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Reading Film History

As Chapter 1 pointed out, the writing of history is not the passive transmission of facts, but an active process of judgment—a confrontation between the historian and his or her material. Similarly the reading of history, in this case film history, should not be thought of as mere reception, but rather as skeptical questioning—a confrontation between reader and historical argument. This chapter discusses some of the issues involved in reading film history, issues that pertain mostly to general survey works, but that are applicable to more specific studies as well. The chapter concludes with a case study of early film historical writing, relating the general historiographic concerns discussed in Chapter 1 and the specifics of film historical writing examined in Chapter 2.

FILM HISTORY AS NARRATIVE

Many historical analyses and almost all survey histories of film are couched in *narrative* terms. Film history thus becomes a story to be told by the film historian. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define narrative as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationships occurring in time. . . . A narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occurs according to a pattern of causes and effects; finally, a new situation arises which brings about the end of the narrative.”¹ We have become so accustomed to relating to history as a story (the two words are related etymologically) that they are sometimes used inter-

changeably. Arthur Knight, for example, announces in the Introduction to his film history, *The Liveliest Art*, "Since the story I elected to tell is of the development of an art, I had to forego much of the chatty gossip about personalities or behind the camera maneuverings that so often pass for film history." Thomas Bohn and Richard Stromgren's *Light and Shadow: A History of Motion Pictures* "tells an integrated story of those experiences which influenced artistic expression . . . and those which influenced the advancement of an industry."² Most survey film histories, whether they announce the fact explicitly or not, attempt to "tell the story" of the movies. The story might be "about" the cinema as art form, industry, cultural product, and/or technology, but is usually a story that begins with the invention of the cinematic apparatus and ends with the present.

[Organizing historical arguments as narratives (a chronological arrangement of events in a cause-effect relationship) is an accepted and frequently illuminating historical strategy. Because so much of film history is written exclusively as narrative, however, it should be pointed out that the qualities that make for a good story are not necessarily those that make for good history. Difficulties arise in the writing of film history when the conventions of traditional fictional narrative are allowed to take precedence over solid historical analysis, and in the reading of film history when we allow our expectations for a good story to take precedence over our expectation that the historian will present us with a convincing argument. Clearly, when we read a spy novel or watch a Hollywood film, we expect more than just a "chronological arrangement of events in cause-effect relationship." We expect to find characters who act and who are acted upon, a plot with a definite beginning, middle, and ending, and the resolution of all the questions or mysteries the story poses. We do not expect to find gaps in or doubts about character motivations or cause-effect relationships, nor do we have reason to question how the storyteller knows what is being related to us or if he or she is reliable. As readers of film history, as opposed to readers of fictional stories, we should always be aware that narrative structures are imposed on historical phenomena by the historian. The data of film history do not conveniently form themselves into a traditional narrative, with a neat beginning, middle, and end—all ready-made to please and excite us.

Traditional fictional narratives often revolve around struggles between one set of characters, with which the reader clearly is meant to sympathize, and another, which is cast as villainous or undeserving of "living happily ever after." Film history is sometimes related as a story containing such heroes and villains. Aesthetic film history is particularly subject to the danger of confusing narrative character depiction with historical interpretation of the individual's role in historical events. In American film history, where the filmmaker usually works within the context of a large economic institution, it is easy to view the filmmaker as a romantic artist who confronts the philistinism of insensitive, greedy

movie moguls. For example, Lewis Jacobs analyzes D. W. Griffith's desire to make longer films in the following way:

Now Griffith began to chafe under the arbitrary limitation of a picture to one reel. One reel was hardly adequate to unfold a complete story; the limitation hindered development, curtailed incidents, and proved a general barrier to the choice of deeper themes. . . . But just as Porter in 1903 had had to convince his doubting employers that the public would sit through a picture a full reel in length. Griffith now had to struggle with Biograph's reluctance to lengthening films to two reels.³

All too frequently, the transformation of historical personae into narrative characters glosses over complex problems of historical causality. Certainly, individuals sometimes act in ways that produce significant historical consequences. In film history they might invent devices, make business decisions, or direct films that affect the course of film history, but individuals do not operate outside of historical contexts. In an institution as large and complex as the American cinema, innovation of whatever kind almost always occurs as a response to a set of economic, aesthetic, technological, or cultural forces far larger than the actions of one person. Hence, to say of Edwin S. Porter, as does Lewis Jacobs, that as "the father of the story film" he "transformed motion picture art"⁴ does not explain very much about why the narrative film became predominant in the United States. It does, however, simplify the "telling of the story" of early American film history.

One reason for the prevalence of the reduction of historical change to the genius of individuals in early American film history is that the work of some directors has survived the ravages of nitrate disintegration while most, if not all, of the films of some of their contemporaries have not. Thanks in large measure to the preservation efforts of the Library of Congress, many of Griffith's early works are extant, as are all of his later feature films. Most of Griffith's fellow directors of the early period were not nearly so lucky. We will never be able to compare Griffith's early work adequately with that of his peers—J. Searle Dawley, Sidney Olcott, or George Loane Tucker, for example—because not enough of their films survived to enable us to do so. Griffith was a very important figure in the aesthetic history of the American cinema. He was acknowledged as such by commentators at the time. However, assessments of the enormity of his role (such as Arthur Knight's: "[He] took the raw elements of movie making as they had evolved up to that time and, singlehanded, wrought from them a medium more intimate than theatre, more vivid than literature, more affecting than poetry") must be viewed in light of the paucity of extant films directed by others against whose work this and other panygerics can be measured.⁵

Traditional fictional narratives ask us to "suspend our disbelief," to take for granted the "truth" of the story being told us and the narrator's knowledge of the events being related. Our attention is directed into the world of the story

46 and away from how that story is being told and by whom. When reading history we cannot afford to be seduced by the story being told as history so that we neglect to ask those historiographic questions the fictional storyteller can so neatly avoid. A historian certainly has the right to relate historical events as a narrative, but as readers of history we have the corresponding right to stop him or her at every turn and ask, "On what grounds is this narrative sequence based?" Even if the relationship depicted between two events makes narrative sense, we must also ask, "Is it supported by historical evidence?"

Survey narrative histories of film present the reader with a serious obstacle to getting at the historical arguments behind their narratives. In many of them, the quantity and quality of evidence used as the foundation of the historical narrative are difficult to determine from the text itself or from references in footnotes and bibliographies. One standard criterion for judging the merits of any historical argument is the extent to which its conclusions are supported by relevant evidence. The absence of footnotes and detailed bibliographic references in survey film histories frequently makes it impossible to trace conclusions back to their evidentiary sources. Compounding this problem is the fact that, unlike survey works in other historical disciplines, survey film histories are not based on mountains of more narrowly focused books, specialized monographs, journal articles, and other pieces of primary research, which have been accumulated, scrutinized, and critiqued over a period of years if not decades.

As an academic discipline, film history is still in its infancy, and the amount of primary research produced thus far is tiny compared to other branches of history. Some of the conclusions presented in a survey of European political history, for example, might well be the result of the application of the principle of noncontradiction (discussed in Chapter 1) to primary research conducted by others. In other words, the survey historian has presented as a conclusion an interpretation that has been confirmed by several historians from differing philosophical orientations having studied the same phenomenon and *not* having disagreed on the issue in question. This is all too rarely the case in film history, however—nor are most survey histories of the cinema based on extensive and detailed primary research conducted by the author. To be sure, most authors of survey film historical works engage in some new research, but all too often they rely on other survey works for their interpretations of many film historical phenomena—survey works that are themselves based on still other survey works. Lack of supporting documentation and the narrative form of survey histories frequently give untested generalizations the undeserved status of accepted historical "fact." Thus it is not surprising to find that much recently published primary research revises or refutes the conclusions offered in survey histories.

There are some film historians who would agree with the preceding criticisms of the sometimes cavalier manner with which problems of evidence and explanation are treated in survey histories, but who would argue for a distinction between narrative or descriptive film history and interpretive or critical

film history. They see the former as the establishment of a well-founded chronological account of "what happened when" in film history, and the latter as the subsidiary task of the application of explanatory models to this chronology. Establishing what happened, they would argue, must take precedence over and can proceed apart from individual interpretation. It is difficult, however, to see how film history can be divided neatly between establishing "what happened" on the one hand and "why it happened" on the other. The two are necessarily part of the same enterprise. The explanatory model being used in the narrating of film historical events might be implicit and hence difficult to specify precisely, but the very selection of which events are worthy of being chronicled and the ordering of those events into a narrative sequence are both acts of interpretation.

READING FILM HISTORIES

Becoming a discriminating reader of film historical works is first a matter of attitude and expectation. The film historian is not presenting the indisputable truth and the only possible interpretation of the facts, but an argument as to how a particular event *might* have happened and the *possible* consequences following therefrom. Any time we pick up a work of film history we are in effect asking the author to convince us of the validity of his or her argument. Hence as readers we should approach the work not as passive receptors but as skeptical questioners, persuaded of the author's interpretation only after a thorough scrutiny of its merits.

A profitable reading of history requires us to read closely and well. Particularly in reading survey film histories, it is sometimes necessary to "de-narrativize" the work, to pull apart the threads of the story and see if the study makes historical and logical as well as narrative sense. Narrative is not the only or necessarily the most appropriate mode of film historical explanation. The narrative mode's central concern—What finally happened?—necessarily emphasizes a limited set of characters and events as they develop over time and can restrict consideration of the complexities of a historical phenomenon.

For many years social and physical scientists have used a nonnarrative format for the presentation of research—a format also found in the presentation of some primary film historical research. Basically this format includes (1) statement of the problem investigated, (2) review of pertinent literature dealing with that problem, (3) posing of the specific research question answered or hypothesis tested, (4) discussion of the method used, (5) presentation of the data generated by the study, (6) conclusions derived from the data, and (7) suggestions for further research that have arisen from the study. This nonnarrative mode of historical writing opens to scrutiny the nature and extent of background research that has been done in preparation for conducting a specific study, the method employed in that study, the sources used, and the validity of

the conclusions based on those sources. Rather than presenting history as a preknown and closed story to be related, it reveals history to be an ongoing process of question framing, data collection, theory building, and argumentation.

READING AS QUESTIONING

In short, getting the most from reading film history is a matter of asking the right questions. Here are some questions one might ask of any film historical work.

1. *To what extent does the author define the nature and scope of the study?* Every historical work is "about" something, and none can be about everything. The subject matter of the work should be defined in such a way that the reader knows the specific project being undertaken and the specific historical question(s) being asked. Furthermore, the reader has a right to ask how certain limits to the study were decided upon, particularly chronological and geographical ones. Every branch of historical inquiry must deal with the issue of periodization: the division of history into smaller units of time—eras, epochs, periods, or ages. By western custom, historical time is divided into years, decades, and centuries, but for most historical purposes these divisions are arbitrary.

Historical phenomena usually do not conveniently coincide with a ten- or one hundred-year chunk of time. A work entitled "The American Cinema of the 1920s," for example, should demonstrate that there is some relevant reason for beginning this investigation in 1920 and ending it in 1930, rather than, say, 1914 and 1927. In fact, a much stronger case can be made for the latter set of dates as markers of a distinct "period" in American film history. World War I, which had a tremendous impact on the American film industry, began in 1914. This year also roughly marks the establishment of the feature-length film as the standard for the industry. The year 1927 marks the beginning of the end of the silent film era with the commercial success of the feature-length sound film. Furthermore, what might be a relevant segment of time with respect to one aspect of film history might not be relevant to another. For example, 1927 is clearly a watershed date for technological film history in the United States. In terms of the representation of social issues, however, the silent films of 1926 have more in common with the sound films of the early 1930s than do the latter with those films made after 1934—the year in which self-censorship began to be more rigidly enforced by the Production Code Administration.

2. *How does the historian analyze historical change, and what assumptions underlie these explanations?* All historians explain change in some manner, and usually there is a pattern to arguments within a particular work. Regardless of the model from which the film historian works there will be certain assumptions underlying explanations of historical change. To give but one example, which will be expanded upon in Chapter 7, the pioneer social film historian, Siegfried Kracauer, argues that changes in the style and content of German films between 1919 and 1933 resulted from changes in the psychological disposition of the German people. As German hopes and fears modulated during that turbulent period, films changed to reflect "those deep layers of collective mentality

which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness."⁶ Two of the many assumptions implicit in his thesis are (1) that groups of people can be said to have a "collective mentality," and (2) that historians can identify the hopes and fears of an entire nation and thus speak of "the German people" in any meaningful way. To his credit, Kracauer lays out his method rather explicitly. In most film histories the explanatory mechanisms being used are presented much less directly and must be teased out by the perspicacious reader.

3. *How does the historian analyze historical stasis and what assumptions underlie these explanations?* The massive changes that have occurred in the cinema since its initial development in the late nineteenth century disguise the fact that some aspects of film history have remained remarkably resistant to change for long periods. Just as the historian is obliged to analyze change, so must he or she account for why things do not change. Explaining stasis is a particular concern if one adopts the systemic view of cinema outlined in the previous chapters. Assuming that the cinema is a complex entity composed of interactive elements, how can one account for change in one element but stasis in others, when logically we would expect that if change occurs in one part of the system, the entire system is altered as a consequence? It might be that changes in other elements of the system in fact occurred, but are not apparent upon cursory examination. It could also be that the rate of change differs among elements of the system, that the elements are not directly connected to one another but are uneven in their historical development. Or it might be the case that some elements of the cinematic system are capable of "absorbing" the consequences of change in others. For example, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson argue that although the style of Hollywood films was modified somewhat between the 1920s and 1960, it has not changed radically—this despite changes in film technology, audience, and economic structure.⁷ They and other film historians are presently engaged in an analysis of this apparent historical equilibrium in the face of significant change.

4. *Does the historian's presentation of conclusions and generalizations make logical sense?* History is a form of argument. It makes a claim upon belief and supports this claim with a reason or reasons. Any time an argument contains the words *hence, thus, it follows that, or consequently*, its author is making a conclusion based on reasons given previously. As philosopher Monroe Beardsley has noted, "Whenever we are asked to agree to a certain statement because we already agree to another statement—when, in short, someone is trying to convince us of something—we must always raise the question *whether the reason is such that we ought to be convinced*"⁸ (italics in text). As previously pointed out, it is frequently difficult to see the relationship between generalizations and evidence in survey film histories because of the paucity of documentation; however, the reader can ask in many cases whether or not a conclusion logically follows from one presented previously. Another way of asking this question is: Can an equally logical alternative conclusion be fashioned from the same material?

5. *What are the sources of data used for the study?* Unfortunately, at present this question applies more to narrowly focused book-length works and journal articles than to most survey film histories, since many of the latter do not cite the sources used to support a particular generalization. Historians usually discriminate between *primary* and *secondary* sources. Primary sources are taken to mean those produced as a part or result of the event under study; secondary sources are commentaries on or later reports of that

Such a distinction is useful, but it should not blind us to the fact that not even the most primary evidence comes to the historian "pure." All our information about the past is filtered or mediated in various ways—certainly by the passage of time, and usually by someone's consciousness. The reader has a right to expect that the historian has used the "best" or least mediated sources of data available, and further, that he or she has brought all the available, relevant data to bear upon the investigation at hand. Whether or not "best evidence" was used in a particular account is often difficult for the reader to determine, but a close examination of the data sources cited is helpful in comparing historical accounts.⁹

The constant reiteration of the Chaser Theory provides a good example of why it is dangerous to accept at face value unsupported conclusions in survey histories of film. The vast majority of American film historians argue that although movies were popular attractions in vaudeville theaters when first introduced in 1896, audiences soon tired of seeing simple films of objects in motion. Within only a few years, it is contended, audiences were so bored with the movies presented in vaudeville theaters that the principal use for films became that of a "chaser": an act so boring that it drove patrons from the theater at the end of the program. Despite the fact that this argument appears in film histories from the 1920s to the present, it is largely unsupported by the evidence, and obscures rather than illuminates the early problems of film exhibition. An examination of vaudeville manager's reports and the theatrical trade press of the period between 1896 and 1903 reveals that while the novelty of the cinema did wear off after some months, films never sank to a level of ubiquitous disdain. In fact, when films could be made of important news events, the movies were often elevated to a place at the "top of the bill." It is because of the reliance of survey histories upon other survey histories that this simplistic historical generalization has circulated for half a century.⁹

6. Does the evidence cited support the interpretation being presented? As anyone who has done research knows, inclusion of a footnote or reference to a piece of evidence does not in itself lend credence to a historical argument. As historian David Fischer puts it: "Every fact in history is an answer to a question, and that evidence which is useful and true and sufficient in answer to question B may be false and useless in answer to question A. A historian must not merely get the facts right. He [or she] must get the right facts right."¹⁰ For example, in his book, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain*, Michael Chanan quotes a reminiscence of an early exhibitor of films in English music halls in support of his contention that some music hall performers resented the intrusion of a mechanical novelty on the music hall stage.

At the time . . . we showed [films] from behind through a transparent screen . . . which was thoroughly damped with water and glycerine . . . I remember . . . getting fearfully ticked off by Marie Lloyd [a popular music hall performer], who was in the turn following us, as we wetted the stage rather badly, to which she took strong and forcible objection, particularly as far as language was concerned.

To this Chanan adds: "Notice here, incidentally, that film, within two years had been promoted to a billing second only to the leading stage artistes."¹¹ Chanan might quite justifiably use this recollection to support (1) that films were shown in music halls, (2) that in some music halls they were projected through translucent screens, and (3) that at least one music hall performer took umbrage at having to follow the movies and the mess

their exhibition apparently made when projected in this manner. Note, however, that there is no justification for the further use Chanan makes of this reference—that "within two years [film] had been promoted to a billing second only to the leading stage artistes." The quotation indicates that, on this occasion, at least, the movies directly preceded Marie Lloyd sequentially on the program, but it in no way indicates the movies' relative programmatic importance, their billing. In fact, music hall, like American vaudeville, did not arrange acts in ascending order of importance or popularity on the program, although the "star" usually did appear at or toward the end of the program. How popular or important movies were as music hall turns at this time cannot be deduced from the evidence Chanan cites.

Conspicuously absent from the preceding list of questions is one raised initially in Chapter 1: How has the historian's culture and his or her place in it conditioned the writing of a particular film historical work? This question is set apart and left until last for two reasons. First, the questions discussed earlier in this chapter, including those dealing with narrative histories, usually can be answered through an examination of the work itself. A close reading will go a long way toward revealing how the film historian has used evidence, what causal mechanisms he or she sees in operation, and the philosophical orientation of the work. The relationship of the film historian to his or her culture, on the other hand, necessarily carries the reader outside the work. Also, examining the role of culture in the writing of film history is less straightforward and more complex. Culture influences the writing of history not only at the level of articulated positions but also at that of presumptions, emphases, and omissions. The following case study shows how two influential film historical works might be "opened up" and their cultural determinations read out.

CASE STUDY: THE FIRST AMERICAN FILM HISTORIANS

The history of the writing of film history in the United States began with two works: Robert Grau's *Theatre of Science* (1914) and Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926). These works interest us today not only because they were "firsts," but because subsequent film histories have relied greatly on them for their analyses of the origins and early development of American film. Grau and Ramsaye not only established the relevant "facts" of film history, but by what they chose to include and exclude, and by the emphasis they placed on certain events, films, and persons, they helped to determine the range of film historical subject matter for historians who wrote after them.

What Grau and Ramsaye saw as constituting film history was influenced by the historical contexts in which each work was written and published. To read either historian today is to read a work wrenched out of one set of historical circumstances and shoved awkwardly into our own. What will be attempted here is an "archeology" of the contexts out of which the two works emerged, to borrow a term and an approach from French historian Michel Foucault.¹² Specifi-

cally, the two works will be placed within their larger *discursive* contexts: within the larger body of thought and writing (the discourse) on the subjects Grau and Ramsaye dealt with in their histories.

At the time they wrote, Grau and Ramsaye knew of no other film histories to which they could relate their efforts (except that Ramsaye, working a few years later, did have Grau). Similarly, their readers received these works not so much as film histories, a species of discourse they had never encountered, but as works on show business, art, technology, and success. Hence it is within the discursive space created by these topics that *Theatre of Science* and *A Million and One Nights* were produced and consumed. Film history was for both authors and their readers the point at which these traditional discourses converged. Also to be considered are the circumstances surrounding the publication of these books, since the economic context of book publishing had much to do with the way these works were written and presented to the public.

Overview

Before writing on film Robert Grau had been a theatrical agent and personal manager of opera and theater stars. In 1910 he turned to free-lance journalism, producing articles on various aspects of show business for the trade and general press. In one year, 1915, Grau claimed to have published 500 articles.¹³

In *Theatre of Science* Grau focused on the contributions individuals had made to "the general progress in filmdom." He included in this category the inventors of the cinematic apparatus itself, film directors, actors, and writers, and especially film entrepreneurs. Many of the chapters are personality profiles and personal histories. We learn that Marcus Loew's success could be attributed to a "dominating yet ingratiating personality" and that David Horsley's rise to prominence in film production "was accomplished as a result of adamant persistence in the fact of never ceasing disappointments."¹⁴ The book is sprinkled with excerpts from letters written to Grau by these persons themselves, detailing their achievements.

Basically, *Theatre of Science* gives us history as the result of herculean acts by great individuals. To Grau, film history was the inevitable progression toward perfection of the cinematic art, guided from one stage of development to the next by a few people who had the foresight to see that film would one day eclipse the stage as a dramatic medium, an intuitive knowledge of public taste, and the perseverance to see their projects through to fruition. In Grau's account their efforts were invariably rewarded by economic success.

While personality characteristics figure greatly in Grau's analysis of the progression of film history, negative attributes such as greed, acquisitiveness, deceit, or selfishness are almost totally missing from his descriptions of the geniuses of film history. At the time Grau wrote, the movie industry was locked in a prolonged and bitter economic struggle between the Motion Picture Patents

Company, the old guard film companies led by Edison and the Biograph Company, and the "independents," an assortment of producers, distributors, and exhibitors, led by Carl Laemmle and William Fox. Grau refused to take sides in this crucial issue or to impune the motives of either group. All contenders, he asserted, performed "constructive pioneer work in the development of the motion picture."¹⁵

Terry Ramsaye began his professional life as a newspaper reporter. When Grau's *Theatre of Science* was published in 1914, Ramsaye was an editor of serialized stories for the *Chicago Tribune*. Between 1915 and 1917 Ramsaye served as director of publicity for the Mutual Film Company, the first of several such positions he held with various film companies. In 1921, at the behest of editor James Quirk, Ramsaye began a long-running series of historical articles on the motion picture for *Photoplay* magazine. These articles, revised and expanded, were published as *A Million and One Nights* by Simon and Schuster in 1926.

In the Preface to his book, Ramsaye asserted a rigorous objectivity: "Within the domain of the motion picture I have neither friendships nor enmities of sufficient weight to influence the telling of this story." His stance was that of a journalist; his aim was "to cover the birth of a new art—the motion pictures."¹⁶ Unlike Grau, Ramsaye went to considerable trouble to track down not only the testimony of important individuals, but documentary evidence as well: personal correspondence, corporate records, and court cases. Ramsaye took his title from the story of Scheherazade, the maiden of Arabian legend who nightly postponed her execution by beguiling the king with a different story. Like her, Ramsaye is a storyteller, the eighty-one chapters of his book relating "tales," which together form the history of the movies in America.

The heroes of his tales are for the most part technological and industrial giants: Eadweard Muybridge, E. J. Marey, Thomas Armat, Jesse Lasky, Carl Laemmle, William Fox, and especially Thomas Edison. The flyleaf contains Edison's endorsement and his signature; the frontispiece bears his portrait. The chapter on Edison's early experimentation with moving pictures is entitled, "In the House of the Wizard." Edison emerges from Ramsaye's work as the most brilliant person of his age, a tireless inventor who finally realized the "wish of the race": motion pictures. Ramsaye even seconded Edison's insistence (long since legally denied) that the right to exploit motion picture technology was his and his alone.¹⁷ Ramsaye, like Grau, clearly subscribed to what has been called the "great man" theory of history: the belief that history is "made" by the inspired acts of outstanding individuals, whose genius transcends the normal constraints of historical context.

To Ramsaye, the cinema's historical significance lay in its being a new and unique art form: "For the first time in the history of the world, . . . an art has sprouted, grown up, and blossomed in so brief a time that one person might stand by and see it happen." Furthermore, Ramsaye sees the history of the movies as art and its history as industrial product to be aspects of the same story: "All of the arts and all the industries are products of the same forces." This com-

pression of art, industry, and technology into a single phenomenon helps to explain the fact that while Ramsaye announces his book as a history of an art, he spends the first 300 of his 833 pages discussing the history of movie technology prior to 1896.

There are differences between the two works. Ramsaye's is more comprehensive. Grau states at the beginning of *Theatre of Science* that he will skip over the better-known aspects of film history to bring to light other factors that also deserve credit. Both, however, share some basic ideas about the nature of film and film history.

1. The aesthetic, technological, and industrial history of the movies are not seen as separate issues but as inseparable parts of the same phenomenon. Hence, inventor, entrepreneur, and filmmaker are given equal stature and treatment.
2. Film is first and foremost a popular art form, and the aesthetic quality of a given film is seen as directly proportional to its audience appeal.
3. Film history is the story of the steady, inevitable progress toward technological and aesthetic perfection.
4. This progress is achieved through the discoveries and innovations of outstanding individuals.
5. This concentration on "great men" excludes other causal factors (economic, social, aesthetic) from their interpretations of film history.

Film History and Popular Discourse on Technology

The placement of these film historical works into a larger context might begin by examining the general discourse on technology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discourse is characterized by an idolization of the machine and the belief that the marvels achievable by technology were limitless. By 1900 the railroad, interchangeable parts, and developments in communication had helped to transform America from an agrarian to an industrialized society. Despite severe financial crises (the panic of 1863 and the recession of 1893), social dislocation, and violent labor disputes (the Haymarket Riot and the Pullman Strike, to name but two), the machine was admired, celebrated, and revered. Seldom was technological change seen as the root of social trauma. Much more frequently it was regarded as the solution to social, economic, and moral problems. The popular discourse on technology, says historian John Kasson, shows a belief that "the course of technology was . . . bringing in sight a world civilization of reduced labor and enriched leisure, health and longevity, abundance, peace, and human brotherhood." The "overriding paradox" of this age, he says, was a consistently laudatory discourse on technology at a time of constant social disorder.

Popular journals such as *Scientific American* were established to chronicle technological progress. Elaborate expositions allowed the public to gawk at the

latest wonders of the machine age. Given this discursive context, it is hardly surprising that Grau and Ramsaye made technology a central part of the history of motion picture art. Neither saw anything incongruous in an art work (a film) emanating from a machine. They regaled the inventor as an artist, and the invention as the producer of art. Nor did the cinema's blatant appeal to mass taste (Ramsaye called it "adolescent" taste) seem to be inconsistent with the cinema's role as *the* art form of the twentieth century. Their view of movie technology as democratic art—the "Theatre of Science," Grau calls it—is an expression of an aesthetics of technological progress to be found in the more general popular discourse of the time. Here we find the machine regarded not only as a utilitarian problem-solver, but quite literally as a wonder to behold, as an aesthetic experience. As the *Scientific American* put it in 1849, "Inventions are the poetry of physical science and inventors are poets."¹⁹ The nineteenth-century view of the machine as art was fed by an American distrust of the "fine arts," which were regarded in popular discourse as European (and, hence, non-American), elitist, and of no practical value. Not only could a huge steam engine induce aesthetic rapture, it *did something*—it ran other machines, provided jobs, and produced goods and services. To Ramsaye, movie technology takes the age-old dream of high-art—the exact rendering of reality—and fulfills it more perfectly than could the most schooled painter. The same technology then makes this aesthetic miracle available to millions of people simultaneously, while preserving that experience for all time. The inventor becomes the artist of the twentieth century.

By the time Grau and Ramsaye wrote their film histories, popular accounts of a technological breakthrough fit a well-established pattern. Each new invention was seen as moving society one rung higher on the ladder of technological progress. The "new" invention had to be larger, more complex, more awe-inspiring than those it superceded. Grau and Ramsaye's treatment of motion picture art fit squarely into this "onward and upward" schema of technological progress. At the exhibition of the Vitascope projector at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, Ramsaye reported, the "amusement world was agog with speculation about the invention."

Viewing the introduction of the movies in the 1890s from the perspective of a decade or two later, however, both men saw the initial success of projected movies as merely the embryonic stage of motion picture progress. In the first few years of the use of movies in vaudeville theaters, filmmakers developed a repertoire of subjects appealing to a variety of audience interests. Audiences enjoyed films of vaudeville performers, vignettes from stage plays, travel films, cinematic portraits of political leaders, and "home movies" of their own cities and towns. To Grau and Ramsaye, however, these documentary subjects were simplistic and primitive. Following a brief flurry of interest, Ramsaye argued, the movies declined to the level of "chaser."²⁰

Ramsaye and Grau looked for new and improved movies with "potentialities of screen art" to revitalize the medium and new artists to put cinematic

pigment to canvas. They found such an aesthetic hero in Georges Méliès, a French magician turned filmmaker. Méliès specialized in elaborate trick films in which devils, witches, imaginary creatures, and scantily clad young women levitated, multiplied, and then disappeared in puffs of smoke. Méliès used both stage and movie technology to achieve his mysterious effects. To Ramsaye, Méliès's films represented a milestone along the road of cinematic progress because he exploited the technological capacities of the cinema.

In his efforts to mystify and startle his audiences Méliès evolved the fade-out, the overlap dissolve, the double-exposure and life expedients which have become commonplaces of camera practise [sic] since. . . . For the first time ideas for the use of the camera as an instrument of expression, rather than of mere recording, were being born.²¹

While Méliès represented to Ramsaye a techno-aesthetic advancement, Méliès's work remained fatally flawed. It could not evolve further because of his adherence to aesthetic conventions derived from the hopelessly low-tech theater. Méliès used editing only to tie large segments of his films together. The space of a Méliès film was stage-space in which characters entered from the wings, and which was observed from a camera positioned as a theater spectator seated in the fourth row. When a closer view of a trick was demanded, Méliès moved his figures toward the camera, rather than moving the camera closer to them. In *Marvellous Méliès*, Paul Hammond has argued that, given the effects Méliès wanted to achieve in his films, narrative editing and other devices would have been unnecessary, even counterproductive.²²

To Ramsaye, further cinematic progress required yet another innovator, this time in the person of Edwin S. Porter, the Edison-employed director of *The Great Train Robbery* and *Life of an American Fireman*. What Porter did to make him a cinematic hero in Ramsaye's eyes was not just to tell a story on the screen, but to make a cinematic device, editing, central to the process of cinematic storytelling. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* was, to Ramsaye, a "gripping masterpiece. . . [that] swept the motion picture industry." Porter's next story film, *The Great Train Robbery*, confirmed his pioneering status by becoming a "boxoffice knockout."²³ As Charles Musser has pointed out, the editing strategies in Porter's films look backwards to the conventions of magic lanternry as much as they look forward to later Hollywood techniques. To Ramsaye, however, Porter's work was a giant leap toward cinematic perfection.

Technology and Success

In addition to being an aesthetic phenomenon and regarded as evidence of America's steady progress toward political, social, and economic perfection, technology also plays a central role in the public discourse on business success

during the early twentieth century. As John Cawelti has noted in his book *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, one American boast of the era was that the United States was the "land of opportunity" where any child could grow up to become President or the head of a large corporation. The epitome of success was the entrepreneur who achieved economic wealth by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the industrial age.

Successful entrepreneurs were seen as forming an American aristocracy, an elite based not on birth or inherited wealth but on a combination of traditional values (frugality, hard work, and piety) and those demanded by the competitive world of industrial enterprise (self-confidence, initiative, and determination). The businessperson's striving for success, says Cawelti, was seen in the public discourse of the day as "the indispensable ingredient of human progress."²⁴ Technology came to be viewed in this context as an important avenue to business success. In the machine age would success not surely come to the inventor of a better machine? The flood of patents issued in the decades around the turn of the century testifies to the belief among thousands of Americans that invention held the key to their success.

The great example of success achieved through invention was, of course, Thomas Edison. By the time Grau and Ramsaye wrote, Edison had been for decades the most celebrated American of his age. The public image of Edison was that of the inexhaustible genius, whose demeanor was still that of the folksy midwesterner. His inventions were practical ones in which middle-class Americans could see immediate and beneficial application: the electric light, the phonograph, the mimeograph machine, the ticker-tape machine, and, of course, the motion picture camera. His productivity engendered the notion that there were no limits to his inventive capacity. Edison seemed to be pushing America toward technological utopia single-handedly. Between 1880 and 1920 no person in the world was so well known or revered. He was feted by every American president from Hayes to Coolidge and received by European monarchs and heads of state. He won every scientific award and medal then given. A man in North Carolina wagered with a friend that a letter bearing only Edison's picture for an address would be delivered to Edison. It was.

There were, however, several aspects of Edison's personality and activities that were conspicuous by their absence from his image in public discourse. Despite the huge sums of money Edison's laboratory generated through its inventions, Edison paid his workers poorly. When he needed university-trained personnel, he hired them from among recent immigrants who willingly accepted substandard pay. The idea of a labor union organizing his operation was so anathema to Edison that when in 1903 his workers did strike for higher wages, he used Pinkerton detectives to break the strike. The Edison facilities in and around West Orange, New Jersey, produced pollution so foul that in 1889 civic groups were able to secure 1500 names on a protest petition. Edison hired a private detective to pay off local public officials so that his property taxes could be kept at a fraction of their assessed value.²⁵

While Grau's treatment of Edison is laudatory but slight, Ramsaye perpetuated and amplified upon the popular image of Edison as the kindly, homespun wizard of technology. His lionization of Edison served several functions. First, Edison provided Ramsaye with a "great man" to whom the origins of modern motion picture technology could be assigned. The "birth" of the cinema was auspicious, indeed, if its "father" was none other than the most respected inventor of his age. Second, Edison's involvement in the invention of the motion picture linked the movies to a larger tradition of American technological progress. The connection of the movies with Edison associated the movies with his other inventions, particularly the phonograph and electric light, that were viewed as benefitting the entire human race. Because of Edison's public image as the self-taught farm boy, the elevation of Edison to the status of father of the movies rendered the cinema a democratic, American technology, and, by extension, a democratic art form. "Every motion picture machine, every motion picture enterprise, every motion picture personality, screen star or magnate of the screen theatre, can be traced to some connection growing out of the little black box that Edison dubbed the Kinetoscope," wrote Ramsaye. "This is one of the absolute facts of the history of the motion picture."²⁶

In *A Million and One Nights*, Edison's role is much more than that of historical personage whose activities are recounted by Ramsaye. Edison and his public image helped to sell the book as well as provide material for its contents. As has been noted, Edison's endorsement adorned the flyleaf and his portrait was displayed in the frontispiece. His involvement in the project did not end there, however. The first edition of the book, published in 1926 by Simon and Schuster, was limited to a few hundred copies, each signed not only by Ramsaye but by Edison as well. As early as 1921, five years before its publication, Ramsaye asked Edison to review drafts of his manuscript and make comments in the margins. According to Ramsaye, he relied heavily on these notes and Edison's responses to letters of inquiry.²⁷

Recent scholarship has indicated that Edison's role in the invention of cinema technology was much more limited than what Grau and Ramsaye indicated. In *The Edison Motion Picture Myth*, Gordon Hendricks argued persuasively that Edison had relatively little to do with the invention of the Kinetograph camera, the first movie camera, patented in 1891. Most of the work was done by an Edison assistant, W. K. L. Dickson. The first successful motion picture projector used in America was invented by two Washington, D.C., men, Thomas Armat and Francis Jenkins. They were persuaded to allow their device to be manufactured and marketed under Edison's name because of the enormous publicity value attached to it. Yet when the Vitascope, as it was called, was unveiled to the press on April 3, 1896, at Edison's laboratory, Edison touted the device as his own. In the Koster and Bial program for the April 23 debut, the Vitascope was hailed as "Thomas A. Edison's latest marvel." Edison's own papers show that, in fact, he had little interest in the movies, either as an invention or as a business venture, being much more concerned with other, more lucrative projects.

Film History and Subscription Publishing

These revelations are not to say that Ramsaye is guilty of some sort of breach of historical ethics in his connection with Edison or that his treatment of him was a willful misrepresentation or distortion of fact. The role of Edison in *A Million and One Nights* must be understood (1) in the context of the popular discourse on Edison, technology, success, and art at the time; and (2) in the context of book publishing in the 1910s and 1920s. In 1914 or 1926 there were no college courses in film history to guarantee sales for a history of the cinema. The very notion of a book-length history of film would have seemed daring and risky to a publisher. The imprimatur of Edison's name no doubt helped to reduce this risk and make of the work a type of discourse more familiar to both publishers and prospective buyers.

The "great man" theory of history is to be found not only in Ramsaye's treatment of Edison, but throughout Grau's work as well. One reason for this historical perspective is, no doubt, that it was common to historical writing as a whole at that time, particularly among histories intended for popular consumption. As we have seen, technology was viewed as the work of one great inventor superseding that of another, forming a chain of technological progress. In the case of both Grau and Ramsaye, however, it was important that each author cultivate the good will of the then still-living historical personages about whom they wrote. In Grau's case it was absolutely essential that he do so; otherwise, his book would never have been published.

From correspondence discovered among the papers of early film distributor George Kleine, it is now apparent that *Theatre of Science* was published by subscription. Although almost never used today, subscription publishing was a common mode of book marketing at the time Grau wrote. Basically, subscription books were those for which a market was created, often prior to publication, by selling advance orders on the basis of a brochure or salesman's pitch. Subscription publishing reduced the risk taken by the publisher and facilitated the production of expensive works and those for which there was thought to be a relatively small market. Subscriptions were sold by traveling salesmen or, as in the case of Grau, by the author himself.

Grau sought orders for his yet-to-be-published book from the film luminaries about whom he wrote. He frequently combined requests for information on the history of film with requests for subscription. Kleine responded to several such letters in the following manner:

I confess that I would take greater personal interest in your book if every letter did not contain some reference to a subscription blank. My attitude towards your book is one of interest and I am inclined whenever they are ready to buy a copy, but, the purchase of a book should not be injected in some way into every letter that passes.²⁸

Although Grau claimed that his treatment of Kleine would in no way be affected by the number of copies he agreed to buy, he said he planned to include

an entire chapter on Kleine and display his photograph prominently. To Kleine's refusal to cooperate, Grau responded, "Perhaps, Mr. Kleine, if the matter was put to you in an advertising way you would resent it less. . . ." meaning that Kleine might look upon the purchase of copies of the book as grateful compensation to one who had provided him with free advertising of considerable value. Kleine still did not respond. As a token of what he could do for Kleine in his book, Grau informed Kleine of his intention to attend the opening of Kleine's new movie theater in New York, promising "to send out more published matter on this than anyone in America."²⁹ Finally, after a barrage of subscription requests over the spring and summer of 1914, Kleine agreed to buy one copy of the book. *Theatre of Science* does contain a photograph of Kleine, among dozens of others, but rather than one full chapter on Kleine's career, there are only a few paragraphs.

Ramsaye's book was not sold entirely by subscription; however, subscriptions were almost certainly sought from the film community for the expensive, autographed first edition of *A Million and One Nights*. Following the publication of his film history in 1926, Ramsaye did produce a subscription work on film. *The Famous Two Hundred of the Motion Picture* was a limited-edition, Moroccan leather-bound volume containing "accurate biographies" and five-by-seven photographs of the 200 most influential persons in the history of the cinema. A prospectus informed the chosen 200 that "a proportionate share of the expense of distributing free copies to leading newspapers and libraries and the cost of printing the book is being charged to those who are presented in its pages, though failure to subscribe will not keep any of the two hundred persons from being included in the book."³⁰

Clearly, then, the economic context in which both books were published influenced what Grau and Ramsaye saw as the subject matter of film history. At issue here is not how many pages each film pioneer received, but the need—in Grau's case, the necessity—of conceiving of film history in terms of the exploits of great individuals. Both discursive and economic contexts influence the writing of film history not so much at the level of the truth or falsity of an account of a specific historical event, but at the more general and equally important level of selection and interpretation of those events.

Conclusions

The pioneering nature of their work, the popular audience for which they aimed, and the ways in which their books were marketed and sold all combine to make Robert Grau and Terry Ramsaye convenient (one is tempted to think too convenient) illustrations of the influence of cultural and economic forces on the writing of film history. It would be wrong to suppose that just because film history is now an "academic" as well as a popular discourse, because the boundaries between film history and press agentry now seem clearer, that these

forces are less relevant today than they were a half-century ago. No film historian stands outside his or her culture or economic system.

The emergence of film history as an academic discipline since the 1960s has made the economics of book and journal publishing more, not less, of a factor in determining what film historical topics are investigated and how they are presented to the reader. Many books of film history published over the past fifteen years (this one included) have been designed and marketed principally as college textbooks. Sales in bookstores have been considered incidental to the vastly larger sales resulting from the adoption of the book as a textbook in some of the thousands of film history courses offered by colleges all over the country.

As Chapter 2 pointed out, one of the pressures placed on an author by publishing companies is that the work be turned out reasonably quickly, since there can be a delay of as much as eighteen months between the completion of the manuscript and its publication as a book. The need for speed oftentimes overrides the need for a reconsideration of the unquestioned reiteration of generalizations from yet other secondary sources—as was seen in the case of the Chaser Theory. In the name of "readability," footnote citations are frequently dropped from survey works designed for use as textbooks in favor of a more general bibliographic list at the end of the chapter or even the entire work, making it difficult if not impossible for the reader to scrutinize the evidentiary basis for the author's conclusions. At its worst, the desire to sell as many copies of a survey textbook as possible to the largest market (students in introductory film classes) reduces film history to an unproblematic story and the reading of such works to a passive consumption. Even university presses, which exist to publish works of scholarly merit rather than to make a profit, are not immune from economic pressures. Increases in publishing costs, a shrinking library market, and decreases or elimination of university subsidies have caused some academic presses to give priority to scholarly works with more general appeal. Potentially important works directed toward a limited academic audience have greater difficulty finding their way onto a publisher's list today than ever before. These remarks are not intended as an inclusive indictment of all film history publishing methods, but rather is a reminder that all works in film history are published within economic contexts that have influenced their production and consumption.

One example of the subtle yet powerful cultural biases at work in the contemporary writing of world film history is pointed out by British film historian Roy Armes. There is, he says, a distinct western orientation not only in the writing of world film histories in general, but also in cinema histories of non-western countries. Because until fairly recently film production has been centered in America and western Europe, film historians have interpreted film history to mean filmmaking history. Many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have had little in the way of indigenous film production—in many cases precisely because the importation of American and European films and distribution control by foreign firms made local production unfeasible. Thus

these countries are seen as having a film history only to the extent that they have had a history of film production. What goes unwritten and unexamined is the history of filmic reception in the Third World and the tremendous cultural impact made by decades of viewing only films produced by "foreigners."³¹

Finally, every reader of a film historical work comes to that reading experience with a set of norms and expectations derived largely from the surrounding culture. Based on their experiences in high school, many college students regard the study of history as the memorization of facts—facts already determined and codified by history professors and the textbooks they write. Both professors and textbooks are placed in a position of knowledge and power. The student regards his or her role as that of receiving that knowledge but rarely as questioning it and almost never as contributing to it. The first three chapters of this book have asked the reader to challenge these assumptions about film history by regarding history as an ongoing process of confrontation between the historian and the materials of the past and by regarding works of historical writing as arguments to be read carefully and questioned by the reader. Chapter 8 takes this challenge one step further by suggesting that the consumer of film historical writing might become the producer of it as well.

NOTES

1. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 50.
2. Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art* (New York: New American Library, 1959), p. v; and Thomas Bohn and Richard Strongren, *Light and Shadow: A History of Motion Pictures* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Alfred Pub. Co., 1975), p. xv. The examination of historical works as narratives is by no means limited to film histories. In his influential study of nineteenth-century European historical works, Hayden White treats "the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse." See his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
3. Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1939), pp. 112–113.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
5. Knight, *The Liveliest Art*, p. 31.
6. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 6.
7. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
8. Monroe Beardsley, *Thinking Straight* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 11. Beardsley's is a good introduction to the logic of discourse in general.
9. Others include: Steven Baker, *The Elements of Logic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965); Stuart Chase, *Guide to Straight Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); and Howard Kahane, *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1976).
9. For a discussion of the Chaser Theory, see Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); and "Contra the Chaser Theory," *Wide Angle* 3 (Spring 1979): 4–11.
10. David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 62.
11. Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 132.
12. In *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970) Foucault embarks on an archeology of the history of science—not a study of science as it progressed through time, but an examination of the level of largely unconscious "rules" that governed what could be said and written about science at a particular point in time. Foucault explains:

I should like to know whether the subjects [authors] responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them. In short, I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structure of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse; what conditions did Linnaeus . . . have to fulfill, not to make his discourse coherent and true in general, but to give it at the time when it was written and accepted, value and practical application as scientific discourse. . . (p. xiv).
13. Grau to George Kleine, May 3, 1915, George Kleine Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress. (Hereafter referred to as "Kleine Collection.")
14. Robert Grau, *Theatre of Science* (New York: Broadway Pub. Co, 1914), pp. 11, 19, 35.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112.
16. Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), pp. vi, xi.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
18. John Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776–1900* (New York: Grossman, 1976), p. 185.
19. "The Poetry of Discovery," *Scientific American* 5 (1849): 77; quoted in Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, p. 147.
20. Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. 394.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Paul Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès* (New York: St. Martins, 1975).
23. Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, pp. 414, 416, 418.

24. John Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 2-4, 171-187.
25. Robert Conot, *A Streak of Luck* (New York: Seaview Books, 1979), pp. 113, 186, 284, 387-414.
26. Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, pp. 72-73.
27. M. Lincoln Schuster to George Kleine, April 5, 1926, Kleine Collection; and Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. 68.
28. Subscription publishing is discussed in John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, Vol. II (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1975), p. 511; and Grau to Kleine, February 16, 1914, Kleine Collection.
29. Grau to Kleine, February 25, 1914 and April 4, 1914, Kleine Collection.
30. Brochure for *The Famous Two Hundred of the Motion Picture*, n.d., Kleine Collection.
31. Roy Armes, ed., "The Possibility of a History of World Cinema," in *Problems of Film History* (London: BFI, 1981), pp. 7-24.

PART TWO

Traditional Approaches to Film History