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Researching Film and History: Sources, Methods, Approaches

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INTRODUCTION

Film has been the pre-eminent modern mass medium and, as such, offers a valuable source for the historian. That it is also a highly problematic source, however, is evident from the fact that relatively few historians seem willing or able to engage with the medium. Partly this may reflect an entrenched cultural resistance toward what is often regarded as an ephemeral and low-brow medium of popular entertainment. But it may also arise from an uncertainty within the historical profession over the nature of film both as a source and as a form of historical communication. The US academic Professor Robert A. Rosenstone has suggested that ‘the topic of history and film... still must be seen as a field (or a sub-field or a sub-sub-field) in search of a methodology’ (Rosenstone, 2006: 165). Rosenstone’s assertion makes a provocative starting point for a historiographical discussion of history and film. This chapter will provide a short summary of the emergence of film history as an academic discipline; it will consider the nature and value of

film as a historical source; it will demonstrate how we can interpret film from a historical perspective as both a social document and a cultural artifact; and it will evaluate the possibilities and limitations of film as a medium of historical communication. What I hope to demonstrate is that, far from being a ‘field in search of a methodology,’ film history is a distinctive area of historical inquiry that has reached a state of methodological sophistication that belies Rosenstone’s claim.

A SHORT HISTORY OF FILM HISTORY

While the history of film dates back to the invention of the medium in the 1890s—the first public film shows occurred in 1895 when the Skladanowsky brothers projected their Bioskop in Berlin and the Lumière brothers unveiled their Cinématographe in Paris—the academic study of film is a much more recent development. The first histories of film were written in the late 1920s, such as

Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926) and Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930), and tended to privilege an aesthetic history that argued for film as an art form and therefore focused on a relatively narrow selection of important films from the major film-producing countries (the USA, France, Germany, Russia, and Britain). It was not until the 1960s, however, that film was being taught as a subject in American and British universities—often, in those days, as an adjunct to English literature—and that the first academic journals appeared in the form of the historically oriented *Journal of the University Film Association* and the more theoretically inclined *Screen Education*. The arrival of film on the university curriculum prompted the establishment of professional associations for film researchers, such as the Society for Education in Film and Television (Britain), the Society for Cinema Studies (USA), and the International Association for Media and History.

The key period for the emergence of film history was during the 1960s and 1970s. This period saw the publication of important scholarly texts that did much to shape the nature of the discipline. Robin Wood's *Hitchcock's Films* (1965) was the first English-language text to adopt the French '*politique des auteurs*' and apply it to the study of a popular filmmaker.¹ Jim Kitses's *Horizons West* (1969) and Colin McArthur's *Underworld USA* (1971) laid the foundations of genre criticism in their studies of the American Western and gangster film. Raymond Durgnat's *A Mirror for England* (1970), Jeffrey Richards's *Visions of Yesterday* (1973), and Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (1975) were social histories of film arguing that popular films could be understood as reflections of the cultural and ideological currents prevailing in the societies in which they were made. Richard Taylor's *Film Propaganda* (1979) was the first comparative analysis of how the state-controlled film industries of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany embraced cinema as an instrument of mass persuasion. And Marc Ferro's *Cinema and History* (1977) and Pierre

Sorlin's *The Film in History* (1980) represented the first attempts to theorize the nature of historical representation in film.

The entry of film into the academic curriculum led, perhaps inevitably, certainly regrettably, to a schism within the field that divided on methodological and ideological lines. On the one hand, emerging principally from an English literature background, was a tradition of high theory that adopted linguistic methods of semiotics and structuralism and applied them to the textual analysis of film. '*Screen theory*' (as it became known after the journal in which much of this research appeared) attempted to move beyond the aesthetic criticism and quality judgments that informed conventional film criticism (especially the '*auteur theory*') and to understand cinema as an ideological apparatus. To this end it drew upon a range of theoretical perspectives from Althusserian Marxism to Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Screen theory* might be seen as an attempt to construct a totalizing theory of cinema, but it was criticized for its tendency to homogenize films in a way that did not allow for differences between texts and to see the cinema spectator as a theoretical construct rather than as groups of historical individuals. On the other hand, emerging principally from social and cultural history, another approach privileged context rather than text, exploring the historical conditions under which films were made and documenting their production and reception through the available primary sources. Film historians understand the meaning of films to arise not from the decoding of films by a theoretical spectator but rather from the relationship between films and the societies in which they were produced and consumed. This approach has been criticized, in turn, for reading films as a crude 'reflection' or 'mirror' of society and for not paying due attention to their status as cultural artifacts. The institutionalization of the intellectual differences between the two schools was exemplified in the direction of the two leading film journals. While *Screen* has been at the vanguard of theoretical developments in the field (including psychoanalysis

in the 1970s, gender studies in the 1980s, and reception theory in the 1990s), the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* is the leading forum for those seeking to locate films in their social, political, and economic contexts.

Since the mid-1980s, however, the ideological cold war between the film theory and film history schools has thawed and their proponents have become less trenchant in their criticisms of the other. The emergence of what has been called 'New Film History' has seen a more holistic and inclusive approach that combines both textual and contextual analysis.² The most influential publication in this regard was David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), a *magnum opus* that looked at the US film industry between the late 1910s and c. 1960 as a 'mode of film practice' in which the institutionalization of an industrial method of filmmaking (the studio system) was intimately connected to the ascendancy of a particular style of film (the 'classical' feature film). The authors use both films and other primary sources, such as scripts, technical manuals, and trade journals, to demonstrate how 'style and industry came to be so closely synchronized' in the Hollywood studios (Bordwell et al., 1985: 9).

New Film History has three particular characteristics. The first is its greater level of methodological sophistication. It understands films neither as a straightforward reflection of social trends nor as 'texts' waiting to be decoded through the application of theory, but rather as complex cultural artifacts whose content and style is determined by a range of historical processes (including, but not limited to, industrial practices, economic constraints, relations with external bodies, the interventions of producers and censors, and the role of individual creative agency within the filmmaking process). It also recognizes that the production and reception of films are historically specific and seeks out evidence of actual responses rather than assuming a homogeneous audience. This relates to the second element of New Film History: the

central importance of primary sources. These include both the films themselves and non-filmic sources such as company records, personal papers, scripts, diaries, letters, publicity materials, reviews, and box-office receipts. The third characteristic of New Film History is its cultural competence in reading films through both their narrative content and their visual style. One of the criticisms leveled against the work of some film historians is the tendency to read films solely as narratives, as if they were novels, without any acknowledgement that films also create meaning through their *mise-en-scène*—a term that refers to the formal and visual properties of film, including set design, art direction, lighting, costumes, and editing. Film style is historically and culturally specific—movements such as the German expressionist cinema of the early 1920s or the American *film noir* cycle between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s arose from particular conditions and circumstances—and the film historian must be alert to changes in fashion and popular taste in order to understand the history of film style.

A note on film preservation and archiving

All history is determined, in the first instance, by the nature and extent of the sources that are available. In this sense film historical research faces the same challenges as other areas of history: often it is based on an archival record that is fragmentary and incomplete. For such a modern medium, it may seem surprising that there are so many gaps in the archival materials. This is particularly true of the period before the 1930s. It has been estimated that up to three-quarters of 'early cinema' (c. 1895–1905) no longer survives. Our knowledge of this formative period in the history of the medium is, therefore, based on a sample of films that may not be entirely representative. Early works by important filmmakers such as John Ford and F. W. Murnau remain 'lost,' and other films survive only in fragments. Even some of the

great ‘classics,’ such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) and Abel Gance’s *Napoléon* (1927), exist today only in versions that have been restored through the painstaking efforts of archivists and historians but which may be different from the films as they were originally screened. This calls into question the idea of there being a ‘definitive’ version of the film. It may never be possible to see these important films in the form in which they were originally released.

Why has so much of our film heritage been lost? There are two principal reasons. For one thing film is a highly perishable medium: celluloid film stock decays more rapidly than paper.³ Today, many films are transferred onto digital media—some are even created digitally—but the long-term stability of these media is still uncertain. Film also tends to be seen as an ephemeral medium. For early distributors and exhibitors, especially, films were a commodity that would be screened for a few days and then forgotten when the next batch arrived. It was not until the 1930s that any serious attention was given to film preservation when archives such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Film Library in London and the Cinémathèque Française in Paris began collecting prints of films for posterity. Even then the film preservation movement has struggled against the ingrained attitude that film was and is foremost a commodity rather than a historical source or an art form. As Ernest Lindgren, curator of the National Film Library, observed in 1948: ‘The word “archive” rings with a deathly sound in the world of cinema, which is so young, vital and dynamic, eager for the future and impatient of the past’ (Lindgren, 1947: 47).

The nature of film as a historical source

All films comprise moving images recorded through a technical process of photomechanical reproduction and most films consist of multiple images edited together

in sequence. The unique formal property of film is its photographic representation of external reality: for this reason film has been claimed as the most realistic of all media. The influential French critic André Bazin, for example, averred that film represented ‘an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time’ (Bazin, 1967: 21). Perhaps the nearest that the medium has ever come to this ideal was in the early ‘*actualités*’ of the Lumière brothers: simple films of everyday events such as workers leaving the factory gate or of a train arriving in a station.

Early cinematographers, certainly, made great claims for their medium as a historical document. In 1898, for example, the Polish cinematographer Boleslas Matuszewski, whose films included records of the Coronation of Tsar Nicholas II and the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, gave a lecture in Paris where he described film as ‘a new source of history’ and expressed his belief that ‘animated photography could become a singularly efficacious teaching process’ (Matuszewski, 1995: 322). Matuszewski held that cinematography, even more so than still photography, had a unique quality of authenticity or ‘truth’:

Perhaps the cinematograph does not give history in its entirety, but what it does deliver is incontestable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography admits of *retouching*, to the point of transformation. But try to retouch, in an identical way for each figure, these thousand or twelve hundred, almost microscopic negatives!... One could say that animated photography has a character of authenticity, accuracy and precision that belongs to it alone. It is the ocular evidence that is truthful and infallible *par excellence*. (Matuszewski, 1995: 323)

Much of the appeal of early cinema was its ability to present images of people and places to its patrons. Two of the earliest film genres were ‘topicals’ (records of newsworthy events) and ‘scenics’ (travelogues of foreign places and landscapes). The films of the Delhi Durbars of 1903 and 1911—great

Orientalist spectacles welcoming first Edward VII and then George V as Emperor of India—could be included in both these categories.

Matuszewski's belief in the 'absolute truth' of the cinematograph, however, does not stand up to scrutiny. Indeed, never has there been a more misleading dictum than 'the camera never lies.' Early cinematographers were not averse to reconstructing events for the camera if they were unable to capture the original event. The French pioneer Georges Méliès produced films of the sinking of the battleship *USS Maine* (1898) and the Coronation of Edward VII (1901) that were entirely recreated in the studio: the latter film was actually shot before the event itself! To be fair to the early pioneers, their intention was not necessarily to deceive the audience and such films were often acknowledged as studio reconstructions. British pioneer R. W. Paul, for example, produced a series of topical films entitled *Reproductions of Incidents of the Boer War* 'arranged under the supervision of an experienced military officer from the front.' As far as evidence of the reception of these films is available, it would suggest that early cinema patrons did not distinguish between real and reconstructed films.

The question of actuality versus reconstruction is best exemplified by the case of the first long (feature-length) documentary film: *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). *The Battle of the Somme* was a compilation of footage shot at the front by two British War Office cinematographers, Geoffrey Malins and J. B. McDowell, on the first day of the major British offensive against the German positions (1 July 1916). Malins and McDowell shot film of the opening artillery bombardment, the explosion of a giant mine under Hawthorn Ridge, British troops on the way to the front, scenes at a first aid station showing wounded British and captured German troops, and captured German trenches. When the rushes of this material were shown to the Topical Committee for War Films in London—an organization set up to supervise films about the front for public

consumption—it was decided they should be edited into a full-length feature film. *The Battle of the Somme* was first shown in London on 21 August 1916 and a general release across the country followed a week later *The Battle of the Somme*, 2010.

The reception of *The Battle of the Somme* has been well documented: it evidently had an enormous impact on the British public and there are reports of hundreds of thousands of people flocking to see it (Badsey, 1983; Reeves, 1997). Reviews in both the national press and the trade papers were much impressed by its vivid and authentic pictures of the front. One sequence in particular was much commented upon: where a platoon of soldiers goes 'over the top' and two fall dead. Among those who saw the film was the author Sir Henry Rider Haggard, who recorded in his diary that the film:

...does give a wonderful idea of the fighting. "The most impressive [shot] to my mind," is that of a regiment scrambling out of a trench to charge and of the one man who slides back shot dead. There is something appalling about the instantaneous change from fierce activity to supine death. (Badsey, 1983: 84)

As film archivist Roger Smither has conclusively demonstrated, however, these shots that created such an impact were staged for the camera behind the lines. There are numerous visual clues. The trench is too shallow for the front line and there is no barbed wire on the parapet; the troops themselves are lightly equipped and are not wearing field backpacks; the position of the camera is too exposed for this to have been taken under enemy fire; and the clinching detail is that one of the 'dead' soldiers who falls forward onto barbed wire can then be seen crossing his legs. How far does this compromise *The Battle of the Somme* as an authentic historical record? Smither points out that 'the proportion of such film to the whole work is actually quite small' and that the vast majority of *The Battle of the Somme* is indeed the real thing (Smither, 1988: 160). The inclusion of a small amount of 'faked' film in *The Battle*

of the *Somme* does not detract from its value as a historical source.

Regardless of whether a film image is indeed what it purports to be, or whether it has been reconstructed for the camera after the event, no film can ever claim to be an unmediated reproduction of reality. Films are highly mediated texts: choices have been made about what to film, where to place the camera, which shots to select, and the sequence in which they are edited together. This is true even of the most straightforward 'actualité' films. The Lumières' films *Workers Leaving the Factory Gate* and *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895) both consist of one shot under a minute in length. In both films the camera is placed in a position that approximates the point of view of a spectator watching the event, but whereas the first film is shot in a side-on tableau frame, the second is shot at an angle that makes it seem that the locomotive is heading toward the camera. This accounts for the reaction of audiences, who reportedly moved out of the way as the train approached. In the sense that the train in the film is not a real train, but rather a visual image of a train, then the film medium should be understood not as a *reproduction* of reality but rather as a *representation* of it.

The notion that film represents the external world through its own formal codes and conventions underlies what has been called the 'formative' tradition in film theory. The early film theorist Rudolf Arnheim, for example, recognized that filmmakers soon started to explore the formal possibilities of the medium:

What had hitherto been merely the urge to record certain events now became the aim to represent objects by means exclusive to film. These means obtrude themselves, show themselves able to do more than simply reproduce the required object; they sharpen it, impose a style upon it, point out special features, make it vivid and decorative. Art begins where mechanical reproduction leaves off, where the conditions of representation serve in some way to mould the object. (Arnheim, 1958: 55)

Arnheim goes on to list the ways in which film could be made to differ from external

reality, including the framing of the image, optical effects such as fades and dissolves, and the use of editing (or montage) to disrupt the continuities of space and time.

One of the unique properties of film, and one that problematizes its status as a historical source, is its ability to create an impression of reality through artifice. A good recent example of this is *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998), which is widely held to have set new standards of realism and authenticity in the representation of combat in a fiction film. Its sequence of the American D-Day landings on Omaha Beach, Normandy (France), on 6 June 1944, was described by critics as 'Hollywood's most grimly realistic and historically accurate depiction of a World II battlefield' and 'as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen' (Chapman, 2008: 21). Further evidence of the film's impact is to be found in the responses of Normandy veterans who spoke of 'powerful memories being reawakened.' Even military historians such as John Keegan and Stephen E. Ambrose averred that it exhibited 'historical truth' and was 'the most accurate and realistic depiction of war on screen that I have ever seen' (Chapman, 2008: 22–23).

Yet this 'most realistic' of combat movies is, of course, entirely fictitious (contrary to some accounts it is not based on a true story) and its 'graphic' war footage is the work of a master filmmaker with all the technical expertise and resources of Hollywood behind him. The publicity material around the film emphasized the lengths to which the filmmakers had gone to achieve the impression of realism. *Saving Private Ryan* is unusual even in this genre for its attention to visual and aural authenticity. Thus, in order to simulate the noise of bullets ripping into bodies the sound editor recorded rounds being fired into meat carcasses wrapped in cloth, while Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski used desaturated color and deliberately out-of-focus shots to replicate the 'look' of authentic combat footage. Archivist Toby Haggith has shown that, in fact, Spielberg over-egged the pudding, creating effects that

would have been impossible for a cameraman to achieve under combat conditions. For example, the shot of the first fatalities, machine-gunned as the ramp of their landing craft is lowered, is taken from outside the landing craft looking back toward it. Haggith concedes that ‘the Spielberg version of D-Day is a more impressive account of the event’ than the existing actuality footage of the landings, but nevertheless points out ‘the artificial and manipulative technique with which the battle has been recreated’ (Haggith, 2002: 348).

ANALYZING FILM AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

The historian may be interested in films as records of the past (actuality and documentary films), films as cultural artifacts (the historical analysis of film form, style, and aesthetics), or films as social documents (the idea that films reflect the values, attitudes, and assumptions of the societies in which they were produced and consumed). In using film the historian must ask the same questions as of any source: What was its provenance? Who made it and who saw it? Under what circumstances was it made, and with what intention? How widely was it disseminated, and what effects or consequences might it have had? Rarely, if at all, will the answers to these questions be evident solely from the film itself, and therefore film historical research must be supplemented by other sources such as company records, personal papers, scripts, diaries, letters, publicity materials, reviews, and box-office receipts. The availability of such material varies between countries and periods: the classical Hollywood film industry is well documented, as the archives of the major film studios have been deposited in research libraries, but elsewhere, particularly in the developing world, the archival record is patchy.

The term ‘film’ covers a wide range of forms, ranging from short ‘actuality’ scenes

to the fictional feature film, but as historical sources films tend to fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are films where the empirical content has value as a historical source: these tend to be non-fiction films—actuality, newsreels, and documentaries—that represent a particular event or subject. This is true no matter how heavily mediated the source is. Thus, for example, a newsreel of the liberation of Belsen provides a record of that event and also has some value as historical evidence for the extent of the Nazi extermination program and the physical condition of the survivors. And a documentary such as *Nanook of the North* (dir. Robert Flaherty, 1922), for all that we know that Flaherty staged scenes for the camera, nevertheless still acts as an ethnographic record of the daily life of an Eskimo and his family. On the other hand, there is the fictional feature film where the film’s value as a historical source is detached from its empirical content. For example, neither *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. D. W. Griffith, 1915) nor *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) would ever be used as sources for the American Civil War and its aftermath, any more than *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2000) tells us anything about the architecture of the Colosseum or the nature of Roman politics c. AD 180. What these films do reveal, however, is evidence of American attitudes toward race and gender in the 1910s and 1930s, while *Gladiator* has been interpreted as ‘a critique of Clintonian America’ (Richards, 2008: 176).

It will be clear that the different types of film will provide different sorts of historical evidence. For the historian interested in, for example, social conditions or leisure activities, the most useful type of film is likely to be unedited actuality film. This will often have been taken by local cameramen and may range from semi-professional to ‘home movie’ footage. Amateur filmmaking was a popular pastime between the 1920s and 1960s, though it tended to be more prosperous families who could afford cine-cameras (usually using 8 mm or 9.5 mm film) and so

the available material is weighted disproportionately in favor of the middle classes. The most famous 'home movie' footage is surely that shot by Eva Braun, which shows Adolf Hitler relaxing in his mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden. While it provides a fascinating insight into the 'home life' of the Führer, however, it is of little value in understanding the historical conditions of the Third Reich as it is, by its nature, restricted to an elite group around Hitler. But there is sufficient amateur footage from the period to suggest that a large proportion of the German people seemed happy and prosperous under the Third Reich: at the very least there was clearly ample time for leisure and sport.

Perhaps the type of film used most by the social historian is the edited non-fiction film. This provides visual evidence of material conditions, working practices, social customs and behavior, though it has gone through an extra layer of mediation than unedited footage. The most extensive collection of this sort of material in the world is believed to be that of the Lancashire filmmakers Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon, which comprises over 800 non-fiction subjects shot between the late 1890s and 1913 (Toulin et al., 2005). The Mitchell and Kenyon films were mostly actuality films of particular events that were shown in local cinemas under the banner: 'See yourself as others see you.' The interest of Mitchell and Kenyon's films lies in their representation of commonplace events, from football matches to days at the fairground. A type of film known as a 'phantom ride'—where a camera was attached to a moving tram—was popular around the turn of the century. These films are useful sources for urban and architectural historians as records of the modern city c. 1900.

These early 'topicals' can be seen as the precursors of the newsreel film. The first regular weekly newsreels were introduced c. 1910 and thereafter became institutionalized with the emergence of major newsreel companies such as Pathé, Gaumont, and Movietone. The chief value of the newsreels is in documenting what topical events were

reported to the public and how those events were represented. The newsreel is even more heavily mediated than the edited non-fiction film: editorial choices have been made about what to report; the film has been edited into a sequence; and, from the late 1920s, music and commentary have been added as an additional layer of exposition. The content of the newsreels was also subject to a range of institutional and political determinants. Anthony Aldgate's study of the British newsreels during the 1930s, for example, demonstrates that the newsreels promoted a consensual view of the major topical issues of the day and effectively endorsed the National Government's policies on rearmament and appeasement. Aldgate concludes that the newsreel companies 'knew that film was a medium which could easily be manipulated, and they knew how to manipulate the medium to best advantage' (Aldgate, 1979: 193).

One example must suffice to illustrate how the newsreels manipulated public opinion. British Movietone's *Epic of Dunkirk* (6 June 1940) is far from being an objective account of the withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force. It clearly sets out to place a positive 'spin' on events through its up-tempo music and jaunty commentary. The evacuation is presented as an unqualified success: commentary refers to 'the success of this amazing military exploit' and asserts that 'the story of that epic withdrawal will live in history both as a glorious example of discipline and as a monument to sea power.' There is no mention of casualties, and all the shots of British and French troops show them smiling and in good spirits. It can be seen as nothing less than an attempt to position Dunkirk as a victory rather than a defeat. And it makes clear where the blame lies: the 'gallant British and French troops [were] betrayed by the desertion of the Belgian king.' This is not to say that *Epic of Dunkirk* has no value as a historical source: merely, that that we must be alert that it is a highly mediated source.

The same is true of documentary films. Again, one example must suffice to illustrate a general point. *Triumph of the Will* (dir. Leni

Riefenstahl, 1935) was a film of the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg: it was compiled from 61 hours of film shot by 16 cameramen. On one level, of course, *Triumph of the Will* acts as a historical record of the rally, showing Hitler's arrival in Nuremberg and his speech to the party faithful. (The audience includes, ironically, Ernst Rohm and other members of the *Sturm Abteilung* who would be assassinated on Hitler's orders in the 'Night of the Long Knives' after the film was shot but before it was released.) On another level, however, *Triumph of the Will* is clearly a highly crafted piece of propaganda that uses film technique (editing, lighting, camera angles) to promote the idea of *Führerprinzip* (leadership) and create an impression of mass support for the regime. *Triumph of the Will* has been described as 'the most powerful propaganda film ever made' (Katz, 1996: 1151). To this extent the historical evidence it contains is largely of the sort that Arthur Marwick appropriately described as 'witting testimony' (Marwick, 1989: 216).

By contrast, the fictional feature film—which has been by far the dominant mode of filmmaking—is largely of value for the 'unwitting testimony' it contains. The feature film has been seen as 'a reflection of certain ideas and preoccupations' (Richards, 1973: xv) and as 'a primary source of information about society and human behavior for large masses of people' (Sklar, 1975: 316). This idea can be traced to the work of the German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer, whose book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) argued that the cinema of Weimar Germany provided a unique insight into the psychological state of the German people in the aftermath of the First World War. Kracauer maintained that films reflect society more directly than other cultural practices because film is a collective medium that has to satisfy the desires of a mass audience. 'What films reflect,' he claimed, 'are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness'

(Kracauer, 1947: 6). In particular, the distorted imagery of expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1919) and *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1922) was seen as reflecting the social dislocation and political instability of postwar Germany. This notion has since been much criticized and is no longer accepted uncritically. In particular, Kracauer's suggestion that these films revealed the unconscious inclination of the German people toward dictatorship, and thus anticipated the rise of Nazism, has been criticized for 'mixing weak history with flimsy psychology' and for reading 'too much out of the films through hindsight' (Monaco, 1976: 160). Most film historians, however, accept that—sometimes in general ways, other times in highly specific ways—feature films respond to and are informed by the cultural, social, and political contexts in which they are produced and consumed.

FILM AS A MEDIUM OF HISTORICAL COMMUNICATION

From the outset, film has been used to tell historical stories. Among the early kinetoscope films were *Joan of Arc* and *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*. Early narrative films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (dir. Edwin S. Porter, 1903) and *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (dirs. John and Nevin Tait, 1906) were based on 'true' stories of notorious criminals. The first historical epics were produced in Italy before the First World War: *Quo Vadis?* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1913) and *Cabiria* (dir. Giovanni Pastrone, 1914). These in turn influenced D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1913), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). The historical feature film, in one form or another, has been a staple of most national cinemas. Films such as the British *Scott of the Antarctic* (dir. Charles Frend, 1948) and the Australian *Gallipoli* (dir. Peter Weir, 1981) demonstrate the special relationship between

the historical film and the representation of national identity in cinema.

Most professional historians tend to be highly skeptical about the feature film as a medium of historical communication. They will typically focus on its historical inaccuracies, especially in arcane points of detail. A good example is the expert on arms and heraldry who took great delight in listing the many historical infelicities of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (dir. Alexander Korda, 1933). These included the Gentlemen of the Court wearing swords within the palace precincts, the king's shoe buckles being on the inside of his feet rather than the outside ('Mr Laughton wears his spurs like a cowboy'), the Earl of Essex not wearing his Lesser George Garter 'as he was bound to by the Statutes of the Order,' and the executioner of Anne Boleyn using a German fighting sword of 1580 (Beard, 1934: 124). While this level of criticism may seem absurdly pedantic, it is not unusual for historical films to provoke such nit-picking responses from historical experts.

A more general criticism of the historical film is its tendency to take liberties with recorded history for dramatic or ideological effect. A few examples will suffice to make this point. While there is no evidence to suggest that Charles I and Oliver Cromwell ever met, the film *Cromwell* (dir. Ken Hughes, 1970) contrives no fewer than three face-to-face meetings. *Mary, Queen of Scots* (dir. Charles Jarrott, 1971) also included two entirely fictitious meetings between Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I. The producers defended these invented incidents on the grounds of dramatic necessity: the films required them to provide 'big' moments of drama. This exemplifies the tendency of the historical feature film to represent history as biography rather than as social process. Sometimes, however, filmmakers are seen as taking too great a liberty. The *Daily Telegraph* was so outraged by *Elizabeth* (dir. Shekhar Kapur, 1998) that it published a leading article describing the film as 'a blackguardly slur upon a good Christian woman' for its

suggestion that the 'Virgin Queen' enjoyed a passionate sexual affair with the Earl of Leicester (Chapman, 2005: 6). *Braveheart* (dir. Mel Gibson, 1995) similarly provoked controversy by suggesting that William Wallace fathered the future Edward III by Princess Isabelle of Wales. And British critics were outraged when *U-571* (dir. Jonathan Mostow, 2001) showed the US Navy rather than the Royal Navy capturing the Enigma machine.

Have there been any historical films that met with the approval of historians? It would be fair to say that examples have been rare. Christopher Hill, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, and renowned social historian of the seventeenth century, was sufficiently impressed by *Winstanley* (dirs Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, 1975) that he gave the film his scholarly endorsement in the prestigious journal *Past and Present*:

Good historical films are sufficiently rare for it to be worth drawing attention to *Winstanley* Although made on a shoe-string budget, the film's detail is meticulously accurate, down to the shoes which the Diggers wear, the agricultural implements they use, the breed of animals they farm But more important than this convincing background is the imaginative reconstruction of the world in which the Diggers lived—still torn by social conflict, but one in which fundamental reform still seemed possible. The film can tell us more about ordinary people in seventeenth-century England than a score of textbooks. (Hill, 1975: 132)

Winstanley, however, was a very different kind of historical film from most. It was independently produced for the British Film Institute rather than for a commercial producer and was filmed using a cast of mostly non-professional actors—a technique that some filmmakers employ to elicit performances that seem more like 'real' people than recognizable actors.

Winstanley exemplifies what Rosenstone has termed 'the New History film.' This is a film that 'finds the space to contest history, to interrogate either the meta-narratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received notions, conventional

images' (Rosenstone, 1995: 8). Other examples of this type include *Hiroshima, mon amour* (dir. Alain Resnais, 1959), *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (dir. Hans-Jürgen Syderberg, 1977), and *Walker* (dir. Alex Cox, 1987). These films tend to be on the margins of commercial film culture and are often the work of directors with a highly self-conscious and formalist style.

There has always been a tradition of alternative historical filmmaking. This emerged first in the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s where a cycle of 'Jubilee' films, including *Strike* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), *The End of St Petersburg* (dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1927), *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (dir. Esther Shub, 1927), and *October* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1928), were commissioned to commemorate landmarks in the revolutionary struggle. These films are recognized as some of the most technically innovative in the history of cinema, especially for their use of montage—a form of rhythmic editing that saw the individual shot as a building block in the creation of meaning. They are also notable for their focus on the mass rather than the individual, thus representing history as a process rather than a personalized narrative. Yet they also took dramatic license in their representation of history. This is exemplified by the famous 'Odessa steps' sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* where Eisenstein employs montage to brilliant effect in depicting the massacre of demonstrators by Tsarist troops. Yet, as Richard Taylor reminds us, this not only lays claim to being 'the most famous sequence of images in the history of world cinema' but 'also provides a classic example of poetic license: a filmic creation of a historical event that in itself never happened but that encapsulates in *microcosm* the *macrocosmic* drama of the more general historical process' (Taylor, 2000: 35).

Rosenstone sees *Battleship Potemkin* and *October* as 'innovative historicals' that are more than works of propaganda. *October*, he claims, 'is also a work of history that can

stand beside written interpretations of the same topic' (Rosenstone, 2006: 51). He argues against the orthodox historical critique of film that focuses on its factual inaccuracies and asserts that the historical film is simply another form of historical communication that is different from, not inferior to, the written word. Rosenstone draws upon the work of poststructuralist critics such as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit for intellectual ballast. The poststructuralist critique of history calls into question the idea of historical 'fact' and sees works of history as 'texts' or 'discourses.' Film, in this argument, is another text or discourse. Rosenstone argues that 'filmmakers can be and already are historians (some of them), but of necessity the rules of engagement of their works with the stuff of the past are and must be different from those that govern written history' (Rosenstone, 2006: 8).

It seems to me that Rosenstone is correct only insofar as historians who attack films for their departures from the historical record have generally failed to understand the nature of film as a medium of representation and (let it be said) entertainment. To suggest, however, that a historical film has the same status as a piece of historical scholarship is utterly absurd. All forms of historical communication are not equal: if they were we would have to attach equal weight to a student essay as to a scholarly monograph! The historical film is at best a popular form of history in the manner of the historical novel. Its purpose is to entertain rather than to educate us about the past. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* succeeded because it was a period 'romp' rather than a history lesson. Even *October*, which clearly has a highly didactic intent, is a spectacle first and a historical narrative second.

The real value of film as a historical source is what it tells us about the time in which it was made rather than the period in which it is set. Sometimes, as in *October*, the historical distance from the subject may be relatively short (a decade), but even so the chief ideological import of *October* is what it reveals

about the nature of Soviet politics in the late 1920s (particularly the emerging cult of Stalin and the elimination of Trotsky from the official history). *Gone with the Wind* is of interest not for what it says about the causes of the American Civil War, but rather as an example of the retrospective cultural and ideological contest over the meaning of the war. *Saving Private Ryan* may not be an authentic account of the landings on Omaha Beach, but it is a rich source for understanding the popular memory of the Second World War. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* may have got its spurs in a muddle, but it tells us a great deal about British social attitudes of the 1930s. Even *Winstanley*, a rare example of a feature film that met the rigorous standards of authenticity demanded by the historical community, was at least partly conditioned by the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s: its account of the failure of a revolutionary movement is told from the perspective of post-1968 ideological disillusionment. Ultimately, film, like all historical sources, speaks of and for its time.

NOTES

1 *La politiques des auteurs*—translated into English as ‘the *auteur* theory’—maintains that despite the collective nature of filmmaking, the creative agency resides with the director, who is best regarded as the ‘author’ of the finished film.

2 The phrase was first used in a review article by Thomas Elsaesser (1985) ‘The New Film History’, *Sight & Sound*, 55(4): 246–251.

3 The base material of most film stock until the early 1950s was cellulose nitrate, which is highly unstable and usually decomposes within 50 years. It is also highly inflammable.

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