

# Response to Dudley Andrew: What is at the Core?

**Matthew Ogonoski**

In his response to Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," Matthew Ogonoski scrutinizes the finer points of Andrew's argument, with particular focus on his concept of *décalage*.

Dudley Andrew's recent article "The Core and Flow of Film Studies" is an impressively voluminous overview of the history of Film Studies up to and including the current state of the discipline (if indeed it can be referred to thusly). And though the majority of this study provides few points of entry for contention, and is a highly recommended read, the conclusory remarks made in the final pages are fleeting and unclear. While Andrew certainly demonstrates an eloquent and passionate perspective of cinema and why it should be studied, the proposed methodology (a tentative term for now) is confusing and incomplete. Andrew explains that the temporal lag of cinema, an affect he describes as unique to the medium, is a key ontological characteristic of the form, and therefore critical to its study. He names this aspect *décalage* and describes it as a gap that "lies at the heart of the medium and of each particular film, a gap between here and there as well as now and then," yet fails to describe how this affect may be useful (914). In this sense, he does not provide a methodology with which to approach the study of cinema, but a characteristic of film with which to structure a methodology that may prove useful. The article is most useful and entertaining in its own right without the inclusion of an incomplete suggestion of how to save Film Studies. Because the conclusion of Andrew's article is so contentious, my focus shall

remain here, and I will suggest a few alternative perspectives on the significance of his proposed, and tentative, characteristic/method known as *décalage*. This examination will not pretend to be complete or definitive, but instead is set up as a way to invite and encourage more discussion in regard to Andrew's ideas.

First, I propose that there is something complicated and insufficient about naming this lag of cinema, or *décalage*, as a unique and therefore important characteristic to privilege over other media. Andrew proclaims that this temporal disposition is unlike other technologies such as television, videogames, or the Internet. It is the immediacy of these media and the way the viewer experiences this immediacy that distinguishes them from film. For instance, the immersive experience of videogames is not the same type of immersive experience of film. Andrew couples the immediacy of access of both streaming Internet video and television as characteristics that differ from the cinematic experience. And though he is sure to discuss cinema's contemporary existence throughout the proliferation of new technologies in everyday life, he primarily argues for a purist viewing experience of cinema in order to cultivate the full potential of *décalage*. I can wholeheartedly agree that the immediacy of streaming Internet video or videogames, whether consciously or subconsciously recognized by the viewer, does spark some sense of ontological difference from the medium of cinema. However, Andrew's fault lies both in his wholesale homogenizing description of these other forms of media, and also in his privileging of the pure cinematic experience without defining that experience. I will focus on these two factors in order to expose the

problems of his conception of *décalage*.

First, I would like to draw attention to a specific, yet broad and encompassing, form of media of two different timeperiods in order to provide a contrast: television in the late eighties and early nineties, and then again with the start of the HBO-style drama series in the vein of what has been deemed “cinematic television.” These two periods have been chosen because both encompass my limited knowledge of television, and both provide examples of the form that test Andrew’s suggestion. Andrew’s concern involves the viewer’s recognition, whether on a subconscious or conscious level (this is unclear), to recognize the temporal issues of cinema. The temporal issues are of two types: the lack of immediacy in cinema, and the time involved in going to and experiencing the movies. The affect of *décalage* results from both of these situations. It is the former concern that will be examined first. *Décalage* results here from the realization that the filmic object was acquired in the past and therefore is not connected to the current moment. There is much time and planning that goes into any production, and perfection (to whatever degree), or at the very least completion, is attained after many obstacles are navigated and problems solved. Ultimately, and to summarize, films are complicated processes of construction that necessitate much mastery, and therefore the end product will always present a sense of past-ness. However, these temporal issues, in relation to the past-ness of the form, are not wholly unique to film.

In 1990 a new television series premiered. It was called *Law And Order* (NBC, 1990). In fact, going into its 20th year of production it is still called *Law And Order*, and has become part of a successful franchise. This television drama is highly constructed, which is in contrast to many television shows surrounding it, particularly at the time of its inception. It is obvious that this show has a larger budget, is filmed over a number of days (unlike its televisual counterpart, the sitcom) and shares many of the same production problems that may effect film production. I believe Andrew would contend this viewpoint because *Law And Order* is filmed on a weekly basis (or, at least, broadcast so) and is part of the everyday, home-viewing experience. However, neither of these responses would disqualify the constructedness of the object itself, or the past-ness that is implicit. If the film object can indeed influence some sense of affect due to its *décalage*, why then can television not do the same? I realize that *Law And Order* is just one example, and in the 90s it only represented a small and select type of television series. (*Homicide:*

*Life On The Street* [NBC, 1993] is another example). Indeed, this show may have been quite anomalous for a substantial period of time. However, this brings us to the next point: the contemporary state of serial television.

Currently, there are many television shows that are either part of the HBO family of serial drama, or are formally and stylistically derivative of it. What is meant by this is that these shows, like *Law And Order*, have high-budgets, are structured in complex ways, and have an inherent feeling of past-ness similar to films. A few examples of these shows are *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999), *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001), *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008), etc. The most prominent and important example that elicits this feeling is an HBO original series called *The Wire* (HBO, 2002), a police/criminal drama that centres around law enforcement and drug culture in Baltimore, Mass. This series is often described as having a cinematic quality, an opinion typically resting on the show’s high-production values and complexity of narrative construction. Although here is not the place to elaborate, I believe this form of serial television is one that exhibits both qualities that can be understood as cinematic, qualities that distinguish it from other television content. However, not only is the series described as cinematic, but it is also making its way into universities as a course appended to Film Studies. In fact, Linda Williams taught a film course on *The Wire* at Berkeley last spring. Again, these are highly constructed shows and, as objects, enable a realization of their past-ness.

The purpose of mentioning these series is not to disclaim the affect of Andrew’s concept of *décalage*, but simply to suggest that cinema is not the only technology to hold this characteristic. The perspectives provided simply serve as suggestion for further study and elaboration. Being no expert of television, these are only tentative, yet, I believe, apt observations. I implore others to contest or affirm these suggestions. Andrew warns, “To have [how film has taught us to watch] subsumed by some larger notion of the history of audio-visions, to have it dissipate into the foggy field of cultural studies, for instance, or become one testing ground among others for communication studies would be to lose something whose value has always derived from the intensity and the focus that films invite and often demand” (913). Why exactly would this knowledge of how films have taught us to watch disappear? If this knowledge hinges on the concept of *décalage*, and if *décalage* is indeed important and unique to cinema, why would these things disappear within media

or communication studies? Would they not be used in those disciplines to demarcate cinema and express why it is important?

This same fear begs further questions. If film, or the way in which film has taught us to view, is in trouble, this would necessarily imply that current film is not what it used to be. Here I am specifically drawing attention to the viewing of film in a theatrical setting. If *décalage* is an important way of understanding film, why would it not continue to be an important characteristic, and why would it not continue to be used when approaching contemporary theatrical film? The immediate answer would seem to be that Andrew is primarily concerned with celluloid, a concern that manifests itself as technophobic when, for example, he homogenizes all forms and media (perceived as) characteristically different from film. If *décalage* is a specific characteristic of celluloid, why only celluloid, particularly when the above examples of television suggest a similar affect?

But there is more than one dimension to Andrew's suggestion. He states,

*This French term décalage connotes discrepancy in space and deferral or jumps in time. At the most primary level, the film image leaps from present to past, for what is edited and shown was filmed at least days, weeks, or months earlier. This slight stutter in its articulation then repeats itself in the time and distance that separates filmmaker from spectator and spectators from each other when they see the same film on separate occasions. The gap in each of these relations constitutes cinema's difference from television and new media. (914)*

Andrew contends that, in addition to emerging from the delay imposed by film production, *décalage* also arises in the spaces, or gaps, that exist between filmmakers and spectators. I will here point out that Andrew does not discuss these two temporal relations that construct *décalage* as working in tandem. In other words, there are two possible ways that *décalage* may come about, according to the film scholar. As stated above, I believe Andrew's wholesale dismissal of television is problematic. He discusses *décalage* as an ontological affect of cinema, and it is implied he is specifically discussing celluloid-based cinema. However, the way he defines the term allows it to be applicable to more than just celluloid; in fact, at no point does he discuss the actual physical qualities of celluloid. Instead, he infers that celluloid has some

connection to temporality that other materials, whether video or digital, do not. If Andrew is implying that there is an indexical quality that photograph-based celluloid contains that other media do not, then I draw the readers' attention to Tom Gunning's discussion of indexicality in "What's the Point of an Index, or, Faking Photographs."<sup>1</sup> I believe a comparison of Gunning and Andrew's articles would be quite fruitful but, unfortunately, there is no space for that here. However, I am unsure whether to attribute Andrew's assertions to a discussion of indexicality, mostly because he does not use the term once throughout this lengthy article. So it seems his argument for *décalage* is based not in relation to medium ontology or specificity but to some sort of pseudo-cognitive affect. In other words, it is not the film object that imposes *décalage*, but rather a conscious or subconscious understanding of the concept of *décalage* that informs the viewing of an object. If the latter case is true, there is no reason why *décalage* could not be conceptually applied to television.

For now I would like to focus on the second form of *décalage*, the gaps created between filmmakers and spectators. Describing the affect of *décalage* this way is a misstep on Andrew's part. Although part of his project is to save cinema from falling into and being disseminated by the disciplines of Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, and Media Studies, by contextualizing part of the affect of *décalage* as a spectatorial practice, he relegates this dimension of *décalage* to Cultural Studies. He removes the concern of *décalage* from the pseudocognitive realm and places it in one of cultural interactions and how those interactions inform knowledge. In other words, by drawing attention to the importance of the gaps created between the filmmaker and spectators, or simply between multiple spectators, he implies that the place of the theatre plays a major role in *décalage's* affect. He contrasts the theatre with television by referring to television's place as an everyday object in the household. But by focusing attention on the place of cinema as being away from the home, he is not discussing an ontological affect of the cinema itself, but a cultural practice of viewing the cinema. The question is not "how does the cinema affect the spectator's thoughts about the act of going out," but instead, "how does the act of going to the movies affect the ways spectators think about film?" This may seem like an issue of semantics, but if Andrew implies that the cinema produces some sort of ontological affect by prompting a sense of *décalage* in the spectator, based on the gaps between the object and the subject, then this also implies that there are particular ways of viewing that are privileged. But there are many ways of viewing film.

There are many types of theatres. Is Andrew privileging any one? Does it matter if it is an arthouse, a megaplex, or a drive-in? The only common characteristic shared by these different theatrical settings is the fact that they are places that must be traveled to. Therefore, if *décalage* is an inherent affective characteristic of the cinema itself, privileging the place of exhibition seems moot. If the affect of *décalage* (in the case of these gaps between viewers and filmmakers) is solely dependant on the act of going out, regardless of where the film is shown, then why can these same affects of *décalage* not translate into the home? It seems very unflattering to discuss the power of cinema in these terms.

This second conception of *décalage* is dependant on purist conceptions of the cinematic experience. And yes, if one is to view a film in the theatre then they must leave their homes in order to do so. But I am unconvinced that this somehow affects spectators' conceptions or realizations of temporal gaps. Essentially, I believe that this sort of argument places more emphasis and concern on the cultural practices of movie-going, then on ontological affects of watching film. Andrew states,

*The gap in each of these relations [that construct décalage] constitutes cinema's difference from television and new media. Films display traces of what is past and inaccessible, whereas TV and certainly the internet are meant to feel and be present. We live with television as a continual part of our lives and our homes; sets are sold as furniture. Keeping up a twenty-four-hour chatter on scores of channels, TV is banal by definition. (914)*

In this quote, Andrew draws a distinction between the phenomenological affects that film objects contain and the cultural significance of objects such as television and the internet in our everyday experiences. He neither explains how an outing to the cinema implies an inaccessible past or gaps, nor does he discuss an ontological affect of the televisual medium. In other words, he collapses the differences between the ontological characteristics of the medium of television and its existence as a cultural object in our homes in order to distinguish it from cinema. This seems like a covert strategy to avoid the discussion of applying the concept of *décalage* to other media.

Andrew's purist argument also ignores different ways of viewing. Of course different spectators view in different ways. I like to think of myself as a purist as

well when considering the theatrical experience. In fact, I never consume food items when at the theatre for the following reasons: it is a distraction (crumpling of bags and slurping of straws); and it leads to bathroom visits. I recall having to leave the theatre twice while watching *Only The Lonely* (Chris Columbus, 1991) when I was eleven years old so that my bladder would not explode from so much pop. Now I rarely drink at the theatre. I have only left a theatre to use the washroom twice since that day. I'm glad to say that both times were during terrible films. The point of this anecdotal digression is to reveal that the ways in which people watch films is very much determined by they themselves, how they think of and how they desire to experience the films. So why can I not attain the same impression of *décalage* at home? Consumers go to great lengths and spend copious amounts of money today in order to establish home theatres. If the cinematic experience is dependant on some purist sense of spectatorship, why can these same issues of temporal gaps not be recreated in the home? The viewer is aware that, regardless of viewing a film at home or at the theatre, the filmic object is constructed with an inherent past-ness. And as for the cultural experience of viewing the film, it is a highly subjective matter that is contingent on the spectator's frame-of-mind.

Another way of examining Andrew's argument is to ask why the concerns of temporality would affect *décalage* in the age of home viewing? To continue the above example, I was upset at missing large segments of *Only The Lonely*, but that was a highly subjective response based on my temporary amnesia of the fact that I could always rent the film later. Of course, at the time this meant waiting a while longer than the turn-over of home distribution today, but I could still indeed rent the film. My being upset was of course partially based on the fact that I had wanted to view this film in the theatre and, in my mind, I had failed. In this sense, I would somewhat agree with Andrew in that the experience of going out did mean something to me. However, this reveals another dimension of the incompleteness of Andrew's argument.

Films continue to be released in the theatre. If *décalage* is dependant on the experience of going out to the theatre, then why is Andrew worried this element of the cinema culture will dissipate? If *décalage* is dependant on the understanding of past-ness inherent in cinema, and the technologies used to construct both cinema and television are starting to approach convergence, then why can *décalage* not be an aspect of television as well as cinema? Again, a question of format arises.

Andrew states, “In contrast [to television], we go out to the movies, leaving home to cross into a different realm. Every genuine cinematic experience involves *décalage*, time-lag. After all, we are taken on a flight during and after which we are not quite ourselves.” (914) But this act of going out to the movies does not wholesale explain the affect of the mystification of film from which we are “not quite ourselves.” Furthermore, Andrew’s explanation that the act of going out brings attention to the spatial gaps between filmmaker and spectator, and between spectators themselves, does not appear to be limited to the second category of *décalage*. This description seems more relevant to the former category of *décalage*, a focus on the constructedness and past-ness of film. Why does going to the theatre draw any more attention to the spatial distances between filmmakers and spectators?

Ultimately, Andrew’s argument for the importance of *décalage* in the cinematic experience is unconvincing; at least in the ways he describes the conditions of *décalage*. *Décalage* seems an important characteristic of film, but a characteristic that is not wholly relegated to this specific medium. As for the place of viewing, I believe that Andrew, like many theorists that promote a purist way of viewing cinema, overlook both the fact that viewers continue to visit the theatre, and the fact that viewers love cinema so much that they try to turn parts of their homes into areas of theatrical experience. I agree with Andrew that movies train people to watch in particular ways. Ideally, this means that viewers watch in an uninterrupted and undistracted way. The same interruptions and distractions that existed in the early days of theatrical cinema still exist today. At home, yes, the viewer has more control, and can pause to use the washroom, or check an IMDB entry. However, purists of cinema, if the purity of the experience remains important, will not distract themselves from the home-viewing experience. Those who will are also those who would care little for distractions and interruptions in the theatre setting: going for popcorn or to the washroom. The actions of this latter group do not reveal the importance of cinema for them, but rather its unimportance. Using the washroom is of course sometimes a biological necessity, and I have at times been utterly frustrated at my aging bladder and the balance of importance that has shifted toward it and away from the importance of the cinema. I see pausing at home therefore as an advantage, though I understand Andrew’s perspective of temporality in this light. However, those popcorn people are the same people that will pause incessantly just for the very reason that the cinema is not important to them. Their cinematic

outings are more about the event status of movie-going (in all its cultural studies implications) than that of the phenomenological experience of cinema. Essentially, those viewers that do care for the cinema, that are trained by the cinema to view in particular and purist ways, will always regard cinema with a certain respect and an understanding that it is a particular, and, in many ways, unique object. These are the people that understand *décalage*, and will continue to understand it, even in their home-viewing theatres.

I was lucky enough to attend a recent presentation of Andrew’s at Concordia University. He primarily discussed this article and read excerpts. At one point in the conversation he discussed “The Exemplary” of cinema, and how *décalage* is particularly pertinent in these examples. There is a whole other counter-argument that could be developed, but there is no space here to do so. However, I bring this up to warn of a potentially disastrous path that this discussion of the importance of *décalage* could take. This is definitely not the way cinema studies should hope to retain validity, by being even more elitist than it already is. By privileging some examples of cinema over others, cinema studies would relegate itself to a thing of the past. If film studies wants to stay afloat in the age of convergence, reminiscing over cinema past would most definitely be counter-productive. It seems, “We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

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## FOOTNOTES

1 Tom Gunning, “What’s the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

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## FILMOGRAPHY

*Law And Order* (NBC, 1990)

*Homicide: Life On The Street* (NBC, 1993)

*The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999)

*Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001)

*Deadwood* (HBO, 2004)

*True Blood* (HBO, 2008)

*The Wire* (HBO, 2002)

*Only The Lonely* (Chris Columbus, 1991)

And a nod to *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1995)

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