, as an institution which plays a role in creating the social conditions of freedom. The university grounds freedom not by formulating its law once and for all but by giving space to the undecidable as the condition of social and political responsibility. This responsibility means leaving an ear open to the voice of the other who would criticize any specific formulation of freedom as law. True freedom is not identical with the law that grants it, though it works through the law as an ongoing process of dialogue, social exchange, negotiation, and compromise. Because the aim of freedom is something that can never be defined once and for all, it lies beyond commitment. Yet, for that reason, the call of freedom requires that we make a decision and commit ourselves to one side or the other at each historical juncture. It has never been more important to think about the requirements of freedom and political responsibility than it is today. As the world grows smaller and our cultural contradictions more visible, it is important to remember William Blake's insight that applying one law to the lion and the ox, one measure to the incommensurable differences that make up human society, is oppressive. Freedom remains possible because the law, as a response to the history of human desire, is *not one*. It is an ongoing process of rewriting and recontextualization.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Acknowledgments



This study, in its theoretical concerns, owes something to Gregory Jay's criticisms of the original manuscript of my second book. I thank those individuals who have read and responded to this work at various stages or have supported me through their friendship: Granger Babcock, Anthony Barthelemy, Murray Beja, the late Bernard Benstock, Ricky Blackwood, Robert Con Davis, Michael Dietz, John Fischer, Eric Halpern, Ellen Carol Jones, Bernhard Kendler, Karen Lawrence, Veronica Makowsky, Michelle Massé, Elsie Michie, Dana Nelson, Leslie Roman, and David Wills. I thank all of my anonymous readers for their helpful criticisms and Louisiana State University for the Summer Research Fellowship and Sabbatical Leave during which I wrote a first draft of the manuscript. I offer my special thanks to Ray Ryan, my Cambridge editor, and to Michael Sprinker, the co-editor of the "Literature, Culture, Theory" series.

My greatest debts are still to my son Sean and my wife Joan who keep me laughing, who tell me when I make a mistake, and who never permit me to lose confidence in myself. They are my toughest critics and closest friends. This book is dedicated to them.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58130-1 - Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture

Patrick McGee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Abbreviations



- AT* T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
- E* J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, book 7 of *The Seminar*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. D. Porter (New York: Norton, 1992).
- ND* T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973).
- NJR* Neil Jordan, *A Neil Jordan Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1993).