

The Raw Material of Film History

CASPER TYBJERG

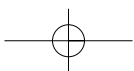
In the following, I shall try to offer some reflections on film preservation from the perspective of a film historian. When I speak of “The Raw Material of Film History”, it may perhaps seem obvious that I am referring to films. Yet film historians may draw on many different kinds of source material when composing their accounts, and some do not use films at all. In their book *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985) Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery write: “For certain investigations, film viewing is really an inappropriate research method ...”¹

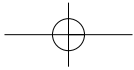
One may well ask: Why inappropriate? Allen and Gomery indicate a number of problems with film viewing as a research method. It keeps many kinds of research questions hidden from view, involving social issues and economic issues. Distribution and exhibition are important areas of study where looking at films may not provide the researcher with any information he or she needs. Furthermore, there is the suggestion in Allen and Gomery’s book that it is hard to maintain the necessary scholarly rigor if one’s attention is distracted by the fleeting and glamorous images on the movie screen. Film viewing, perhaps, is too much fun.

Allen and Gomery are very concerned to make film history more rigorous, but this should not rule out trying to find ways of giving sense to film viewing as a research method. This is often called “placing the films themselves” at the centre of research. To exemplify this, I shall briefly describe two approaches that take “the films themselves” as their object of research: *constructivism* and *neo-formalist historical poetics*.

But this gives rise to a new question - what exactly are “the films themselves”? How stable is the identity of a given film? When we speak of a particular title, can we be certain that we refer to the same thing? There are different ways of questioning the films themselves. More emphasis can be placed on the fact that many films exist in differing versions and variants. This will raise interest in learning the reasons for the choices that have to be made between different versions, making manifest the importance of critical documentation.² Carefully documented critical reconstructions may help to demonstrate the complex identity of many films. Researchers may begin to examine the film as a material object, looking at the history of individual prints. Questions of provenance and survival lead to a consideration of the history and politics of archiving, and more widely, the place of films in collective memory.

As an approach to film research, the label “constructivist” has been used by a group of German scholars to identify their position. In a programmatic article from 1989, Werner Faulstich argued that the basis of film history must be the analysis of individual films: “The writing of history as a reality-founded construct must in my view proceed from what is **given** rather than filter and colour it through historicist-hermeneutical





or radical-constructivist glasses. And the one unquestionable given is for me ... the films themselves.”³ When Faulstich and his colleague Helmut Korte call their position “constructivist,” what they are referring to is what they regard as the constructed nature of all large-scale historical concepts. They reject the notions most film histories use to structure their accounts: nationality, periodization, movements, -isms, and so on. These concepts force the films into a pre-existing interpretive framework, which is why they call the use of such concepts “historicist-hermeneutical.” While they deny that such concepts have any real existence, they do not adopt the “radical-constructivist” position of saying that *everything* is made up, either.

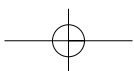
Faulstich and Korte applied their principles as editors of the five-volume *Fischer Filmgeschichte* (1990-95). In their general preface, they write: “Film history to us means first and foremost: the history of individual films, that is, *product history*.”⁴ The work as a whole consists of a collection of analyses of individual films, one for each year (more or less) of the history of the cinema. Strikingly, there is rarely any mention of the material used for the analyses, and where it appears, it is generally on the lines of “According to the video edition issued by Atlas Film.”⁵ While there is an insistence on the work as a given, the issue of whether the work can be unproblematically represented by a videotape is not discussed.

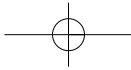
By and large, these issues are not addressed either by the American scholars whose work have been grouped together under the designation “historical poetics.” The term was introduced by David Bordwell to describe an alternative to interpretive criticism that studies “how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects.”⁶ The approach has been ably summarized in an article by Henry Jenkins for the anthology *Approaches to Popular Film* (1995). A central point, he writes, is the belief that “historical explanations must start with the work itself and move gradually towards its most immediate contexts rather than adopt global or transhistorical theories.”⁷ Where the analyses of the constructionists tend to focus on narrative structure, historical poetics are more preoccupied with stylistic devices and their practical functioning, seeking to get away from interpretive practices that seek to assign meanings to them.

When it comes to the understanding of the object itself, the clearest formulations may be found in the work of film-philosopher Noël Carroll, whose work shares many of the same objectives as historical poetics. He writes in an essay entitled “*Ontology of the Moving Image*”:

The film performance is generated from a template – standardly a film print, but it might also be a videotape or a laser disk or a computer program. These templates are tokens; each one of them can be destroyed and each one can be assigned a spatial location. But the film – say *Broken Blossoms* by D. W. Griffith – is not destroyed when any of the prints are destroyed, including the negative or master. Indeed, all the prints can be destroyed and the film will survive if a laser disk does, or if a collection of photos of all the frames does ...⁸

Film historians, even those whose explicit goal has been to place the “films themselves” at the centre of their research, have largely overlooked the problems posed by the





*Hidden behind the curtain of time?
(From "Atlantis" by August Blom,
1913). Photo: Nordisk Film/DFI*

materiality of films. A film exists in the form of prints; these may differ from each other in a number of ways. There may be quantitative differences: multiple negatives shot from different cameras (a common practice in the silent period), censorship cuts, and differing versions for different markets where both images and intertitles may vary; there can also be qualitative differences: genealogical distance from original, base (nitrate, acetate, etc.), format (16 mm, 35 mm, etc.), colouring, chemical decay, and wear and tear.

A few scholars with a background in archiving have assiduously maintained the importance of these differences between individual prints of the "same" film, none more so than Paolo Cherchi Usai. In his *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, the most important points are presented as "rules", set off from the main text in black-bordered boxes. Rule 9 runs as follows:

Every print of a film is a unique object, with its own physical and aesthetic characteristics, and should not be treated as identical to other prints of the same title.⁹

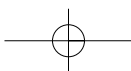
He writes this in the context of viewing notes, insisting that any conscientious scholar must take care to indicate exactly which print of a given film he or she has seen. Cherchi Usai emphasizes the differences between prints and, indeed, between viewing situations. In his polemical and aphoristic little book, *The Death of Cinema*, he argues that each individual screening of a film is essentially different from every other, and that they should not be regarded as any more comparable than performances of musical works:

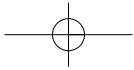
The nature of the light source, the apparatus, the physical structure of the image carrier ... and the physical structure in which the event occurs are variables which have the power to determine the quality of visual perception and its patterns. Given their huge number, each with its vast potential for mutation ..., preservation of the moving image ought to be treated as an equivalent to musical performance. As with the moving image, each aural experience is in fact a unique event; both are subject to variations due to their transfer to another object (musical score and matrix), their display (concert and screening), their repetition (sound recording and viewing print).¹⁰

This is a radical position, which threatens to dissolve the "films themselves" into an effectively infinite number of unique objects and events.

Still, Cherchi Usai's combative pronouncements force us to consider the issues with care. They certainly force those film historians who work complacently with videotapes to think about whether they are not missing something crucial. They make plain the importance of original materials, and they serve to keep the aesthetic dimensions of film viewing in firmly sight, even in the context of the most rigorous scholarly investigations.

Another example of the passionate engagement with nitrate originals can be found in the article "*Nitrate Take Care*" by Mark-Paul Meyer, who is equally insistent on their vital historical importance: "In the case of a duplicate you are one generation further away from the original.





It is as if a curtain had been interposed between the original and the new print, the curtain of time ... this curtain of time will always be noticeable to anyone who is sensitive to a direct relationship with the so-called pro-filmic, the people and objects in front of the camera, as if you could almost touch and feel them.¹¹

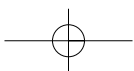
Some people may regard this as fetishistic, and perhaps it is. Nevertheless, I believe that it is an attitude that should be cultivated, not least in students. There certainly are numerous film scholars to whom the importance of working with original materials and sources is so obvious that it barely seems worth mentioning; but in my experience, there are many places where this is insufficiently appreciated. I think much more can be done to expose aspiring film historians to the lure of the archive.

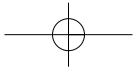
The fascination of working with original materials should not be underestimated. I remember how striking it was to see a roll of tinted nitrate film for the first time, looking not black, but strangely multi-coloured, the tints having dyed the whole width of the film strip, including the edges. The past becomes palpable.

Perhaps it is the strength of the fascination that the object can exert that has led preservationists like Paolo Cherchi Usai to insist on the uniqueness of the individual print, as he does with his Rule 9. Taken to its logical extreme, this leads to the conclusion that each print is given the status of an independent artwork, like a painting. That, however, represents a denial of the mechanical reproducibility of film and renders any restoration efforts effectively futile, because duplication, copying, is necessarily involved in them.

With paintings and suchlike, the artwork resides in a single, unique object; this is not the case with film, as even Cherchi Usai admits.¹² For that reason, even though film restorers may find that there is much useful inspiration to be had from the field of art restoration, it provides an imperfect analogue. A more apt one, I would like to suggest, may perhaps be found in the field of *codicology* (other suggestions may be found elsewhere in this volume). Codicology is a historical subdiscipline, a technical tool, like palaeography (the study of ancient handwriting). It is defined, in a recent introduction to the historian's craft, as "the study of handwritten books as archaeological objects, including the study of the materials (parchment, paper), of the bindings, of cataloguing, and of preservation problems for manuscripts."¹³ Another formulation states that codicology "concerns itself with the technical preparation of tools and the writing surface"¹⁴ including the way codices were made and the layout of their pages.

The codicologist, accordingly, studies objects, but whereas the object the art restorer deals with *is* the work of art, the codicologist deals with a carrier. It may of course be argued that the film's visual qualities are crucially dependent on the properties of the print and cannot be faithfully copied, while a text found in an ancient codex remains the same work if copied accurately. While there is some truth in this, the process of copying is integral to the very nature of film. For instance, if an archive possesses the original negative of a film and strikes a new print from it, it seems highly unreasonable to claim that the new print is not the same work. I think the analogy with codicology help us keep two things in mind: on the one hand, that the existence





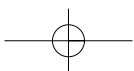
of the film artwork is not tied to a particular carrier; and on the other hand, that the study of the carriers requires important technical skills that are not necessarily closely tied to the skills the film historian uses in the study of the works.

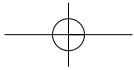
Splitting these two sets of skills apart may well be regarded as deplorable and unwise. Certainly, the most eminent theorists of art restoration insist that restoration is (also) an act of art appreciation which must be grounded in a thorough art-historical knowledge of the *work*, not (just) of the object and its properties. In practice, though, the split is often a fact, even in the field of art restoration. In some places (like Denmark), the technical skills required in conservation work are taught at institutions completely separate from the university departments where art-historical scholars are taught. This entails a number of obvious problems. Codicology, however, is not a completely independent discipline but a technical tool, a domain of specialized knowledge. It is connected to historical source criticism and especially to textual criticism, understood as “the technique of restoring texts as nearly as possible to their original form.”¹⁵ Textual criticism, with its tracing of genealogies and lines of descent, its efforts to establish the relationships between different and often incomplete copies of the same work, is as important for the film restorer as art restoration theory. And codicology can be described as the branch of textual criticism that deals with the carrier, the physical object, and therefore provides a good analogy for the activities of those who work directly with old prints. As the codicologist deals with the “external characteristics of the written heritage,”¹⁶ so the film preservationist deals with the external characteristics of the cinematographic heritage.

Encouraging close attention to the artifact and thinking about what status it should have is likely to awaken an interest in the handiwork of restorers. This is why careful documentation is so important; it allows later restorers and historians not only to learn what sort of technical work was carried out, but also to get an understanding of the theories, convictions, even prejudices that shaped the restoration. Indeed, we may discover that the methods and protocols of film restorers can have significant consequences for the way supposedly “given” artworks become available for study.

The print is a cultural artifact which has a history of its own. As Paolo Cherchi Usai writes: “The silent film we are about to watch is not an abstract entity... It is the survivor of a complex, often random process of selection, not much different from a Darwinian evolutionary scheme.”¹⁷ While random forces are perhaps the most important, those that reflect deliberate choices have understandably attracted much more attention. Recently, there has been considerable interest in the issue of collective memory, “the ways in which present concerns determine what part of the past we remember and how we remember it.”¹⁸ The reasons why things - including films - are kept and shown are part of this. Many accounts emphasize how such present concerns often lead to fierce struggles between groups with different opinions of what should be remembered and what should be forgotten.¹⁹

A highly provocative discussion of these issues can be found in *Cultural Selection* (1996) by Gary Taylor, one of the editors of the *Oxford Shakespeare*. As his title’s play on “natural selection” suggests, Taylor espouses an insouciant cultural Darwinism. He freely makes use of the vocabulary of evolutionary biology, speaking of “cultural

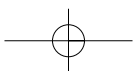


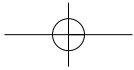


niches” and referring to artworks as “stimuli.” Taylor emphasizes the power of *editors*, a term he uses to encompass all those whose work affects the survival of texts and artworks, including restorers, curators, and so on. Their activities, in his view, reveal political motives and have political consequences. Discussing the status of Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*, he writes: “...those stimuli could only be created in a racist cultural niche; they could be perpetuated in collective memory only by editors, by mediums, who were at least tolerant of racist representations of the world.”²⁰

This attitude of suspicion and mistrust, determined to see unsavoury hidden motives behind apparently benevolent acts, and while we may often think our predecessors made mistaken choices, it is too easy to paint them as villains, because that tends to let ourselves off the hook. Rather, we should approach their work respectfully, with the assumption that they were animated by motives similar to those that we believe ourselves to have. Only that way can we begin to learn from their mistakes; and while we are probably as blind to our own prejudices as they were to theirs, perhaps we can try to make them more visible to our successors and help them undo the damage we cause.

For an interesting and illustrative example, I would like to turn to art history. In 2000, the State Museum of Art in Copenhagen undertook the restoration of one of the largest Danish pre-20th-century Danish paintings: *Kristus i de dødes Rige* [*Christ in the Land of the Dead*] by Joakim Skovgaard, painted 1892-95, an immense canvas measuring 350 x 580 centimeters. The restoration was carried out in public, which not only served to attract attention to *Sjælebilleder*, a large exhibition of symbolist art held later that year at the State Museum, but also made the restoration work visible. Less obviously, it also formed a new chapter in the contentious history of the painting, which well exemplifies the way history, even the history of art, is often fiercely contested.





The State Museum of Art refused to buy the painting when it was first exhibited, and although it relented in 1911, it was long considered something of an embarrassment.²¹ It was finally removed from display in 1966, and since it was too large to store as it was, it was removed from its frame and rolled up. For the next quarter of a century no one saw the painting; there did not even exist a colour photograph of it. The Danish symbolist painters of the 1890s were long out of favour with art historians, who tended to ignore them in favour of the aggressively colourful modernists who followed them in the early 20th century. Only since the early 1990s has this really begun to change. An important indication was the publication of a new multi-volume history of Danish art which had an entire volume on symbolism and impressionism; characteristically, its author was not an art historian but a historian of literature, Henrik Wivel.²²

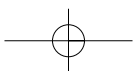
Wivel is scathing in his attacks on the way the symbolists have been made to disappear from view. He writes about *Kristus i de dødes Rige*: "...that this in every way nerve-wracking masterpiece now, a century later, is still hedged about with prejudice at the State Museum of Art can be seen, or, precisely, not seen, from the fact that it since 1966 has lain rolled up in the museum's basement."²³ The State Museum's handling of the painting had become controversial, and the worry that it had suffered serious damage in storage (or would do so if unrolled) was perhaps a reason for the museum not only to do something about it, but to be seen to do so.

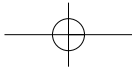
Be that as it may, the museum made a point of putting the conservation on show; the painting as object became the centre of attention. The conservation could be followed by the museum's visitors, and photos showing the gradual progress of the work were posted on the museum's website. After the completion of the conservation, the work was documented in a very nicely produced little book.²⁴

While it might not be possible or useful to give prints a place in collective memory, it may nevertheless be worth trying to give the objects a history: to insist on detailed documentation, to make public presentations that highlight restoration and reconstruction work, to draw attention to the qualities of particular prints - and not only their defects, and to display fragments whose very incompleteness draw attention to the vicissitudinous processes that have allowed some films to survive and consigned many more to oblivion. Perhaps this will encourage us film historians to reflect a little more upon the precariousness of what we too often regard as given, the efforts required to preserve and prepare the "raw material" for our work.

NOTES

1. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 38.
2. The importance of thorough documentation in film restoration is well described in Michele Canosa, Gian Luca Farinelli, and Nicola Mazzanti, "Black on White: Notes on Film Restoration: The Documentation," *Cinegraphie* 10 (1997).
3. Werner Faulstich, "Filmanalyse als Filmgeschichte: Prinzipien einer konstruktivistischen Filmgeschichtsschreibung," in *Filmgeschichte schreiben: Ansätze, Entwürfe und Methoden*, ed. Knut Hickethier (Berlin: Sigma, 1989), 56 (emphasis added).





4. Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte, "Vorwort der Herausgeber zum Gesamtprojekt," in *Fischer Filmgeschichte*, ed. Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 9.
5. Jürgen Felix, "Die Anfänge der Slapstick Comedy: *Arbeit (Work, 1915)*," in *Fischer Filmgeschichte*, ed. Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 264.
6. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 266-67. See also David Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," in *The Cinematic Text. Methods and Approaches*, ed. Barton Palmer (New York: AMS Press, 1989).
7. Henry Jenkins, "Historical Poetics," in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 100.
8. Noël Carroll, "Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image," in *Philosophy and Film*, ed. Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg (New York: Routledge, 1995), 77.
9. Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI, 2000), 147.
10. Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001), 103.
11. Mark-Paul Meyer, "Nitrate, Take Care!," in *Restauro, conservazione e distruzione dei film*, ed. Luisa Comencini and Matteo Pavesi, *Quaderni Fondazione Cineteca Italiana* (Milano: Il Castoro, 2001), 55.
12. Cherchi Usai's Rule 10 runs: "The 'original' version of a film is a multiple object fragmented into a number of different entities equal to the number of surviving copies." (Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, 160.)
13. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 56.
14. James W. Marchand, *What is Codicology?* ([cited 31 October 2001]); available from <http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~smcarey/whaticodicology.html>.
15. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "textual criticism: "Textual criticism in this sense is usually called *filologia* in Italian; see, particularly, Michele Canosa, "Per una teoria del restauro cinematografico," in *Storia del cinema mondiale*, ed. Gian Piero Brunetta (Torino: Einaudi, 2001).
16. Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and David Ganz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 20.
17. Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, 44.
18. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience*, British Paperback ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 3.
19. For some examples, all primarily concerned with World War Two, see Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), and Claus Bryld and Anette Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring: Historie- og traditionsforvaltning af krig og besættelse 1945-1997* (København: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 1998).
20. Gary Taylor, *Cultural Selection: Why Some Achievements Survive the Test of Time - and Others Don't* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 140.
21. For the early debates over the painting, see Bente Scavenius, "Et omstridt gigantbillede," in *Kunstværkets krav: 27 fortolkninger af danske kunstværker*, ed. Ernst Jonas Bencard, Anders Kold, and Peter S. Meyer (København: Fogtdal, 1990).
22. Henrik Wivel, *Symbolisme og impressionisme*, vol. 5, *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie 1-10* (København: Fogtdal, 1994; reprint, 1995: *Den store stil: Dansk symbolisme og impressionisme omkring år 1900*). It does not stand alone, of course. Among other things, one should certainly mention an important exhibition of Danish symbolist art held in 1993 which - according to the catalogue - was the first of its kind (Hanne Honnens de Lichtenberg, ed., *Symbolismen i dansk kunst: Udstillingskatalog* (Nivaagaards Malerisamling, 1993), 3).
23. Wivel, *Symbolisme og impressionisme*, 243.
24. Henrik Bjerre and Peter Nørgaard Larsen, *Skovgaard-konserveringen* (København: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2000).

