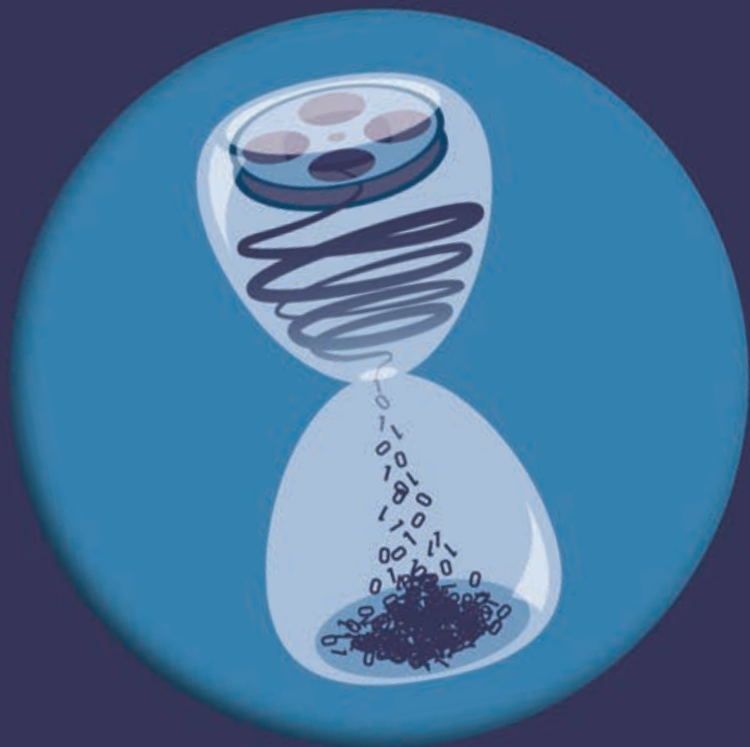


FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION



HOW FILM HISTORIES WERE MADE

Materials, Methods, Discourses

EDITED BY

MALTE HAGENER
YVONNE ZIMMERMANN

Amsterdam
University
Press

How Film Histories Were Made

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*Edited by
Malte Hagener and
Yvonne Zimmermann*

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	9
Introduction: Unpacking Film History's Own Histories Towards an Archaeology of Film Historiography <i>Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann</i>	13
I Models of Film Historiography: Philosophy and Time	
1 The Aporias of Cinema History <i>Thomas Elsaesser</i>	47
2 What Next? The <i>Historical Time</i> Theory of Film History <i>Jane M. Gaines</i>	59
3 Relativist Perspectivism <i>Caligari</i> and the Crisis of Historicism <i>Nicholas Baer</i>	85
4 The Discovery of Early Cinema The Moment of "Silence" <i>Heide Schlüpmann</i>	119
II Film History in the Making: Processes and Agendas	
5 Consistency, Explosion, and the Writing of Film History On Different Ways to Approach Film History at Different Times <i>Francesco Pitassio</i>	135
6 Defeats that Were Almost Victories Jay Leyda's (Soviet) Archives <i>Masha Salazkina</i>	163
7 A Film-maker's Film Histories Adjacency Historiography and the Art of the Anthology <i>Benoît Turquety</i>	189

- 8 Hans Richter and the “Struggle for the Film History” 209
Yvonne Zimmermann

III Revisiting Film History: Institutions, Knowledge, and Circulation

- 9 Historicizing the Gulf Moving Image Archives 237
Firat Oruc
- 10 British Cultural Studies, Film History, and Forgotten Horizons
of Cultural Analysis 263
Charles R. Acland
11. The Rise and Fall of Secular Realism 283
Notes on the Postcolonial Documentary Film from India
Arvind Rajagopal
- 12 What Was a Film Society? 315
Towards a New Archaeology of Screen Communities
Michael Cowan

IV Rewriting Film History with Images: Audiovisual Forms of Historiography

- 13 A Televisual Cinematheque 349
Film Histories on West German Television
Volker Pantenburg
- 14 The History of Film on Film 371
Some Thoughts on Reflexive Documentaries
Eleftheria Thanouli
- 15 Audiovisual Film Histories for the Digital Age 389
From Found Footage Cinema to Online Videographic Criticism
Chiara Grizzaffi

V Into the Digital: New Approaches and Revisions

16	Future Pasts within the Dynamics of the Digital Present Digitized Films and the Clusters of Media Historiographic Experience <i>Franziska Heller</i>	419
17	Tipping the Scales of Film History A Note on Scalability and Film Historiography <i>Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger</i>	445
18	Representing the Unknown A Critical Approach to Digital Data Visualizations in the Context of Feminist Film Historiography <i>Sarah-Mai Dang</i>	467
	Select Bibliography	495
	Index	519

List of Illustrations

Fig. 2.1.	Edison's Kinetoscope interior mechanism and celluloid film. <i>La Nature</i> (Paris, 1894).	61
Fig. 2.2.	Kinetoscope machines exterior motion picture theatre, 1920s.	77
Fig. 3.1.	Three streaks in the director's hair and gloves.	99
Fig. 3.2.	Cesare's slender, angular physique and knife.	99
Fig. 3.3.	Flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles.	104
Fig. 3.4.	Often-exaggerated sizes and proportions.	104
Fig. 3.5.	Iris shots.	108
Fig. 3.6.	Subjectivist and even solipsistic perspectivism.	109
Fig. 5.1.	Cover of the volume published together with cinema's fortieth jubilee. <i>40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935</i> (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).	143
Fig. 5.2.	Building a transnational European film canon. <i>Feu Matthias Pascal (The Late Matthias Pascal, Marcel L'Herbier, 1925)</i> in <i>40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935</i> (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).	144
Fig. 5.3.	Building a transnational European film canon. <i>Casta Diva</i> (Carmine Gallone, 1935) in <i>40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935</i> (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).	145
Fig. 5.4.	Exhibiting cinema under Fascism. The project of the BPRR Group for the Exhibition of Art Design in Cinema, Como, 1936.	146
Fig. 5.5.	Designing visual history. Francesco Pasinetti, <i>Mezzo secolo di cinema</i> (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).	150
Fig. 5.6.	Designing visual history. Francesco Pasinetti, <i>Mezzo secolo di cinema</i> (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).	151
Fig. 5.7.	Designing visual history. F. Pasinetti, <i>Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi</i> (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939).	151
Fig. 9.1.	Sharjah Paramount open-air cinema at an RAF station in the Persian Gulf. © IWM CM 6015.	242
Fig. 9.2.	Still shot from <i>Desert Venture</i> (1948).	243
Fig. 9.3.	Still shot from <i>The Island of the Arabs</i> (1955).	245
Fig. 9.4.	Doha Gulf Cinema in the 1970s.	250

Fig. 9.5.	Still shot from <i>These Are the Trucial States</i> (1958).	252
Fig. 9.6.	Khalid Al-Siddiq shooting <i>Cruel Sea</i> (1972).	255
Fig. 9.7.	Film Poster of <i>The Hour of Liberation Has Struck</i> (1974).	257
Fig. 12.1.	General assembly of the Kinogemeinde.	319
Fig. 12.2.	Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft, 1921.	319
Fig. 12.3.	Announcement for Kinematographische Studiengesellschaft.	320
Fig. 12.4.	Statutes of the Wiener Kinematographie Klub, 1910.	324
Fig. 12.5.	Announcements by the Kosmos Klub für wissenschaftliche und künstlerische Kinematographie.	326
Fig. 12.6.	Universum Kino programme, 1913.	332
Fig. 12.7.	Member list of the Kosmos Klub.	338
Fig. 15.1.	Jessica McGoff's desktop documentary <i>My Mulholland</i> (2020).	406
Fig. 15.2.	The draft of the "mind map" in John Gibbs' <i>Say, Have You Seen the Carioca?</i> (2019).	408
Fig. 15.3.	A still from Davide Rapp's VR film <i>Montegelato</i> (2021).	410
Fig. 16.1.	Screenshot of an interactive restoration of a still from the silent movie <i>Rapsodia Satanica</i> (1914/1917).	425
Fig. 16.2.	Screenshot of a digital restoration with the possibility of interactive modulation of the (digital) film image.	425
Fig. 16.3.	Screenshot of a digital restoration with the possibility of interactive modulation of the (digital) film image.	425
Fig. 16.4.	Screenshot of an interactive film still from Michael Curtiz' film <i>Mystery of the Wax Museum</i> (1933) "before and after preservation."	426
Fig. 18.1.	Screenshot of the COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. "COVID-19 Dashboard," cropped by the author.	472
Fig. 18.2.	Screenshot of an example by media scholar Kevin L. Ferguson that Christian Olesen presents in his overview on image data visualization, cropped by the author.	477
Fig. 18.3.	Screenshot of the Cinemetrics website that shows a case study on Charlie Chaplin's <i>City Lights</i> (1931), slightly cropped by the author. This graph is also highlighted by Olesen to give an example of a statistical data visualization (2018).	479

- Fig. 18.4. Screenshot of the Project Arclight website that shows how many times the terms “witches” and “bodyguard” are used in film magazines over several decades, cropped by the author. 480
- Fig. 18.5. Screenshot of the BFI Filmography website that shows how different graphs are applied to different aspects in film history, slightly cropped by the author. 481
- Fig. 18.6. Screenshot of the Shape of History Project by Lauren Klein, a multi-perspective, interactive data visualization project, slightly cropped by the author. 485

Introduction: Unpacking Film History's Own Histories

Towards an Archaeology of Film Historiography

Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann

Film is a historical object. This statement sounds simple and straightforward. But, as many assertions that appear self-evident at first sight, this turns out to be in actual fact a complex proposition with countless assumptions and preconditions, with many consequences and effects which this book will be devoted towards unpacking. History, the sequential, causal, and interpretative organization of past events, is a hermeneutical process which revolves around the selection of material, the connection of facts, as well as the argumentation of correlations and causations. An archaeological perspective on film history that this book proposes helps to shift attention towards the fragmentary state of sources, the material nature of records, and the necessarily constructivist manner of building evidence. While the academic discipline of history has made the turn towards a reflexive metahistory several decades ago,¹ film historiography appears to lag behind in this respect, as it still often clings to notions of natural evolution, national schools, and individual greatness.

In very general terms, film can be—and has been—historicized in many different ways: as an aesthetic and as a technological object, as a story of progress or decay, with a focus on the social effects of the films or on the economic trajectory of the business. While different approaches to film history—auteur and genre theory, new film history,² stylistic history,³ media

1 See, for example, the writings of Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt, Carlo Ginzburg, Aleida Assmann, or Reinhart Koselleck.

2 Robert C. Allen, and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

3 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

archaeology⁴ and new cinema history⁵—have been proposed and discussed (and continue to do so), the constitution of film history itself has rarely been systematically addressed and studied in-depth. In the process, the elements that contributed to it and the factors that shaped it, the material base as well as the contingencies and necessities that account for its shape and development, have been examined and scrutinized mainly in passing and rather been taken for granted. Attempting to fill this gap, the present book suggests to retrace how film history became the way it is today—and why it does not look any other way. This includes not only an exploration of the emergence and development of persistent records and the lore of the filmic past as it has been preserved, but also a foray into the dead ends and forgotten threads of film history. While revisiting the well-known narratives that film history tells us, we—together with the authors that we have assembled—also look out for the stories untold and wish to listen to the voices that have often been ignored in the past. In taking film history as the object to be historicized, the volume intends to uncover and mine the complex and contested processes and politics involved in the making of film and cinema an object of historiography. Insight into the fabrication of film history and the discourses on its materials, methods, and theories in the past can contribute to a better understanding and critical reconsideration of film history today.

What Are Film Histories? From Singular to Plural

Film history itself has a history that needs to be written—and constantly rewritten. It is a history of material objects (film prints, books, magazines, archival and non-archival documents, objects, studios, etc.) and their circulation and transformation, but it is also a story of immaterial things (ideas, theories, arguments, oral statements) and their afterlife. It is concerned in equal measure with theory and practice. It is a story of great men and women (from Iris Barry to the pioneers at the International Federation of Film Archives [FIAF] conference in Brighton in 1978), even though many names have been forgotten and will remain so. It also unfolds across

4 Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

5 Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

impersonal structures (government bureaucracies, studio hierarchies, institutional libraries, and university administrations), concrete things (film prints, annotated scripts, props, cinema theatres) and most often in hybrid networks of structures and actions, of personal dedication and utilized objects, of abstract ideas and concrete doings. From the prints themselves, their availability and physical condition, all the way to conversations and ephemeral encounters, film history has a basis in the sources that were—or were not—available at specific places and at specific times. So this approach also seeks to address the potential methods and tools at hand to write not one, but many histories of film history. In order to take a closer look at the shape of film historiography, we may need to employ digital methods as well as archival skills; theoretical reflection is no less important than creativity in placing documents or anthropological and ethnographic research methods. While this book will not transform the writing of film history single-handedly (no single tome would be capable of doing that), it sees itself as part of a larger movement towards integrating archival research with theoretically advanced considerations.

Film history has geographical biases, temporal prejudices, and institutional preferences—certain objects, places, times, and institutions promise more fame and glory than others. For example, film history as we know it today has to a very large extent focused on art cinema and commercial film-making and ignored as a consequence studying the use of moving images in the classroom, of audiovisual media in large-scale exhibitions (such as world expositions), and other fields of non-theatrical film culture. This bias towards fiction, mainstream film, and the classical movie theatre is in a (slow) process of transformation, as the last decade has seen a strong surge of interest in the field of “useful cinema.”⁶ Moreover, film history as we know it today has been written to a large extent in and about the films produced and seen in the Western world. Neglected in this process are non-Western subjects and practices, perspectives, and experiences. A

6 Some of the important volumes are: Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009); Scott Curtis, *The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Alison Griffiths, *Shivers down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Bo Florin, Patrick Vonderau, and Yvonne Zimmermann, *Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

truly global film history should look at the reasons for such predilections that obscured alternative film histories, as well as at the blind spots that such a conceptual approach entails.⁷ This anthology includes film histories from the Global South and studies idiosyncrasies as well as transcultural influences and exchanges in order to discover film history's diverse and entangled histories. Yet, we are also sensitive to the pitfalls of such an endeavour because it risks once again replicating a specific bias towards spectacular stories and shining discoveries. Covering every country or region with a text of its own is an impossible mission, first of all because it would go beyond the scope of this book, but more importantly such a procedure would be in danger of delegating non-Western history to a series of case studies while the West would be responsible for the theoretical reflection.

The essays in this anthology are transculturally informed and deeply entangled probes into the problems and issues of writing film history which are as much historical (Who had access to which material, who made which inferences, who influenced whom?) as they are conceptual (What does it mean to speak of film history? What does belong in film history? What does not belong?). Ultimately, these questions come down to the role of cinema: as a cultural actor, as a social force, as a political weapon, and as an economic factor. To write a history of the cinema—or of any aspect thereof—implies that the subject has value and significance.

While staying aware of film's specificity (in terms of its ontology, aesthetic forms, social contexts, institutional logics, and economic developments), the contributions in this book also address the transmedial nature of film history. The writing of film history cannot be done in splendid isolation; it has to think about radio and television, chrono-photography and computing, magazines and newspapers, magic lantern and photo journalism—just to mention some of the most obvious fellow travellers of film historiography. Such historiography does take film serious in its specificity, but it also keeps in mind the larger networks of media, infrastructures, and publics that have shaped our media and image culture in the past and continue to do so today. In this sense, this anthology is sensitive to recent proposals from media archaeology to shun away from a linear history of progress and to look instead at both the materiality of history and the dead ends of forgotten practices.

7 See also the revisionist feminist history/theory exhibition (at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt) and publication: Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, eds., *Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

The influential film histories of the past have been written by single authors, usually male, from major countries in North America or Europe.⁸ These works, sometimes single volumes, sometimes several tomes, have claimed their rightful place within the field and they have been useful to generations of students. From today's perspective, it appears increasingly megalomaniac to write a global film history single-handedly—too diverse are the traditions and sources, too broad is our knowledge spread out across very different domains, too high are the demands and expectations. Therefore, we speak here of film histories in the plural since we are faced not with one unified story, but with many (hi)stories—(hi)stories of many different places and aesthetic forms, (hi)stories of cinema memories and screening contexts, (hi)stories of movie palaces as well as political rallies, (hi)stories of factories, prisons, and museums as screening spaces. Films have been shown in many different venues and put to many different uses; they have circulated in many formats and audiences have reacted in very different ways. The plurality of the object cinema is crucial and consequently film history can only be imagined in the plural—as “film histories.”

When Was Film History? Beginnings and Developments

The canon established during the 1910s and 1920s remains with us today.

—David Bordwell (1997)⁹

What are the conditions of the possibility of writing and constructing a film history? Or rather, as we have argued for the plural, film histories? Why did a discourse that gave itself that name emerge some time between 1925 and 1935? History is predicated on temporality and transformation—it is dedicated to charting and explaining change over time. Therefore, only once the cinema was seen as a unified phenomenon worthy of consideration and endowed with a certain longevity in which transformations became visible that were structural rather than random and arbitrary did it appeal to people to think about film in historical terms. This was the case some time after World War I, when the feature film had become the standard

8 We are thinking here of the works of Paul Rotha, Georges Sadoul, Jean Mitry, Jerzy Toeplitz, David Robinson, David Cook, and Mark Cousins, but also of such teams as Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, Enno Patalas and Ulrich Gregor, and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.

9 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 12.

of the industry and a certain structure of production, distribution, and exhibition had been established.

Of course, there had been earlier attempts to write the history of the moving image that are noteworthy. Mostly, these early examples were histories of technological invention and development. Antonia and William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson's collection of essays on the *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetograph* came out in 1895 when moving images were barely "born" and the Lumière brothers' first commercial screening of moving images to a paying public at the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris was yet to come in the near future.¹⁰ Henry V. Hopwood devoted a chapter of his 1899 book *Living Pictures* to their history (entitled "Chronophotography and the Practical Development of the Living Picture"),¹¹ the others being on photoproduction and practical working. Other early historiographic approaches from France, Germany, and Britain, respectively, include Georges Demeny's *Les Origines du cinématographe* (1909), Franz Paul Liesegang's *Das lebende Lichtbild. Entwicklung, Wesen und Bedeutung des Kinematographen* (1910), and Colin N. Bennett's *The Handbook of Kinematography: The History, Theory and Practice of Motion Photography and Projection* (1911).¹² Such efforts could be summarized under the tagline "future needs origin," which since the industrialization of the mid-1850s had been widespread to promote novelties in industries and corporate communications by rooting them in a certain tradition. In the preface of his book, Bennett writes:

Thus, briefly, we have the history of the kinematograph—a history of development and improvement which has ultimately resulted in a scientific entertainment, the like of which has never been enjoyed and witnessed by the people of the whole world, the possibilities of which we can barely imagine, which gives employment to thousands and enjoyment to millions daily, and which amuses, educates, and brings into closer relationship the inhabitants of every quarter of the globe.¹³

10 See William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetograph* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970 [1895]).

11 See Henry V. Hopwood, *Living Pictures: Their History, Photo-production and Practical Working* (London: Forgotten Books, 2015 [1899]).

12 See Georges Demeny, *Les Origines du cinématographe* (Paris: H. Paulin, 1909); Franz Paul Liesegang, *Das lebende Lichtbild. Entwicklung, Wesen und Bedeutung des Kinematographen* (Düsseldorf: Liesegang, 1910); Colin N. Bennett, *The Handbook of Kinematography: The History, Theory and Practice of Motion Photography and Projection* (London: The Kinematograph Weekly, 1911).

13 *Ibid.*, v.

Apart from the teleological belief in progress that speaks from the quote and that is typical for such early historiographies that retrace a certain genealogy of the moving image, it also illustrates a discourse that is much infused with the promise of cinema's future. In addition, writings like Bennett's were usually authored by practitioners who had multiple purposes in mind—be they to explain and legitimize their business or to secure their place in history. This motivation to get involved in film history and historiography can, of course, be traced across the whole trajectory of the moving image and across all fields from avant-garde, experimental, and amateur film to what we call useful cinema today (see, for example, the essays by Cowan, Turquety, and Zimmermann in this volume). These early endeavours into the history of film are particularly interesting for their situatedness within a larger visual culture and multimedia history.

The first tentative steps in the direction of a historiographic discourse based on an assumed medium-specificity of film and on a particular interest in aesthetic properties emerged in the mid-1920s. Recent research has shown that a number of factors contributed to this development: the growing awareness of film's significance (as an art form, a cultural force, an educational tool, and a political and economic factor) was possibly the most important contributing aspect. The introduction of sound film in the second half of the 1920s made people conscious of the fact that an era was coming to an end (and instilled in some a nostalgic longing for silent cinema), while the sudden economic obsolescence of films without a sound track marked a watershed that was crucial for the growing sense of material heritage that was on the brink of destruction. At the same time, political tensions underscored the importance of the cinema in social terms.¹⁴

If we turn towards the beginning of this decade (1925–1935) in which (medium-specific) film history emerged, we find a book such as Iris Barry's *Let's Go to the Pictures*,¹⁵ published in 1926, which was still suspended somewhat undecidedly between criticism, theoretical argument and historical overview. It arguably succeeded most consequently as a “report on the nature and rewards of filmgoing,”¹⁶ as her biographer has characterized the book. The chapters of the book address different aspects that were being discussed at the time: specificities of the medium (“Dolls and

14 See the contributions in Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

15 Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926).

16 Robert Sitton, *Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 131.

Dreams," 21–34; "Art," 35–50), social problems ("Conventions and Morals," 141–60) or national schools ("Speaking of International," 237–54). Yet, it presents one topic in each chapter (theory, social issues, national history) rather than following one of those consequently through. Therefore, film history was present in the book, yet again as one aspect of several. At the time, Barry was working as a film critic in London, where she had just been involved in the founding of the London Film Society, a key institution for establishing a canon of silent film. Later, after she moved to New York in 1930, she became the curator of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library and a key force in establishing and consolidating a certain version of film history.¹⁷

It was in the decade following the publication of Iris Barry's book that a consensus formed and a discourse emerged which could be described as an early form of film history. Of course, this period was characterized by the introduction of sound with its many direct and indirect effects. In what is still one of the most concise overviews of film historiography, David Bordwell has argued that at this time a "Basic story" of the process of film history was established which exhibited considerable influence and longevity. Bordwell writes: "[B]efore 1940 very few book-length histories of cinema were published. Instead, institutions created by international film culture served to maintain and update the Basic story."¹⁸ The Basic story is a film historical discourse that relies on a logic of national characteristics, stylistic progress, and a gradual maturation—"schools" compete with one another and exhibit recognizable characteristics. These schools have mostly national roots (this is why some people still speak of a "typical French film" today) and individual proponents, usually called "auteurs." There is a clear element of scalability here, as individual films belong to the oeuvre of an individual person (the "auteur") who, in turn, can be attributed to a school which, again, is part of a national style.

One important publication from the midpoint of the decade in which film history was established is Paul Rotha's *The Film till Now*, which first came out in 1930.¹⁹ The young author (born in 1907) underlined the precarious nature of knowledge about film:

17 See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

18 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 22.

19 Paul Rotha, *The Film till Now: A Survey of the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930). Rotha, with the help of Richard Griffith, published an updated edition in 1949, followed by another (final) edition in 1960. Both editions still very visibly exhibit the original structure of the book, as well as the signs of expansion, but remained influential.

It must be remembered that the life of a film is short. It fades into the past with rapidity and is only to be seen again with difficulty. Moreover, reliable data about even quite well-known films is scarce and sometimes unprocurable. Secondly, I have attempted to investigate the film as a means of expression; to catalogue its attributes as evidenced till now; and to speculate upon its potentialities as suggested by its course of development.²⁰

Evidently, Rotha wrote at a time when access to film was difficult, as no archives or established reference works existed. Yet again, the quoted passage demonstrates a clear sense of historicity, as it also projects film into the time to come. Rotha's book—and the future editions (in 1949 and 1960, respectively)—proved to be very influential for many decades.

If Barry opened the decade with her publication and Rotha's book marked the midpoint, then Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach's *Histoire du cinéma*, which first came out in French in 1935, is the conclusion to this ten-year period.²¹ The book was translated into English by Iris Barry, who worked at the time for the recently founded Museum of Modern Art Film Library. According to Bordwell, its value lies in the specific position from which it is written: looking back at the silent cinema, while the sound film was not altogether new, the authors formulated a "truly transnational stylistic history."²² It became an influential work by its overview character which led to many re-editions and also translations. The English version came with a word of caution by John E. Abbott, the director of the Film Library:

The tale which Messieurs Bardèche and Brasillach have to tell is a fascinating one. [...] Only after a prolonged and complete re-examination of the film of the past will a wholly authoritative analysis of the film come to be recorded; in the meantime this animated (if often controversial) account is most welcome.²³

20 Ibid., 10.

21 We do not have the space here to go into the political ramifications of these film histories, but it should at least be mentioned that Brasillach held Fascist beliefs and sympathies; he was executed in 1945 as a collaborator with the German occupiers after the liberation of France. Bardèche, his brother-in-law, attempted to clear his name and reinstate him as an important writer in the following years. For this political context, see Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 142–60 ("The Movies").

22 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 40.

23 Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures*, trans. and ed. by Iris Barry (New York: W. W. Norton/The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), xii.

The structure of the book makes clear that it is organized by national cinemas and by phases which are either delineated by political events or by technological developments. The major parts divide the forty years of cinema that it covers into six specific periods which are still being evoked today: birth (1895–1908), pre-war (1908–1914), World War I (1914–1918), emergence of art (1919–1923), classic silent film (1923–1929), and talking film (1929–1935). Within these short time windows, subchapters address the American, French, German, Russian, Scandinavian, and Italian film, effectively synchronizing the development in the different national sections according to political events or transformations of an economic and technological nature.

Of course, concentrating on books means to ignore newspapers and journals, exhibitions and film programmes, lectures and radio broadcasts which dealt with the history of the cinema, too. Yet again, books stood unrivalled as authoritative sources of knowledge and as encyclopaedic registers of fact. Rotha himself acknowledges this in the second edition of his book when he points to the appendices: “Knowing that perhaps the most used section of the book has been the Appendix of Production Units of some Outstanding Films, this list has been revised, expanded and brought up-to-date.”²⁴ In this sense, the publication of a book requires a certain amount of work from author and publisher, but also from reader and user, so that a book with an authoritative aspiration to cover a field can be seen as a sediment of a larger discourse. It is in this sense that we speak of an emergent film history which becomes visible in the years around the introduction of sound.

What Do Algorithms Know? Data-Driven Film Historiography

In order to test the common assumption that film history as a discourse emerged some time in the 1920s and 1930s and had found a relatively stable form by the beginning of World War II, we turned to digital methods. We wanted to see if we could find evidence—or at least hints and tendencies—in the available data that speak for or against the general proposition.²⁵ To

²⁴ Paul Rotha (in collaboration with Richard Griffith), *The Film till Now: A Survey of World Cinema*, rev. ed. (New York: Twayne, 1949), 16.

²⁵ This digital research was done as part of the Digital Cinema-Hub project, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (<http://dicihub.net>). We thank data scientist Marcel Förster and project coordinator Josephine Diecke for their productive collaboration and input on this data module.

accomplish this, we built a corpus from the books available in digital form at the Media History Digital Library²⁶ that were published before 1940. Since our chosen method was text mining and topic modelling we removed all titles in languages other than English and also those volumes that were just catalogues or lists of film titles. These volumes would have required a very different approach that is not easily combinable with our perspective. Also deleted were titles that were present in multiple forms in the collection, mostly new editions or differently titled US/UK editions.

The question that guided the steps in the process of data preparation was whether the emergence of a film historiographic discourse could be traced through the development of the prose used in the published books. Or rather: if the data on word frequencies and topic modelling would give us new insights into the historiography of the medium. We quickly came to realize that evidence from data, at least in the humanities (but we suspect: also in other disciplines), has to be constructed and argued, rather than “discovered” and “displayed.” The metaphors used for the preparation of data mostly originate from the primary sector of the economy, dealing with the production of raw materials—mining, harvesting, fishing—and imply an extractive process. Hence, this is a highly labour-intensive process that produces the basic material for all further steps, and it is important to make these steps transparent in detail.²⁷ We found that several titles on specific topics skewed the results in such a way that they made it difficult to get differentiated results on the rest of the corpus. We therefore removed several titles of a highly specialized nature, namely an authoritative book on the topic of law²⁸ and one on the history of three-colour photography.²⁹ Both titles generated topics of their own to which no other book belonged, thereby diluting the topics without giving any additional insight.

The basic corpus that we then worked on in more detail consisted of seventy-seven full texts of books, published in the years from 1911 to 1939. Since we considered it such an important title, we added—to the titles found in the Media History Digital Library—the English translation of Bardèche and Brasillach's book as a crucial publication in the field. The smallest

26 <https://mediahistoryproject.org/>.

27 Flawed input produces flawed results—therefore, it is important to make sure that the data is of high quality and not GIGO (as data scientists say, “Garbage in, garbage out”). For reasons of transparency, it is crucial to lay open the steps of data gathering, cleaning, and preparation.

28 Louis D. Frohlich and Charles Schwartz, *The Law of Motion Pictures: Including the Law of the Theatre* (New York: Baker, Vorhis and Company, 1918).

29 E.J. Wall, *The History of Three-Color Photography* (Boston: American Photographic Publishing Company, 1925).

portion of books came out in the 1910s (fourteen titles), some more titles were published in the 1920s (twenty-one titles), while the largest percentage of books came out in the 1930s (forty-two titles)—here our corpus reflects the realities of publishing, we believe. The number of books on the cinema published increased over the course of three decades. Using a standard tool in topic modelling (DARIAH Topics Explorer³⁰), we let the algorithms divide the corpus into distinct semantic categories. Topic modelling is a relatively established method from machine learning and natural language processing which searches for clusters and atypical frequencies of words in larger corpora. In digital humanities this text-mining tool is often used to classify larger data sets which are compiled with specific research questions in mind. Cases in which topic modelling has been used successfully include studies into the genre of novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth century or the examination of trends in scholarly publications.³¹ In our case, we experimented a bit with the number of topics, until we settled on eight topics that appeared distinct enough to be distinguishable, while also reflecting the semantic variety of the books in the data set. Some of the eight topics were easily recognizable because they fit into established categories; volumes on “education” listed key words such as *school*, *child*, *teacher*, *instruction*, while another topic which we called “film technology” had frequent words such as *light*, *lens*, *exposure*, *lamp*, and *projection*. We identified the following four topics easily and named them accordingly—“technology,” “education,” “screenwriting,” and “sound film”—with “education” probably being the most distinctive topic since it showed up as a topic regardless of the number of topics we experimented with. This we think reflects the importance of education in historical film practice and discourse, which is a fact that was largely overlooked for a long time given “classical” film historiography’s focus on art and entertainment films and that has only been “uncovered” in recent years by research into the history of useful cinema.

The rest of the topics proved to be more difficult to discern. Two topics dealt with questions of production—one appeared to be rather oriented towards studios and actual work on studio stages, while another one included

30 Severin Simmler, Thorsten Vitt, and Steffen Pielström, “Topic Modeling with Interactive Visualizations in a GUI Tool,” paper presented at the Digital Humanities Conference 2019 (DH2019), Utrecht, the Netherlands, July 9–12, 2019, <https://dataverse.nl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.34894/ENV3TX>.

31 See, for example, Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007), and Elijah Meeks and Scott B. Weingart, eds., *The Digital Humanities Contribution to Topic Modeling*, special issue of the *Journal of Digital Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2012), <https://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/2-1/>.

more significant terms with a focus on the industry in general, also referring to exhibition and censorship. Of the two remaining topics, one included several words referring to nation states (*French, English, British, German, American, Russian, Soviet*), as well as *Chaplin*, one of the few cases of a name of an individual coming up more frequently within the sample. The other one appeared to be a bit more poetic and romantic as the most significant words were *movie, girl, life, child, like, and boy*. The first topic, we concluded, can be seen as a nascent historical discourse which focused on national styles and prominent individuals, as Bordwell has argued about the structure of the Basic story. We termed this topic “world film history,” the other “romantic/personal (hi)story.”

Next, we turned to the books that the algorithm assigned to the specific topics, thus changing our scale from the whole data set to individual items. This shift of focus is crucial when working with digital methods and tools because results from data computations, at least in the humanities, always require interpretation and hermeneutic forms of understanding. By using the results from the algorithms as a specific way into the material, a constant movement between algorithmic computation and hermeneutic interpretation is necessary. It turned out to be significant that the titles in our “world film history” section were all published around or after the introduction of sound, mostly in the 1930s, some in the late 1920s. Thus, this topic only emerged after sound film had rendered film to be historical, as it showed the obsolescence of silent film in the new age of sound film. In the other topic—“romantic and personal (hi)story”—the years of publication are spread out wider across the period, even though we can also observe in this case a tendency towards the later decade.

The nascent topic of “world film history” contained the following books,³² listed according to the degree to which the algorithm found them belonging to the category³³: Paul Rotha's *The Film till Now* (1930) which we have discussed above and Allardyce Nicoll's bibliography on *Film and Theatre* (1936). The next title, *Plan for Cinema* (1936), was written by Dallas Bower,

32 Rotha, *The Film till Now* (1930); Allardyce Nicoll, *Film and Theatre* (New York: Crowell, 1936); Dallas Bower, *Plan for Cinema* (London: Dent, 1936); Ernest Betts, *Heraclitus; or, The Future of Films* (London: Kegan Paul, 1928); Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Parallel Paths of the Cinema, Which Have Led to the Present Revolutionary Crisis Forming a Study of the Cinema as an Instrument of Sociological Humanism* (London: Howard Shaylor, 1930); E. W. Robson and M. M. Robson, *The Film Answers Back: An Historical Appreciation of the Cinema* (London: The Bodley Head, 1939).

33 The topic modelling algorithm assigns each text in the sample to one or (usually) more topics with a corresponding percentage which gives the relative weight of this attribution.

who was appointed as one of the first two senior producers at the BBC in 1936 after having worked in the film industry as a sound expert and director. In a study of his life (he turned out to be an important figure in the BBC), it is argued that this volume is “in many ways a visionary book foreseeing how colour, widescreen and 3D might be used to create a new form of filmic poetic drama.”³⁴ Ernest Betts’ *Heraclitus* (1928) is, in his own words, an “attempt to survey the position in the film world in 1928,”³⁵ as it presents an argument that is partly theoretical, partly historical. Huntly Carter’s *The New Spirit in the Cinema* (1930) flaunts a long-winded subtitle: “An Analysis and Interpretation of the Parallel Paths of the Cinema, Which Have Led to the Present Revolutionary Crisis Forming a Study of the Cinema as an Instrument of Sociological Humanism.” The book presents an idiosyncratic argument in which the cinema contains both “the good and evil seed,” i.e. commercialism and humanism. Both paths are laid out in historical terms before Carter turns towards impeding developments. Finally, Emanuel W. and Mary M. Robson’s *The Film Answers Back* (1939) is a serious non-fiction book from the end of the decade which already announces in its subtitle that it is “An Historical Appreciation of the Cinema.” It consists of two parts, “The Cinema: Europe and America” and “The American Cinema,” and it opens with the “invention” of the cinema (with well-known proponents such as Friese-Greene, Edison, and the Lumières as protagonists), as it goes on to tell the standard story which had been well-established by the end of the 1930s.

The topic “romantic/personal (hi)story” on the other hand, contained the following books which we briefly characterize here: a theatre and movie critic reminiscences about his life (Mark Hellinger, *Moon over Broadway*, 1931), an anecdotal history of early cinema focusing D. W. Griffith, written by his wife (Linda Arvidson, *When the Movies Were Young*, 1925), the autobiography of a well-known Scottish singer, named after his most successful song (Harry Lauder, *Roamin’ in the Gloamin’*, 1928), a famous Payne Fund study on the movie-going of young people based on their own accounts (Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, 1933), a collection of anecdotes around film production (Charles Ray, *Hollywood Shorts*, 1933), a study aimed at middle-class mothers and religious groups from the same series of Payne Fund studies as Blumer’s (Henry James Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*, 1933) and a popular book on movie appreciation (Ira Price, *A Hundred Million*,

34 John Wyver, “Dallas Bower: A Producer for Television’s Early Years, 1936–39,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 9, no. 1 (2012): 26–39.

35 Betts, *Heraclitus*, 18.

1938).³⁶ On first sight, the studies of Blumer and Forman do not seem to fit this topic because they are sociological analyses of movie-going, but also of film content. They consist to a certain extent of retellings of movie plots, just as of the statements of teenagers and adolescents. In this sense, the books fit into this topic, which is more fascinated with criminality and sexuality, with emotions and affects, than with the nascent film historiography that we discussed above. We have to remember how the algorithm works and divides the string of words that have no semantic dimension to a computer into distinct categories.

With this in mind, we need to critically reevaluate not only the results, but also the steps that led us there. The process of analysis in itself is hermeneutical, even though the data is generated by an algorithm that is purely interested in frequencies and patterns of words, not in meaning and understanding. Nevertheless, the results of the disinterested algorithm need to be interpreted semantically in order to make sense. And this process of meaning-making does not start with the results; but the whole process of building a data set, of choosing a method, and of setting parameters (establishment of corpus, list of stopwords, number of topics) is highly contingent and therefore already a part of the interpretative process. In fact, the process itself is iterative and algorithmically based, as much as interpretative because we went back and forth between larger patterns which the algorithm interpreted stochastically and closer looks as to which books fell into what category. In a way, this is a different kind of hermeneutical circle that does not only shift from text to context and back again, but that includes the statistical logic of the computer which remains elusive to historical facts and frameworks.

The topics that topic modelling as a method works with are dependent upon the corpus because they are generated from the material that is fed into the algorithm—the computer extracts the topics from the words. Therefore, the results are not only dependent upon the pre-existing knowledge since our assumptions always form the questions we have. The results are also contingent in relation to the corpus because what we feed into the machine

36 Mark Hellinger, *Moon over Broadway* (New York: William Faro, 1931); Linda Arvidson, *When the Movies Were Young* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925); Harry Lauder, *Roamin' in the Gloamin'* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1928); Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Charles Ray, *Hollywood Shorts: Compiled from Incidents in the Everyday Life of Men and Women Who Entertain in Pictures* (Los Angeles: California Graphic Press, 1935); Henry James Forman, *Our Movie Made Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Ira Price, *A Hundred Million Movie Goers Must Be Right: An Aid to Movie Appreciation* (Cleveland: Movie Appreciation Press, 1938).

constructs the categories. Our exploratory study into the early phases of film historiography is based on digitized books in English that are available via open access. The choice of books predicated a publishing industry (with writers, readers and a market) and also an infrastructure which makes them available a hundred years later (libraries, digitization projects, digital infrastructure for access and computation). In a way, this highlights our own situatedness as researchers with specific assumptions, skills (language, computer), and knowledge. One could go on tweaking the corpus and add such titles as Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights*,³⁷ Georges Michel Coissac's *Histoire du cinématographe de ses origines à nos jours*,³⁸ or other contemporary titles by Lewis Jacobs and Léon Moussinac. Yet again, we believe that the results would not be much different.

What is more crucial here, as we discuss the methods and assumptions of (digital) film historiography, is to stay wary of the idea that data somehow speaks for itself, that the answer is already there and needs only to be found. These processes are selections at heart that do not aim at teasing out any pre-existing truth, but rather highly contingent constructions of probabilities. As Bernhard Rieder has recently argued (and as it is quoted in the essay by Schneider and Hediger in this volume):

[F]or any sufficiently complex data set, the idea that “the data speak for themselves” is implausible; developers and analysts select from a wide variety of mathematical and visual methods to *make* the data speak, to filter, arrange, and summarize them from different angles, following questions that orient how they look at them. Rather than ideas of a natural order, there are guiding interests that drive how data are made meaningful.³⁹

Our small case study using digital methods has shown that a specific film historical discourse emerged in the 1930s that was built on a relatively stable set of ideas, such as national cinema, individual greatness, and aesthetic value. Especially the works by Paul Rotha and Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach proved to be influential trailblazers for a larger post-war interest in film history. Of course, the results of the topic modelling that we

37 Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926).

38 Georges Michel Coissac, *Histoire du cinématographe de ses origines à nos jours* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1925).

39 Bernhard Rieder, *Engines of Order: A Mecanology of Algorithmic Techniques* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 32.

present here are neither groundbreaking nor radically new. But they give us pause to reconsider some more general aspects of doing film history. First of all, such digital tools allow us a different access to the data that we rely on in film history. Before the digital, the amount of data was mostly limited to what we as individual scholars could take in. Now, the capacity of computers to find patterns in large data sets makes it much easier to find outliers, typicalities, and structures we were not able to see before. Since a digital investigation forces us to constantly shift scale from close to distant reading, it often foregrounds aspects that we would not have been aware of otherwise. Therefore, our pilot study could be used to look at those titles that are largely forgotten today.

Second, this topic modelling has also intensified our reflexive orientation towards the methods that we have used. A mixed-methods approach with digital and hermeneutical elements, a scalable reading that shifts focus from close to distant reading, necessarily forces us to ask questions about the way we do our business. Mixing digital methods and hermeneutic interpretation, as we have done, privileges a research process that is modular, reflexive, and iterative. This process takes critically into account our own situatedness as well as the process of data gathering, corpus building, and tool use. At least in these two respects, the investigation reaches beyond the concrete results and brings in a more general consideration of approaches and methods. In this sense, the digital can act as a catalyst for a methodological turn.

What Is in This Book? The Volume

How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses engages with questions of film history and film historiography and in this sense stands in a longer tradition. Doing and writing film history is a topic that has also been addressed recurrently since the establishment of film as a field of academic study in the late 1960s. Without attempting to map the terrain systematically here, we want to mention Michèle Lagny's seminal 1992 book *De l'histoire du cinéma* in which she details the methodologies of film historiography informed by "traditional," hermeneutical and archive-informed film historiographical methods.⁴⁰ Another milestone we do not want to let go unmentioned is the famous book by Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, which came out in 1985 in the aftermath of the 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton and in the

40 See Michèle Lagny, *De l'histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992).

spirit of the New Film History.⁴¹ The subject of their book is to a certain extent similar to the topic of this volume, namely “the historical study of film, not film itself.”⁴² But unlike the present volume, the authors wish to systematically discuss film history in relation to history and to equally systematically discern and describe traditional approaches to film history, of which they consider aesthetic film history, technological film history, economic film history and social film history. The third part of the book is devoted to exemplary cases of “doing film history.” Allen and Gomery’s book is widely known for the—to some, provocative—statement that films can be studied without the need to see them: “For certain investigations, film viewing is really an inappropriate research method.”⁴³ Colleagues engaged in New Cinema History would certainly agree.

Most recently, Dimitrios Latsis has pursued a similar concern as this anthology in his 2023 book *How the Movies Got a Past*, which looks into the ways the movies’ past was constructed, discussed, and preserved in American cinema from 1894 to 1930.⁴⁴ While we see our volume in a tradition of critically engaging with the materials, methods and discourses of writing film history in our field of film studies, the present volume wishes neither to propose a systematic discussion of the subject matter nor to delve into a certain industry and period in detail. We also do not want to give an overview of the state of the art of film historiography today. Our approach is deliberately eclectic but still exemplary to a certain extent in its casting spotlights on selective actors, networks, infrastructures, and geographies that at a certain moment in time were involved in doing film history. This rationale is partly owed to the fact that the volume is not a single- or double-authored book but an edited collection of original essays written by established film historians and younger voices in the field. The collection is based in part on a conference on “Histories of Film History” held in Marburg, Germany, in December 2018, which was generously funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Other contributions were added to complement the picture, especially in regard to the potential, if not possible, futures of film history in the digital present. Still, there are some lacunae, for example, a consideration of film collectors’ contributions to film historiography based on their own film collections. Compared to

41 See Allen and Gomery, *Film History*.

42 *Ibid.*, iii.

43 *Ibid.*, 38.

44 Dimitrios Latsis, *How the Movies Got a Past: A Historiography of American Cinema, 1894–1930* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

previous contributions to film historiography from the field of film studies, the present volume differs in that it is specifically concerned with film history's own history, understood as a diverse set of dominant, divergent, contradicting, future, and forgotten (hi)stories that this volume wishes to make visible.

The volume is divided into five sections which we are introducing on the following pages. The first section of the book, entitled "Models of Film Historiography: Philosophy and Time" is concerned with theoretical and conceptual issues that are at stake when writing film history. For the longest time, film history behaved as if professional historiography had not yet taken its linguistic, narrative, and culturalist turn, as if one could still talk of great men bringing forth single-handedly great films. Largely modelled on art historical ideas of cyclical progress and decay, traditional film historiography was interested in how national characteristics played out in different schools which again broke up into distinct personal styles. The strong interrelation between nation, wave, and auteur led to such triads as Soviet/montage/Eisenstein or German/Expressionism/Lang. Despite the enduring lack of engagement with theories of history within film studies, there is a different tradition in which the question of temporality has been crucial. From its beginnings, cinema held a special relation to time, as projected filmic images presented a view of past events and persons, yet one that appeared to be dialectically present and absent at the same time. From Bergson to Deleuze, from Münsterberg to Cavell, this relation between (perceptual) presence and (ontological) absence has been frequently discussed in film theory. At the same time, some voices in film history took up the question of how historical events were depicted in movies,⁴⁵ but seldom asked reflexively about the nature of film historiography.

Chapter 1 is a wide-ranging essay by Thomas Elsaesser entitled "The Aporias of Cinema History," which we publish posthumously. In it Elsaesser poses important questions about the scale and scope of film history, when considered in relation to much larger temporal frames such as the Anthropocene or the co-evolution of humans and tools. Such an "archeo-topological model" of the cinema, as he calls it, thwarts traditional distinctions that are held dearly in cultural histories: nature/culture, movement/stillness,

45 Important classical studies of the relationship between historical events and their cinematic representation are Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

analogue/digital. In its second century, film historiography faces the challenge that everything appears to be turning into data—and data is open to many different forms of access and processing, the algorithmic operations most often remain opaque to human understanding. Thus, the long-held truth that film is made for humans to behold and understand has at least been shaken because more and more operational images are produced which are intended to steer vehicles, operate machines, and put populations under surveillance. Elsaesser poses the crucial question: What kind of a film and cinema history is needed for this radically transformed situation?

In chapter 2, “What Next? The *Historical Time* Theory of Film History,” Jane Gaines also starts from the observation that the long transformation process that film and cinema are undergoing from analogue to digital requires film studies to rethink its position vis-à-vis history. For this task, Gaines turns to German historian Reinhart Koselleck and his conception of “*historical time*.” The long history of copying, pirating, and legal interference provides her with the material “to develop a theory of history as it relates to technological change.” Proposing that Koselleck is more important for this undertaking than Kittler, the essay dissects the various layers of temporality at play in any given historical situation. The paradoxical result of employing Koselleck is not only that every new time is both new and not so new, but also that we need to consider the perspectives, speaking positions, and historical assumptions that such claims imply.

In chapter 3, “Relativist Perspectivism: *Caligari* and the Crisis of Historicism,” Nicholas Baer takes a fresh look at German historicist tradition by revisiting one of the flagships of Expressionist cinema, Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Baer argues that Albert Einstein’s relativist perspectivism, which fostered a more decentred, spatiotemporal dynamic and a non-absolute relationship between subject and object, found expression both in modernist films and in the historical-philosophical debates of the Weimar era. Diverging from Thomas Elsaesser’s reading of *Caligari*,⁴⁶ Baer’s analysis positions the work as a metahistorical intervention into the period’s philosophical debates, arguing that the film, under the influence of relativist perspectivism, adopts an ironic stance regarding issues of historical ontology, epistemology, and narration. Baer’s close reading of *Caligari* within the context of film-theoretical and philosophical debates demonstrates the medium’s capacity to engage with fundamental questions of the philosophy of history.

46 Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000).

In chapter 4, "The Discovery of Early Cinema: The Moment of 'Silence,'" Heide Schlüpmann revisits the emergence of a feminist perspective on film historiography and theory that, in the context of West Germany, emerged within the domain of film criticism before film studies gained a foothold within academia in the 1980s. Herself an important figure in feminist film theory and historiography since its inception, Schlüpmann describes the rediscovery of early cinema as a way out of the dilemma of loving cinema but wanting the screen to emancipate from male views about women and the world. In particular, the subversive moment of silence, the freedom from the spoken word, meant an attachment to visuality and was a motivation to rescue films that had been lost from memory. Schlüpmann's retrospection and outlook reveals and reflects the film historian's own subject position, thus calling attention to the film historian's stance towards her object of historiography between critical distance, immersion, and activism.

The essays in the second section of the book examine "Film History in the Making: Processes and Agendas," with Schlüpmann's consideration of the film historian's own position regarding her object just outlined providing a smooth transition. This section focuses on the making of film history in the historical past and examines the agendas and tactics, institutions, materials and power relations involved in the processes of constructing narratives. The essays look at different geographical regions (Italy, Russia, and the United States) and the transnational trajectories of film histories and their makers. Film histories in the making are situated, historically specific, and contingent, as the contributions in this section show: some came timely and persisted, others were forgotten the moment they had seen the light of day, and some were lost in translation.

In chapter 5, "Consistency, Explosion, and the Writing of Film History: On Different Ways to Approach Film History at Different Times," Francesco Pitassio takes a close look at early attempts in film historiography which were written in Italy between the mid-1930s and the early 1950s. Whereas most of these efforts took place under a Fascist regime and mirrored some of its nationalist policies, it is surprising to see how many transnational connections become visible nevertheless. Despite obvious echoes of Fascist policies in the works that Pitassio discusses, cinema emerges as an international art form and cultural force from the very start. Yet, the essay moreover demonstrates that film history was expansive and border-crossing not only in terms of geography, but also regarding the situatedness of early film historiography within a wider film culture. Pitassio discusses exhibitions, archives, journals, film schools, and other elements that show that film

history did not appear out of nowhere, but rather emerged from a rich and fledging ecosystem that we have now come to call “film culture.”

The next three contributions look at specific film historians who were practitioners in the first place, who made, collected and/or taught film: Jay Leyda, Peter Kubelka, and Hans Richter. These essays show that making film, collecting material, and writing about it not only went hand in hand, but that these activities were interdependent and influenced each other. In chapter 6, “Defeats That Were Almost Victories: Jay Leyda’s (Soviet) Archives,” a study of the prolific film-maker, writer, archivist, and teacher Jay Leyda, Masha Salazkina argues for the significance of the experience that Leyda made in the 1930s, when he studied in Moscow under Sergei Eisenstein. When he came back to work in the US (in archives and universities, as a teacher and as a writer), many of the ideas and practices that proved to be influential for future generations can be traced back to the experimental and open model developed within the Soviet film school in the early 1930s. Salazkina thus proposes to “historicize a historian whose own work relied so clearly on the power of personal experiences, anecdotes, and broader intellectual conjunctures.” Beyond his fascinating personal trajectory, Leyda as a film historian and archivist, as a teacher and writer, proved to be a key influence on the shaping of North American film culture and scholarship.

In chapter 7, “A Film-maker’s Film Histories: Adjacency Historiography and the Art of the Anthology,” Benoît Turquety argues that film artists produce specific kinds of histories, ones that rely less on history writing (in a literal sense) and more on paratactic forms of discourse and non-literary practices such as film programming. To illustrate this claim, Turquety looks at Peter Kubelka and Anthology Film Archives’ practice of collecting and programming film as a form of history writing which is based on the modernist conceptions of collecting and curating as historiographical projects. With *Essential Cinema*, a cycle of 110 programmes screened on a regular basis, Anthology Film Archives, according to Turquety re-enacted in the film world the model of the anthology and its tactics that had proven their efficiency in modernist poetry and art. The *Essential Cinema* programmes represent an interventionist mode of history writing that refuses linearity and endorses adjacency historiography instead.

Chapter 8, “Hans Richter and the ‘Struggle for the Film History’” by Yvonne Zimmermann, focuses on a proponent of a linear film historiography and an advocate for the “progress” of film towards art—Hans Richter. Zimmermann’s contribution illustrates Richter’s “struggle for the film history” (in reference to Richter’s only posthumously published film history book, *The Struggle for the Film*) and his own place in it. Richter’s preoccupation

with film and art history is mostly attributed to Richter's experience of exile, but can be traced back to the early 1920s and the German crisis of historicism. Richter was a practitioner of various forms of history making, besides writing also teaching and film-making. His philosophy of history was partly in line with the ideas of his compatriots Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, who shared the fate of exile, but diverged also in significant ways. Richter's efforts were highly situated, some were successful, others came untimely. The contribution also sheds light on a ramified network of institutions and actors involved in building the/a canon of film (history) across the Atlantic.

The third section of the book is entitled "Revisiting Film History: Institutions, Knowledge, and Circulation" and is devoted to constellations in which institutional arrangements play a key role. The essays gathered herein take a diverse set of subjects—the early development of cinema in the Arab peninsula, British cultural studies, Indian documentary, film societies and ciné-clubs—and read them against the grain of conceived wisdom. Institutions refer to a wide variety of objects in the essays: colonial administrations, chartered associations, transnational corporations, a loose group of individuals gathering around an idea, political parties, and production houses. At the same time, the essays do not follow one institution as a kind of protagonist and do not present institutional histories in the conventional sense, but rather consider complex networks that dynamically change over time. In particular, they are interested in arrangements that have to do with two factors: on the one hand, they look at the production of knowledge; on the other hand, they take an active interest in the circulation of material and immaterial things.

In chapter 9, "Historicizing the Gulf Moving Image Archives," Firat Oruc focuses on the "social, historical, and cultural role [of the cinema] in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity in the Gulf." Whereas the contemporary situation in the Arab peninsula with its festivals and biennales, importing talent and accessing significant levels of funding, draws much attention, the prehistory of the current boom is basically unknown. Oruc begins to fill this gap by arguing that "the history of the moving image in the Gulf followed a transcolonial, transregional, and transnational set of directions." More than that—as petromodernity shaped the way of our global economic interdependencies and trade flows, the argument that Oruc unfolds also casts into doubt the received truths and stereotypes of film history in which a modern Western invention was adapted, albeit at different speeds, globally. In contrast, the history of visual culture and the cinema in the Gulf is one of uneven and even contradictory developments between

the colonial powers, economic interdependencies, and local interests. It is also a history of its material traces, such as administrative files and scarce newspaper reports, that are the sole sources available today to reconstruct the past.

In chapter 10, “British Cultural Studies, Film History, and Forgotten Horizons of Cultural Analysis,” Charles R. Acland redirects attention to British cultural studies and its—largely forgotten—close connections with film studies and film history, in particular. Acland recalls British cultural studies’ focal points of film historical analysis, which included technology and its material uses as well as the relation of film to popular culture, established culture, and modernist culture. Arguing that these are still highly relevant today, the essay takes a close look at the debates about the politics of cultural historiography at the History Workshop at Oxford University and its events and publications in the 1970s and 1980s where “new methods and materials of historical research were being explored and expanded to situate ‘popular arts,’ including film, within cultural history.” It was in this context of a wider debate about radical history projects that the FIAF conference in Brighton transpired. The contribution argues for a film historiography along the lines of British cultural studies that is part of a tradition of radical cultural history and includes efforts to develop new and inclusive modes of historiography as well as theoretical engagements.

In chapter 11, “The Rise and Fall of Secular Realism: Notes on the Postcolonial Documentary Film from India,” Arvind Rajagopal examines the Indian non-fiction film and argues for a film history that logically turns into a media history because films are never produced, distributed, and seen in isolation from other aspects of cultural life. He traces a genealogy for the populist video work which has supported the rise of the Hindu nationalist party since the late 1980s. This genealogy goes back to the famous documentaries of the state-supported Indian Films Division. The key task of how to address the masses in what still likes to pride itself as “the largest democracy in the world” has been a key concern all the way from post-Independence India to the rise of today’s divisive politics. Rajagopal therefore also argues for a film history that is relevant to our current situation of social media and fake news that are less new than we might think.

Taking his cue both from the expansion of film studies into what has been termed “useful cinema” and from media archaeology, Michael Cowan presents a revisionist history of (early) film societies in chapter 12, “What Was a Film Society? Towards a New Archaeology of Screen Communities.” Arguing that former approaches had concentrated too exclusively on film as art and avant-garde ideas of purity and independence, the research

unearths a much more diverse and pluralist variety of societies devoted to film as a topic. From political organizations to technical associations these groups not only demonstrate how varied the interest in the cinema was in the first decades of the twentieth century, but they also acted as active producers of taste and viewing dispositions. In conclusion, he pinpoints three theses—relationality, production, and ideas—that are productive not only to the study of film society but also to a film history open towards social phenomena, complex processes, and a diverse ecosystem of persons, objects, and non-tangible things (ideas, practices, etc).

Traditionally, film history in its academic form has been presented in textual form—as a book or journal article because publications have been and still are the currency within the university. As the fourth section of the book—entitled “Rewriting Film History with Images: Audiovisual Forms of Historiography”—aims to demonstrate, there is a counter-tradition of presenting film history in audiovisual form, be it in the form of documentary films, television programmes, or digital video essays. At least since the 1920s, there are examples of writing film history in the medium of film itself. The three contributions in this section present specific approaches to film history, some of which have been largely overlooked in the past. This poses a series of further questions regarding the aesthetic forms, the (material and legal) access to the film itself, the narrative strategies, and the technological challenges, to name but a few of the key issues. Yet again, such audiovisual works also pose institutional questions around their production, circulation, and appreciation.

As Volker Pantenburg argues in chapter 13, “A Televisual Cinematheque: Film Histories on West German Television,” film history has traditionally focused almost exclusively on the dissemination of the relevant material through the cinema. Thus, archives, repertoire cinemas, and cinematheques, to a lesser extent books and magazines, have been seen as the organs through which knowledge about film history was distributed. They have been researched, championed, and celebrated in recent historiographic discourse. Examining the exemplary case of the West German television of the 1970s, the text argues for relevant agents and configurations elsewhere, in this case public broadcasting television of the 1970s and 1980s. In presenting three concrete examples, Pantenburg demonstrates the rich and varied approaches to film history that the regional broadcaster WDR allowed for in the decade from 1975 to 1985. It also shows links to the essay and experimental film, as film-makers such as Harun Farocki or Hartmut Bitomsky were involved, yet it does not depart from an auteurist framework around these cases.

In chapter 14, “The History of Film on Film: Some Thoughts on Reflexive Documentaries,” Eleftheria Thanouli explores the “history of film on film” with a focus on reflexive documentaries and looks at how non-fiction films narrate the history of the medium with its own tools, namely sounds and images. In the first part, Thanouli argues that histories on paper and histories on film share philosophical assumptions (such as organicist ideas about the historical process) that historical documentaries are as capable of expressing—with their own means—as written histories of cinema. In the second part, Maximilian Schell’s *Marlene* (1984) and Chris Marker’s *The Last Bolshevik* (1992) serve as case studies to illustrate Thanouli’s second argument, namely that reflexive documentaries, due to their self-consciousness, can uncover and bring to the fore explanations about cinema’s past that are beyond the dominant narratives in written historiography. Reflexive documentaries are capable of producing histories of film that writing cannot, or, as Thanouli holds, they “allow us to glimpse the possibility of a more complex and contextual approach to the filmic past.”

In chapter 15, “Audiovisual Film Histories for the Digital Age: From Found Footage Cinema to Online Videographic Criticism,” Chiara Grizzaffi discusses audiovisual scholarship that has become very popular in the past ten to fifteen years. These are (mostly short) video works that can be produced with standard computer equipment, easily available software and accessible AV sources as a new way to generate and communicate knowledge about film, including film historical scholarship. Grizzaffi not only presents the prehistory and the emergence of this fledgling form, thereby showing the genealogy of a seemingly novel form that extends into the avant-garde and the essay film, she also gives an overview of the critical terms and approaches that have been established. The horizon of such works for the future of film history is both as a new form of dissemination of historiographical knowledge, but also more experimental ways of generating insights.

The fifth and final section of the book is “Into the Digital: New Approaches and Revisions.” Film historians have gone “digital” long before “the new millennium has arrived as the era of Big Data,”⁴⁷ even if their objects of study—be they films, photos, or printed material—were still in an “analogue” state. They have collected, stored, processed, and accessed data with the help of digital tools. The most common tool to collect, enter, compile, store, process, search, and access film historical (meta)data are databases, i.e. computational forms of structured data aggregation. Thus, historical knowledge has long

47 Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson, “Introduction,” in *“Raw Data” Is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 2.

been produced and circulated digitally. The contributions in this section examine, on the one hand, the place of historical films in today's digital environment and the experience of film history they produce. On the other hand, they look at concepts such as scalability and at practices such as data visualization as methods to rethink and rewrite film history.

In chapter 16, "Future Pasts within the Dynamics of the Digital Present: Digitized Films and the Clusters of Media Historiographic Experience," Franziska Heller examines the digital reviving of "old" films in today's digital environment, which she conceptualizes as experiential spheres. Hence, her focus is on phenomenology and more specifically on the perceptual experiential effect of "historicity." Heller borrows François Niney's term "reprise" to describe the analogue reviving of films from the history of cinema in digital culture, arguing that this digital environment frames how we see and experience moving images from the past. The presentation of film restoration on the internet and Criterion Collection's editorial practice serve as two cases to illustrate how binaries such as "old" and "new," "analogue" and "digital," and the method of "comparative vision" dominate the discourse but obfuscate the plurality of *historical times* (in Koselleck's sense). Heller also draws attention to how digital film editions reformulate the canon and at times even reiterate institutional racism.

In chapter 17, "Tipping the Scales of Film History: A Note on Scalability and Film Historiography," Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger engage with the concept of scalability, which describes the potential of a system, network, or process to change scale. In the context of film and media studies, scalability has become important in the emerging sub-field of format studies and in computational research into film and film history. Schneider and Hediger take to scalability to evaluate the concept's uses, limitations, and potential side effects when transferred to film and film historiography. The authors argue that film has always been scalable and also that the founding paradigm of film historiography, the auteur/nation approach to cinema, can be described as a scalable system—"with distinctive downsides for much of what belongs to film history but does not match the paradigms' definition of a historical fact." Hence, they call for more attention to facts that do not become data and do not compute or, in other words, for non-scalable histories of film that include "the singular, resistant, incomputable, the facts that do not count."

In chapter 18, "Representing the Unknown: A Critical Approach to Digital Data Visualizations in the Context of Feminist Film Historiography," Sarah-Mai Dang follows a twofold agenda: on the one hand, the essay aims "to reconstruct women's work in early film industries and tell their stories to today's audiences," while, on the other hand, it asks for a general

reconsideration of data-intensive visualization. Taking her cue from examples of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dang sees data not as neutral, quantitative information that is waiting out there to be discovered and exhibited, but as an entity that is always gathered, arranged, and visualized in specific ways. Data is not given, as Johanna Drucker and others have repeatedly argued, but constructed and presented in specific ways. Concerning graphs, tables, and maps, Dang argues that “[d]ue to representational conventions and epistemological premises, visualizations appear ordered, comprehensive, and structured, when in fact they often obscure ambiguities, conflicts, and contradictions.” But Dang also sees potential in new forms of visualizations that she points out in the final part of her essay. Digitally based research is an open field that film historiography could—and should—embrace not in a naive way, but in a critical and reflexive stance: “[I]t is essential to understand what visualizations do but also what they *could* do.”

In sum, the anthology looks both back into what film history has been about, but also forward into potential futures of the domain. The film historiographies of the past that have been the object of the essays in this collection provide a vast and rich field to explore, not only for their own sake, but also because these examinations give us insight into the methods and premises of specific approaches. Studying the histories of film history is therefore not an end in itself, but rather a way into the conceptual groundings and ramifications of doing film history. At the same time, by excavating dead ends and roads not taken we can also take inspiration for future explorations because they often contain ideas for the future. Film historiography still offers many discoveries and potentialities that might take inspiration from digital forays, but that also rely on archives and material traces, as well as hermeneutical argumentation. We hope that this collection will contribute to the shaping of film historiography as a diverse, productive, and exciting field for many years to come.⁴⁸

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I

Models of Film Historiography: Philosophy and Time

1 The Aporias of Cinema History

Thomas Elsaesser

Abstract

Understanding the cinema as an archeo-topological medium of the Anthropocene, this chapter looks at some of the consequences of studying cinema from a post-human perspective. The ecology of humans interacting with technology serves as a starting point for reconsidering cinema history, where the uncanny ontology of the cinema becomes apparent in its dual role as an accelerator of post-human progress, aligning several relevant elements towards an eventual transition between humanity and technology, and an emergency brake on this road of no return, underlining the still growing importance of film heritage, of the archive, and of cinema as the cultural memory of mankind in its humanity and diversity. Therefore, one way to salvage history from cinema's (and not only cinema's) uncanny ontologies, is to open historical thinking up to the archeo-topographies of cultural memory, and especially to its traumatic remainders and apparently obsolescent values.

Keywords: cinema history, Anthropocene, post-human theory, media ecology, cultural memory, cinema ontologies

Editorial Note: This text was given to the editors briefly after the conference "Histories of Film History," which took place in December 2018 in Marburg. Thomas Elsaesser intended to rework his talk for the publication into a more extended argument, as he wrote to us, but his unexpected passing in December 2019 prohibited this. Since Thomas always wanted his texts to circulate, to be read and discussed, we decided to publish this text, even though it still bears some marks of its origin. We have only made some slight corrections of obvious mistakes and inconsistencies, otherwise the text is printed here as we have received it.

The New York art critic Hal Foster once observed: “We still find it difficult to think about history [merely] as a narrative of survivals and repetition,” yet we increasingly have to come to terms with a “continual process of protension and retention, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts.”¹ Or as an old joke from the Soviet Union goes: “Comrade Sergei went to Commissar Dimitri and said: Commissar Dimitri, I’m worried about the future. Replies Dimitri: don’t worry about the future—it’s all set forth in the five-year plan. What worries me is the past: I have to rewrite it every other week.” Media archaeology sometimes feels that way, and I’ll come to what seems to have replaced the five-year plan.

But back to Hal Foster and his processes of protension and retention. Foster does not name film and photography, with *their* uniquely haunting time-warp effects on our conception of history as a linear sequence, connecting effects to causes, and events to their antecedents. But Foster clearly alludes to the relays of countervailing and unsynchronized temporalities that the ubiquity of photographic media has engendered. Cinema, after all, defies time by what could be called its *uncanny ontology*: simulacra of life at its most vivid, moving images always document what is not yet dead but neither quite alive. This unresolvable tension between rewind and replay, between presence and absence, between life preserved and the kingdom of shadows has, I contend, also contributed to our altered understanding of what history is, just as the same tension between original and copy, between reconstruction and the replica, dominates our thinking today about the status of art and of historical artefacts, in our post-auratic era that nonetheless craves for authenticity, and “the return of the real,” to quote another Hal Foster phrase.

As we try to assess the impact of moving pictures on history and memory, as we try to make sense of the impact that archive, digital files, and databases have made on the once ephemeral experience of cinema, due to its irreversible flow and intangible presence, I want to risk the observation that the coexistence in the twentieth century of cinema with nineteenth-century historicism has introduced two unsettled but interrelated crises: first, it has turned into a truism *the spatialization of time* which was already well under way when Bergson had his disagreements with Einstein in 1922 over relativity theory and time as duration. Second, it has begun to substitute for our notion of linear causality such terms as *contingency*, *chance*, *chaos theory*, and *stochastic series*.

Taken together, the spatial turn and the crisis in causation have challenged the hegemony of history—which the nineteenth century had discovered

1 Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-avant-garde?,” *October* 74 (Fall 1994): 30.

as the relentless force of destiny (Hegel's *Weltgeist*, or world-spirit), or had celebrated as the engine driving human progress (Marx). More specifically, spatial time and contingent non-linearity have deconstructed the past into competing but also complementing centres of more negative forms of energy, identified with the *archive as a locus of power and random access as the logic of the database*.

What this does to the past is that it suspends the narratives crafted by historians and turns the facts they based themselves on into a treasure trove of data, collected and laid out for mining and crunching, in order to derive from them predictions, risk assessments, and probability calculations. And what this in turn does for our idea of the future is indeed similar to the five-year plan: it forecloses the possibility of imagining a future that is not in the image of the past, which would seem to confirm the phrase attributed to Fred Jameson, and quoted by Jane Gaines, namely that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, and the sentence that Nick Baer quoted from Sepp Gumbrecht, namely that there is neither anything from the past that we need to leave behind, nor anything from the future that could not be made present by simulated anticipation.

How, then, can we think the cinema in this configuration? Suppose we would regard the storytelling functions of cinema as only one aspect of filmic representation's part and purpose in human evolution. Especially when we add non-theatrical films—some of which featured in our discussions: home movies, useful films, state-sponsored documentaries, etc.—we come close to what film philosophers have been arguing for quite some time: namely that cinema enacts a form of thought, and indeed, may have to be considered less an art form than a form of life. Thus, if one grants that moving images have agency, they make possible “acting at a distance,” to use a term introduced by Lev Manovich, who helpfully distinguishes between only two categories of images: images you can lie with, and images you can act with.² Under the name of “operational images”—an idea introduced by Vilem Flusser and made popular by film-makers Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen—“images to act with” assist in calculating and controlling the environment, in that they measure phenomena and can modify their behaviour:³ this comprises what I have elsewhere called the cinema's S/M practices of the cinema, meaning all

2 Lev Manovich, “To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence,” <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/to-lie-and-to-act-potemkin-s-villages-cinema-and-telepresence>.

3 Trevor Paglen, “Operational Images,” *e-flux* 59 (2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/>.

the non-entertainment uses of the cinematic apparatus in *medicine and the sciences*, in *monitoring and surveillance*, for *military operations and satellite communication*, including mimetically mirroring the *motor-sensory* coordination of the human body, and not only in industrial time-and-motion studies.⁴

As for “images to lie with,” from the broader anthropological view here taken, which encompasses fiction films and extends to computer games, cinema’s role is one of “mastering” life through simulation and play, which also has a scientific variant, namely experiments that require computer simulation to calculate risk and probability, or are making visible processes too fast or too slow for the human eye to perceive and to control.

This way, cinema can be inscribed in the evolutionary arc of “homo ludens,” as analysed by Johan Huizinga and others: humans at play, considered as both an ontogenetic (individual) and a phylogenetic (species-related) dimension.⁵ Play, as Jean Piaget taught us, is essential for the formation of a self, and organized play leads not only to sociability, but also to the spirit of adventure, competition, and experimentation. The modalities of “as-if,” of “what if,” and of “make-believe” are obviously cardinal properties of cinema, even as—and perhaps because—scenarios, belief systems, fictions (and their complementary obverse: frauds, deception, based on prediction and promise) have become an increasingly crucial tool for humans in real world situations, trying to anticipate possible outcomes and for tracking and tracing all manner of processes in so-called “real time,” but also for gaining an advantage over adversaries. The “play-drive” (*Spieltrieb*) once occupied a key role in the aesthetic theories of German idealism⁶: now it is recognized as one of the key dynamics of both digital life and financial capitalism, with enterprise, improvisation, and creativity now the hallmarks of neoliberalism.

Images to act with and images to lie with associated cinema with capitalism in its innermost structures, but it also aligns cinema inherently to technology. Behind almost every theory of cinema is the question whether cinema’s scope and development is or is not technologically determined: is cinema of the “extensions of man” in Marshall McLuhan’s phrase,⁷ i.e. a

4 Thomas Elsaesser, “Afterword—Digital Cinema and the Apparatus: Archaeologies, Epistemologies, Ontologies,” in *Cinema and Technology: Cultures, Theories, Practices*, ed. Bruce Bennett, Marc Furstenau, and Adrian Mackenzie (London: Palgrave, 2008), 232.

5 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

6 See, for instance, Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), 11–16, where he discusses the “*Spieltrieb*,” the ludic drive.

7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

way of appropriating the world by prosthetically extending human physical faculties and the senses. Or—especially when it concerns our mental faculties—is there an inverse relation? Do we, in the movies, rather than empathetically extend our feelings, actually instead “outsource” our bodies, our minds and affects in such a manner that other powers take over? There are numerous technophobe fantasies and sci-fi scenarios where machines turn against their creators, from *Frankenstein* to *The Terminator* franchise, but there is also the “uncanny valley”⁸ effect of humanoids eliciting emotions, often in domestic settings, such as in Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.*: the film whose robot child challenged us with a tagline: “His feelings are real, but he is not”? Similarly, films like *Under the Skin* or *Her* test our limits of associating a body with identity and a voice with being human.

This would suggest that the new kinds of passages that have established themselves between artificial intelligence, design and life, also place cinema in the wider field of transitions and transformations affecting human beings, in their interaction with the world. It is a context of the in-between that takes into account the impact of humans on the earth, and by extension, the impact of human technology on the very idea of “life” itself, namely of how we define life and how we reproduce it. In other words, the post-filmic moment is also an all-cinematic moment, which may well extend into the post-human moment, where the “post” is neither a temporal marker nor indicates succession, but stands for the minimal gap that both separates a concept from and links it to its changing manifestations. Here, too, change is happening, but it is moving in both directions: It means to think cinema today not from its past, but from the future—a future where cinema, but also life, will be decided between *the animated and the automated*.

It may seem a stretch to situate cinema within the epochal changes we usually associate with the Anthropocene, since cinema certainly does not turn up among any of the factors that are said to have brought about the onset of the Anthropocene. As we know, the term “Anthropocene” has been invented, in order to reflect the fact that the impact of human activity, human habitation and human proliferation on Earth has become so significant in its consequences for the atmosphere, the environment and the entire ecosystem, that it merits its own geological name.⁹ And among

8 For “uncanny valley,” see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley.

9 Among the many books that try to define the Anthropocene, one can name Erle Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (London: Polity, 2017).

the factors whose dramatic spike as recently as since the 1950s, *have* created the Anthropocene are: population growth, CO² emission, overfishing the oceans, motor vehicle production, water use, species extinction, deforestation, plastic waste, and even the exponential rise in paper consumption.

Yet if we broaden our definition of the Anthropocene to include a version of the post-human, and extend it in the direction of another ecology—not the species-based one that is focused on animal studies and other aspects of creaturely life, but the ecology of humans interacting with *technology*, then a space opens up where the cinema does indeed have an interstitial role to play, especially since human interfacing with machines is one of the most common definitions of the post-human. However, it is not the only one: “Post-human” also embraces the realization that we share the planet with other sentient beings and living organisms that have the right to exist, to prosper, and to survive. The Anthropocene and the post-human join these two apparent extremes—man is no different from a machine/man is no different from a plant—in a paradoxical combination. For if the post-human displaces the *anthropocentric* view of humans as the apex of creation, it still does so *from the human point of view*. Likewise, the Anthropocene contains a no less paradoxical insight: for insofar as humans now have the capacity to affect the planet in all manner of nefarious ways, and thus “own” the planet’s problems and have to take responsibility for the consequences, the humans of the Anthropocene—as the name of a geological time frame—also must know full well that the earth, whose time scale are billions of years, rather than the few thousands that encompass human time, is entirely indifferent to both our existence and to our actions, making no distinctions whatsoever between beneficial and nefarious ways we humans interact with the environment, given the scale, magnitude and nature of the forces that regulate and determine planetary life.

What would be some of the consequences of seeing cinema not within a hundred-year time span, not even a five-hundred-year episteme that started with a Renaissance perspective, the camera obscura and lenses that altered the scale of projections, and not even the five thousand years that someone like Siegfried Zielinski suggests for what he calls “the deep time of media”? One consequence would be that we could no longer speak of causal connections, of influences or of material or intellectual continuities. But such a view of history might in turn suggest a post-human perspective from the start, and suspend the difference between human history, natural history, and evolutionary history: in which case, first, the post-human view would privilege informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate (such as our flesh-and-blood bodies)

could be seen as an accident of evolution rather than as a necessary or inevitable conditions of “life.”

Second, the post-human view might consider *consciousness*—traditionally regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition even before Descartes’ *cogito*—as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart, trying to claim that it is the main event, when in actuality it is only a sideshow, as the combined efforts of Darwin, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud have set out to demonstrate, long before the advents of computers and artificial intelligence.

Third, the post-human view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending the body’s capacities, or replacing body parts with other prostheses becomes the continuation of a process that began before we were even born.

Fourth, the post-human view configures human beings so that they can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines, each adapting to the other, and each adapted by the other, as we experience it every day, as smartphones, GPS devices, and Amazon’s Alexa, Apple’s Siri, Google’s Nest become our ever more indispensable partners in living. In this version of the post-human, there are no absolute demarcations but only porous passages between bodily existence and computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, between robot running on programmes and algorithms, and humans pursuing goals and harbouring ambitions.

According to media theorist Friedrich Kittler, this process is both less dramatic and less revolutionary: such technological determinism as implied by “the machines taking over” has undeservedly been getting a bad name: tools and technologies have always been the natural condition of being human, because at every stage of evolution it was the media of communication—first language, then writing, then printing, then mechanical recording, and now mathematical modelling and algorithmic computation—that has defined what a given epoch considered “human” and “social.” Media machines are an integral part of the sociability of humans as a species: there never was a pristine humanity, in unmediated harmony with nature—technology is the sole medium within which we are human.¹⁰

This might lead to the following hypothesis: With respect to the debate over the post-human, the cinema has been invested in the post-human, right from the start, given, for instance, the centrality of the debate over cinema’s automatism among all those who have taken an interest in the cinema as a theoretical or philosophical object. However, with respect to the smooth alignment between humans and machines—something that for

10 See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

a certain generation and mindset in the United States cannot happen soon enough, seeing how vigorously and successfully it is promoted by Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Tesla—with respect to the post-human as automation, in other words, the cinema may have played a dual role.

Assuming we are on the road of no-return to automating the functions of the brain as well as of the body, the existence of cinema may well have acted as an accelerator, aligning several relevant elements towards an eventual transition: this would include the cinematograph's early use in the non-theatrical contexts, which, of course, also comprises the time-and-motion studies that synchronized human bodies with factory machines, paving the way for robotics and automated manufacturing and assembly work. It would include what I have called “operational images” and the way moving images are used in our increasingly militarized public sphere, not only through ubiquitous surveillance, but also through the security state in all its other aspects, from airport screenings to online shopping that tracks our clicks and turns them into “likes” and “preferences.”

In other respects, however, the cinema has also acted as an *emergency brake* on this road of no return, and continues to do so: think of the rise of “slow cinema,” also known as “contemporary contemplative cinema,” or consider the way cinema has found a home in museums and galleries—reflexive-contemplative spaces par excellence—as “installations” situated somewhere between architecture and sculpture. We can also remind ourselves of the use of found footage, and welcome the recovery of obsolescence as an aesthetic value in its own right.¹¹ It merely underlines the still growing importance of film heritage, of the archive and of cinema as the cultural memory of mankind in its humanity and diversity, discovered by practicing film-makers, by scholars as well as by nations using cinema to claim identity, autonomy and the right to self-determination.¹²

However, another conclusion to draw from current philosophical debates around cinema is that it has been a powerful agent not for instantiating subjectivity or embodiment, but for getting rid of them, for helping an ongoing and equally irreversible process of dismantling the sovereign subject and a relentless *exteriorization* of all forms of interiority (privacy, desires, feelings, psyche, soul). Even Stanley Cavell agrees, when in *The World Viewed*, published already in 1971, he writes:

11 Thomas Elsaesser, “Media Archaeology as Poetics of Obsolescence,” in *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 331–50.

12 See, for instance, Lada Drazin Trbuljak, ed., *Muzej filma—Film u Muzeju* (Zagreb: MDC, 2017).

Insofar as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied [...] the human wish [...] to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation. Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by automatism, by removing the human agent from the act of reproduction.¹³

The consequence of the paradox or unresolved tension seems to be that the more cinema in the twenty-first century is exteriorized, outsourced and regulated by forces that are automated, the more we film and media scholars want to “re-animate” it, that is: to make present and to make it re-present the embodied and located experience of the spectator as a fully self-possessed locus of attention, participation, and agency. But what is evident is that under these conditions, cinema’s ontology cannot be realism. The paradox is a reminder that moving images are not representations of reality, but exist on a groundless ground which requires the kind of indeterminacy, whose suspended reciprocity and retroactive anticipation of the “as-if” and the “what-if” (mentioned earlier in connection with “play”) resembles the cognitive and argumentative circularity which German idealist philosophy called *Das Setzen des Gesetzten* (Johann Gottlieb Fichte). It means that one has to suppose a presupposition, i.e. performatively enact as given what one first sets out to create, and thus to bridge the abyss of scepticism with a leap of faith, but one proposed by mathematics, logic, and probability calculus, rather than religion and theology.

It would therefore be no more than following in the footsteps of André Bazin’s “change mummified” if one were to argue that cinema was not only the memory of twentieth-century history, but perhaps more accurately, the fossil record of twentieth-century history given how “layered” each filmic image finally is. If tar pits, bogs, and glaciers are the natural “media” of evolution, then photography and film would be the excavation sites of history, to complement the usual genealogies of celluloid that start with wax tablets, clay cylinders, scrolls, and paper—symbolic notations rather than the preserved imprint of the objects themselves.

The idea of cinema as an archeo-topological medium—one way to come to terms with its uncanny ontology—not only revives debates about stillness and movement and of movement stilled, but also helps the conflation of categories that used to be separate and even opposed to each other, such as “memory” and “history.” The same goes for the opposition of “culture” and “nature,” which the radical egalitarianism of the camera has

13 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 21.

also levelled—think of Jean Epstein’s definition of *photogenie*: “I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction.”¹⁴ It is important to note the equivalence that Epstein draws between “things, beings, or souls.” Even more clearly, the once considered fundamental nature/culture divide has been rendered all but obsolete due to the expanded scale and impact of human activity on the planet. The oxymoronic element in a term like historical topographies, mixing the man-made and the geological, can draw attention to these different kinds and timescales of agency, and therefore reflect the recognition that humans are henceforth in charge of—and hence responsible for—nature as well as culture: which inaugurates the macro-historical time of the Anthropocene.

But the Anthropocene might well include what Harun Farocki once identified as one of the effects of film-making, and in particular, of documentary in the age of surveillance, namely: “cameras circling the globe that make the world superfluous”—pointing to a sort of mutually determining loop of creative destruction, where what cameras capture and preserve, they also downgrade to the status of the prop or pretext. Such preservation cannot but destroy what it sets out to rescue, because when the world opens itself up to ubiquitous visibility, people and places risk existing merely in order to end up as images.

The cinema as cultural memory and historical topography could therefore be regarded as a kind of “transitional object,” a comfort blanket that eases our transition from humanism to post-humanism. The uncanny ontology would be the uncanny valley of the “humanist” side of the divide, while what I just called cinema’s archeo-topological definition looks at the same transition between Holocene and Anthropocene from the heights of algorithmic cinema—each indexing the different relations we now have to the world, following the end of “grand narratives” and other Enlightenment teleologies of progress, and thus also of history as we commonly understand it.

Recalling Benjamin’s frame of reference, we can cite his messianic conception of *Jetztzeit* (or now-time), and argue that “the past is always formed in and by the present. It comes into discourse in relation to a present, but since it is read from the standpoint of the present, it also forms ‘the time of the now.’” This analeptic-proleptic relationship I call the “loop of belatedness,” which is to say, we retroactively discover the past to have been prescient

14 Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristic of Photogénie” (1924), in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907–1939, Vol. 1: 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314.

and prophetic, as seen from the point of view of some special problem or urgent concern in the here and now. Much of our work as film scholars and media historians is, for good or ill, caught in this loop of belatedness, where we retroactively assign or attribute foresight and agency to a moment or a figure from the past that suddenly speaks to us in a special way.

But here's the rub: if one of the strategic uses of obsolescence is that it can serve both as an *aesthetic value* and as an *ecological virtue*, there is still the fact that, being a term that inevitably associates both capitalism and technology, it implicitly acknowledges that today there can be *no art or nature* outside capitalism and technology. This would be the term's political dimension, since the dialectics of (technological) innovation and (capitalist) obsolescence has in some sense become the fate of the contemporary world, keeping us in a loop of our own historical belatedness, whether as members of the First World decentred by globalization or as a species, decentred by our own actions.

It suggests that obsolescence, as we touched on it yesterday evening and I have been trying to sketch it in my book on media archaeology, is also the recto to the verso of the now definitely lost ideals of progress and enlightenment: through obsolescence we negatively conjure up the ghost of progress past, making it the token or fetish of a future we no longer see other than as the recovery of a past: a past that may be trapped for us—but possibly also trapping us—in the translucent amber of our celluloid heritage. It leaves us pondering the trade-off I have been suggesting: namely that one way to salvage *history* from cinema's (and not only cinema's) uncanny *ontologies*, is to open historical thinking up to the archeo-topographies of cultural memory, and especially to its traumatic remainders and apparently obsolescent values. It gives the past—more and more recalled and present to us only through moving images—the kinds of *locatedness* and *materiality* that, far from making the world superfluous, establishes for it a *new ecology of sustainability*. Re-establishing a cycle that isn't just a loop, it would ensure for mankind's many pasts the possibility of managing our resources for the future, rather than foreclosing it in the post-human life scenarios of bio-algorithmic or bio-digital fusion.

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2 What Next? The *Historical Time* Theory of Film History

Jane M. Gaines

Abstract

Our particular problem of technological change, from the photochemical to the so-called “digital,” requires engagement with theories of history. Given that comparing emerging technologies a century apart raises the question of “differences of times,” I turn to Reinhart Koselleck’s theory of *historical time*, or the relativity of past, present, and future, with particular attention to the problem of *historical prognostication* or prediction. The case at hand compares motion picture film duplication 1897–1907 and contemporary cyberlocker storage technology as charged in their moments with “piracy” or illegal “taking.” Thus intellectual property doctrine draws parallels between historically different “piratical practices” as evidencing responses to the problem of technological “newness.” But Koselleck is canny as he challenges us to consider that paradoxically every new time is both new and “not so new.”

Keywords: digital turn, motion picture film history, film piracy, cyberlocker storage technology, reproductive technologies, theories of history

Suddenly, the field of film and media studies, once so peripheral in the academy, is symbolically central.¹ Because the question *for* our time, *of* which we are daily reminded, is the sociality of audio and visual media. Then there is the question as to where “film history” fits in this new world picture as well as how that place translates into the academic scheme of

1 The paraphrase of Stuart Hall—“The socially peripheral is symbolically central”—is intentional. See Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Essential Essays, Vol. I: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. Stuart Hall and David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 71–100.

things. Because in the academy we have a new role for which we may not have been prepared. And what is that? We are tasked with theorizing a historical transition from our specialization to whatever it is that comes next, moving as we are from photochemical exceptionality to digital ubiquity. So, let's ask: For how much longer can we afford to be specialists of the sort we have been? Because strangely, our photochemical object of study, once so arcane, has been swept up into the stream, literally meaning that, once digitized, that object is no longer exquisitely *unlike* but now *just like* everything else—just data.² Then what are the implications for motion picture film history? For one thing, if we are period specialists, our time frame has changed. In the technological transformation, “film history” (as the account of objects and events) is now stretched into the long cinema century, 1895 to 2012, the year of digital projection roll out.³ But that is not all.

I. The “Film Called History”

If the film called history rewinds itself, it turns into an endless loop. What will soon end in the monopoly of bit and fiber optics began with the monopoly of writing.

—Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*⁴

For a moment, let's think about the oddity of this statement. In Kittler, “the film” may supply a metaphor for “history,” but despite the “loop” metaphor, “film” is “dropped out of the loop,” so to speak. Note that in the next sentence Kittler uses an “end” and a beginning with “motion picture film” missing between “writing” and “bit and fiber optics.” Perhaps there is a confusion between the Vitascope and the kinoscope technologies, as though the media historian didn't know that the kinoscope loop came *before* not *after* the projected image strip wound around reels. Then again, this illustration from the French *La Nature* (1894) suggests that a look inside the kinoscope

2 See Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 244, 248.

3 See Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, 3rd rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 14.

4 In the original German: “Wenn der Film namens Geschichte sich rückspult, wird er zur Endlosschleife. Was demnächst im Monopol der Bits und Glasfaserkabel enden wird, begann mit dem Monopol von Schrift.” Note as well as the datedness of fibre optics as up-to-the-minute in 1986 when *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* was first published. Thanks to Malte Hagener for the German original. See Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

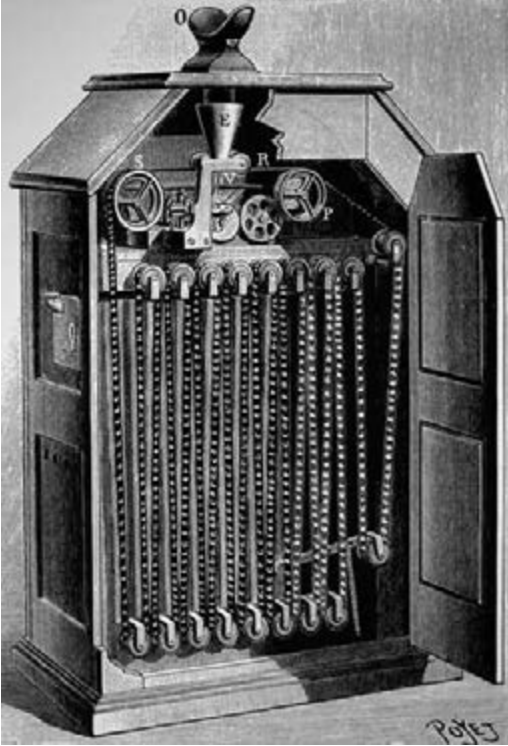


Fig. 2.1. Edison's Kinetoscope interior mechanism and celluloid film. *La Nature* (Paris, 1894).

reveals reels as well as loops.⁵ And who would rewind without a take-up reel? But if “history” is like “the film” as celluloid strips wound around circular reels, it might seem to be endlessly looping but also *not* looping if, like the wound film strip, it has a head (writing) and a tail (bit and fibre optics). If it has a head and a tail it is therefore linear, although it may not spool out in a straight line. So Kittler’s formulation is really two metaphors for thinking about the historiographic. In “writing” to “fiber optics” we see the conventional “from ... to” linear paradigm.⁶ But the circular “loop” metaphor for “history” suggests repetition and return, or events coming around “again and again.”

Kittler’s paradigm problem is our problem too, as having been experts on film form, we must now also be experts in something else—the miraculous

5 *La Nature* was a French-language popular science magazine founded in 1873.

6 See Elsaesser’s critique of “from ... to,” which he says characterizes all of the first standard histories, in Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History as Media Archaeology,” *Cinémas* 14, no. 2–3 (2004): 93. In “The Inevitability of Teleology: From *le Dispositif* to Apparatus Theory to *Dispositifs Plural*,” *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 31, no. 1–3 (2011): 46, I argue somewhat differently for seeing the unavoidability of “from ... to” paradigms.

materiality of the apparently immaterial computational.⁷ More difficult in the “digital turn,” of course, is *how* this shift to the computational is indicated, that is, what signs of it are in evidence and where is it that we might continue to look for them. But that is not all, as I said. There is yet an unspoken expectation. We stand back in an attempt to gain distance on our historical present. In attempting this, however, the burden is on us not only to organize knowledge and to analyse trends. The burden is on us *to speculate*. Yes, to speculate. This doesn’t mean, however, that we get on the bandwagon of Thomas Elsaesser’s “next big thing.”⁸ We never did want to get *on* the bandwagon, anyway, for we would be too late. The goal is not to get *on* it, it is to get *ahead of it*, get *before* it in order to project the shape of things to come. Of course, it’s a question of how we interpret trends and shifts. And undoubtedly some will say that we should be analysing phenomena for, after all, that is what we have been trained to do. But in analysing we are never *just* analysing, especially in comparing two phenomena a century apart as I attempt below. Yes, we may think that we are just analysing, but we are not. *We are also predicting*. Some, quite rightly, will object. The future as such cannot be researched, they will say, and, after all, the proper historian can only work in the realm of empirical verifiability. Further objection might be made that since future time *does not exist* it is therefore ridiculous to take up the empirical study of events that have yet to happen or, what’s more, may never happen. And yet, *we do go there*. As historical analysts we are engaged with the possibility of things yet to come, however implicitly. And what is our concern about getting an analysis right (as opposed to wrong) other than an admission that we’re making a prediction? Consider, in this regard, the way field scholars foregrounded prediction in the very titles of their books on the “cinema to come” and the “future of movies.”⁹

If the “history of motion picture film history” occasions an assessment of where we have been, it surely also means that we are critiquing the means and methods of knowledge production itself. The approach named *media archaeology* has licensed that critique and in so doing has also underwritten a double relation to knowledge production. Here one thinks of Foucault,

7 See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 7, on how processes of magnetic inscription are made invisible within hard drives and consequently this invisibility makes these processes seem “immaterial” to users.

8 See Elsaesser, “The New Film History,” 89.

9 See Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: 7 Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); David Bordwell, *Pandora’s Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies* (Madison: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2012).

who conducted his empirical research into the sanatorium while critiquing the methodological straightjacket of traditional historiography. We, too, undertake archival research while critiquing “the archive.” This double approach invites us to take the “histories of history” to mean not intellectual histories of a field of knowledge but rather Foucault-inspired undertakings now termed *media archaeology*.¹⁰ In the spirit of “histories of history,” the following is as much a challenge to *media archaeology* as an exercise defined as such.

Foucault is also an invitation to think about “theories of history.” Schooled as we have been in the post-structuralist legacy of film theory we are ideally positioned to conjoin the question of the technological advent with the philosophical problem of *historical time*. However, this requires not just Foucault but also Heidegger. And thus my segue—with trepidation given that this text was written for a conference in Marburg—into the terrain of German philosophy in order to reference Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Different schools of thought continue to rotate around as well as to deviate from Heidegger’s orbit. Think, for instance, of the new philosophy of history that has produced that contradictory term “deconstructive historian.”¹¹ For a theory of *historical time*, however, I rely on Reinhart Koselleck who overlapped historically with Heidegger although he is more closely associated with Carl Schmitt.¹² I conclude with the relevance of Jacques Derrida’s lecture notes on *Being and Time* to a theory of *historical time*.¹³ And although we find variations on the concept here, vestiges of Heidegger can be glimpsed in all.¹⁴

10 For an overview of current approaches to media archaeology, see Wanda Strauven, “Media Archaeology: Where Film History, Media Art, and New Media (Can) Meet,” in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 68–73.

11 Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, eds., *The Nature of History Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 12–15.

12 For background on Koselleck’s reception in English, see Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

13 See Thomas Dutoit, “Editor’s Note,” in Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being & History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xv–xix, on these handwritten lecture notes delivered between 1964 and 1965 at the École normale supérieure and the challenges of deciphering as well as translating them but also Derrida’s plan to write a book on Heidegger titled *The Question of History*.

14 Althusser and Balibar appear to take the term from Heidegger although without citing him; Ricoeur offers one of the most useful but least critical summaries of Koselleck’s concept of *historical time*. See Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, “The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time,” in *French Philosophy since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions*, ed. Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer et al. (New York

Koselleck warns that *historical time* is not an easy concept. For *historical time* is nowhere to be found in empirical sources and is distinct from the biological time of the planet and the life of its species. *Historical time* for Koselleck is social and political, and has to do with human customs and institutions, the rhythms of everyday life, as well as the actions and the “suffering” of human beings.¹⁵ Above all, *historical time* for him is not singular but plural modes, multi-layered, and, most importantly, relational as in past to present and present to past and future.¹⁶ So what value is there in Koselleck’s notion of *historical time* for the “historiographic stretch of motion pictures,” from photochemical film to digital media, from mechanical to computational, from exhibition to access? Before addressing this question, however, I should ask why turn to Koselleck now, although it may be enough to say that in the English-speaking world interest in Koselleck is somewhat belated. In the moment associated with Hayden White in the US and Keith Jenkins in the UK, Koselleck was left out, suspiciously missing from the “linguistic turn” in historical studies.¹⁷

From Koselleck’s work, less philosophy of history than “theory of history,” I want to take up three conceptualizations.¹⁸ Two of these are broad and the third more particular: (1) “New Times,” closely related to Koselleck’s theoretical umbrella termed (2) *historical time*, and (3) *historical prognostication*, an offshoot reliant on both of these conceptualizations. My own interest in *historical prognostication* or prediction stems from a comparative technological exercise I’ve undertaken whose features continue to perplex me. This quandary boils down to how to compare the newness of two technologies a century apart. Elsewhere I have approached this comparison by means of

and London: The New Press, 2011); Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 296–305.

15 See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2, which explains my interest in taking *historical time* as an approach to the theorization of melodrama. For more, see Jane M. Gaines, “Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama,” in *Melodrama Unbound*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 325–39.

16 See Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 2.

17 On Koselleck’s reception in the US, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Koselleck in America,” *New German Critique* 44, no. 3 (2017): 167–187. His major essays were translated into English in the early 2000s, but the last essays only in 2018. On this, see Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Introduction: Translating Koselleck,” in Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), ix–xxxi.

18 See Hayden White, “Preface,” in Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), on the term “theories of history” as opposed to “philosophy of history.”

what I call the “differences of times,” the present of necessity differentiating itself from the past as well as from the future that it is “not yet.”¹⁹ What can a theory of *historical time* tell us about two technologies at their advent? It may be, however, thinking of technologies, that the historical phenomena in question are *incomparable*, and incomparable in two senses of the term, the so-unlike-as-to-be-impossible-to-compare or the novelty that is so much more amazing than what has gone before as to be just *incomparable*. Let’s be honest, however, and reveal what is behind such a comparison, for what we really want to know is what havoc *has been* and *will be* wrought by the amazing digitization of everything. Thus I propose to think the technologies in question on arrival, that is, appearing in the “now” as distinguished from the “before now,” even astoundingly as “never before,” that is, in terms of the relative “difference of times,” one way into which is to ask how copyright grapples with new technologies.

II. Two Media Pirates a Century Apart

Elsewhere I have called the pre-copyright period in US film history the “heyday of copying.”²⁰ More precisely, I would now date early motion picture “piracy” as concentrated in the years 1897 to 1907. As I said, my interest is in testing the validity of comparing this “copying heyday” with the 2005 appearance of cyberlockers, a new storage technology turned into a shady business whose founders were similarly charged with “piracy.”²¹ There are eerie parallels between these two so-called “pirates” a century apart—Philadelphia’s Siegmund Lubin, the early cinema “Pirate King,” and “cyberpirate” Kim Dotcom, founder of the cyberlocker business Megaupload Ltd., in 2020 still fighting the US Department of Justice (DOJ) in a series of lawsuits filed in 2012 when the DOJ raided his New Zealand compound.²²

19 See Jane M. Gaines, “Copying Technologies: Two Pirates, Two Centuries,” in *Oxford Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. Charlie Keil and Rob King (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), where I take up the 1902 and 2012 cases of motion picture “piracy” relative to the charge of unauthorized “copying” in more detail.

20 See Jane M. Gaines, “Early Cinema’s Heyday of Copying: The Too Many Copies of *L’Arroseur arrosé*,” *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2–3 (May 2006): 227–44.

21 See Gaines, “Early Cinema’s Heyday,” on the copying “heyday” as well as Peter Decherney, *Hollywood’s Copyright Wars: From Edison to the Internet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

22 Legal commentary on Megaupload has been slow to appear. The best overview is the documentary *Kim Dotcom: Caught in the Web* (Annie Goldson, 2017). That the raid was in violation of New Zealand law and that the US and New Zealand do not have an extradition treaty contributes

Like Lubin before him, Dotcom, actually German ex-patriot Kevin Schmitz, built a lucrative business. Megaupload by 2012 was leasing forty-three data centres with 180,000 regular users and averaging 50 million site visits per day. The other fascination this case holds is the outrageousness of Dotcom's inventive circumvention of US copyright law, for, quite unbelievably, he got around the very provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (DMCA) by following the letter of the statute. How? Prolific users in the "Uploader Rewards" programme could earn as many as five million reward points that would be worth up to \$10,000 in cash, an especially delicious parody of consumer rewards deals.²³ Megaupload could not be indicted on this basis, however, because it was their customers who uploaded copies of the popular film *Ghostbusters*. Under the DMCA, since the web host is not liable for the actions of users, Megaupload couldn't be found in violation of copyright on this basis.²⁴

"The Internet in its nature shocks real-space law," writes copyright historian Lawrence Lessig.²⁵ Legal historians, it seems, are as concerned about the "disruption" of tradition and the "end of copyright" as film and media historians are worried about "rupture," the most extreme form of which is another "end"—the so-called "death of cinema."²⁶ But a word of caution about comparisons between legal history and technological history given

to the international intrigue although this legal saga is too peripheral to my argument to take up here. See also Enigmax, "The Mega-Money World of Mega-Upload," *TorrentFreak*, June 6, 2010, <http://torrentfreak.com/the-mega-money-world-of-megaupload-100606>; Adi Robertson, "Kim Dotcom Getting Copies of Data Seized in Megaupload Raid," *The Verge*, 9 September 2014, <http://www.theverge.com/2014/9/9/6128457/court-rules-police-must-give-km-dotcom-access-to-megaupload-files>; Chris Cook, "New Zealand Supreme Court Knocks Back Kim Dotcom's Appeal over Illegally Gained Evidence in MegaUpload Case," *Complete Music Update*, February 4, 2020, <https://completemusicupdate.com/article/new-zealand-supreme-court-knocks-back-kim-dotcoms-appeal-over-illegally-gained-evidence-in-the-megaupload-case/>.

²³ *United States of America v. Kim Dotcom*, 2012 WL 149764 (E.D. Va.), 2. On the relevance of DMCA reform, see Ross Drath, "Hotfile, Megaupload, and the Future of Copyright on the Internet: What Can Cyberlockers Tell Us about DMCA Reform?" *John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law* 12, no. 205 (2012): 204–41.

²⁴ For background on the first challenges the cyberlocker represented for the copyright regime, see Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Ramon Lobato and Leah Tang, "The Cyberlocker Gold Rush: Tracking the Rise of File-Hosting Sites as Media Distribution Platforms," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (2014): 423–35; and Nick Marx, "Storage Wars: Clouds, Cyberlockers, and Media Piracy in the Digital Economy," *Journal of e-Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1–27.

²⁵ Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 199.

²⁶ See Monika Dommann, *Authors and Apparatus: A Media History of Copyright*, trans. Sarah Pybus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 5 and 7, on media history and copyright; Gaudreault and Marion challenge the "death of cinema" by counting how many times over a century "cinema,"

that while the latter with its interest in technological advents is caught up in the political economy of the social, the former, by convention, ignores social conditions. Where the two histories might be considered together (despite the reluctance of legal theorists) is in the evolution of what social science takes to be “legal norms.”²⁷ Here, “piracy” plays an odd part, not only as aberration from a norm of copyright “respect,” but as an indicator of the well-kept secret of reproductive technologies, from photography and phonography to computation. The secret that every user knows? These machines make copying easy. Still, we wonder what the machine that projects the motion picture film print has in common with the storage service that systematizes access to popular moving image works—two such unlike delivery systems, not to mention conditions of reception.²⁸ They both cause trouble as a consequence of their unanticipated newness. Thus, what we might not have considered here is relative modes of time, that is, the what “was” relative to the advent of the copying technologies in question. Both of these piracy cases illustrate the precariousness of market control which depends upon regulation on the basis of copyright’s short-term monopoly grant—the ostensible “protection” that insures profitability. The technologies in question here endanger the very basis of regulation. Two modalities of time issues emerge: new and unanticipated capacity to duplicate then circulate and the disjuncture between legal past and technological present, which is where I will start.

Returning to the copyright skirmishes between industry leader Thomas Edison and upstart Siegmund Lubin, one has to remember that judges can’t be relied upon to grasp the finer points of technological operations. Indeed, the struggle regarding the extension of copyright protection from lithographs and photographs to motion photography is a historical lesson in deference to legal precedent despite technological change. For it is here that we see copyright doctrine looking *backward* to precedent, and the reverse—nascent motion picture companies looking *forward* to new business

variously defined, has already died; see André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

27 Dommann refers to the law’s doctrinal dedication to itself and use of “ahistorical” concepts as well as its proclaimed insularity from social conditions. This is “incomprehensible,” she thinks, because the law is focused on that which is “outside the law” (*Authors and Apparatus*, 9–10). I take up her additional point that what social science takes up are “legal norms” rather than the law per se. The kinds of “legal norms” that interest her emerge during “media transformation” and evolve.

28 In the last decade a range of studies addressed the “future of the movies” by comparing delivery systems. See note # 9. Bordwell, *Pandora’s Digital Box* and Tryon, *On-Demand Culture*.

in film print sales. To be more specific, market control hinged on the legal difference between a photograph and motion photography at the turn of the century. Now we might object that kinetograph inventor William Kennedy Laurie Dickson also wrestled with the difference between the still photograph and moving pictures. However, the inventor's challenge was the technical problem of registration.²⁹ In contrast, the judge in *Edison v. Lubin* (1902) struggled with legal doctrine, which led him to approximate motion pictures to "a photograph," the single category of protection available to film companies at the time since only the photograph was protected under the 1865 statute. Paradoxically, if the motion picture was a *plural* "aggregate of photographs" it was not a singular photograph and therefore was not covered by the relevant statute. The resulting legal uncertainty contributed to the market free-for-all in which every US company got "in on the game" of duping and remaking each others' films, from Méliès' *Trip to the Moon* (1902) to so many Biograph, Edison, and Lubin pillow fights. In retrospect, this hold up based on legal intractability seems rather ridiculous but what we have here is a case of temporal disjuncture—present statutory doctrine deferring to the 1865 historical past when confronted with unexpected technological change, but also differential rates of change, as we will see.

But "differences of times" (the past impinging on the present) challenge us to think how to grasp the two advents at the beginning and at the end of the century, and by the "time we get to" the cyberlocker, something has already happened in the century's middle, for after motion pictures, broadcasting needed to be approximated to "performance," and after that another new technology "shocked" existing law—the videotape recorder. That law was stunned by the question of the legality of "off-air" taping of copyrighted television shows, giving rise to the dispute staged in *Sony v. Universal Pictures* (1984).³⁰ It is now, then, not only technological transformation of the delivery system from mechanical to computational but also a question of "use." Bringing us up to date are the lawsuits against Megaupload beginning around 2012 filed by copyright owners 20th Century Fox, Viacom, and Disney.³¹ Megaupload's bogus "uploader rewards" confirms that "use" is now an established copyright consideration. Yet a century after *Edison v. Lubin*

29 See Paul Spehr, *The Man Who Made Movies: W. K. L. Dickson* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2008), ch. 12.

30 *Sony v. Universal Studios, Inc.*, 480 F. Supp. 464 US 417 (1984).

31 *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., Disney Enterprises, Inc., Paramount Pictures Corp., Universal City Studios Productions LLLP, Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc., and Warner Bros. Entertainment, Plaintiffs v. Metaupload Ltd., Vestor Ltd., Kim Dotcom, Mathias Ortmann, and Bram Van Der Kolk*, April 7, 2014.

(1902), copyright is still about property-like claims to ownership, despite the exponential increase in apparent propertylessness that epitomizes cloud computing. So new, yes, but not so new given the persistence of ownership.

If there is one place that the social enters the law it is where “use” begins to figure in the history of copyright doctrine and thus seen “over time” in the cinema century in the transformation of the distribution of popular film and television. Here is an admission that copying technologies (from the photograph to moving pictures to video) testify to ever increasing ease of duplication as seen in the legal shift from “theft” to “uses.” By the time, post *Sony v. Universal* (1984), we arrive at the Megaupload cases, it is not only businesses that are accused of “piracy,” but “users” as well.³² Whether we’re considering the book, the music, or the film and television industry, “use” of copyrighted material has historically seen entertainment product as “works of authorship.”³³ Given proprietary “authorship,” copyright translates into ownership disputes, new conflicts arising all over again. So new, yes, but not so new either. Now, to turn to our second issue—the total unpreparedness for limitless copying.

We’re suddenly back to our prognostication question. Here Motion Picture Producers of America (MPPA) anti-piracy watchdog Jack Valenti speaks the unspoken: reproductive technology threatens the very profit basis of the entertainment industry.³⁴ But by the time Valenti gasps: “Ten thousand copies as pristine as the original,” it is already too late. So why was the MPPA, the ultimate example of Hollywood-in-bed-with-Washington, so unprepared? Legal historian Lawrence Lessig has argued that at the inception of networked computation, culture industries failed to see that “to upload” is also “to copy.”³⁵ Again, here are our two historical repeats—the unreadiness of the law to regulate the ever-increasing reproductive function and the disjuncture between legal doctrine and technological capability. In her overview covering several centuries, Monika Dommann sees this as early as the shift from the seventeenth-century letterpress to recording technologies based on photography. As she summarizes the centuries-old

32 More recently, however, entertainment producers-distributors have taken another view. See Ernesto van der Sar, “Rapidshare Aims to Convert Pirates into Customers,” *TF*, March 26, 2010, <https://torrentfreak.com/rapidshare-aims-to-convert-pirates-into-customers-100326/>.

33 See Jane M. Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), ch. 1.

34 For an overview of anti-piracy campaigns, see Kelly Gates, “Will Work for Copyrights: The Cultural Policy of Anti-Piracy Campaigns,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Reader*, ed. Toby Miller (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 486–99.

35 See Lessig, *The Future of Ideas*, 199–211.

pattern, although economic regulations were “permanently eroded by technology,” despite the impossibility of regulating the unregulatable, codes were “yet continuously expanded.”³⁶ There is then a kind of futility to legal exercises dictating “use” and as well as to controlling copyright’s short-term monopoly grant extended to the owners of works of culture. Dommann concludes, describing this never-ending exercise, that the legal edifice withstands the disruption as evidenced in the way it “requires constant reinforcement” in response to every new media phenomenon.³⁷

So my interest here is admittedly not what one might expect. Clearly it is not opportunities for capital but neither is it really doctrinal disputes which in the end for us only provide an example of temporal disjuncture between advent and regulation. More importantly, legal history offers another angle on the problem of technological “newness.” This is because it is about time lag as disjuncture, or “then” related to “now,” the precedent held over and newly applied to that to which it may not actually apply. Copyright law, however, is painstakingly slow to evolve, sluggishly stubborn to respond to the technological upgrade, the exigencies of the market, or the enthusiasm of users to “share.” Concomitantly, we want to know where to start if we want to develop a theory of history as it relates to technological change. Because, as I am arguing, comparing emerging technologies always raises the “differences of times” question which is finally not just about precedent per se. It is, however, about relative times as in how “now” is like or unlike “then,” and if we have this now, “What later?” Yet thinking new technologies together with copyright doctrine may also be about the futility of “time and time again” as much as the futurity of “What next?”

What these copying technologies have in common is that they were legally unanticipated—whether we find this in the internet’s “shock” or photography’s “surprise.”³⁸ That historians of copyright would in the current decade come to see copyright pirates as in the technological vanguard only confirms our premise.³⁹ Lessig has even proposed that every technology can expect a period of piracy.⁴⁰ But what is “vanguardism” other than to be

36 See Dommann, *Authors and Apparatus*, 8.

37 See *ibid.*, 186.

38 The reference is to the original French title of Bernard Edelman, *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of Law*, trans. Elizabeth Kingdom (London: Routledge, 1979): *Le droit saisi par le photographie* (Paris: Maspéro, 1973), or *The Right Seized by the Photograph*, alternatively “surprised” by the photograph.

39 See Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*.

40 See Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Creativity* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Lessig even wrote a brief in support

in anticipation of the technological future? In addition, the problematic of the lag is also, from another point of view, a vantage relative to expectation as we will see below. For the vantage of the incomparable or amazing is so close to the unanticipated. And here it would seem that “piracy,” the very epitome of a “legal norm,” is not exactly a violation of the law. After all, “piracy” is just an accusation of extra-legal activity, and *only* that in times characterized by the absence of doctrinal certainty. Furthermore, “piracy” is to be expected given the uncertainty of the applicability of copyright law at each juncture when new technologies (photography, motion pictures, streaming services) take the law “by surprise.”

III. *Historical Time Theory*

1. “New Time” and the Relocation of the Future Relative to the Past

Turning back to Koselleck, we get a longer view and more distance on technological vanguardism. Koselleck studied what he termed “*Neue Zeit*” (“new time”) or “*Neuzeit*,” alternatively, “New Times.” What was his interest? He wants to know, relative to ancient and medieval times, how another time, a new temporality, has been experienced as what we call “modernity.” Whereas earlier periods would have lived “time” according to a recurring past or the expectation of sameness, this “new time” was unlike the time before. This “new time,” over the past three hundred years, Koselleck thinks, has been increasingly oriented towards a future time. Or, as he puts it, the more a time is “experienced as a new temporality,” or as “modernity,” the higher the expectation placed upon the future.⁴¹ What has happened and is happening given the modern concept of “history in general” is another perspective on time in which the future and the past have been “relocated” vis-à-vis one another.⁴² In Koselleck this “relocation” is read in the discrepancy between

of Megaupload. See “Affidavit,” *United States of America v. Kim DOTCOM, et al.* His “copyleft” position was based on the idea that the cyberlocker accommodated “non-infringing as well as infringing uses,” and this argument needs to be historically situated relative to US statutory as well as case law which evidences ever more convoluted stretching in order to achieve the desired outcome. Here we see a foundational doctrinal principle as a built-in tension, consequence of a contradiction. To put it simply: while profit requires restriction, innovation requires availability and circulation but then restriction all over again. From the point of view of media history, restriction versus availability translates into a vacillation between regulation and unregulated usage.

41 See Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 3.

42 See *ibid.*, 4.

our experience of things and the anticipation of things for which we have as yet had no experience, with an ever-shortening gap between the two.⁴³ Among other things, he sees our increased awareness of the “weight of the future” as an “effect of technological-industrial transformation.”⁴⁴ Whether today we attribute this future awareness to industrial technology or not, what is altered is our investment in a future time. However, let’s note that this near synonymy between technology and modernity explains why “technological modernity” may be used to explain “technological modernity” to the tautological degree that the term “modernity” has lost what few analytical teeth it might have had. Worse, technological change is often both an effect and a cause: consequence and determinant, or as often a symptom of “modernity.” Koselleck’s term “New Times,” however, allows another vantage, encouraging as it does a comparison of the “modes of time” to which I turn next.

2. *Historical Time as the Relativity of Past, Present, and Future*

Second, in Koselleck, the concept of *historical time* could be called a theory of the relativity of times, each mode of time defined by the others, a relationship that reminds us of what we forget but know all too well: that there is no present without its status relative to the past that it *will come be* and the future that it *cannot just yet be*. Some will recognize in any theory of *historical time* Heidegger’s three “ecstases,” ever and always in play: past, present, and future.⁴⁵ And I do mean “in play” for the three never stand alone and constantly change places. Here we might think of the difficulty of trying to study either of our two pirates, past or present—alone without the other—from either historical end point or starting point, especially given the pressure stemming from sheer expectations placed on the technological future, not to forget the “future of cinema.” While each mode of time modifies the other, there may be a weighting towards one of the three.

43 Koselleck’s original terms are “*Erfahrung*” and “*Erwartung*,” which may resonate with German speakers. Thanks to Malte Hagener.

44 See Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 3.

45 Heidegger scholar Magda King, in explicating the philosopher’s own formulation of the “three ecstases of temporality,” comments on one relevant passage: “The difficulty of this passage is not to be mitigated, nor can Heidegger be reasonably blamed for what is, after all, the ungraspable nature of time itself.” Magda King, *A Guide to Heidegger’s Being and Time*, ed. John Llewelyn (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 223.

3a. *Historical Prognostication and the Paradox of “New Times”*

Thus to the third concept which is the centre of my interest here. Beyond the theory of *historical time* that posits three alternating modes of time there is in Koselleck an intriguing approach to what could be called *historical prognostication*. And I am daring to pick this up from the suggestive hints he drops. But to get to “foretelling the future” we will need to pause just a moment to *admit* something to ourselves. We must admit (as I began by urging) that one of the unspoken motives of historical research *is to project*, that is, based on the technological formations of the past, to anticipate the direction of innovation toward the future. Such projection is sometimes achieved by means of *historical hold over*: the telegraph becomes the telephone; television at its inception is briefly called “image radio.”⁴⁶ We read printed “books” on paper and now also read e-“books.” Thus Friedrich Kittler’s theory of history suggests the present as consequence of the past, monopoly begetting monopoly: “What will soon end in the monopoly of bit and fiber optics began with the monopoly of writing.”⁴⁷ Let us concur that this is historical prediction, however finessed.⁴⁸ Koselleck—and I’m sticking my neck out here—is more important to us than Kittler, and not only because his scheme is finally more grand. It is also because any “history of technology” especially needs to consider what theories of history are operative.⁴⁹ Technology, historically synonymous with “modernity”/modernization, as we have seen, is above all implicated in the question of future times.⁵⁰

46 Rick Altman references “image radio,” but also “screen radio.” See Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 16.

47 Kittler, *Gramophone*, 4.

48 Beyond this chapter is the question of the genealogical in the sense of ancestry, as in the search for precursors of “digital cinema” which might return us to telephony and the kinoscope in an attempt to “grandfather” in ancestors. Or, considered as variation on “the present as the outcome of the events of the past,” there is technological artefact excavation to determine historical DNA on the assumption that genetic make-up can be traced in digital descendants.

49 Benoît Turquety argues for going beyond the ontological “What is it?” since “digital cinema” is more of a “historical epistemology” question. See Benoît Turquety, “Toward an Archaeology of the Cinema/Technology Relation: From Mechanization to ‘Digital Cinema,’” in *Techne/Technology*, ed. Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 63.

50 See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 16, on what he calls the “great modernization project,” which may now appear impossible because “there is no Earth capable of containing its ideal of progress, emancipation, and development.” In 2020 we may be less apt to anticipate future “possibility” than to expect “no possibility at all” in a future time. Latour’s hypothesis is that the modernization that led to globalization is likely the end of the Earth.

But let me back up to connect the problematic of *historical time* with Koselleck's theorization of what we are calling "New Times." There is a feature too little remarked upon in our comparisons between old and new technologies: It is the "over time" phenomenon, as in what happens or transpires, as we say, "over time." Already, the field has proposed technological history as consideration of "when old was new," as well as expected obsolescence.⁵¹ But there has been less work on, more precisely, this feature of the "over time what then" as in "over time," by means of repetitions and returns, the new will "no longer" be what it once was when it was received as innovation or wonder or revelation. One example of technological transformation "over time" might be Tom Gunning's theory as to how a novelty becomes "second nature." The new thing, as he says, becomes "second nature" when, after use and "over time," we become habituated to it.⁵² But that's not all, as I keep saying. Because right here, right at the recognition of "newness," there also appears to be the *paradox* of "New Times," to extrapolate from Koselleck. Paradoxically, every new time is not so new. It is that, on the one hand, every time, on arrival, is "always new, insofar as every present differentiates itself from every past and every future." Yet on the other hand, with "time" we reference seasonal cycles and the predictable planetary pattern of the earth's rotation.⁵³ Here, as well, is the aspect of daily life lived as the "time and time again" of ritual event and custom. Now to restate the *paradox* of "New Times": *Every* time is immediately felt to be a new time as different from the last, but it is also always a repetition, *a time again and again*. Every time arrives as a new time, a time unlike past times, but, in spite of that, a time like other times. In a comparison of technological advents—motion picture film duplication and distribution and cyberlocker streaming services—the new appears to disrupt regulatory doctrine. But that is not new. The technology appears anew and yet disturbs the law all over again.

51 On "when old was new," see Wendy Hui Kong Chun, "Introduction: Did Somebody Say New Media?," in *New Media/Old Media*, ed. Wendy Hui Kong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); on "What is new?," see Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, "Introduction: What's New about New Media?," in *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); see Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), on obsolescence.

52 See Tom Gunning, "Re-newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century," in *Rethinking Media Change: Aesthetics in Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 39–60.

53 See Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 148.

Let's add a corollary to the paradox of "New Times" and call it the *proximity of old to new*. Koselleck says of the repetition that "precisely that which is new in it [...] turns into the everyday and loses its meaning as a new time."⁵⁴ That the "new" might be so close to the "becoming old" may not have occurred to us exactly. Yet the cinema century provides multiple examples of a novelty getting "used up" such that when a technology becomes everyday it is "no longer new." Circulating as commerce, it loses its function as a novelty—think moving pictures, sound-on-film, colour television, or QuickTime. To repeat Koselleck's paradoxical principle another way: the recurrence that produces the "over again" (no longer new) also produces the "again" (as new). A somewhat more controversial example might be how historians take the "cinema of attractions" and project that concept forward onto the present blockbuster. In Tom Gunning's original theorization, the "cinema of attractions" is said to "come again" in the 1990s "Spielberg–Lucas–Coppola" cinema of "special effects." But here I want to point to the inadequacy of Gunning's formulation in which the "cinema of attractions," as he says, "goes underground" after 1906.⁵⁵ For the "underground" relies on the metaphor of space rather than that of time and thus too neatly avoids the present differentiating itself or the "differences of times" problematic. What theory of history is operative here, if any? In short, we need to think the relativity of times. Implicated would be comparisons between the original "cinema of attractions" and later "attractions" that suggest that the earlier phenomenon was in some way superior to contemporary special effects.⁵⁶ We suspect in such cases either the dismissive "not new" or "not as good as the original," neither of which takes account of the paradoxical "never entirely new," as we will see.

But wait. In Koselleck there is also an exception to this paradox of "New Times" in which the "always new" on arrival is yet "again" via the repetition of times. The exception comes to our attention with the emphasis on *historical prognostication*. For intriguingly Koselleck declares that "history is always new and replete with surprise."⁵⁷ However, he qualifies, that if we are not

54 Ibid., 150.

55 See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3–4 (Fall 1986): 70.

56 Sobchack and Bukatman imply that the first "cinema of attractions" was superior to the later special effects. See Vivian Sobchack, "'Cutting to the Quick': Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of Slow Motion," and Scott Bukatman, "Spectacle, Attractions, and Visual Pleasure," both in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

57 See Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 135.

so surprised, and predictions “turn out to be true,” it would follow from this that (and I almost don’t dare to repeat this): “history is never entirely new.” To repeat: “history is never entirely new.” And from “never entirely new” Koselleck transitions to the assertion that there must be “longer-term conditions or even enduring conditions within which what is new appears.”⁵⁸ There are, he goes on, long lasting structures and persisting processes that extend beyond singular events, the singular being where historical surprises occur—the Berlin Wall comes down and the Soviet Union collapses. This sets up Koselleck’s theory of history that strives to explain the success of prediction, the underpinning of which is the principle of “interplay between singularity and repetition.”⁵⁹ This singular-multiple figure, in turn, is reliant on a structure of temporal stratification or layering that he would continue to develop over his career.

3b. *Historical Prognostication and the Theory of Three Time Layers*

Let me briefly sketch out this temporal stratification structure as a means of double-checking the problem of *historical prognostication*, or the prediction of things and events thought to be unpredictable. *Historical time* is multi-layered, and, what is more, the distinct layers are subject to what Koselleck terms different “velocities of change.”⁶⁰ Very broadly, he proposes three layers: The first layer is the short-term “before and after” in the day to day in which prognoses are difficult to make (and where historical surprises occur). Middle-term trends constitute the second layer, effectively “conditions” which might seem impervious to the actions of change-agents, here exemplified by “modes” or “techniques of production” as well as “revolutionary” upheaval. As applied to our historical research and writing, this would operate on the first and second layers—the first a discovery of an aberration that could complicate the narratives of progression (or regression as in “attractions” to “special effects”). For instance, we might find evidence that the kinoscope (whose heyday was 1894–1896) persisted as an attraction into the 1920s in the exterior foyer of the motion picture theatre as this image shows. Then, the second layer would be our Marxist analysis of the capitalist “mode of production” as it explains both work place “speed-up” and dizzying rates of change that produce technological obsolescence, the exception to which would be residual media.

58 See *ibid.*

59 See *ibid.*, 136.

60 See *ibid.*, 135.



Fig. 2.2. Kinetoscope machines exterior motion picture theatre, 1920s.

Let's admit the agony of toggling between the first and second layers which defines one pattern of academic work. So if you're frustrated with the first two layers you may be more intrigued by Koselleck's third layer. Now this third layer will *not* likely resonate for readers if I refer to it as the "metahistorical duration plane," Koselleck's term.⁶¹ This third layer, however, deserves our attention as the most persistent and enduring of structures. Here Koselleck locates "juridical conditions" which affords me one explanation for the gap between intellectual property doctrine and technologically new forms of property. That explanation? Layers of time shift at different rates. But more intriguing is Koselleck's recourse to anthropology to describe this third layer, one so much slower than the others, that is, slower given his theory of relative "velocities of change."⁶² And how else to locate recalcitrant resistance to change other than by recourse to deep culture where anthropology finds its patterns?⁶³ What does anthropology reveal to him? The stubbornness of human beings. Koselleck is convinced that human behaviour is slowest to change. Behaviour lags behind technological invention.

61 See *ibid.*, 143.

62 See *ibid.*, 135.

63 See *ibid.*, 143.

In my analysis, this third layer is where ideology functions. Fleshing this out, however, requires going beyond Koselleck. While his examples are the “truth of proverbs,” as, for instance “Pride goeth before a fall,” we can suggest a host of aphorisms addressing the problematic of change.⁶⁴ Common-sense wisdom weighs in, shaping how ordinary people adapt and modify their experiences of leaving home, saving money, or using new devices. In wide circulation, for instance, are the ideas that “What goes around comes around” and that there is “Nothing new under the sun,” or equally banal, “Here we go again.” No, Koselleck cautions, do not underestimate empty “words of wisdom.”⁶⁵ So it may be that not only are we analysts of trends but we are also participants in the culture we analyse. How quick we are to agree that multi-tasking is “killing the ability to concentrate” and to concur that digital devices are “shortening attention spans.” Or we may claim that our devices are dividing us while in the same breath say that they are bringing us together.⁶⁶

Historical prognostication: Now what are the implications for our research? Koselleck’s layer theory of historical change or “rates of change” underwrites our own exercises in historical prediction. It is only insofar as these “formal structures” are themselves repeated that historical prognoses become possible.⁶⁷ To wit: “It is not only the formal repeatability of possible history that guarantees a minimum amount of prognostic certainty, but success also depends on taking into account the multilayeredness of historical courses of time.”⁶⁸ Taking revolution as his example, he finds the “singularity and repetition” pattern in the way that while “[e]very revolution is unique,” within the concept of revolution one finds “repetition,” “return,” and even “cyclical movement.”⁶⁹

Since Jacques Derrida has found similar principles in *Being and Time*, this deserves some final attention. Derrida also finds in Heidegger’s theory of history this multi-layering but adds to the differentiation between the layers certain rhythmic qualities. Each historicity has its “own movement and temporal rhythm: the historicity of equipment, of technology, the historicity of institutions,” types of art, and artistic styles.⁷⁰ It is even that each layer

64 See *ibid.*

65 See *ibid.*, 145.

66 This common-sense view is encapsulated in Sherry Turkle’s title *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

67 See Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 135.

68 *Ibid.*, 143.

69 See *ibid.*, 136.

70 Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being & History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 208.

with its own type of concatenation produces something more political in that the layers evidence a "fundamental inequality of development."⁷¹ Finally, in Derrida, Heidegger is found to have conceived historicity as a "circularity," a coming around "that surprises us not like the unforeseeable caprice of a new fashion, of a new or simply future mode."⁷² Here it would seem is Koselleck's singular "surprise," rather like "unforeseeable caprice," albeit placed within the larger pattern of "circularity" or repetition. But perhaps we should pause here to ask about the meaning of "unanticipated" as opposed to "anticipated." Then consider what we do with two slightly different meanings of "unanticipated"—the "unforeseen" as opposed to the "beyond expectation"? We might think of the relatively unanticipated digital projection "roll out" of 2011–2012 referenced earlier. Then we can compare this "surprise" with another "unforeseen" technological development, my favourite example of which is the unprecedented computational capacity to copy. Then again, "unforeseen" might even apply to the "wrong" or incorrect prediction. One recalls here the 1999 "wrong" prediction of the Y2K computer systems world disaster. Here was the prediction that led to technological preparedness in the West and the highly ideological corollary that because Third World computers were likely not set to the year 2000, computer system dysfunction would produce airport disaster on January 1, 2000, in nations like India. That disaster did not happen.

In conclusion, let me say that I am of two minds about Koselleck's theory of *historical prognostication*. This is because if historical predictions are borne out this could become support for an argument that history is a science which is where I will not go.⁷³ But the other part of me finds productivity in the *question of* historical research as prediction of the future. And here is exactly where Koselleck's third layer is most useful. That layer, most resistant to change, is a layer to which we all unthinkingly contribute. It is likely that even given our sharp analytical awareness we subscribe to an idea that "the more things change, the more they remain the same." And this goes for my project of comparing two piracies a century apart. The very project commits to the discovery of "time and again" repetition before I have even started. I admitted that I was stumped. Then again, if the present features the new but not so very new at all, we're back to Kittler's "loopiness" of history.

71 See *ibid.*, 143.

72 See *ibid.*

73 From the point of view of film and media studies, the best challenge to history as science is Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Now what do I say about the OCFH (one click file host) development of the cyberlocker access to cloud storage, continuing, despite shut downs, to be wildly popular with movie fans worldwide? In a recent study, servers were located in eight countries and 151 streaming cyberlockers found linked to thousands of crowd-sourced “indexing websites.” Remarkably, the authors of the study characterize their data as just a “slice” of the streaming cyberlocker “ecosystem.”⁷⁴ What global video piracy has to do with the piracy of the first decade of motion pictures is not a phenomenon outside of what I have proposed as an explanatory *historical time* paradigm. Yet even that paradigm is only too reducible to a level of common-sense ideas to which we all subscribe. To say that “history repeats itself” is both a totally empty truism *and* a valid analytical approach to incomparable inventions a century apart.

I do not know if I am glad or sorry that we have been “found out.”

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74 Iboiola et al. say that post-Megaupload the cyberlocker “ecosystem” has grown; see Damilola Iboiola, Benjamin Steer, Alvaro Garia-Recuero, Gianluca Stringhini, Steve Uhlig, and Gareth Tyson, “Movie Pirates of the Caribbean: Exploring Illegal Streaming Cyberlockers,” *Proceedings of the Twelfth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2018), 131–40, <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/15008/14858>. See also Nan Zhao, Loïc Baud, and Patrick Bellot. “Exploring Cyberlockers Content,” *International Journal of Multimedia and Image Processing* 4, no. 3–4 (September/December 2014) for a discussion of the content.

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3 Relativist Perspectivism

Caligari and the Crisis of Historicism

Nicholas Baer

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I."

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

*"I give you the right to lock me up; I am giving you the possibility of healing me."
This is the meaning of the avowal of madness: avowal signs the asylum contract.*

—Michel Foucault²

Abstract

This chapter repositions Robert Wiene's Expressionist classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), at the nexus of two sets of developments: the popularization of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity and widespread recognition of the relativist implications of historicist thought; and the rejection of perspectival conventions in the visual arts and the emergence of perspectivism in philosophy. Eliciting comparisons to Einstein's theory upon its release, Wiene's film challenges basic tenets of the German historicist tradition, conveying a radical scepticism regarding the possibility of detached, disinterested observation. With its enigmatic narrative and distorted, post-perspectival set design, *Caligari* dismisses Leopold von Ranke's ideal of faithfully and impartially reconstructing the past. Instead, the film follows Friedrich Nietzsche's early writings in suggesting a perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181.

2 Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 13.

of finite interpretations. *Caligari's* legacy thus consists not only in its modernist aesthetics, but also in its engagement with fundamental historical-philosophical questions.

Keywords: Expressionism, Weimar cinema, historicism, philosophy of history, Albert Einstein, theory of relativity

Despite its antagonism toward all metaphysical claims, the positivism popularized by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century often expanded into a universalizing scientism, whereby natural-scientific methods were transposed to the examination of human history, culture, and society at large.³ Given this imperialist tendency, it is both ironic and suitable that one of the major challenges posed to the Baconian epistemology adopted by positivism—namely, Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity—seemed to reverberate within all realms of academic study and creative endeavour in the following century. Published in 1905, Einstein's "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies" ("Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper") implied a relativist perspectivism decisively at odds with the empirical mode of observation widely practiced across diverse scholarly and artistic realms—from the natural sciences to the disciplines of history and sociology, and from the "experimental novels" of Naturalist authors to the *plein-air* paintings of the Impressionists.⁴ Where practitioners in these realms had assumed the position of fixed, detached observers whose viewpoint was separated from the external world, Einstein's theory suggested a more decentred, spatiotemporally dynamic, and non-absolute relationship between subject and object. Such a relativist form of interaction, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, found expression in both the modernist works and historical-philosophical debates of the Weimar era.

Emerging contemporaneously with Einstein's theories, works of aesthetic modernism likewise rejected traditional, widely accepted standards of observation, evoking a new mode of relationality between human subjectivity and the objective world. While the Impressionists had already substituted an apprehensive space for that of ordered, Euclidean geometry, modernist artists abandoned the mimesis of perceived reality altogether, replacing a

3 Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*, trans. Norbert Guterman (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1968), 9–10.

4 Albert Einstein, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," in *The Principle of Relativity*, trans. George Barker Jeffery and Wilfrid Perrett (New York: Dover, 1952), 35–65.

fragmentary consciousness for the fixed, detached observer and negating rather than faithfully imitating the exterior realm.⁵ Most evident in the turn away from figurative painting, the “dehumanization of art” (José Ortega y Gasset) in fact occurred across a broad range of media, finding its corollary in the retreat from the realistic, coherent plot in literature and the dismissal of harmonic tonality in music.⁶ In a 1923 manifesto, Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin rendered explicit the correspondence between scientific paradigms and artistic practices, characterizing bourgeois and socialist realist forms as “projections along the fixed, plane coordinates of Euclid’s world.”⁷ Emphasizing the proven non-existence of such a “finite, fixed world,” Zamyatin called for a more complex form of literature—a literature with the pioneering, self-reflexive inquisitiveness of Einstein, who “managed to remember that he [...], observing motion with a watch in hand, was also moving,” and thereby succeeded in “looking at the motion of the earth from *outside*.”⁸

Among the modernist movements in art and literature that suggested a new worldview along with a more mutable, impermanent order of spatial relations is Expressionism. As Georg Marzynski wrote in a 1920 study, Expressionist painters shifted emphasis from external reality to human subjectivity, constructing works from colours and forms untethered to the realm of sensory experience. In this way, Marzynski argued, Expressionist artists sought to liberate European painting from the representational function it had performed since the Renaissance; whereas earlier art consisted of “subjectivized objects,” their works portrayed “objectifications of the subject.”⁹ Similarly, Walter Sokel later contended that in the dramas of August Strindberg and the Expressionists, the protagonist’s physical environment is not “the source of experience,” but rather “a structure designed for the purpose of expressing emotions.”¹⁰ In Sokel’s analysis, Expressionist dramatists rejected the postulate of a fixed, given external nature,

5 See Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

6 José Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1956), 1–50.

7 Yevgeny Zamyatin, “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters,” in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 112.

8 *Ibid.*, 111–12.

9 Georg Marzynski, *Die Methode des Expressionismus: Studien zu seiner Psychologie* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1920), 11, 34.

10 Walter H. Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 39.

envisioning the world instead as “a field of magnetic and gravitational forces radiating from the soul.”¹¹ The theatrical *mise en scène* of Expressionist dramas, according to Sokel, is thus dynamic, serving as a projection of the protagonist’s ever-fluctuating interior states: “The scenery of the Expressionist stage changes with the psychic forces whirling about in it, just as in the universe of relativity space is modified by the matter it contains.”¹²

For many commentators, however, the art form most capable of representing the dynamics of the Einsteinian universe was film.¹³ Perhaps most famously, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Epstein, and Dziga Vertov invoked the Principle of Relativity and the fourth dimension in their theoretical writings on cinema’s medial properties and aesthetic possibilities.¹⁴ As Annette Michelson has argued, the three film-makers shared an interest in the power of montage techniques (e.g. freeze-framing, slow, fast, or reverse motion) to reveal, suspend, or even reconfigure spatiotemporal and causal relations, thereby offering a new mode of experiencing and knowing the phenomenal world.¹⁵ Einstein’s ideas also found cinematic articulation in the German context—most explicitly in Hanns Walter Kornblum’s 1922 educational film, *The Fundamentals of the Einsteinian Relativity Theory* (*Die Grundlagen der Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie*), but also in relation to works of Expressionism, distinct less for their montage techniques and trick sequences than for their distorted *mise en scène*. In a 1920 essay, Herman Scheffauer invoked Einstein while celebrating Expressionist cinema’s plastic and dynamic conceptualization of space, which, in his view, lent the medium a “fourth dimension.”¹⁶ For Scheffauer, the first film to exemplify

11 Ibid., 38.

12 Ibid.

13 On Einstein and the emergence of cinema, see Harro Segeberg, “Is Everything Relative?: Cinema and the Revolution of Knowledge around 1900,” in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, ed. Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2009), 67–76.

14 See Sergei Eisenstein, “The Fourth Dimension in Cinema,” in *Selected Works, Volume I: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), 185; Jean Epstein, *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 294, 312–14, 319, 324, 348–49, 367, 400; and Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 9, 41, 78, 131.

15 Annette Michelson, “Reading Eisenstein Reading ‘Capital,’” *October* 2 (Summer 1976): 32; and Annette Michelson, “The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval,” in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 65.

16 Herman George Scheffauer, “The Vivifying of Space,” in *The New Vision in the German Arts* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), 46.

this new spatial sensibility was Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920), the sets of which seemed to apply and visualize "Einstein's invasion of the law of gravity."¹⁷

In this chapter, I will examine *Caligari* in terms of the relativist perspectivism that was widely invoked in the early twentieth century. During this period, the popularization of Einstein's Theory of Relativity converged with increasing recognition of the relativist implications of historicist thought, and the dissolution of perspective in the visual arts coincided with the emergence of perspectivism in modern philosophy, especially in the wake of Nietzsche. Locating *Caligari* at the nexus of these broad-scale developments, I will build on the work of Thomas Elsaesser, who has accounted for the film's unique stylistic and formal features with reference to Weimar cinema's "double 'legitimation crisis'" vis-à-vis German cultural tradition and an increasingly hegemonic American film industry.¹⁸ Where Elsaesser links the film's reflexive qualities to a "meta-critical discourse," I will position the work as a meditation on conceptions of time and history.¹⁹ And while Elsaesser notes *Caligari*'s "radical skepticism as to evidentiary truth in the cinema," I will argue that the film adopts an ironic stance regarding issues of historical ontology, epistemology, and narration more generally.²⁰ *Caligari*'s legacy, in my analysis, consists not only in introducing aspects of aesthetic modernism to the medium of film, but also in demonstrating the possibilities of an "intellectual" or "cerebral" cinema—one that engages with fundamental questions of the philosophy of history.

The Critique of Positivism

Positivism made an enormous contribution to empirical sciences such as history and sociology in the nineteenth century, offering these emerging disciplines a model of primary source research, scientific exactitude, and objective, detached neutrality. Nevertheless, the extension of naturalist postulates to the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) raised many vexing questions for intellectuals in Central and Western Europe: Might not human life and activity bear unique, vital, and dynamic qualities

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 103n54.

that are obscured when social existence and behaviour are treated like objects of natural-scientific scrutiny? Are there dimensions of one's being, interiority, and lived experience that exceed the purview of a phenomenalist epistemology, which relies on sense perception and denies any distinction between appearances and essences? Can one yield genuine knowledge of spiritual-intellectual realms from a passive, disinterested mode of examination, abstaining from value judgements and proceeding strictly according to inductive generalization? And, finally, is it possible to figure the subjectivity and historicity of the observer without thereby sacrificing a claim to universal validity?²¹ Such questions fuelled a "crisis of science" addressed by Max Weber in his celebrated 1917 lecture, "Science as a Vocation" ("Wissenschaft als Beruf"), delivered at a time when many in the younger generation expressed radical scepticism about the ultimate purpose and meaning of specialized intellectual inquiry.²²

The general rebellion against science at the end of the "long nineteenth century" also entailed the rejection of a specific tradition of historical thinking.²³ Though not a simple positivist, Leopold von Ranke had upheld a correspondence theory of truth, pursuing the ideal of faithfully and impartially recreating empirical reality—or, in his well-known words, showing "*wie es eigentlich gewesen* [how it essentially was]."²⁴ Ranke's mode of historiography, involving the rigorous collection of individual facts, was criticized as early as 1874 by Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom it connoted a dry, ascetic antiquarianism as well as the dissolution of all foundations into a ceaseless, Heraclitean flux.²⁵ Philosophers including Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Dilthey later addressed epistemological and methodological issues related to the science of history, seeking to

21 Kolakowski, *Alienation of Reason*, 1–10; and H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 33–66.

22 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129–56.

23 On the German historicist tradition, see Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); and Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

24 Leopold von Ranke, "Preface to the First Edition of *Histories of the Latin and German Peoples*," trans. Wilma A. Iggers, in *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (London: Routledge, 2011), 86.

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 108.

provide a firm basis for historical knowledge and understanding.²⁶ Their inability to wield off the relativist implications of historicism presaged a crisis of historical thought diagnosed by Ernst Troeltsch in the disorienting post-war years, when a Rankean faith in the meaning and coherence of the historical process seemed to be decisively shattered.²⁷ In *Historicism and Its Problems* (*Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 1922), Troeltsch discerned a “historical relativity of values” in the German historicist tradition—one, in his view, with “a certain analogy to the physical Theory of Relativity, which, in its set of problems so strongly intensified by Einstein, concerns the whole world today.”²⁸

Expressionist artists participated in the early-twentieth-century revolt against science, following a lineage of philosophical reactions to positivism. As Siegfried Kracauer argued in a 1918 essay, visual and literary works of Expressionism betrayed a Nietzschean vitalism, countering an “Apollonian intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*]” with elementary and instinctually driven being, “irrepressibly animated and suffused with Dionysian fervor.”²⁹ Kracauer attributed the movement’s interest in recovering an “*Ur-ego*” to the repressive, hegemonic power of science, which renders the world increasingly objective and converts the individual into “a purely impersonal intellect.”³⁰ Writing sixteen years later, Georg Lukács set Expressionism against the backdrop of the Kaiserreich’s “philosophy of life,” which, in its attempts to mediate between neo-Kantianism and historicism, tended toward an “extreme relativism” and even “mystical irrationalism.”³¹ For Lukács, one of the exemplary figures in this context was Hans Vaihinger, whose *The Philosophy of “As if”* (*Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, 1911) theorized human fictions on the basis of a Kant- and Nietzsche-derived “idealist positivism.”³²

26 See Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

27 Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Krisis des Historismus,” *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922): 572–90.

28 Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 219. See also Otto Hintze, “Troeltsch und die Probleme des Historismus: Kritische Studien,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 135, no. 2 (1927): 227: “An die Stelle der Beurteilung nach einem absoluten Wertsystem war die lebendige Beziehung zu einer für den Betrachter geltenden, aber historisch bedingten Wertwelt getreten. Es war eine ähnliche Wendung wie die, die in der Naturwissenschaft durch die Einsteinsche Relativitätslehre hervorgebracht worden ist.”

29 Siegfried Kracauer, “Über den Expressionismus: Wesen und Sinn einer Zeitbewegung: Abhandlung,” in *Werke*, vol. 9.2, ed. Ingrid Belke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 46–47.

30 *Ibid.*, 49, 63.

31 Georg Lukács, “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline,” in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 80.

32 Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of “As if”: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935).

Vaihinger himself hinted at a link between Expressionist aesthetics and the critique of positivism. In his analysis, the sceptic or logical pessimist discredits a naïve identity theory of truth, according to which the psyche “portray[s] the objective world truthfully and without alteration,” preferring to regard thought instead “as though it distorted reality like a pair of coloured spectacles or a concave mirror.”³³

The Expressionists’ rejection of a positivist epistemology—their insistence, in Gottfried Benn’s words, that “there was no reality, only, at most, its distorted image”—also implied a challenge to basic historicist tenets.³⁴ Manifestos by Kasimir Edschmid and others proclaimed a radical break with the past—a break often articulated in terms of cultural iconoclasm, Oedipal rebellion, and revolutionary or eschatological politics.³⁵ Negating all traditions, norms, and stylistic conventions, the Expressionists strove toward a new reality, which they envisioned not through faithful mimesis of a given external world, but rather through the act of pure, unfettered creation. The artificial universe formed by the Expressionists would be detached or even independent from concrete temporal and historical determinants, reflecting what Wilhelm Worringer identified in 1907 as an “urge to abstraction.”³⁶ In contrast to naturalism, which had presupposed a confident relationship between human and environment, abstract art arose, in Worringer’s words, from “a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world”—that is, from a loss of faith in history as the site of logos and meaning.³⁷ Such a disillusioned view found explicit articulation in Georg Kaiser’s “Historical Fidelity” (“Historientreue,” 1923), in which the writer characterized history as a “succession of occurrences that are senseless and purposeless,” and described the task of the poet as that of transforming chaos and accident into order and lawful necessity.³⁸

In their conception of surface reality as a creation of the intellect, and in their prioritization of non-mimetic art as a link to the eternal, the Expressionists drew from Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and*

33 Ibid., 163.

34 Gottfried Benn, “Bekanntnis zum Expressionismus,” in *Deutsche Zukunft*, November 5, 1933, quoted in Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 18.

35 Kasimir Edschmid, *Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung* (Berlin: Erich Reiß, 1919), 31.

36 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 4.

37 Ibid., 15.

38 Georg Kaiser, “Historientreue: Am Beispiel der Flucht nach Venedig,” in *Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Walther Huder (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1971), 577.

Representation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, 1818–1819). The first prominent irrationalist among Western philosophers, Schopenhauer had presented a pessimistic vision of human life as lacking sense, direction, and meaning. Opposing Hegel's philosophy, Schopenhauer described the material of history not as a source of general knowledge, but rather as "the particular in its particularity and contingency."³⁹ Much as Schopenhauer had undermined an affirmative, theodicean view of history, likening its movement to "clouds in the wind [...], often entirely transformed by the most trifling accident," Expressionist theorists Worringer and Wassily Kandinsky dismissed a coherent or teleological *Geschichtsbild* (conception of history), reflecting a sense, in the former's words, that "man is now just as lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world picture as primitive man."⁴⁰ Bernhard Diebold also alluded to Schopenhauer's aesthetics in his prescient 1916 article, "Expressionism and Cinema" ("Expressionismus und Kino"), and the screenwriters of *Caligari*, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, explicitly modelled their title character's appearance after the nineteenth-century philosopher.⁴¹ Upon its release in February 1920, one critic even lauded *Caligari* for departing from a naturalist preoccupation with "objective facts," depicting instead "the world as will and representation of the madman."⁴²

The Rejection of Realist Aesthetics

Like Worringer, who identified opposing aesthetic drives in the history of art—a mimetic empathy with the vital, organic world and an abstractionist retreat into a realm of tranquil, crystalline form—Kracauer would later observe dual forces at work in the evolution of photographic media. In *Theory of Film* (1960), Kracauer noted the contemporaneous popularization of photographic technology and positivist methodology in the nineteenth century as well as their common promise of accurately and impersonally

39 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), vol. 3, 224.

40 Ibid., 224; Worringer, *Abstraction*, 18; and Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977).

41 Bernhard Diebold, "Expressionism and Cinema," trans. Alex H. Bush, in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 416; and Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/20*, ed. Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), 52–53.

42 Eugen Tannenbaum, "Expressionismus im Film," *Berliner Abendpost*, February 29, 1920.

reproducing physical reality.⁴³ While realists across scientific and aesthetic fields celebrated photography's ability to record and reveal nature, other commentators and practitioners—particularly those upholding Romantic ideals—emphasized the medium's artistic qualities, as derived from the selective rendering and creative shaping of raw visual material. Kracauer discerned a comparable interplay between “realistic” and “formative” tendencies in the history of film, which was already split in its early years between the Lumière brothers' *actualités* and the staged fantasies of Georges Méliès. Echoing Erwin Panofsky, who had distinguished film from older representational media in its compositional process “from bottom to top”—a process, Panofsky argued, corresponding to a materialist rather than an Idealist worldview—Kracauer postulated a “basic aesthetic principle” of cinema, prioritizing visual engagement with the infinite, transitory, and fortuitous realm of physical existence.⁴⁴

Given the frequent association of realist and Impressionist aesthetics with photographic representation, the relationship between Expressionism and cinema was a contentious issue among film theorists, enmeshed in broader debates about the medium's specific properties and artistic potential. As Rudolf Kurtz wrote in 1926, “Of all art forms, film seems to be the least art and the most nature. Already its most essential means, photography, is perceived as fundamentally inartistic.”⁴⁵ Kurtz argued that while Expressionism in film necessarily entailed compromise, the movement had nonetheless enriched the medium's visual repertoire, conjuring up “effects that lie beyond the photographable.”⁴⁶ In a 1934 essay, Rudolf Arnheim likewise credited Expressionism with film's artistic development. Though criticizing the blind transference of stylistic principles from graphic art and painting to three-dimensional, cinematic space, Arnheim acknowledged Expressionism's important influence on film, likening it to the movement's impact on other arts: namely, the prioritization and freer application of formal factors, thus ending “a period in which the object was overvalued.”⁴⁷

43 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

44 Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 168; and Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 38.

45 Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, ed. Christian Kiening and Ulrich Johannes Beil (Zurich: Chronos, 2007), 51.

46 *Ibid.*, 52, 84.

47 Rudolf Arnheim, “Expressionist Film,” in *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 85.

Kracauer, whose aforementioned 1918 essay had recognized the movement for creating new artistic means, similarly argued in 1939 that Expressionist films, while overly theatrical, had been fruitful in establishing the necessary distance from outer reality to approach it anew, released from the constraints of inhibition and convention.⁴⁸

Widely identified as the first work of Expressionist cinema, *Caligari* held a central position in classical film-theoretical debates on modes of engagement with physical reality. From its initial release onwards, Wiene's film was praised by some for its attempt to redefine cinematic practice apart from naturalist representation—or, as one reviewer wrote in 1920, for lifting the medium “out of the realm of photography into the pure sphere of the artwork.”⁴⁹ Among *Caligari*'s numerous detractors, criticisms included the film's disregard for the medium's unique features and devices; impure combination of naturalistic and stylized elements; excessive, even enervating décor; and, finally, linkage of Expressionist aesthetics with the theme of insanity. In his 1947 essay, Panofsky argued that insofar as *Caligari* presented an adulterated pro-filmic space, it avoided the problem of cinema: namely, “to manipulate and shoot unstylized reality in such a way that the result has style.”⁵⁰ Writing four years later, André Bazin similarly characterized *Caligari* as a failed attempt to depart from film's inalienable spatial realism, replacing “the world of experience” with “a fabricated nature” strongly influenced by theatre and painting.⁵¹ Finally, in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer positioned *Caligari* as the earliest cinematic effort to abandon the medium's recording function. For Kracauer, Wiene's work prioritized free and autonomous creation above “camera-realism” in a misguided, even retrogressive quest to attain the legitimacy of the traditional arts.⁵²

Caligari thus served as a negative example in numerous mid-twentieth-century theorizations of cinematic ontology and generic aesthetic boundaries. If, however, with a nod to Kracauer, one pursues an analogy between *Caligari*'s reworking of “camera reality” and contemporaneous intellectual efforts to rethink the nature and epistemology of “historical reality,” one might also interpret the film in terms of historical-philosophical

48 Kracauer, “Über den Expressionismus,” 77; and Siegfried Kracauer, “Wiedersehen mit alten Filmen: Der expressionistische Film,” in *Werke* vol. 6.3, ed. Inka Müller-Bach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 269.

49 Roland Schacht (aka Balthasar), “Caligari,” *Freie Deutsche Bühne* 29, March 14, 1920, 695–98.

50 Panofsky, “Style and Medium,” 169.

51 André Bazin, “Theater and Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 109.

52 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 37, 39, 61, 84–85.

debates—and, more specifically, as a critique of nineteenth-century German historicism.⁵³ Indeed, the Expressionist *mise en scène* of Wiene's film not only rejects traditional realist aesthetics, but also abandons the historicist quest to establish “how it essentially was” through individualizing observation. *Caligari's* circular narrative structure also thwarts the historicist stress on evolutionary development, coinciding more with Oswald Spengler's vision of historical cyclicity.⁵⁴ Such a correspondence between Expressionist aesthetics and anti-historicism was suggested by Wiene himself in a 1922 text. Writing in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, Wiene positioned the Expressionism that emerged in the decade before World War I as a reaction against aesthetic realism, whether in its historicist or naturalist guises. For Wiene, Expressionism marked “an irrepressible countermovement, which turned against the last vestiges of historicism—in short, against all forms of realism,” and had since become the goal of film and all other arts in the current era.⁵⁵

Expressionist cinema's visual features and narrative structures are thus interpretable not only within a metacinematic or metacritical discourse—that is, as reflections of/on the properties, possibilities, and cultural-industrial positionality of the filmic medium—but also as *metahistorical* considerations of the philosophical tenets of historicist thought. Furthermore, Expressionist film's oft-noted reflexivity aligns it with what Hayden White has called an “ironic” mode of historiography, or one that inspires doubt about its own truth-claims by self-consciously negating that which it affirms on a literal level.⁵⁶ Such ironic reflexivity found astute and eloquent articulation in the culture of Weimar Germany—a culture that Helmut Lethen and Peter Sloterdijk have noted for its cool demeanour and disillusioned, cynical reason—and it is also evident in later movements of film history, including the *films noirs* of the 1940s and 1950s and the mind-game films of more recent decades.⁵⁷ More broadly, by examining Weimar cinema's extraordinary

53 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995), 3–4.

54 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

55 Robert Wiene, “Expressionism in Film,” trans. Eric Ames, in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 437.

56 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 37–38.

57 Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 36; and Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 546.

innovations in aesthetic and narrative form with regard to developments in early-twentieth-century intellectual history, I hope to demonstrate the significant role of film in engaging with large-scale, seismic shifts in modern philosophy—in particular, the decentring and disintegration of the Cartesian subject as well as the change from subject-object modes of thinking to a more complex, relativist perspectivism. In the following, I will study these shifts through a closer analysis of Wiene's *Caligari*.

Framing *Caligari*

Among the major points of contention in scholarship on Wiene's film since *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) has been the function of the frame narrative, the addition of which, in Kracauer's well-known assessment, transformed "a revolutionary film [...] into a conformist one."⁵⁸ Kracauer based his appraisal of the film on a 1941 manuscript by Hans Janowitz, who had attributed the narrative device to Wiene, disavowing its presence in the original script.⁵⁹ Numerous scholars have since diverged from Kracauer's critique, offering alternative readings of *Caligari*'s politics; most notably, Anton Kaes has characterized the film as "an aggressive diatribe against the murderous practices of war psychiatry," associating it with "Dada's nihilistic attacks on the establishment."⁶⁰ While I would agree with those who have emphasized that *Caligari*'s openness and indeterminacy frustrate all ascriptions of direct socio-historical referentiality and political coherence, I also wish to shift focus to an unexplored area of inquiry: namely, the film's engagement with ontological, epistemological, and historiographical questions of the philosophy of history.⁶¹ In my analysis, *Caligari* marks a challenge to basic historicist tenets, including the objectivity of historical accounts, the reliability and authority of narration, and the alignment of power and ethics. The film, I argue, conveys a radical scepticism regarding the possibility of

58 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 67.

59 Hans Janowitz, "Caligari—The Story of a Famous Story," in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories*, ed. Mike Budd (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 221–39.

60 Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 53.

61 See Stefan Andriopoulos, "Suggestion, Hypnosis, and Crime: Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)," in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, ed. Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 24; and Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema*, 63, 76, 79, 92, 95.

detached, disinterested observation, suggesting a more perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay of finite interpretations.

For Kracauer, *Caligari's* framing device pathologizes the narrator, Francis, thereby delegitimizing and even reversing his story's implied challenge to state authority. Furthermore, Kracauer views the narrative device itself, with its ambivalent gesture of containment, as the symbol of a collective trend in Weimar Germany toward both solipsistic retreat and inner, "psychological revolution."⁶² Apart from its factual errors, internal contradictions, and dubious methodological premises, Kracauer's argument confronts myriad hermeneutical obstacles, most obviously the extension of the film's Expressionist design into the framing scenes and their intertitles. Because the film's concluding episode does not, as Kracauer himself notes, restore "conventional reality," it problematizes the relationship between Expressionist stylization and narrational insanity assumed by many contemporary reviewers.⁶³ Whereas Kracauer nonetheless maintains that Francis' story is bracketed as a "madman's fantasy," I would emphasize that the film not only ultimately refuses to designate his (and the asylum director's) degree of sanity, but also interrogates the bases upon which the figures' credibility might be evaluated and ascertained.⁶⁴ Moreover, in contrast to Kracauer, who associates the film's exclusive use of studio settings with a post-war German withdrawal from the exterior world, I submit that *Caligari* follows Nietzsche in calling into question the very existence and accessibility of a normative historical reality—one external to the subjective perspectives of discrete individuals.

In juxtaposing *Caligari's* framing scenes with its inner story, Kracauer also discounts the blurring of formal and textual boundaries that characterizes Wiene's film and the Expressionist movement more generally. Distinguishing Expressionist dramaturgy from earlier theatrical practice, Walter Sokel argued that "the physical stage [...] ceases to be a fixed frame of a scene or act," and the protagonist's dreamlike vision is no longer placed within an "explanatory frame of reference."⁶⁵ Although, as stated, *Caligari's* Expressionist style is not consistently or unequivocally aligned with one character's psychological state, the film nonetheless disregards the barriers between inner self and external environment, and between enigmatic visions and elucidatory frameworks. In Wiene's film, aspects of characters' appearances, costumes, and props (e.g. the three streaks in the director's

62 Kracauer, *Caligari to Hitler*, 67.

63 *Ibid.*, 70.

64 *Ibid.*, 67.

65 Sokel, *Writer in Extremis*, 38, 45.



Fig. 3.1. Three streaks in the director's hair and gloves.



Fig. 3.2. Cesare's slender, angular physique and knife.

hair and gloves; Cesare's slender, angular physique and knife) correspond to patterns in the surrounding décor, and characteristics of the *mise en scène* (e.g. irregular shapes, distorted angles) extend not only to the film's framing scenes, but also beyond the diegesis to include the font and design of the intertitles. The film also obscures the thresholds between word and image, and between textual and paratextual elements; the injunction "*Du musst Caligari werden* [You must become Caligari]," which appears before the asylum director in a famous scene, also featured prominently in the film's 1920 advertising campaign.

The film's obfuscation of conventional borders also applies to its narrative and thematic registers. Drawing from the Romantic and Gothic literary works of Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*, 1818), E. T. A. Hoffmann ("The Sandman" ["Der Sandmann," 1817]), Edgar Allan Poe ("The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," 1845), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1886), *Caligari* features fantastic, uncanny figures or motifs (e.g. ghosts, somnambulists, doppelgängers) that frustrate basic ontological distinctions, such as those between life and death, sleeping and wakefulness, and self and other. Cesare is first hailed for his omniscient and prophetic powers, which extend across temporal horizons ("Cesare knows the past and sees the future"), and he is also revealed to transgress spatial boundaries, repeatedly exiting the fairground area and penetrating into others' private spheres. The central mystery of the story within the story—Who is truly responsible for the series of murders in Holstenwall?—not only bleeds into and even beyond the frame narrative, resisting unambiguous resolution or closure, but is also complicated by a further question opened up by the concluding episode: namely, whether the murders narrated by Francis in fact occurred, or if the entire inner story was merely his subjective delusion. The film's inverse, mutually incompatible endings, alternately depicting the director and Francis in straitjackets in the insane asylum, pose an irresolvable challenge to viewers' capacity for decisive adjudication.

Caligari thus challenges the Kantian analytic of aesthetic judgement, confounding the delimitation of the work (*ergon*) from its addendum or frame (*parergon*), or the intrinsic from the extrinsic aspects of pictorial representation.⁶⁶ Emphasizing the non-absoluteness of the boundaries between the aesthetic object and its milieu—or, as Georg Simmel wrote in

66 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110–11. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54–73.

“The Picture Frame” (“Der Bildrahmen,” 1902), between the work of art and elements of an unmediated nature—*Caligari* deploys frames not toward the dual ends of external defence and internal integration, but rather toward those of “continuing exosmosis and endosmosis.”⁶⁷ By reduplicating the inner story’s themes of permeability and liminality across stylistic, narrational, and paratextual registers, the film eliminates the distance from the spectator that Simmel, following the Idealist tradition, deemed as essential for an artwork’s wholeness, coherence, and self-sufficiency. Countering Simmel’s conceptualization of the work of art as an autonomous, self-enclosed unity, the film highlights the indefiniteness of all demarcations or “border regions” as well as the non-fixity of the relationship between object and observer.⁶⁸ This new, more dynamic mode of relationality, as the following section will demonstrate, involved the dissolution of the perspectival system of space, which had not only contributed to the autonomy and formal order of the image, but had also allowed it to address a single beholder, whose monocular, immobile point of view was separated from the object of representation.

The Dissolution of Perspective

In his seminal essay “Perspective as ‘Symbolic Form’” (“Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form,’” 1927), Erwin Panofsky modified the approach of Alois Riegl, who had examined the relationship between the artwork and its surrounding world through his concept of the unique *Kunstwollen* (artistic will) of every epoch.⁶⁹ Panofsky replaced Riegl’s inchoate *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* (philosophy of world views) with a neo-Kantian theory of the “symbolic form,” or Ernst Cassirer’s term for the spiritual energy through which human consciousness attributes meaning to sensual signs—a phenomenon, as Cassirer emphasized, that occurs across the various realms of cultural expression.⁷⁰ Observing correspondences between advances in Western philosophy and the evolution of spatial perception, Panofsky argued

67 Georg Simmel, “The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study,” trans. Mark Ritter, in *Theory, Culture & Society* 11 (1994): 11.

68 On “border regions,” see Till Dembeck, *Texte rahmen: Grenzregionen literarischer Werke im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

69 Alois Riegl, “The Main Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*,” trans. Christopher S. Wood, in *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 87–103.

70 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 41; see also Wood’s “Introduction” in *ibid.*, 7–24.

that much as the idea of an infinite empirical reality had superseded the circumscribed geocentrism of Aristotelian thought, the system of central perspective had envisaged endless extension to a vanishing point, establishing distance between human beings and an objectified world of experience. Panofsky characterized perspective as an ambivalent and versatile method, and one that has served as the target of diametrically opposed critiques over the course of its history. Whereas ancient and medieval artists had largely eschewed perspective, associating it with subjectivism and contingency, the Expressionists had rejected it for preserving empirical, three-dimensional space, and thereby retaining an element of objectivity that constrained the “formative will” of the individual creator.⁷¹

The Expressionist movement advanced a broader trend in early-twentieth-century visual art toward dispelling perspectival geometry and envisioning new conceptions of space. Impressionist paintings of the 1860s and 1870s had already signalled an increasing dissatisfaction with perspectival conventions; instead of representing solid objects in three-dimensional space, works by Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and others had depicted the fleeting, subjective impressions that these objects left on the artists’ perceptual apparatuses. However, where works of Impressionism had maintained a connection to physical reality, subsequent art movements (e.g. Post-Impressionism, Cubism) blatantly defied the aim of perspectival technique, as identified by Panofsky: “to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space.”⁷² This rejection of art’s function as a mimesis of external objects—and, with it, a dismissal of the pictorial surface’s status as a window to the outer world—troubled the longstanding Cartesian split between the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) and the extended substance (*res extensa*). Emphasizing the untenability of separating the world of objects from a fixed observer, modern artists abandoned what the art historian Carl Einstein, in *Art of the Twentieth Century* (*Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 1926), called the “perspectival calculus of distance,” inaugurating “an epoch of technical and formal freedom.”⁷³

Concurrent with art historians’ responses to the innovations of aesthetic modernism, early film theorists recognized cinema for its potential to expand and reconfigure the field of human perception. In *The Photoplay* (1916), Hugo Münsterberg made a plea for film’s aesthetic independence on account of unique methods like the close-up, through which “an entirely new

71 Panofsky, *Perspective*, 71.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Tanja Frank (Leipzig: Reclam, 1988), 12, 17.

perspective was opened.”⁷⁴ Defending film against negative comparisons to the realist theatre, Münsterberg emphasized that art’s purpose is “not to imitate life but to reset it in a way which is totally different from reality.”⁷⁵ Eight years later, Béla Balázs’ *Visible Man* (*Der sichtbare Mensch*, 1924) distinguished film from legitimized arts such as painting and theatre through its ability to offer spectators a dynamic point of view and a multiplicity of perspectives. Identifying uniquely cinematic scales and shot distances, Balázs celebrated film’s ability to capture the ephemeral, often-invisible phenomena of everyday experience and to abstract them from their spatiotemporal coordinates.⁷⁶ Finally, in “The Cinema Seen from Etna” (“Le Cinématographe vu de l’Etna,” 1926), Jean Epstein argued that cinema contributes an additional element to three-dimensional spatial representation: “To the elements of perspective employed in drawing, the cinema adds a new perspective in time.”⁷⁷ Epstein highlighted the versatility of this temporal perspective, especially on account of cinematic techniques such as slow- and fast-motion.

Caligari marked an early demonstration of cinema’s potential to offset conventions of perspectival representation. Emphasizing the medium’s stylistic above its naturalist capacities—or, in Kracauer’s words, its “formative” above its “realistic” tendencies—Wiene’s film refuses to create the illusion of solid objects in three-dimensional space. The film thwarts viewers’ sense of objects’ physical properties and depth relationships through flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles; irregular, crooked shapes; and often-exaggerated sizes and proportions. Furthermore, whereas perspectival unity had depended on a particular point of observation, Wiene’s film creates a highly unstable spectatorial positionality, not least through instances of direct address to the camera, alternation between the first- and third-person voice in the intertitles, and unresolved ambiguities regarding narratorial credibility. Writing in the *Berliner Abendpost* on February 29, 1920, Eugen Tannenbaum argued that Wiene’s film does not depict “the perspective from the auditorium [*Zuschauerraum*],” but rather imposes the point of view of a madman: “the viewer is forced to see everything through *his* eyes: bizarre, grotesque, distorted, full of dark secrets and inexplicable connections.”⁷⁸

74 Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (Mineola: Dover, 1970), 15–16.

75 *Ibid.*, 67.

76 Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 41, 62, 63, 71.

77 Jean Epstein, “The Cinema Seen from Etna,” trans. Tom Milne, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 294.

78 Tannenbaum, “Expressionismus.”



Fig. 3.3. Flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles.



Fig. 3.4. Often-exaggerated sizes and proportions.

Other reviewers similarly noted the film for its “suspension of perspective,”

abandonment of “all laws of things in space,” and representation of the world “from a different viewpoint than that common until now.”⁷⁹

Challenging the association of film with the faithful reproduction of three-dimensional space, *Caligari* thus destabilized a linear-perspectival scheme that had reigned from Renaissance art to Impressionist painting. Though not fully exploring the possibilities of montage and camera movement, *Caligari* nonetheless deployed stylistic and narrative devices to enact what Kracauer, in his *Theory of Film*, identified as the “dissolution of traditional perspectives”—a general process that he attributed to photographic media, with their capacity to record and reveal unusual aspects of physical reality.⁸⁰ While Kracauer disparagingly categorized German Expressionist films as among those “which neglect the external world in freely composed dreams or visions,” it may be more productive, following Friedrich Kittler, to place the films in a trajectory that includes optical devices (e.g. camera obscura, magic lantern, stroboscope), romantic literature (Friedrich Schiller’s *The Ghost-Seer* [*Der Geisterseher*, 1787–1789], Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* [1802], E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixirs* [*Die Elixiere des Teufels*, 1815]), and emerging sciences (psychiatry, hypnotism, psychoanalysis), all of which involve illusions, hallucinations, and blurred boundaries between dreams and palpable reality.⁸¹ If, as Kittler argues, the medium of film mobilizes the spectator’s gaze and manipulates her or his “unconscious psychological states,” it decentres the transcendental subject and suggests a more finite, relational regime of vision—or what Nietzsche had theorized as perspectivism.⁸²

The Advent of Perspectivism

In its four-century-long “scopic regime,” the technique of linear perspective was metaphorically extended to denote processes of perception and cognition.⁸³ Etymologically derived from the Latin verb *perspicio* (to look

79 Martin Proskauer, “Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari”—Ein Nachwort und eine Prophezeiung,” *Film-Kurier* 2, no. 51 (February 29, 1920): 2; Christian Flüggen, “Das Kabinet des Dr. Caligari,” *Deutsche Lichtspiel-Zeitung* 8, no. 12–13 (March 27, 1920): 2; and J. P. M., “Ein Film von Eigenart,” *Vorwärts* 134 (March 13, 1920): 2.

80 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 9.

81 *Ibid.*, 37; and Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, trans. Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 98–189.

82 Kittler, *Optical Media*, 175.

83 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 187.

at/into, look/see through, examine, observe), the term “perspective” came to designate a particular line of sight on an object as well as a spatial or temporal distance necessary for proper valuation or judgement. From the seventeenth century onwards, the metaphor was employed by thinkers including Francis Bacon, François de La Rochefoucauld, Blaise Pascal, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the latter of whom first transposed the figure to the realm of metaphysics. Whereas Leibniz assumed a divinely assured, “perfect harmony” among different epistemic points of view, later philosophers confronted the immanence and potential incommensurability of discrete, localized perspectives.⁸⁴ The attendant concept of perspectivism, as developed by Gustav Teichmüller in *The Real and the Apparent World* (*Die wirkliche und die scheinbare Welt*, 1882), was theorized most influentially by Nietzsche and was also taken up by twentieth-century thinkers including José Ortega y Gasset, George Herbert Mead, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The concept’s emergence in modern philosophy thus coincided with the dissolution of perspective in the visual arts, reflecting what Claudio Guillén and Martin Jay have identified as an epochal change in conceiving vision as a possible means of knowledge and understanding.⁸⁵

Across his writings, Nietzsche shifted between semantic registers of perspectivism, moving from an “unbridled” to a more “circumspect” use of the metaphor, as James Conant has argued.⁸⁶ In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (“Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne,” 1873), Nietzsche emphasized the impossibility of “correct perception” or “pure knowledge” of an external object, undistorted by the subject’s cognitive perspective.⁸⁷ Nietzsche’s early work nonetheless presupposed the possibility of *conceptualizing* “the essence of things,” unmediated by forms of human subjectivity—a conceptualization, as he later acknowledged, that would itself be unavoidably perspectival in character.⁸⁸ Questioning

84 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), section 357.

85 Claudio Guillén, “On the Concept and Metaphor of Perspective,” in *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 326, 358; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 188–89.

86 James Conant, “The Dialectic of Perspectivism, I,” *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2005): 8.

87 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense,” in *Philosophy of Truth*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), 86, quoted in Conant, “Perspectivism, I,” 40–41.

88 Conant, “Perspectivism, I,” 46; and James Conant, “The Dialectic of Perspectivism, II,” *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2006): 34.

a fatalistic sense of inescapable confinement within subjective consciousness, Nietzsche restricted the scope of the metaphor and argued for the untenability of the antithesis between the noumenon and phenomenon, or the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) and its perspectival appearance. By *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887), Nietzsche called for rethinking the entire conceptual opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, emphasizing their necessary admixture and interaction in the quest for truth. Rather than postulating the existence of an endless multitude of perspectives as an indication of humans' untranscendable epistemic constraints, Nietzsche now invoked the possibility of employing "a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge."⁸⁹

Nietzsche's theorization of perspectivism raised critical issues for the discipline of history. The advent and metaphorization of Renaissance perspective had prompted increasing reflection on the particularity of the historian's viewpoint. Already in the eighteenth century, Johann Martin Chladenius had recognized the historian's perspectival position as a determining factor in her or his understanding and interpretation of the past.⁹⁰ Whereas Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, 1822–1830) had adopted an avowedly omniscient view—"the sum total of all possible perspectives"—Ranke had espoused the more modest, self-effacing ideal of impartial, objective representation, or showing the "naked truth without adornment."⁹¹ Critiquing historicism in both guises, Nietzsche not only denied the existence of a transcendent, supra-individual point of view, but also questioned the assumption of a single, actual history that could be methodically reconstructed. Furthermore, dispelling Hegel's affirmative theodicy and Ranke's optimistic faith in the alliance of ethics and power, Nietzsche instead presented historical reality as the interplay of fallible and value-laden interpretations. Thus, although perspectivism has often been conflated with historicism, it bears emphasis that Nietzsche's writings destabilized and even undermined the latter's basic

89 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1969), III, 12, quoted in Conant, "Perspectivism, II," 44.

90 Reinhart Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality: A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 133–34.

91 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 30; and Leopold von Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1824), 28; quoted in Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality," 131.



Fig. 3.5. Iris shots.

tenets, anticipating the “crisis of historicism” widely diagnosed following the German defeat in World War I.

Emerging contemporaneously with the acute crisis of historical thought, *Caligari* enacts the idea of perspectivism through its narrative and aesthetic features. Wiene’s film is intensely preoccupied with how historical accounts are mediated and distorted through subjective consciousness. The first scene alone focuses on an act of first-person narration and deploys multiple iris shots, which highlight the incompleteness of the perspective offered by the individual storyteller and by the camera lens. The film’s inner story likewise emphasizes forms of visual and cognitive limitation, with multiple secrets, inexplicable occurrences, and instances in which both the film’s characters and its viewers are deceived or denied information—an epistemic instability reduplicated through the film’s spatiotemporally indeterminate settings and disorienting, post-perspectival set design. The final sequence, which discloses the narrator’s unreliability but maintains the Expressionist style, offers neither a detached, stable point of view on the action nor narrative clarification and resolution. Refusing insight into the “actual” course of events, the film’s concluding scenes instead suggest a proliferation of incommensurable accounts without an external standard of judgement. Furthermore, denying viewers a definite specification of



Fig. 3.6. Subjectivist and even solipsistic perspectivism.

the identities, ethical commitments, and degrees of sanity of both doctor and patient, the film intimates an interchangeability of roles and even an arbitrariness of institutional power structures.

Abandoning the historicist ideal of unbiased, comprehensive representation, *Caligari* instead stresses the invariable partisanship and epistemic limitations of all accounts. In its scepticism regarding the attainability of pure truth, and in its self-reflexive figuration of all human knowledge as bounded, imprecise, and relative, the film recalls Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of "learned ignorance [*docta ignorantia*]." ⁹² However, whereas Nicholas postulated the essential incomprehensibility of an Absolute Being who alone "apprehends what He is," *Caligari* instead follows Nietzsche in confronting the philosophical dilemmas accompanying the proverbial death of God—a death, as Martin Jay emphasizes, that also eradicated the "God's-eye view."⁹³ *Caligari*, in my analysis, takes up Nietzsche's early invocation of a relativist, subjectivist, and even solipsistic perspectivism, as envisaged in the film's final depiction of the insane asylum, where each

92 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981).

93 *Ibid.*, 25 (I, 16: 44); and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 190.

patient is radically insular and discrete in assumed identity and worldview. Notably, the multiplicity and incommensurability of different perspectives extend beyond the *mise en scène* to interpellate the film's own viewers, faced with a bewildering array of possible interpretations of the work itself. Wiene's work, as I will demonstrate, thus foregrounds problems of hermeneutics following the detranscendalization and dissolution of Cartesian perspectivalism, whereby all cognizing subjects are implicated as finite, locally conditioned participants within the dynamic process of history.

Problems of Hermeneutics

Recognizing the threat of relativism faced by the historical sciences, Wilhelm Dilthey adapted the interpretive procedures developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher into a methodology for securing knowledge of the past. In "The Rise of Hermeneutics" ("Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," 1900), Dilthey conceived a process of understanding (*Verstehen*) through an imaginative re-experiencing (*Nacherleben*) of others' psychic states. In this way, Dilthey wrote, the subjective operations of the observer could "be raised to objective validity."⁹⁴ Among the many problems with Dilthey's approach was an assumed homogeneity of exegete and author, or subject and object of research. Appealing to "the substratum of a general human nature" as the basis for interpretation, Dilthey neglected historicism's crucial emphasis on the uniqueness of all sociocultural phenomena and values.⁹⁵ Thus, although Dilthey sought to resist what he deemed "the inroads of [...] skeptical subjectivity," he failed to offer a satisfactory solution to the aporias of historicist thought, as later formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer: "how objectivity is possible in relativity and how we are to conceive the relation of the finite to the absolute."⁹⁶ Taking up Dilthey's hermeneutic theory, Gadamer emphasized the limited range of vision within the present and the unfeasibility of self-transposition into the past. While postulating the inescapability of tradition and prejudice, Gadamer

94 Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," trans. Fredric Jameson, *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 231.

95 Ibid., 243. On the problems of Dilthey's thinking, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 222–34.

96 Dilthey, "Hermeneutics," 244; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 230.

invoked the potential for historical understanding through an ongoing “fusion of horizons.”⁹⁷

For Dilthey, hermeneutics promised not only to avert historicism’s relativist implications, but also to delineate humanistic inquiry from an imperialist positivism. An innovator of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) in the late nineteenth century, Dilthey distinguished the dynamic sphere of human activity from the inanimate objects of natural-scientific research, positing life itself as the foundation of the human sciences. Countering the theory of phenomenalism, which denied the distinction between appearances and essences, Dilthey described the object of the human sciences as “an inner reality, a coherence experienced from within,” and he identified the goal of hermeneutics as that of surpassing an author’s own self-understanding, as per the “doctrine of unconscious creation.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, emphasizing the interpreter’s immersion in her or his very sphere of investigation, Dilthey problematized the separation of facts from judgements and also eliminated the distance between the observer and objective world; whereas the scientific method had facilitated the amassing of facts based on neutral, disinterested apprehension, Dilthey sought meaningful truth through a more holistic, projective act of interpretation. Finally, in contrast to positivism, which lacked reflexivity regarding the observer’s subjective consciousness, Dilthey characterized understanding and interpretation as “active in life itself,” and he envisaged the process of historical reconstruction (*Nachbildung*) as a means of self-knowledge.⁹⁹

Caligari followed Dilthey and other “philosophers of life” in critiquing positivism, challenging the privileged relation that it had presumed between vision and knowledge. Wiene’s film perpetually reveals the epistemic insufficiency of external signs, featuring figures who deceive sensory perception, assume alternate names or identities, are driven by obsessive ideas, or are even unaware of their own actions. While highlighting modes of observation and surveillance involved in detective work, the film emphasizes the fallibility and manipulability of visual evidence as well as its inadequacy for determining motives—as when a man is wrongfully accused of the murders in Holstenwall due to his possession of a knife (with which he had hoped to divert suspicion for an attempted homicide), or when Francis unwittingly watches Cesare’s dummy for hours while the actual somnambulist abducts Jane. The film also confounds basic temporal and ontological boundaries

97 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

98 Dilthey, “Hermeneutics,” 231, 244.

99 *Ibid.*, 241, 231.

between the researcher and the object of investigation; in a flashback within the inner story, the asylum director reads an eighteenth-century chronicle of Dr. Caligari and is compelled not only to re-enact the doctor's murderous experiments, but also to "become Caligari." Though Francis and the asylum's doctors later unmask the director after scrutinizing his book and diary, the film's concluding scenes disclose the dubiousness of Francis' own story, thus undermining spectators' assumptions based on the entire preceding action.

Insofar as *Caligari* unsettles attempts to ascertain knowledge on the basis of written accounts, it also destabilizes central tenets of Dilthey's hermeneutic theory. Much as the narrative's unsolvable mysteries thwart an optimism regarding the ultimate attainability of truth, the film's own vicissitudinous history of distribution and exhibition disrupts a philological concentration on "fixed and relatively permanent expressions of life," revealing contingencies and discontinuities in the passage from a work's creator(s) to its present-day exegete.¹⁰⁰ The century since *Caligari*'s premiere has witnessed the circulation of prints varying significantly in length, music, intertitles, and colouration along with the proliferation of spurious, often-contradictory claims regarding the film's authorship, production process, and political meanings. Important discoveries (e.g. the screenplay, a tinted nitrate copy) over the past decades have dispelled numerous legends about the film and have also facilitated more precise, historically grounded readings. In my analysis, however, the unreflexive historicism of much research on *Caligari* is at odds with the film's own pointed critique of nineteenth-century historical methodology. If, as I have sought to demonstrate, *Caligari* rejects a naïve objectivism and abandons the historicist quest for comprehensive representation, the film renders one film historian's recent encyclopaedic effort to document "the true story behind its creation" a rather ironic undertaking.¹⁰¹

Caligari emerged at a time when the German historicist tradition was entering a state of acute and widely diagnosed crisis, and the film, I have argued, engaged with contemporaneous metahistorical debates, offering aesthetic responses to ontological, epistemological, and historiographical questions of the philosophy of history. Dismissing the Rankean ideal of faithfully and impartially reconstructing the past, or showing "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*," *Caligari* instead followed Nietzsche in envisioning historical reality as the interplay of finite, locally conditioned interpretations. This perspectivist view corresponded with the insights of Einstein's

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰¹ Olaf Brill, *Der Caligari-Komplex* (Munich: Belleville, 2012), 7.

Theory of Relativity, which superseded Newton's ideas of absolute time and space, provoking an epochal shift, as George Herbert Mead later wrote, from assuming "an absolute world of reality of which perspectives are partial presentations" to conceiving another possibility: that of "a universe consisting of perspectives."¹⁰² Einstein's Theory implicated individuals as participants in their very realm of observation, suggesting a more interactive, spatiotemporally dynamic relationship between the cognizing subject and the object of cognition. Enacting this new mode of relationality through its unnerving, enigmatic narrative and Expressionist, post-perspectival style, Wiene's *Caligari* helped herald an age of self-conscious uncertainty—an age, as Werner Heisenberg would write, aware of the impossibility of any "sharp separation between the world and the I."¹⁰³

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102 George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 118–19.

103 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999), 81.

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4 The Discovery of Early Cinema

The Moment of “Silence”

Heide Schlüpmann

Abstract

This chapter reviews the study of early cinema in the 1980s, focusing on the significance of the rediscovery of early cinema for feminist film historiography and theory. The fact that women participated in every branch of early cinema while at the same time being denied a public voice brought the silence of film to the centre of feminist considerations; for those who were not allowed to speak in public, like women, and who lacked voice—for them, film, which relied on gestural rather than spoken language, offered equal opportunities to interact with what was happening on screen as it did for the dignified bourgeois male sitting next to them in the cinema. By rediscovering and imagining early silent cinema as a preparatory stage for a radically altered public sphere, emancipatory movements and a developing film scholarship were equally equipped with the means to critique the dominant “media public sphere.”

Keywords: feminist theory, early cinema, silent film, film historiography, film criticism

Background

The rediscovery of early cinema had far-reaching consequences for thinking about film and cinema. What we were dealing with at the beginning of the 1980s was not just another field of archival and scholarly pursuits. Indeed, in West Germany film studies was only institutionalized at the end of 1980s—unlike film criticism. Riding the upswell of the 1960s and taking part in a widespread social awakening, film criticism in the wake of '68 had been diversified through various emancipatory movements,

especially the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movements, and debates about colonialism and racism. Integral to this diversification was the strengthening of a politically engaged film scene and cinema culture coupled with efforts to establish critical methodologies in the academy. Film criticism moved between these scenes and movements. It traced an arc from the nascent film theory of the Weimar period to the film scholarship then emerging in the United States, Great Britain, and France. The writings of Siegfried Kracauer, Béla Balázs, Rudolf Arnheim, and Lotte Eisner were all more or less indebted to criticism rather than academia. They tried to help the "spirit of film" (Béla Balázs) achieve social recognition while also encouraging a debate, whether explicitly or implicitly, about the mediation of the ideologies through which politics and film capital exercised their power. This legacy became increasingly relevant during the formation of film studies worldwide.

Before the archival and academic rediscovery of early cinema, there was the discovery of cinema by the post-war generation of students and intellectuals, which marked a departure from the educated public's disdain for mass culture. For my generation, going to the movies meant breaking out of the institutions of the 1950s and a culture of rebuilding after the war. It meant experiencing liberation and claiming freedom from the intellectual paths laid out for us—extraordinary experiences that informed all our later reflections, including critical ones. We were critical not least of the "old" German cinema, the product of National Socialism and the 1950s. We were also self-critical regarding the social and cultural dispositions that this kind of film mobilized in the viewer.

Especially for female scholars, the prehistory of the rediscovery of early cinema includes the renewal of the women's movement. Along with a nascent feminist film practice and a feminist film criticism that was international from the start, the women's movement joined the cinema to enter the public sphere. The emancipation of women from images of men—from their subjugation to the male gaze or their identification with it—was not a strictly theoretical matter. It was an essential part of practical liberation.

Hence a divide began to emerge in the work of feminist film critics: on the one hand, a dedication to cinema, even a captivation; on the other, a wish for emancipation from male views about women and the world, which manifested in the films themselves. This wish could lead to a wholesale condemnation of the dominant cinema. At the very least, it raised a pointed question: What, exactly, is the female viewer supposed to do with "male cinema?" Yet feminists were not alone in their ambivalence. A growing debate about film contended with competing conceptions of cinema: as

a culture “from below,” for example, or as an instrument of power in the hands of industry, economics, and politics. These politically motivated discourses called for a viable solution, both conceptual and practical, which in turn generated various efforts to identify an object that, due to its very ambivalence, resisted easy conceptualization. For instance: “male cinema” or the identification of film through its fundamental technologies, the so-called *apparatus theory*, where each film is inscribed in a dominant structure of viewing, which is then reproduced irrespective of the content that might be communicated in the best intentions.¹

Critics consolidated their own political identities with respect to the characteristics they identified in the films. They spoke and wrote as representatives of the oppressed masses, which were excluded and deceived by the dominant cinema. Leftist and feminist theories inspired this critical engagement and signalled a new beginning: the intervention of critique into cinema. As a consequence, the practice of identifying could be abandoned, and the split attitude towards cinema could be dissolved in a process of transformation—a process that concerned the audience and the films. Independent theatres and communal movie houses were concerned with enlightening the public, educating the masses, and promoting self-reflective awareness. Criticism and film-making united to break completely with an idea of film as a mass medium inscribed in structures of domination. Political critique was no longer part of leftist and feminist movements that signalled a distance from their object, the mass medium. On the contrary, critique was incorporated into the cinematic movements and took up matters like the formation of the self, the emancipation of consciousness, and not least the ability to act. That a similar emancipatory movement could be found in places other than the “avant-gardes”—or rather, before them—was the explosive effect of the discovery of early cinema.

The discovery came at just the right time. Amid changes in the social and political outlook of the 1980s, the emancipatory movements fell apart or began to be incorporated into “mainstream” culture. The Cinema movement more or less came to a standstill. Subversive cinema held out for a while in West Germany in niches like the Super 8 scene. But without utopian and political movements to unite criticism with the public, little remained for critics to do than to accommodate the emerging neoliberal society. Film theory gradually migrated from independent publishing—journals like

1 See, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 286–98.

Filmkritik or *Frauen und Film*—into the academy, also in West Germany. At the time, the goal was to earn a reputation as a scholar whose object of study was film. Gaining a foothold within academic institutions might have seemed to be a victory when seen in the perspective of a broader cultural recognition of film. In practice, however, it led to a decline in the politically motivated split between a critical intellectual, on the one hand, and a commercial cinema trapped in a system of capitalist production, on the other. Indeed, criticism was eclipsed by scholarly analysis; hence the object of analysis, film, lost its social explosiveness. Psychoanalysis and Marx's political economy no longer formed the theoretical horizons. They were replaced by aesthetics and, ultimately, by the film theory of Gilles Deleuze.² These were the products of the 1980s, the years of the rise of the digital media industry. Reflecting on the experience of cinema, the philosopher severs the connection between the viewing public and the films, which then unfold in the act of reflection as an aesthetic phenomenon related to Being and the World. Along with the idea of a “creator/author,” it became normal again to talk about masterpieces. A way out of this structural regression was offered by the recovery of a suppressed history of early film.

The Discovery

A second awakening of cinema opened up a new world, hitherto unseen. We were once again a “naive” audience presented with unusual, unfamiliar films from the early period of cinema. But this time around, our experiences did not lead to critical distance. On the contrary, a movement took hold that was motivated by a sympathetic desire to rescue films that had disappeared from the cinema and that had been lost from memory. Archives began to invite scholars to go through collections that had remained in the dark for decades. The famous International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) conference of 1978, held in Brighton in the UK, was a seminal event. A few years later, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the festival still held in the northern Italian town of Pordenone, became a focal point for scholars, archivists, film-makers, and other enthusiasts. This festival let us immerse

2 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1. L'Image mouvement* (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1983); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L'Image-temps* (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1985). It forms Part 2 of my book *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: Das Drama des Frühen deutschen Kinos*; the American edition, *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema*, did not include this part. Due to cost concerns, in particular the translation, the text had to be dramatically shortened. It seemed to me to be the lesser evil to restrict myself to Part 1 than to make cuts throughout the text.

ourselves in the world of silent film and fostered a feeling, an idea, for this other kind of cinema—experiences that had been buried were brought to life once more. A new field of research opened up in the universities where film studies had already been established, especially in the United States.

As I began my studies of early German cinema in 1985, Miriam Hansen, then at Rutgers, was already working on *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, which appeared in 1991.³ She furnished me with texts like Russell Merritt's 1976 essay "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," Charles Musser's "The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood's Mode of Representation" (1983), or an issue of *Wide Angle* from 1982 with a contribution by Judith Maynes titled "Immigrants and Spectators."⁴ As for early German cinema, I had to refer to research work coming out of literary studies for a start. In 1976, the German Literature Archive in Marbach published a comprehensive catalogue—*Hätte ich das Kino!* (If only I had the cinema!)—for an exhibition held on early German cinema.⁵ Shortly thereafter, in 1978, *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929* (The cinema debate: Texts on the relationship between literature and film, 1909–1929) appeared under the editorship of Anton Kaes.⁶ That little red volume was, and remains, a treasure. Such pioneering work was followed in 1984 by Fritz Güttinger's collection, *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm* (Not a day without the cinema: Writers on silent film), an edition published by the Frankfurt Film Museum.⁷ Yet it was the experience of early cinema in the theatre, especially in the unique space offered each October by the Cinema Verdi in Pordenone, that caused a reconsideration not only of how film history was written but also of earlier theoretical positions—and caused as well, let us not forget, extensive investigations in the catacombs of the archives.

3 See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

4 See Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 59–82; Charles Musser, "The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood's Mode of Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 22–23 (1983): 4–11; Judith Mayne, "Immigrants and Spectators," *Wide Angle* 5, no. 2 (1982): 32–41.

5 See Ludwig Greve, Margot Pehle, and Heidi Westhoff, *Hätte ich das Kino! Die Schriftsteller und der Stummfilm. Katalog zur Ausstellung des Deutschen Literaturarchivs im Schiller-Nationalmuseum Marbach 1976* (Marbach Schiller-Nationalmuseum, 1976).

6 See Anton Kaes, ed., *Kino-Debatte: Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909–1929* (Munich: dtv, 1978).

7 See Fritz Güttinger, ed., *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über den Stummfilm* (Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt, 1984).

At the time, I would spend days, eventually weeks, at both the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress in Koblenz, where the Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv (National Film Archive) stored its films, and in the Berlin archives of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (Foundation for German Cinema). And I was astonished: These films cut the ground out from under the theoretical positions of feminists (and leftists): they contradicted the psychoanalytic discussion of the gendered relationship between the subject and object of the gaze, as well as the verdict of British film critic Claire Johnston according to which “Woman as Woman” did not exist in film.⁸ I saw women with binoculars peering into the distance or coming out of the shadows to pursue activities usually reserved for men. I saw maids spying on the comings and goings out on the street, looking into a mirror perched on the windowsill. I saw women shooting knowing glances behind the backs of their husbands.⁹ Women as detectives, adventurers, or daring artists were clearly *Handlungs-Subjekte*—subjects (rather than objects) of the plot as well as of agency. The narrated plot, on the other hand, must have reflected the interests of women in the theatre: a desire to see themselves onscreen, their daily lives, their conflicts and struggles as well as their wishes and dreams.

The reality of women at the beginning of the twentieth century was suddenly made present. The documentary element of early cinema was quite prominent in the first narrative films as well as in the social dramas, if only because of the copious exterior shots, shots from the daily life of women, that is, from their daily reality. Going out for the evening with a scarf or an elegant shawl thrown over her shoulder, she crosses the street and waits before a stately house of the 1870s; she strolls along in front of the shop windows. The class distinctions of the interior spaces are quite obvious—the fixtures, the furnishings, the clothes—as are the social distinctions between the housewife, the woman of the middle class, and the elegant lady. But despite these differences, the same stories were being told about daily life in a patriarchal society and the struggles with its representatives. Seduced, betrayed, abandoned, the protagonists of these films also showed their resilience. The films were filled with the faces of women; and it was even possible to speak of a female “narrative perspective.” In the short dramas,

8 Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” in *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: SEFT, 1973): 24–31.

9 Siegfried Kracauer emphasizes this exchange in an essay: “Kult der Zerstreuung,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, March 4, 1926; reprinted in: Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse. Essays* (Frankfurt am Main 1963), 311–17. For more on the diversity of the viewing public in early cinema, see Emilie Altenloh, *Zur Soziologie des Kinos* (Jena, 1914); newly edited by Andrea Haller, Martin Loiperdinger, and Heide Schlüpmann (Frankfurt am Main: KINtop Jahrbuch, 2012).

for example, the protagonists clearly opposed the male dramatic framework representative of the patriarchal order of society.

These films were “Alternative Cinema.” Yet in its day, it was simply *the* cinema. A need to grasp that fact and verify such an emancipatory moment motivated further research. At first, this required learning more about the viewers in their historical and social context, as well as about the role of the actress in film production. This meant reading and understanding everything that could be found about contemporary reactions to the new cinematic phenomenon, especially documents in the trade press. The writings of the women’s movement around 1900 also formed a rich background that encouraged an appreciation for what it meant to go to the cinema for women. First and foremost, such visits were an obvious violation of a ban enforced by both social expectations and by the police. The texts of the so-called “cinema reformers” made it possible to infer these revolutionary elements *ex negativo*. They took aim at the “immorality” of the films, which they saw in the exhibition of the female body, the love stories, and the tales of criminals. They also took issue with the cinema as a gathering place where people of both sexes could meet in the dark. The main line of attack for the defenders of morality, the guardians of culture, pertained, as it always does, to women—not least because of the association between the masses and femininity.

Studies of actresses and other sources permit the inference that the decidedly autonomous performance of an actress obtained its elan from being a step into freedom—and away from a feeling of being tied down by male directors and playwrights, which in the theatre was a form of semi-prostitution while film-making allowed for a more open dynamic.¹⁰ Because few experiences and much less routines had been established with respect to film acting, a woman had to rely on her ability to perform in stories that were taken from daily life. Thus, her ability depended on her expertise in those daily routines. She was able to convey her closeness to a female public. She knew what would touch her public. In turn, knowledge about the meaning of the camera, about technologies of shooting and about ways of working with the camera, allowed an actress like Asta Nielsen to act in a way that would truly reach her audience. In this case, “truly” means in the depths of a viewer’s feelings, in her memories, in her experiences of life.

¹⁰ This was an issue around 1900. Theatre actresses who were not stars earned little and had to pay for their own costumes. Therefore, they often depended on men in the audience, who paid for the costumes in exchange for the actresses becoming their mistresses. Cinema was being praised for not giving men the opportunity to go “behind the curtain” and have access to vulnerable actresses.

New Histories of Film, New Theories

Of course, the upheaval in thinking about film that occurred at the time did not pertain to feminist film criticism and its theoretical implications alone. An appreciation for early cinema and its wealth of films relativized other political-critical theories and provoked new attempts at theorization. The essential feature of these theories was their connection to history and, therefore, a break with categories whose validity was assumed to be general. From then on, it was about an “alliance between theory and history,” as André Gaudreault put it in a veritable résumé of his own research.¹¹ He and Tom Gunning formulated concepts that helped early cinema achieve scholarly recognition while also questioning a general theory of cinema based on the gaze and voyeurism. The “cinema of attractions” put a psychoanalytically underpowered critical theory in its place, as did the detection of a presenting instance, a showman (*Monstrateur*), with the concept of narrative cinema for the fiction film.¹²

To formulate their concepts, Gunning and Gaudreault had in mind films that were made in the first decade of cinema, when the origin of the cinema in travelling fairs and variety shows was still perceptible even if stationary theatres already existed. In their view, it was possible to speak of early cinema from 1895 to 1903 or even 1907. This temporal boundary was not uncontroversial, and eventually, it was extended to 1917. For female scholars this was obvious since only then did actresses and the female public come into consideration. In 1992 Eric de Kuyper published an article that placed a “*cinéma du premier temps*” (“cinema of the initial period”) alongside a cinema of the “*second époque*” (“second epoch”), an epoch that comprehended the first phase of the feature film, the beginning of the “long film,” and the identification of actresses and actors and the formation of the star system.¹³ Nevertheless, the concept “cinema of attractions” became a synonym for early cinema, as it remains. Originated from Eisensteinian montage-theory, this concept lent early films a political-aesthetic touch of the avant-garde while at the same time making careers in film studies that went well beyond examinations of the first decades of film—for instance, through investigations of action films and blockbusters. Yet the concept also

11 André Gaudreault, *Cinéma et attraction. Pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe* (Paris: CNRS, 2008); therein the section “Alliance de la théorie avec l’histoire,” p. 24.

12 See André Gaudreault, “Narration et monstration,” in *Du littéraire au filmique: Système du récit* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988).

13 See Eric de Kuyper, “Le Cinéma de la seconde époque. Le muet des années dix,” *Cinémathèque* nos. 1 and 2 (May and October 1992).

unintentionally erases the constitutive role of women in the development of film—the women in front of the camera, in production, and in the audience. This erasure in the New Film History was not exactly new. During the 1980s, when I was watching early films and studying contemporary documents, I was shocked by the writings from the beginnings of film theory, which ranged from bourgeois defensiveness and the incrimination of women to critical disregard, ignorance, and thereby implicit exclusion.

A sharp opposition became apparent between the early reality of cinema and its portrayal in the field of public relations. Whereas cinema had opened itself to women, female authors in film criticism remained isolated. Nor did the women's movements aim to adopt the cinema, or, if they did, they restricted themselves to propagandistic goals, as Kay Sloan showed in the case of the United States in *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (1988).¹⁴ In the 1970s, the women's movement played a central role in the spectrum of Alternative Cinema and its related criticism and theory. This was surely not the case at the beginning of the twentieth century. Women at the time did not participate in the cinema debates—an omission, it now appears in hindsight, and all the more reason to dedicate new research to the beginnings of public relations understood through the absence of the female voice. Film theory assumed a male stance from the start.

Silence

The fact that women participated in every branch of early cinema while simultaneously being denied a public voice moves the silence of film to the centre of feminist considerations. The soundlessness of the film is grounded in a particular inextricability from the cinema space—a connection, too, with the viewing public. In the first three decades of film history, the source of sound was in the cinema: a piano, an orchestra, and living, breathing people. In their performances, the musicians followed what was going on in the audience and onscreen. An awareness of both generated the musical accompaniment. With the discovery of early cinema, these findings became common knowledge: "Silent film was never silent." Hence earlier views, not least those of certain cinephiles, collapsed. Especially the German auteur films of the 1920s we know from screenings that took place in auratic stillness. Yet new attention to the music in silent cinema passed too quickly

14 See Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

over soundlessness as a proper aspect of film, though this was not the case among feminist historiographers. In 1999, scholars, archivists, and curators founded the international association “Women and the Silent Screen,” whose conferences drew attention to matters of film projection.

It is about the otherness of silent film. An origin at fairgrounds and variety shows may well have influenced the first decade of film, but in order to understand the formation of mass culture in the twentieth century, it is equally, if not more important to attend to the direction that the cinema headed: into newly emerging spaces, dark rooms equipped with their own projection machine. As has already been noted, the place of exhibition, not the film itself, contained the source of sound, usually a piano. Outfitted with benches, stools, and chairs, a space arose that was open to people of both sexes and from different social backgrounds—a space, moreover, that was present in all regions of the world including where films were not made but were nevertheless seen. In short, the soundlessness of film, its “silence,” was foundational to the connection it had with a new public; and this connection fostered its own developments. The element that allowed for comprehension was not the word, not writing. In his 1924 book *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (Visual man, or The culture of film), Béla Balázs celebrated the gestural language of film and overlooked the subversive moment of silence, not least due to his enthusiasm about the expressive capacity of the woman on the screen.¹⁵

Soundlessness meant freedom from the spoken word and an attachment to visuality—the communication of the visual, by means of what is visible. This freedom was there from the start. The cameramen and actresses developed a feeling for what could not be grasped in words. For those who were not allowed to speak in public, like women, and who lacked language—for them, the cinema afforded equal opportunities to interact with what was happening onscreen as it did for the dignified bourgeois male sitting next to them. Perhaps, it even afforded them better opportunities. Film historians formulated a new perspective on the 1920s. The silence of film is the decisive element that divides the first decades of cinema from later ones. Early cinema had opened the eyes of the audience for the presence of women in film, as well as for the manifold connections between women in film production and in the theatres. And this world could be found outside a canonical film history that hewed to the dynamics of production, including the separation of popular from avant-garde or auteur cinema.

15 See Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder Die Kultur des Films* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1924. Rpt Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

The power of men was established in the course of the 1920s, not least through a reversal of economic relationships between cinemas and production companies that favoured the latter—this called for the patience of women. Indeed, a coalition of capital, industry, and politics brought silent film to an end. The economic disempowerment of cinemas followed from a technical one: from that point on, sound belonged to the film and was brought into the cinema. This can be interpreted as a beginning of the end of a cinema that had been organized around a new kind of public sphere. In 1932, the author and film critic Dorothy Richardson wrote a farewell to the silent cinema for the journal *Close Up*. Her short text is subtitled “The Film Gone Male.” She relates how silent films in particular constituted a thoroughgoing cinema with women and for women. The sound film opened a future for film as a “medium of communication.” By contrast, earlier film “provided a pathway to reality” through “its insistence on contemplation.”¹⁶

Emancipatory movements like the women’s movement demanded reality in film and developed a critique of the dominant cinema. By imagining silent cinema as a preparatory stage for a radically altered public sphere, “Brighton 1978” and the rediscovery of early cinema were equipped with the means to criticize the dominant “media public.”

What Follows?

In 1990, my study *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: Das Drama des Frühen deutschen Kinos* (The uncanny gaze: The drama of early German cinema) was published, and one year later, I began working as Professor for Film Studies at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main.¹⁷ In light of all the previous arguments and experiences, it was clear for me that film studies needed to be developed and pursued as cinema studies. This meant allowing for courses of study that moved between the seminar room and the cinema while also maintaining and renewing the connections with film movements. It also required departing from a focus on the film, the work, and

16 Dorothy Richardson, “Continuous Performance: The Film Gone Male,” *Close Up* 9, no. 1 (March 1932): 36–38, <https://picturegoing.com/?p=4471>. I discovered this text late, 2018, in connection with the preparation for the Remake. Frankfurter Frauen Film Tage (Remake: Frankfurt Women’s Film Days) festival and a publication on the occasion of the festival, *Zu Wort kommen* (Speaking Up).

17 See Heide Schlüpmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: Das Drama des Frühen deutschen Kinos* (Frankfurt a. M.: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990).

discovering theoretical horizons where the meaning of film can be grasped in the moment of its inextricability from the cinema.

The “transnational university reform” known as the Bologna Process came into effect at the turn of the millennium and led to the corporatization of the university and its course offerings. In forcing competition, elite education, and “excellence clusters,” this process changed the conditions of teaching and research fundamentally. In the Bologna System there is a priori no room for anything other than achievement and, in particular, for what can be quantified according to a point scheme. Accordingly, there is no time to waste in the cinema. In 2000, the Institute for Theatre, Film, and Media Studies along with the other humanities departments at the University of Frankfurt moved into the former administrative building of IG-Farben Industries. Built at the end of the 1920s, the building later became the headquarters for American Forces in Europe, and today it is part of a sprawling new campus.

The turn of the millennium also saw the founding of the Kinothek Asta Nielsen e. V. by a group of film scholars, students, and cinephiles. This independent project was intended to bring film and film history—especially the neglected history of women—into the cinemas. At first, the Kinothek was a home for film scholarship, but it has long since occupied a place at the centre of Frankfurt and has been supported by both the city of Frankfurt and, beginning this year, by the state of Hessen. Since 2018, part of its work has been to organize the *Remake. Frankfurter Frauen Film Tage* (*Remake: Frankfurt Women’s Film Days*) festival.

The Kinothek, and here I return to the beginning of my retrospect, owes its existence to a particular energy and a capacity for resistance—to a relentlessly autonomous work undertaken without institutional safeguards. An energy, a determination formed in the women’s movements and in the cinema movements of the 1970s has sustained the founders and Karola Gramann, who was director until 2019. From the beginning of the Kinothek Asta Nielsen and especially after I left the university in 2008, I worked with Karola and others, in particular Gaby Babić, who has since taken over as director. For me, this project was an opportunity to sustain a connection between theory and praxis.

The practice of cinema, however, is becoming more and more difficult due to the pervasiveness of digitalization. In particular, attempts at making silent films a part of our present experience are restricted to the few archival cinemas that continue to cultivate analogue projection. In those places, at least, an awareness for film history is possible. The international association “Women and the Silent Screen” organizes its conferences around

those cinemas and invites female film historians, archivists, distributors, film-makers, and film curators, thereby building a bridge between the academy and cinema. Only, what happens to a public that still goes to the cinema and, naturally, still wants to go? The prospects are not good for encountering film history, and especially early cinema, in its integral form.

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II

Film History in the Making: Processes and Agendas

5 Consistency, Explosion, and the Writing of Film History

On Different Ways to Approach Film History at Different Times¹

Francesco Pitassio

Abstract

The chapter deals with four Italian books, early attempts at film historiography which were published between 1935 and 1953. These film historical volumes illustrate the role continuity and discontinuity play in historical narratives. These notions are related to cultural frameworks, as the volume published for the Fascist exhibition for cinema's fortieth anniversary, which offers a narration based on a discontinuous, revolutionary time. Moreover, continuity and discontinuity are also the outcome of attempts of legitimizing cinema, as in Francesco Pasinetti's works. Finally, history writing is also the result of agencies such as film archives and film clubs, as in the case of Carlo Lizzani's history of the Italian cinema. Cultural frameworks, contingent tactics, and institutions therefore shape film historiography and the consistency of film history.

Keywords: periodization, canon, nation, politics, exhibition practices, film archive

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Critical Periods

My aim is to discuss film historical practices and concerns throughout Italian history. That is, the scope is highlighting if and how historical shifts affect film historiography. The notion of historical shift is itself contradictory, and notably when referring to film history. Firstly, because it implies a major transformation occurring somehow abruptly and telling a section of the historical continuum apart from another one; even if a thorough scrutiny reveals many more consistencies than received wisdom assumes. Secondly, because translating a periodization from a series taken for granted (e.g. international relations, politics, economy, etc.) to film history considers periods as substantial monoliths, whereas they are much more an outcome of research questions and functional simplification, serving to the purpose of making meaning out of the ever-blurring historical continuity.

My crucial question is: Do periods within film history stand alone or are they extracted from continuity as a crucial action of historical writing, as French historian Jacques Le Goff put it? In one of his last works, the renowned scholar focused on the relation between historiography and periodization, and pinpointed how periods themselves are inherently meaningful of the symbolic and political act underpinning them. In fact, time is continuous, whereas periods are arbitrary and refer to specific needs:

Periodization is not only a way of acting upon time. The very act itself draws our attention to the fact that there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time into smaller parts. [...] Even if breaking time into segments is something historians cannot help but do, [...] periodization is more than a mere collection of chronological units. It contains also the idea of transition, of one thing turning into another.²

Therefore, historical periods are inherently a privileged chance to scrutinize the way historical writing operates. For this reason, I intend to consider the way Italian film history periodized its subject and accounted for transitions. The aim is twofold. On the one hand, I shall focus on the periods Italian film historiography traced, as a way to articulate issues of continuity and discontinuity and, in consequence, enhance specific legacies, while down-playing others. Continuity traces a lineage and legitimates extant works,

2 Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2. On periodization in film history, a wide array of opinions to be found in E. Biasin, R. Menarini, and F. Zecca, eds., *The Ages of Cinema* (Udine: Forum, 2008).

schools, or agencies, whereas revolutions motivate innovation. On the other hand, I shall read against the grain of established historical periods some film histories, to discern whether historical shifts influenced the writing of history. Polish historian Krzysztof Pomiań discusses history in terms of “history of structures,” i.e. a set of constraints preventing variations to exceed a certain limit. Consequently, he terms “revolution” the appearance of a new structure, replacing a previous one, which is an overall wave of innovations.³ As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the question of continuity and discontinuity is pivotal in historical writing; however, the latter did not always occur when revolutions happened on a more general level. Reinhart Koselleck points out that, since the French Revolution, the notions of “revolution” and “crisis” have overlapped and “the concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.”⁴ But is it really so? I contend that when looking at film historiography we should not overlook the lure of continuity for historical writing, and notably when it comes to establishing canons. I believe that a “crisis historiography” as applied to media history is highly productive, as Rick Altman and, in his wake, Michael Wedel propose. In their view, major shifts within the mediascape push media to question their very identity, prompt theoretical reflection, and foster unprecedented strategies to act and position themselves.⁵ However, I contend that in traditional historical writing, until New Cinema History emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, continuity and canons played a non-negligible role in defining media identities. In addition, received wisdom regarding canons and periodization is still largely valuable when it comes to commonsensical knowledge about film history and is very effective when it comes to producing film criticism, retrospectives, and bedside table books. Finally, I believe we should decouple media crisis from revolutions, in the broad sense Pomiań assigns to the notion.

My overall aim is defining at what level discontinuities are observed, in terms of historical narratives, sources, or agencies. I tentatively connect

3 Krzysztof Pomiań, “L’Histoire des structures,” in *La Nouvelle histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel (Paris: Retz-CEPL, 1978), 528–53; Krzysztof Pomiań, *L’Ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

4 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (April 2006): 371.

5 See Rick Altman, “The Silence of the Silents,” *Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 648–718; R. Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Michael Wedel, “Universal, Germany, and ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’: A Case Study in Crisis Historiography,” *NECSUS* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012), https://necsus-ejms.org/universal-germany-and-all-quiet-on-the-western-front-a-case-study-in-crisis-historiography/#_edn5. A discussion of the notion of “crisis” as related to film criticism in Matthias Frey, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

film historiography with film practices, and I chose to scrutinize a section of national history and film history which, allegedly, implies major turns affecting politics, society, culture, and cinema: the transition between Fascist totalitarianism and the post-war, democratic age. Did such a major shift influence historical writing? Did film history, practice, and related institutions mirror political upheaval? I believe this approach might be fruitful, despite the fact that I am no more than gesturing at prospective surveys. I posit that film historiography is a full-fledged part of a broader film culture, as several scholars recently discussed it.⁶ As a notion, film culture articulates the writing of history through institutional policies, professional training, archival and exhibiting practices, and mediascape. Accordingly, the crucial question of film histories is: To what purpose do historians write them?

The corpus I chose might well illustrate said concerns. It brings together four different texts, considered to be key publications regarding film history at a crucial time for Italian history, i.e. between the 1930s and the 1950s. The first is a volume published in 1935 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the birth of cinema. The book opens with two short, albeit pregnant, statements by Benito Mussolini and Galeazzo Ciano, the undersecretary for the press and propaganda and then lines up a wide array of short essays on film history. The second and the third texts are two film reference books by the same author, Francesco Pasinetti, respectively published in 1939 and 1946, that is, just before and just after the rupture of World War II. Both are encompassing accounts of world film history published at a time when encyclopaedic film history was taking place. The fourth text, written by a young artist and critic named Carlo Lizzani, is the first attempt at a scholarly publication on Italian film history and was part of a book series on “modern culture.” These four publications were not influential on an international scale; it was a time when the Italian endeavours in film history and theory circulated to a limited extent beyond national boundaries. However, they were all relevant in building national knowledge on film history, creating a place in the sun for Italian productions within it in the case of the earliest publication, and being reference books for contemporary and following generations, in the ensuing three cases.

6 Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). See also Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

National Periods

The celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of the invention of cinema belong to an overall endeavour undertaken by the Fascist regime to aestheticize politics and articulate cultural life as radiating from political power. This process, which cultural historian Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi terms “Fascist spectacle,”⁷ materialized in two concurrent ways. First, the regime emphasized visuality: in addition to mass rallies, the regime produced an unprecedented number of exhibitions, inaugurated by a great exposition celebrating ten years of Fascist rule over Italy. The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (*Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*) was an art exhibition held in Rome from 1932 to 1934. This exhibition created a template for articulating history through visual means, while effectively persuading the viewer. Exhibitions were not solely directed at celebrating Fascist rule, but did so indirectly, by deploying modernist settings, technology, and immersive experiences. Images, and notably photographic ones, played a major part. The exhibition articulated its spatial setting around photos and photomontages,⁸ and prominent personalities belonging to Italian modernism contributed at designing it.⁹ It should not go unnoticed that Antonio Valente, together with the rationalist architect Adalberto Libera, was responsible for the “Sacrarium,” i.e. the sacred space for evoking the names of those who fell for the Fascist revolution. Valente, architect and set designer, was later responsible for the Pisorno Studios (1933–1934) and for the venue of the Rome film academy (*Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, 1936–1948), where he taught set design.¹⁰ Furthermore, the person appointed to select the enormous mass of photographic material on display was none other than Luigi Freddi, soon to become the General Director of Cinema, who was then in charge of the celebrations in honour of the invention of cinema. To

7 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988).

8 On the role of photography at the exhibition, see Paolo Morello, “Fotomontaggio e rappresentazione politica alla Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista,” in *Il teatro del potere. Scenari e rappresentazione del politico tra Otto e Novecento*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Roma: Carocci, 2000), 89–108.

9 Antonella Russo, *Il Fascismo in mostra* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999). See also Marla Stone, “Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, no. 2 (1993): 215–43.

10 See Lucia Cardone and Lorenzo Cuccu, eds., *Antonio Valente. Il cinema e la costruzione dell'artificio* (Pisa: ETS, 2005).

summarize, the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution benefitted from the visual culture modernist artists and intellectuals forged, aimed at creating consensus by moulding and modulating visual and spatial experiences, and referred to representational strategies, which film and theatre set designs and photography offered to achieve the goal.

According to historian Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Fascist exhibitions were to the twentieth century what museums were to the nineteenth: whereas the latter promoted a notion of history rooted in scientism and elitism, exhibitions created a volatile memory aimed at the masses.¹¹ Schnapp posits that Fascist exhibitions matched a newly emerging mass subject who was distracted and uncultivated. In order to address their audiences, exhibitions rejected historicism, revolved around visuality, and associated remote historical periods, such as contemporary Italy and the Roman Empire, to contribute to the myth-making and nation-building process.

The second centralized attempt by the regime to articulate cultural life was by fostering institutions in mutual support of each other. Among them, were the International Educational Cinematograph Institute,¹² created in 1928 in Rome as a section of the League of Nations; the Rome film academy, which saw the light in 1935,¹³ and the journal originating within the academy from 1937 onwards, *Bianco e nero*; and organizations such as Cineguf, a network of film clubs set up at universities by GUF (Gruppo Universitario Fascista, the student wing of the National Fascist Party) designed to train students in film technique.¹⁴ All the prominent figures

11 Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Mostre," in *Modernitalia*, ed. Francesca Santovetti (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 145–73. See also Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Anno X. La Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista del 1932* (Roma-Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2003).

12 Christel Taillibert, *L'Institut international du cinéma éducatif. Regards sur le rôle du cinéma éducatif dans la politique internationale du Fascisme italien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Christel Taillibert, "L'ICE e la politica estera del Fascismo," *Bianco e nero* 64, no. 547 (2003): 107–15. Druick discusses the initiative as related to the notion of "reactionary modernism." See Zoë Druick, "The International Educational Cinematograph Institute, Reactionary Modernism, and the Formation of Film Studies," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 80–97. On Luciano De Feo, founder of the Institute, see Christel Taillibert, "Luciano De Feo: un internazionalista pacifista nell'Italia di Mussolini?," *Cinema e Storia* 5, no. 1 (2017): 35–50.

13 See Alfredo Baldi and Silvio Celli, eds., *L'Università del cinema. I primi anni del CSC (1935–1945)*, special issue of *Bianco e nero* 71, no. 566 (2010).

14 See the groundbreaking study: Andrea Mariani, *Gli anni del Cineguf. Il cinema sperimentale italiano dal cine-club al neorealismo* (Udine: Mimesis, 2017). See also Luca La Rovere, "I Cineguf e i Littoriali del cinema," in *Storia del cinema italiano 1934/1939*, ed. Orio Caldiron (Venezia: Marsilio, 2006), 85–95; Gian Piero Brunetta, "Il cinema nei Guf," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 2 (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 76–97.

of these institutions contributed to the volume published on the occasion of cinema's fortieth jubilee.

The celebrations for the fortieth anniversary followed in the wake of the Fascist exhibition policy and acted as a meeting point between bottom-up initiatives, such as Cineguf, and top-down governance, such as the General Directorate for Cinema. Accordingly, the initiative played a twofold function: on the one hand, it served as a *geopolitical agent* to advance Italy's relevance within European and world film culture,¹⁵ as it later happened with the International Film Chamber¹⁶; on the other hand, it offered an *experimental space* for younger generations to design new forms and historical frameworks.

With regard to the geopolitical function, a crucial move the celebrations and associated volume took was creating a Latin allegiance between Italy and France, by declaring Louis Lumière as cinema's noble father. The French inventor's statement followed the ones of Mussolini and Ciano. Furthermore, Lumière incarnated a humanist genealogy, which Italy inaugurated, associating scientific research with representational concerns, as in Leonardo's camera obscura. Many contributions—including Mussolini's—refer to the description Leonardo da Vinci offered of this technology in his *Codex Atlanticus* (1478–1519), and the volume incorporates this description in the closing pages.

In this view, cinema represents an imaginary solution for the contradiction between tradition and modernity—a pressing question for Fascist reactionary modernism.¹⁷ By bringing together Leonardo and Lumière, the volume establishes a genealogy whose origins are firmly rooted in Italy, which represents at the same time tradition (Renaissance art) and modernity (the location for contemporary celebrations). However, rather than lingering on reactionary modernism, we should deal with the Fascist exhibition policy and the celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of cinema's invention as a sign of a modernist way to write history. Mussolini himself associates cinema with movable type print and the camera obscura, while Nicola De Pirro, General Director for the Theatre, pleads for a true film history, pace

15 See Elena Mosconi, "L'invenzione della tradizione. Le celebrazioni per il quarantennale del cinema," in *L'impressione del film. Contributi per una storia culturale del cinema italiano 1895–1945* (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2006), 209–26.

16 Mino Argentieri, *L'asse cinematografico Roma-Berlino* (Napoli: Libreria Sapere, 1986); Massimo Locatelli, "La Camera Internazionale del Film e il cinema italiano," in *Storia del cinema italiano. 1940/1944*, ed. Ernesto Laura and Alfredo Baldi (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 425–32.

17 See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Godard, which champions the importance of the European science and art in inventing cinema.¹⁸ This plea produces an approach, which we might anachronistically term *media archaeological*, associating relatively ancient visual devices to cinema, as in the contributions of Luciano De Feo, head of the International Educational Cinematograph Institute,¹⁹ theoretician Eugenio Giovannetti,²⁰ or film critic Jacopo Comin, who associates cinema with prehistoric cave painting.²¹ This approach to film history favours the invention of the image over cinema's reproductive power, and animation and motion over photography; accordingly, it belongs to a broader notion of classical film theory than its post-war definition, as Tom Gunning recently pointed out.²² In fact, this stance allows contributors to associate cinema to European artistic legacy, as much as to contemporary European avant-garde cinema. Otherwise, national supremacy is built by promoting a technological primacy of rather obscure inventors, as Filoteo Alberini,²³ or associating early Italian cinema with path-breaking representational choices, such as parallel cutting or tracking shots.²⁴ As Umberto Barbaro, the celebrated mentor of neorealism, wrote: "I believe that if one thing is to be credited to Italy, it is not some glimpse of Latin genius (I don't believe in *glimpses*), but *discovering the most cinematic expressive means*: close-up, editing, pan-shot, artistic lighting."²⁵

18 Nicola De Pirro, "Per una vera storia del cinema," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 25-27.

19 Luciano De Feo, "Luigi Lumière e il mulino delle immagini," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 19-24.

20 Eugenio Giovannetti, "L'adulto adolescente," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 103-6.

21 Jacopo Comin, "Origini e natura della cinematografia," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 98-102.

22 Tom Gunning, "Moving away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothöhler (Wien: Synema, 2012), 42-60. I tried to address this approach in Italian interwar film theory in Francesco Pitassio, "Technophobia and Italian Film Theory in the Interwar Period," in *Techné/Technology*, ed. Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 185-95.

23 Ernesto Cauda, "Il contributo italiano al progresso della cinematografia," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 82-90; Giuseppe De Tomasi, "Filoteo Alberini," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 107-10.

24 Umberto Barbaro, "Nascita del film d'arte," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 77-81; Francesco Pasinetti, "Quarant'anni di cinematografo," in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), 114-17.

25 Barbaro, "Nascita del film d'arte," 79-80. Emphasis in the original.



Fig. 5.1. Cover of the volume published together with cinema's fortieth jubilee. *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895-1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).

Finally, we can pinpoint the attempt at designing new political allegiances through the iconography the volume displays, wherein European and notably Italian and French cinema dominate. Beyond typically national films such as *Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*, F. Lang, 1923) or *Sperduti nel buio* (*Lost in the Dark*, N. Martoglio, 1914), or a good deal of Hollywood films, many stills refer to European transnational productions. These latter incarnate continental



Fig. 5.2. Building a transnational European film canon. *Fu Matthias Pascal* (*The Late Matthias Pascal*, Marcel L'Herbier, 1925) in *40° Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895–1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).



Fig. 5.3. Building a transnational European film canon. *Casta Diva* (Carmine Gallone, 1935) in 40° *Anniversario della cinematografia, 1895–1935* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935).

cultural heritage, such as *Campo di Maggio* (*100 Days of Napoleon*, G. Forzano, 1935), *Casta Diva* (C. Gallone, 1935), or *Thérèse Raquin* (J. Feyder, 1929).

As for other exhibitions under Fascism, cinema's anniversary also implied associations with experimental practices and personalities. For instance, Cineguf and one of its chief personalities, film-maker and theoretician Francesco Pasinetti, had a crucial role in the celebrations; in previous and following years he heralded experimental film-making and exhibition practices. Moreover, the national newsreel company, Istituto Luce, produced as a part of its news revue a short, titled *Il cinema ha quarant'anni* (*Cinema Is Forty Years Old*).²⁶ Corrado D'Errico, an avant-garde film-maker who directed between the late 1920s and early 1930s the few attempts of Italian urban symphonies,²⁷ supervised the *Luce Revue* and likely directed the

26 See [https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000094863/2/rivista-luce-cinema-ha-quaranta-anni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:\[%22\%22Rivista%20Luce%22%22\],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20}}](https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000094863/2/rivista-luce-cinema-ha-quaranta-anni.html?startPage=0&jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:{%22query%22:[%22\%22Rivista%20Luce%22%22],%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20}}).

27 On Italian avant-garde and film production, see Leonardo Quaresima, "Stracittà. Cinema, Rationalism, Modernism, and Italy's 'Second Futurism,'" in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (Herts: John Libbey, 2013), 213–20. See the recent collection: Rossella Catanese,



Fig. 5.4. Exhibiting cinema under Fascism. The project of the BPRR Group for the Exhibition of Art Design in Cinema, Como, 1936.

short.²⁸ The film incorporates excerpts from early cinema, notably from Lumière's and Alberini's productions, and later melodramas, and alternates this materials with a staged and nostalgic reconstruction of a silent cinema exhibition. Therefore, this brief movie resonates with the nation-building

ed., *Futurist Cinema: Studies on Italian Avant-garde Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

28 On D'Errico see Silvio Celli, "La gazza ladra,' film futurista di Corrado D'Errico," *Cinegrafica* 5, no. 9 (1996): 129–36; Silvio Celli, "Corrado D'Errico," in *Storia del cinema mondiale, IV: 1924–1933*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Venezia-Roma: Marsilio-CSC, 2014), 200–1. The Istituto Luce online archive credits Arturo Gemmiti for the short, albeit no film credits offer evidence of Gemmiti's role in the production. An article preserved as a newspaper clipping in Francesco Pasinetti's estate, at the La Fabbrica del Vedere, credits Cineguf Giorgio Ferroni for the film. See Francesco Pasinetti, "Cavalcata del cinema," *L'Ambrosiano*, May 3, 1939.

practices the celebrations fostered, while reflexively looking at the medium's history. Finally, the volume also hosted a contribution of an avant-garde icon such as Germaine Dulac. Most of all, the celebrations were an occasion for Cineguf to reflect on film history and exhibitions as a way to bring about historical knowledge. In the following years, other exhibitions devoted to film history, which Cineguf organized, communicated historical knowledge through visual display and association, and spatial settings.²⁹

To draw some conclusions: the fortieth anniversary produced historical narratives revolving around geopolitical concepts like Europe as opposed to America, rooted in a non-linear temporality, which did away with causality and technological evolution. This narrative relied on a critical notion of time, properly revolutionary, in the reactionary sense Fascism applied to the term. Or, according to philosopher Peter Osborne, in a new temporality, which modernity overall originated.³⁰ This temporality moves away from the destruction of tradition. In the case of Fascism, the aim of history is to create anew, by non-causal historical narration, what is lost—the past. This was a common concern for Cineguf, which intended to produce an entirely new, experimental film practice and history. In this narrative visuality played a key role, as a way to address the masses—a recurring notion throughout the fortieth anniversary volume; visuality and experimental settings also held a major function in designing ephemeral history and museums, as art historian Francis Haskell termed exhibitions.³¹

Designing the Art

Among the emerging personalities who contributed to the fortieth anniversary celebrations was Francesco Pasinetti, promoter and organizer of the fledgling Cineguf organization, film critic, experimental and documentary film-maker, and author of one of the first, if not the first at all, Italian

29 Andrea Mariani, "The Cinema Pavilion at Expo '42 in Rome and Italian Experimental Cinema: Preliminary Notes," in *A History of Cinema without Names 3*, ed. Diego Cavallotti, Federico Giordano, and Leonardo Quaresima (Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2018), 317–26; Giovanna D'Amia and Andrea Mariani, "Le Manifestazioni Internazionali di Cinematografia Scientifica e Turistica a Como (1936–1937)," *Immagine*, no. 15 (2017), 85–111.

30 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 1995). I am grateful to Nicholas Baer for attracting my attention to this inspiring work. A discussion of Fascism, modernity, and "regeneration" in Roger Griffin, "Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism: A 'Mazeway Resynthesis,'" *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 1 (January 2008), 9–24.

31 Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

dissertation on film as an art at the University of Padua, in 1933.³² Pasinetti fully belonged to the institutional network Fascism implemented to control national cultural life. Beyond his involvement with Cineguf, Pasinetti joined the unfinished *Film Encyclopaedia*, another initiative that the International Educational Cinematograph Institute implemented, and Rudolf Arnheim coordinated.³³ Moreover, since early 1936 Pasinetti was an instructor at the Rome Film Academy, where he taught film history. In this capacity, the Venetian intellectual exhibited manifold activities: firstly, through the film archive under construction at the Rome Film Academy, which he helped to establish and where he prompted the students to test their own skills by imitating previous masterworks; secondly, he wrote on film history and film art, through the active knowledge of the heritage; finally, he organized the reflection on film education, together with Cineguf.³⁴

The two film histories Pasinetti authored in 1939 and 1946 are, respectively, “the jewel in the crown” of the publishing series originating in the training programme of the Rome Film Academy,³⁵ and part of a series which Poligono Società Editrice, a publisher associated with avant-garde art and architecture, devoted to film art.³⁶ They were published before and after a major shift—World War II and the rise of neorealism. However, the second volume entirely overlooks the burgeoning film style.

Pasinetti heralds cinema as an art in its own right, through two strategies. On the one hand, both film histories rely on categories coined in traditional scholarship in literature and art, such as style, genres, visuality, and, more evidently, after 1945, authorship. Equating film direction and authorship was a decisive turn in advancing post-war Italian film culture, which the 1946 book entirely displays. However, Pasinetti took this approach from his early days as an active Cineguf organizer and film-maker, and when researching for his dissertation.³⁷ In this view film art is just the very last episode of an

32 Francesco Pasinetti, *Realtà artistica del cinema. Storia e critica* (diss., Regia Università di Padova, 1933), in Francesco Pasinetti, *La scoperta del cinema*, ed. M. Reberschack (Roma: Luce Cinecittà, 2012), 217–377.

33 See Adriano D'Aloia, “La parabola italiana di Rudolf Arnheim,” in R. Arnheim, *I baffi di Charlot. Scritti italiani sul cinema 1932–1938*, ed. Adriano D'Aloia (Torino: Kaplan, 2009), 25–91.

34 See Giulio Bursi, “Inquadrare la materia. Tracce di un metodo pedagogico,” in *L'Università del cinema. I primi anni del CSC (1935–1945)*, ed. Alfredo Baldi and Silvio Celli, special issue of *Bianco e nero* 71, no. 566 (2010), 52–58.

35 Francesco Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939).

36 Francesco Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).

37 Within the materials now part of the estate of his brother Pier Maria Pasinetti, preserved at CISVe, is a collection of newspaper clippings of film critiques written by Francesco Pasinetti for daily newspapers. They are glued on paperboard and classified according to the surname of

art history conceived as made of and by nations, whose heritage national cinemas fulfil; by the same token, the interwar debate, and notably the one blossoming within the Cineguf movement, significantly appreciated European animation, from the abstract film to Lotte Reininger. Such close association of film and art history is part and parcel of the emerging Italian film culture: for instance, the Rome Film Academy training programme lined up classes on topics such as film history and film culture with art history.³⁸ In a similar vein, the discussion about film heritage bestowed on it cultural value, by comparing it with artistic heritage.³⁹ Accordingly, the great attention Pasinetti pays to European cinema stems from his awareness of European cultural capital: in the first volume, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Film history from its origins until now), the author describes individual artworks and personalities as the result of national communities; in the post-war book, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Half a century of cinema), Pasinetti moors cinema's birth in Europe, proceeds to describe individual personalities, which in the vast majority are European, and details major developments (e.g. the advent of sound) as eminently European conquests, which prominent European directors facilitated; moreover, he produces a whole chapter on European cinema. In this section, he describes European cinema as made of different languages, cultures and nations; its unity stems from bringing together art and market, commercial and aesthetic concerns. Accordingly, European cinema perpetuates the European artistic legacy, incarnates national traditions, and counters the hegemony of American mass culture, whose main concern is economic profit. Continuity incorporates cinema into established culture.

On the other hand, Pasinetti enhances issues belonging to the avant-garde legacy, as the role of non-representational images, such as in abstract cinema and cartoons, rhythm, atmosphere, and technique. This latter, rather than rendering reality more faithfully, is discussed as a set of constraints to fully predicate film language. In the same vein, Pasinetti champions documentary cinema, highlighting its paramount role in interwar film culture⁴⁰: a site

the film directors, thus identifying film authorship as a chief category. See Manuscript of *Realtà artistica del cinema*, 10.A.01.03, CISVe. See also Francesco Pasinetti, "I nostri referendum—Chi è l'autore del film?," *Film* 3, no. 49 (December 7, 1940), 2.

38 See Francesco Pasinetti, "Il Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia," typewritten (1941?), unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere.

39 See Francesco Pasinetti, "L'antiquario di film," *La gazzetta del popolo*, October 21, 1941; Glauco Pellegrini, "Il dramma delle pellicole," *Corriere Padano*, December 30, 1941. Pellegrini was a close collaborator of Pasinetti.

40 For a thorough discussion of documentary film-making and the avant-garde between the two world wars, see Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-garde," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 580–610; Malte Hagener, "Melodies across the Oceans: The Intersection of



Fig. 5.5.
 Designing visual
 history. Francesco
 Pasinetti,
*Mezzo secolo di
 cinema* (Milano: Il
 Poligono, 1946).

for aesthetic experimentation and political agency, and a crossroads for testing cinema's expressive and reproductive power. The layout of the books themselves, which relies on a careful selection of images, seems to bring to the fore the role of vision and figuration as a mode of understanding. As a matter of fact, both books, by juxtaposing film stills through mutual resonances, enhance visuality as a way to produce historical knowledge: the collection of images from different films displays similarities and differences

Documentary and the Avant-garde," in *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 205–34.



Fig. 5.6. Designing visual history. Francesco Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1946).

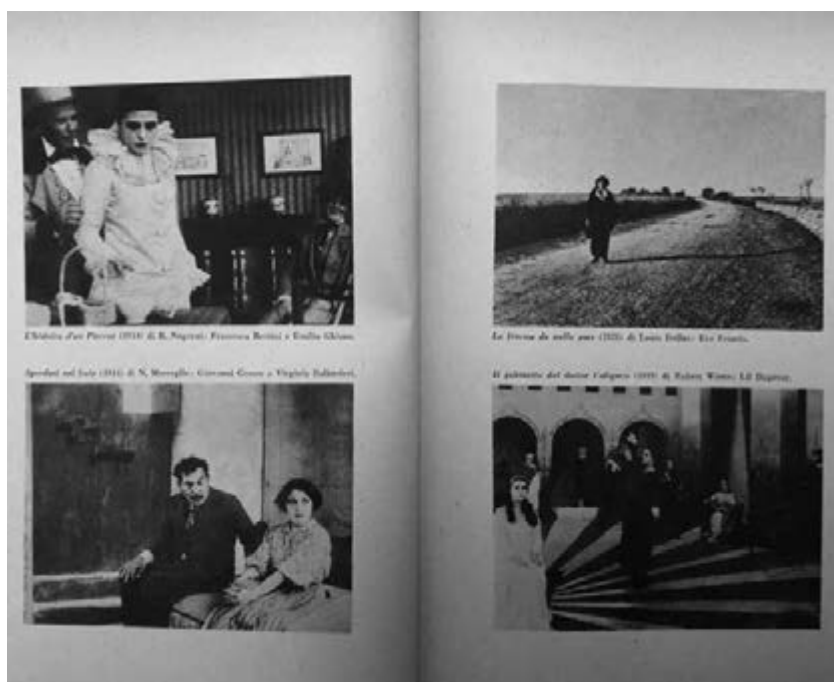


Fig. 5.7. Designing visual history. F. Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi* (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939).

in terms of themes, lighting, or framing; therefore, by simply looking at the images and extracting information out of lines, tones, and iconography, the readership can achieve some understanding of cinema.

Pasinetti's first film history attempts to describe in a synchronic way the development of film art across the globe, but mostly regarding Europe and the US; but it also offers close analysis of a few masterpieces, coinciding with holdings established in Italy at the time. The description is a chronicle, as Hayden White put it,⁴¹ avoiding causal explanation but simply lining up facts and dates.⁴² The head of the Rome Film Academy, Luigi Chiarini, in his introduction to the 1939 volume, singles out the pitfalls in writing film history: the absence of proper film archives limits the access to the works. Then he credits among the merits of Pasinetti's work the reference to actual works.⁴³ Six years later Pasinetti declares that repeated viewings of film works are difficult, because of the still unaccomplished project of a film archive.⁴⁴ In fact, between the 1930s and 1940s Pasinetti is at the centre of a vivid discussion, aimed at building a film archive and fostering film restoration. In his view, as articulated in a series of articles, this archive is destined to serve a number of purposes: it properly creates a film heritage, by safeguarding the remnants of the past⁴⁵; in order to do so, it endows these remnants with artistic value, and accordingly removes them from the commercial field⁴⁶; a film archive is the final achievement of the Cineguf movement, which was the first to implement historical awareness, by exhibiting films from the past, selected on the basis of their aesthetic value. A film collection allows historians to iterate viewings and, accordingly, creates an actual and detailed knowledge of a body of works, while promoting film culture and historical depth for the lay public; finally, this archive aligns Italy with the most modern countries, as the examples of the Museum of Modern Art and the Cinémathèque française demonstrate.⁴⁷ In Pasinetti's

41 Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27.

42 Pasinetti iterates this model of historical explanation in his notes. See Francesco Pasinetti, *Cronistoria del cinema* (manuscript, 1942(?)).

43 Luigi Chiarini, "Prefazione," in *Storia del cinema dalle origini ad oggi*, by Francesco Pasinetti (Roma: Bianco e nero, 1939), 5–7.

44 Pasinetti, *Mezzo secolo di cinema*, 5.

45 Francesco Pasinetti, "Parlatorio. Conversazione con Guido Aristarco intorno all'esigenza che venga costituita una Cineteca Nazionale," typewritten, n.d., 2 pp., unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere; Francesco Pasinetti, "A proposito di una cineteca," *Il Ventuno* (August–September 1938).

46 Pasinetti, "Parlatorio"; Francesco Pasinetti, "Cineteca," typewritten, n.d., 3 pp., unclassified, La Fabbrica del Vedere.

47 Francesco Pasinetti, "Per un repertorio cinematografico," *L'Ambrosiano* (30 May 1938).

vision, a modern film archive was seen as the most suitable way to train a new cohort of film-makers and a cultivated audience, and to produce an up-to-date film history, which ought to be at the level of what is published elsewhere in Europe and across the Atlantic.⁴⁸

To summarize, film history emerging from the Fascist era provides a non-causal notion of historical development, which either refers to a “factual time,” i.e. the chronicle, or associates works, names, and phenomena through aesthetic motifs. This stance championed the opportunities film technique offers to film-makers, including animation, and hinges on an impending notion of film heritage. Film history, so the conclusion of the book has it, requires a heritage to be properly written, turning film into a document.⁴⁹ The academy and the archive are mutually supportive institutions, providing the framework for blossoming film historiography.⁵⁰

Narrating Film History

The first comprehensive attempt at writing an Italian film history appeared as Italian neorealism was slowly fading out, in 1953.⁵¹ Its author was a very active, young intellectual, Carlo Lizzani. A film critic and screenplay writer under Fascism, an actor in a number of neorealist productions, a leftist

48 The Venetian intellectual was fully aware of contemporary publications, which he contributed to review or translate. For instance, he edited *Filmlexikon* (Milano: Filmeuropa, 1948), based on Charles Reinert, *Kleines Filmlexikon. Kunst, Technik, Geschichte, Biographie, Schrifttum* (Einsiedeln: Benzinger & Co., 1946). Moreover, he closely read and reviewed Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, *Histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1943). Finally, he thought for his work of an international circulation, and notably asked his brother, who resided in the United States, to send a copy of his film history volume from 1946 to the Museum of Modern Art and to seek a publishing house to translate it. See Francesco Pasinetti, *Lettera a Pier Maria Pasinetti*. N. 2, April 16, 1946, typewritten, 2 pp., 372.40.12, CISVe.

49 See Simone Venturini, “The Cabinet of Dr. Chiarini: Notes on the Birth of an Academic Canon,” in *The Film Canon*, ed. Pietro Bianchi, Giulio Bursi, and Simone Venturini (Udine: Forum, 2011), 451–60.

50 As Grieveson and Wasson explain, “building a practical infrastructure for [...] a sustainable network of specialized films and film viewers was a basic precondition for what we now know as film study: films must be seen to be known. [...] A distinct kind of circuit had to be built, which introduced a range of questions about film’s temporality (what did it mean to watch old films?) and spatiality (what did it mean to watch old films in an art museum?),” Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, “The Academy and Motion Picture,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, 21. It should not go unnoticed that a few years after Pasinetti’s book, Poligono published the Italian silent cinema’s history by the founder of the national film museum. See Maria Adriana Prolo, *Storia del cinema muto* (Milano: Il Poligono, 1951).

51 Carlo Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano* (Firenze: Parenti, 1953).

activist, in the late 1940s, he turned to film direction. Furthermore, Lizzani was at the forefront of the film clubs' movement, which greatly contributed to spreading both neorealist film culture and producing knowledge on film history.⁵² Film clubs were not a novelty themselves, as the movement started on the verge of the 1920s and the 1930s, to later merge into the Cineguf experience. However, in the post-war era film clubs fully blossomed, due to unprecedented democratic conditions, the creation of public film archives, and the widespread acknowledgement of cinema as a cultural and artistic expression.

Recent historiography alternatively rejects Lizzani's account of Italian film history as politically biased, or downsizes it to a document of neorealist culture,⁵³ with good reason. In fact, Lizzani relies on many historical notions which belong to the post-war Marxist debate, and notably to Gramsci's legacy: fracture, revolution, and crisis are concepts iterated throughout the book. For the same reason, Lizzani overlaps the notions of nation and people, as in Stalinist cultural politics. However, I posit that Lizzani's history is possibly the least revolutionary and the most consistent in three different ways: the dismissal of visuality to produce historical knowledge; the role of causality for historical explanation; and the reference to a canon of films inherited from the interwar historiography and never truly questioned.

In the first place, when compared with previous historical accounts, this work stands out for its iconophobia, which associates this book with established literary scholarship: film stills are included at the very end of the volume, as mere illustrations of mentioned works. Interwar modernist projects of addressing the readership through visuality are rejected. Secondly, cultural and social developments find causal explanation through the master narrative of class warfare, connecting facts, artworks, and personalities. Basically, historicism, that is, the delusion of continuity in modernity, as Osborne in the wake of Walter Benjamin puts it,⁵⁴ resurges in the pages

52 Virgilio Tosi, *Quando il cinema era un circolo. La stagione d'oro dei cineclub (1945–1956)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999). See also Callisto Cosulich, "Neorealismo e associazionismo 1944–1953: cronaca di dieci anni," in *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano*, ed. Lino Micciché (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), 90–97.

53 See, for instance, Gian Piero Brunetta, "Lo storico come testimone," in *Carlo Lizzani. Un lungo viaggio nel cinema*, ed. Vito Zagarrò (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 49–54.

54 Osborne contends that Walter Benjamin discusses modernity as radical discontinuity: whereas communication between generations produced tradition, continuity, and historical experience, modernity sets generations one against the other and questions the same possibility of historical experience. Accordingly, historicism is a way to create a false continuity (and bad modernity) whereas in modernity ruptures, crisis, and shifts mark the experience. See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, particularly pp. 147–57.

of Lizzani's work. In this vein, Lizzani's volume posits that realism is a common thread throughout national film history: the token of continuity and the stylistic device opposing a historically truthful and proletarian representation to the delusions the bourgeoisie offers, to dominate the working class. Finally, the body of works Lizzani refers to is a canon mostly established under Fascism.

That being said, in a barely discussed appendix, the volume foregrounds a method for film historiography, expanding the notion of sources beyond film works and introducing the concept of "film document"—theoretical works, statements, screenplays, and so forth. Moreover, Lizzani's work advances the need for a critical inquiry of the secondary sources and refers to the French IDHEC's data sheet to describe films. In my view, this wider notion of film sources proceeds from two major developments in film practices. On the one hand, the post-war years saw a confrontation between two models of film archive: one devoted to preservation and renting the masterworks of film art, which the Cineteca Italiana in Milan represented; another one, whose main task was teaching and public service, which the Cineteca Nazionale, the Rome Film Academy's archive, incarnated. Lizzani clearly leans to the second, as film historiography is not focused solely on film art, but must, according to him, encompass different kinds of sources, in order to integrate cinema into legitimate history. On the other hand, this set of sources helps achieve the purpose of thoroughly conveying and explaining films within the framework of film clubs and film journals, and is instrumental in the slow penetration of film culture into academia.

Conclusions: Canons and Gaps

The four volumes I discussed in the previous paragraphs are no longer consulted as reference books in contemporary historiography: much water flowed under the bridges and methods and concerns deeply changed. However, I accounted for them because they were important publications when they appeared, either because they testified to major endeavours at establishing Italy as a beacon for contemporary film culture and history, or because they acted almost as textbooks for decades. Furthermore, and notably in Pasinetti's work, the international perspective on film history is striking and bears witness to the effort of Italian culture, particularly under Fascism, to merge modernity and tradition, and project national interests on the international scenario. On some occasions this endeavour implied that Italian cinema and culture were deemed to rule over Europe, because

the national tradition and legacy made Italy as the most suitable place for cinema to fulfil its mission. Accordingly, Europe is opposed to Hollywood, which is downsized as the land of mass culture and artistic misery. The book published on the occasion of the celebrations for cinema's fortieth anniversary is a case in point. In the post-war era this scope was greatly reduced, and Lizzani's book was focused solely on Italian cinema as a result.

Polish historian Jerzy Topolski recommends a synchronic narration when dealing with cultural history, as opposed to a diachronic one when discussing other historical series.⁵⁵ I attempted to merge the two approaches, by focusing on some synchronic questions related to specific books and endeavours, while collating them across time. With this in mind, I want to draw some tentative conclusions.

First of all, a platitude: political frameworks regularly provide film historiography with grandiose slogans. However, writing history hinges much more on actual practices. Within a totalitarian society, struggling to trace a continuous line between the Roman Empire and contemporary Italy, non-causal, experimental time in historical writing and a mode of address privileging visuality and direct involvement dominated. Conversely, in a revolutionary self-proclaimed period, in the war's aftermath, narrative and causal explanation designed a continuous time.

Moreover, less blatant evidence: institutions greatly contribute to creating historiographical practice and originate concerns. In Italy, evolving institutions and practices progressively established the notion of the film document, with the purpose of writing film history, moving from artworks to a more comprehensive notion. First film archives, then film clubs, played a major function in this development.

Finally, a crucial means of continuity are film canons, which film archives and film historiography created and transferred. Canons circulating in Italy expanded year by year, and international film historiography helped in establishing shared references. Rakefet Shela-Sheffy discussed the notion of canon, usually contested within cultural studies, as being the expression of ruling elites; however, the cultural historian highlights the stabilizing function canons play throughout social upheavals:

[T]here is a long-term process of accumulation and creation of unshakably sanctioned cultural reservoirs by societies, which reservoirs we call canons. Understood in this way, the canon equals the longevity of a

55 Jerzy Topolski, *Narrare la storia. Nuovi principi di metodologia storica* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1997).

culture, or even exceeds it, in cases where violent revolutions or other catastrophes seriously endanger the social structures and civilizations which maintain it.⁵⁶

In Italy, the fledgling archives and attempts at historiography cooperated in defining a film canon which was blatantly consistent across social and cultural explosions, with at least one exception: animation, and abstract and experimental cinema. This production was significant for interwar film historiography, for a number of reasons, as I partly attempted at clarifying beforehand: it prolonged traditional art history into modernity and media; it detached cinema from photographic reproduction, i.e. the recording of a profilmic scene, and associated it with painting and drawing, and therefore with individual creation; finally, through abstract cinema, it connected cinema to the avant-garde and experimentalism, as practices legitimizing cinema in its own right. A scapegoat was to be sacrificed on the altar of post-war film culture and realism: unfortunately, possibly the most modern one.

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56 Rakefet Shela-Sheffy, "Canon Formation Revisited: Canon and Cultural Production," *Neohelicon* 29, no. 2 (2002): 145.

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6 Defeats that Were Almost Victories

Jay Leyda's (Soviet) Archives¹

Masha Salazkina

Abstract

This essay assesses Jay Leyda's contribution to film studies' gradual emergence as a field of knowledge in the twentieth century. It focuses on Leyda's stay in the Soviet Union in the 1930s during a key moment in the development of an ambitious and experimental programme for the production, research and preservation of cinema. Leyda's life-long travel trajectories which began in Russia shaped his understanding of the archive's role as a source, foundation, and vehicle for cinematic knowledge and his keen awareness of its geopolitical positioning, producing a vision of film history that was unique for American culture at the time. The essay argues for the importance of his legacy as speaking to key developments within film and media historiography today.

Keywords: film history, film education, archival practices, Sergei Eisenstein, Jay Leyda

Jay Leyda is best remembered now as one of the first translators of Sergei Eisenstein's writings into English, most notably the two collections, *Film Form* and *Film Sense*, which for many generations (at least until Richard Taylor's translations) were the only source for a systematic analysis of Eisenstein's theoretical oeuvre, in any language.² In fact, many of Eisenstein's translations into languages other than English or French were done using Leyda's translation rather than the original, the writings in Russian were

¹ My sincere thanks to the editors of this volume and to Tom Gunning, Charles Acland, and Nicolas Avedisian-Cohen for their insightful comments and suggestions.

² Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942); Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949).

largely unavailable. After a selection of Eisenstein's writings finally came out as "collected works" in the Soviet Union and when, simultaneously, several other translations began to appear in different languages, Leyda continued until his death in 1988 translating, editing, and publishing other works by Eisenstein, contributing greatly to the preservation and dissemination of his legacy worldwide.

But Leyda was also an important and fascinating figure in his own right. He not only published the first volume on Russian and Soviet cinema in English, but also wrote historical works on Chinese cinema and compilation film (in both cases these were some of the first studies on these two subjects published in English), along with studies of Melville, translations of Musorgsky, and biographies of Rachmaninov and Emily Dickinson.³ His background was in avant-garde political film-making (as part of the Film and Photo Leagues of the Workers International Relief), which led him to study film under Eisenstein in Moscow between 1933 and 1936. Upon his return, he accepted the position of an assistant curator in the newly founded film department of the Museum of Modern Art and continued political film-making through his affiliation with leftist collectives Nykino and Frontier Films. He later worked as a consultant for Warner Bros., and conducted archival film research in France, China, and the German Democratic Republic, until beginning a university teaching career that culminated in teaching at the graduate programme of New York University from 1974 to 1987, shaping generations of film scholars to come.⁴ Leyda belongs to the handful of artists and intellectuals (Joris Ivens and Paul Strand come to mind) whose lives and careers connect some of the pivotal moments in the cultural and political history of cinema of the twentieth century and many of its geographic "hot spots."

As a scholar and an educator, he shaped much of the development of the English-language field of film studies, amongst other disciplines, developing film history in particular. And while the importance of Leyda's experience in the Soviet Union in the 1930s is central to any account of his life and work,

3 Books by Jay Leyda: *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964); *Dianying (Electric Shadows): An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891* (New York: Harcourt, 1951); *The Musorgsky Reader: A Life of Modeste Petrovich Musorgsky in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947); *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960); with Sergei Bertensson, and Sophia Satina, *Sergei Rachmaninoff; a Lifetime in Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1956).

4 Ian Aitken, "Jay Leyda," in *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Documentary Film* (London: Routledge, 2013), 545–48.

making sense of that connection in terms of what it can tell us about the history of film studies and film historiography, beyond Leyda's individual biography, still remains a pressing task. This essay charts this historical connection, through the figure of Jay Leyda, in the larger context of film studies emerging as a field of knowledge in the late twentieth century. In particular, I focus on the broader context for Leyda's stay in Moscow during a key moment in the development of an ambitious and experimental—albeit very short lived—programme for the study of the production, research, and preservation of cinema, as well as Eisenstein's role in that process, that took place at the Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), the Moscow film school.

Eisenstein's work at VGIK and his ideas about pedagogy and film training as it pertained to his general approach to film theory and history were obviously central to the trajectory of Leyda's intellectual development: he came to Moscow specifically to learn film-making from the celebrated Soviet film-maker, studying in Eisenstein's "workshop" (which is how the institute was organized) for three years. At first, this was as an officially enrolled student and later as an auditor. He also worked as an assistant on the making of *Bezhin Meadow* (*Bezhin Lug*). Leyda understood the importance of Eisenstein's pedagogical practice and how integral it was to his overall theoretical and artistic oeuvre. These insights were reflected in Leyda's translations and commentaries, several of which deal explicitly with Eisenstein's teaching (this includes the translation of Nizhny's *Lessons with Eisenstein*, as well as *Film Essays and a Lecture*).⁵ In fact, until quite recently, when some of VGIK's original documents were finally published (in the four-volume *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], 2000–2013), much of the existing information outside the institutional archive about both the film institute and Eisenstein's role in it could only be gathered from Leyda's work—both his translations and his own writings.

Considering Leyda's work in the context of the pedagogical experiments taking place in VGIK in the 1930s may help us to reconstruct Leyda's place in the development of American film historiography, as a scholar, activist, and teacher. While not fully accounting for Leyda's specific approach to film history to his experiences at VGIK, Leyda's career links the Soviet experiments in film education with the broader development of the discipline of film studies—film historiography, in particular—in the Anglo-American sphere. It connects several pivotal moments in the transnational history of

5 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Essays, with a Lecture*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968); Vladimir Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda and Ivor Montagu (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

the institutionalization of the preservation and study of cinema. As a result, it draws attention to some constitutive tensions and struggles underlying these developments, which Leyda's experiences bring to light with particular force.

In sketching out the contours of VGIK's experimental programme in the remainder of the essay, I do not mean to suggest that all of its inner workings and broader social and political contexts were known to Leyda at the time (despite his closeness to Eisenstein). And yet, acknowledging the gaps, disjuncts, and contradictions in our attempts to reconstruct this slice of history—while still asserting the importance of this larger project—seems like a fitting way to historicize a historian whose own work relied so clearly on the power of personal experiences, anecdotes, and broader intellectual conjunctures, and whose own method was in many ways an homage to his illustrious Soviet mentor—Eisenstein himself, of course, posited history as a kind of dialectical montage (this approach is visible in the episodic structure of the writing of *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, or in the very premise of *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*, as well as in student accounts of Leyda's own teaching).

And as befits a Marxist historian, such a dialectical history understands its object as the site of struggle: in our case, of simultaneous and inseparable drives towards institutionalization—and therefore, control and organization of knowledge and material through scientific management—and democratization, which often demands the opposite, namely, the dismantlement of the institutional hierarchies and control, which in turn inevitably demonstrate the specific failures of scientific management as a model when these are confronted with the particularities of individual experiences, perceptions, desires, and the unpredictability of historical outcomes.

Early Soviet film education embodies this cluster of contradictions with particular force due to the political urgency placed on these developments by state and political actors. What I argue here is that the way conflicting forces that shaped the emergence of institutionalized film education in the Soviet Union played out over a longer period from Moscow to New York. This institutionalization was reshaped not only by the circumstances of different times and places, but also by different but intrinsically related historical pressures over the course of the twentieth century, which established the norms and aspirations for the study of film history as we know it today. This was embodied most succinctly in Leyda's intellectual and professional trajectory.

A few elements emerge here as part of a broader conceptual framework connecting Leyda's ideas and teaching practices and the Soviet context on which I will be drawing. Central to it is an expansive and ambitious notion

of film pedagogy, in its many forms, including the assertion of cinema as an object of organized scholarly study—which had no equivalent in the US cultural and educational landscape of the 1930s.⁶ As part of this broader ambition, Leyda combined, for the duration of his career, three discrete notions of film archives: the first is the archive as the foundation for alternative (non-commercial) exhibition and education circuits and the kind of experimental, artistic, and theoretical knowledge they produce (a notion, which has come to fore within film scholarship only in recent decades)⁷; the second is the archive as a primary scholarly resource (as canon formation but also as a way to refute the existing assumptions about cinema, its history, and its geography), and this is where his work for MoMA and for the French, German Democratic Republic, and China film archives are relevant referents⁸; the third is the archive as a site for potential creative and political practice (an understanding that is foregrounded in *Films Beget Films*). Leyda's work reveals an interplay among these different functions as conceptualized by his contemporaries and comrades Harry Potamkin, Eisenstein, and Nikolai Lebedev. This broader understanding of the social, pedagogical, and historical functions of an archive extends to the personal and affective, but is also dialectically connected to the institutional archive or library models of film education. This encompasses education of the masses (especially through non-commercial cultural circuits and sites of film exhibition), as well as highly specialized forms of pedagogy (such as graduate education in film studies).

A commitment to this model, which combines the seemingly contradictory impulse towards the popularization of film education and its extreme specialization, can be seen in Leyda's involvement, on the one hand, in such projects as MoMA's and, on the other, in the NYU graduate film programme from the 1970s onward—one historical pillar in the development of the highly specialized scholarly discipline of film studies. Establishing film archives turns out to be a crucial precondition for both.

6 See his argument in Jay Leyda, "Training for Film Workers: Russia," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (April 1946): 279–86.

7 For examples of such recent scholarship, see Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (London: Berghahn, 2014); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

8 See, for example, Jay Leyda, "Towards a New Film History," *Cinema Journal* 14, no. 2 (1975): 40–41; and especially "Waiting for Jobs," *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 2, with a Special Survey: Our Resources for Film Scholarship (1962–1963): 29–33.

Beyond merely securing the material basis for exhibition and scholarship (which is, of course, the most direct way to think of archives' functions), archive-building historically acquires particular symbolic social value: a form of institutional organization as a form of accumulation of cultural (and material) capital, on the one hand, which legitimizes the institution in the eyes of the public (or the state)⁹; at the same time, the centrality of archives to the institutional development also speaks to the triumph of scientific management and rational organization of knowledge (and labour). Both of these functions of the archive were particularly resonant in the early Soviet Union, where the ideologies and practices of scientific management (part as adoption of Marxist ideology, and part as a response to strategic needs of industrialization and modernization) were inseparable from the dynamics of cultural revolution, in which film played an important role. And the debates on what a film archive should be—and the competing plans for its creation and development in relationship to film education—took place in the Moscow throughout the 1930s, coinciding precisely with Leyda's own experience there.

To begin teasing out Leyda's pioneering vision for the discipline of film history, I will only sketch out the broader context of Leyda's stay in the Soviet Union at a moment of crucial transformation in film education, in particular through Eisenstein's work for VGIK. I propose this here as one of the possible broader contexts within which to frame the trajectory of Leyda's life and work. At the same time, Leyda's experiences serve as an entry point into considering a slightly different version of a translational history of film education and film archives and the problems this may pose.

Jay Leyda's time in Moscow was preceded by experience in New York, where he arrived in 1930 to work as the photographer Ralph Steiner's assistant where he became involved in the photography branch of the Film and Photo Leagues of the Workers International Relief. Using his first experimental short, *A Bronx Morning*, as his admissions portfolio for the application to the Film Institute, specifically in hopes of working under Eisenstein, he arrived in Moscow in 1933. At the time it was not only the oldest (its earliest incarnation was founded in 1919) but by far the most advanced film school in the world, at once contributing to the development of cinema as a craft as well as a field of academic study. It was by that time also the main institution of film education in the Soviet Union, with highly centralized resources. While the institute's main goal was (as it remains

9 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 9–63.

to this day) the training of film-makers, such training from the earliest days of the school was understood as going far beyond the pragmatics of film-making, or even questions of the development of a particular film style. The institute's goals—especially as advanced by the early 1930s—included the integration of film theory, historiography, and methodology with production, resulting in its institutional ability to grant academic degrees (university level by 1930, and advanced post-graduate degrees by 1934) not only in aspects of film production but also research—both theoretical and historical—something that was unique anywhere in the world at that time and essentially the forerunner to university film studies programmes as they exist today.

Unlike any other film educational institution of that period, training within the film institute was understood to combine practice with theory, embracing artistic experimentation as way to produce knowledge about cinema, and vice versa. Central to this project of institutionalization of cinema as a field of study was the goal of creating a major film archive and a museum of cinema.

Notwithstanding the constantly escalating threat of administrative purges, and problems with infrastructure, the years between 1933 and 1937 (the period that coincided exactly with Leyda's stay in the Soviet Union) proved to be the most productive in the institute's history in terms of realizing its ambitious research platform. It was also a time of constant changes and institutional reshufflings. Ultimately, it was the pedagogical and administrative work by two figures—Sergei Eisenstein and Nikolai Lebedev—that would be fundamental to the institute's growth and development, and the unique research status achieved by VGIK during the 1930s. Attending the institute during these crucial years of its experimental practice, and through his personal proximity to Eisenstein, Leyda witnessed the fleeting but powerful moment in which the modern film institute was in the process of being first imagined. The ambition of this pioneering institution was truly ahead of its time as a model of pedagogy and research. For many of those who participated in and witnessed its early construction (and lived to tell the tale), it would serve as an inspiration for many years to come.

Despite his canonical status as a theorist and film-maker, the importance of Eisenstein's institutional and pedagogical work tends to be largely unacknowledged. This is despite the fact that not only were the theoretical ideas he is so well known for often explored and refined through his teaching, but also his vision for the institutional development of cinema as an academic discipline was directly linked to his intellectual production. Notably, his monumental *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, was in fact

developed as part of his course planning for the research section of VGIK.¹⁰ Eisenstein's broader goal was, indeed, to fully integrate creative, theoretical, and pedagogical practice, and VGIK in the 1930s provided a space to realize this ambition. In fact, between 1932 and 1935 Eisenstein's activities were entirely centred on the institute: both his pedagogical activities and his administrative and organizational work were uninterrupted by any production work as he was consistently denied the opportunity to make films during that period. But even before assuming a permanent position in the institute, starting from the late 1920s, Eisenstein was already involved in the debates on film education and what it should entail. In his continuous efforts to expand the kind of education offered at VGIK, Eisenstein published polemics, insisting on the need to extend film education beyond a practical curriculum, allowing students time to develop an artistic sensibility as well as master the foundations of dialectical thinking. Complaining about the inadequacy of cram courses in "*diamat*" (the abbreviation of "dialectical materialism") and lack of aesthetic education, he compares rushing students into the film industry like a "shock worker mother" who decides to support the Five-Year Plan by giving birth in seven months rather than nine.¹¹

After years of reorganizations, and following intense debates in the press and among cultural bureaucrats, in 1930 the film school finally attained the status of an institution of higher education. While Eisenstein would become central to shaping the direction of the institute, he was not alone. The other key figure in this respect was Nikolai Lebedev. Throughout the 1920s, Lebedev had established himself as a director of educational cinema, having directed five feature-length documentary films at the studio for *kulturfilms*. He had also been actively publishing essays on various aspects of cinema and started working on a dissertation on film theory in the graduate school of the Communist Academy. He initially started teaching in the newly formed faculty of cinematography, leading its newsreel department. Given his keen interest in theoretical questions and pedagogical practices, he quickly became the head of the institute-wide committee on the methodology of cinema. Lebedev started teaching at VGIK in the fall of 1931, just before Eisenstein assumed a permanent position there as well, first creating the department of film history and theory. By 1934, became director of VGIK, which he remained until 1937. Many decades after his

10 See Sergei Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, ed. Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

11 Sergei Eisenstein, "Pis'mo v GIK," *Izbrannye* 5, no. 40, quoted in Vance Kepley, "Eisenstein as Pedagogue," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 4 (1993): 5.

dismissal, he continued to teach at the institute and was instrumental in the creation and preservation of its internal archive.¹²

Lebedev and Eisenstein shared a common ambition to create a methodological and pedagogical apparatus for the systematic development of leading research in film studies. In the 1920s, prior to the two men taking leading positions, the core course of study at the institute focused on the training of actors, with workshops offered for directors, screenwriters, and editors (including a special animation workshop). By the early 1930s, perhaps the best organized—and largest—faculty was that of cinematography. Its programme understood the work of cameramen as a combination of both technical and aesthetic criteria and skills, elevating it to artistic status. From its very beginning, the faculty was able to boast many of the most famous Soviet cameramen, such as Vladimir Nilsen or Anatolii Golovnia, among their ranks. It was also highly specialized methodologically, differentiating between the training of cinematographers for fiction, newsreel (documentary), and educational (especially scientific) cinema.

As part of the reorganization of the institute in the early 1930s (right before Leyda's arrival in Russia), the programme of study was extended to three years, and subsequently included considerably more political education, including the introduction of such required courses as Leninism, Marxist socialist art (different from art history or art theory) as well as history and theory of literature, sociology of the arts, political economy, economics, and the rational organization of production.¹³ It seems unlikely, however, that the international students such as Leyda would be expected to follow this curriculum.

As a response to the accusations of a lack of theoretical, methodological, and ideological cohesion, research and pedagogical methodology of the study of cinema were given new emphasis and institutional priority as a way to solidify its apparatus. Criticism and theory were clearly conceptualized as a way to introduce and enforce greater control over a *uniform* model for film scholarship. On the part of the administration of the institute, this was an attempt to demonstrate that they were moving away from the “formalist tendencies” and multiplicity of positions and points of view that characterized the 1920s cultural debates in the Soviet Union, and towards

12 Nikolai Lebedev, “Ot shkoly k VUZu” [“From a school to an institute of higher learning”], in *K istorii VGIKa* [About the history of VGIK], 1 (1919–1934), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2000), 350–55.

13 Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev, eds., *K istorii VGIKa* [About the history of VGIK], 2 (1919–1934) (Moscow: VGIK, 2000), 214.

a unified “Marxist-Leninist method,” which gradually came to be expected of all cultural production. This “artistic method”—the development and articulation of which was supposed to be one of the goals of education within the institute—in this context became an early code word for “socialist realist method,” used in direct opposition to “the leftist excesses.”¹⁴

At the same time, while this process was obviously enforced from above, making the development of a unified artistic method a priority also attracted many of the most brilliant theorists and scholars, who shared the ambition of creating an institutional space to further develop a theoretical platform for the scholarly study of cinema. Many of them, such as Eisenstein, were themselves known for their “formalist excesses.” With Eisenstein’s return as VGIK’s head of directing in 1932, he immediately threw himself into the methodological and theoretical challenge of developing a programme of systematic study of film direction. This included everything from designing entrance exams to the evaluation process, and, of course, devising a complex and theoretically rigorous course of study. Right at the start, Eisenstein offers the following list of conditions, as summarized by Kepley:

(1) He would not spend his classtime showing movies or discussing them, claiming that “it will not be from the corpses of outmoded [film] works that we shall examine the processes of production.” His charges would have ample opportunity to see films through other VGIK avenues, including its new cinematheque. (2) He would not work from available scripts since they employ pedestrian, nonexpressive language. Scenes from literature would offer material for staging and editing. (3) The artistic heritage (novels, plays, paintings) would be worked right into the direction workshop, not isolated as background disciplines.¹⁵

It is easy to see from this description that Eisenstein’s approach to the teaching and study of cinema, both in its practical and theoretical aspects, was geared towards integrating cinema within the broader history of the arts, contrary to contemporary assumptions about “medium specificity” as the basis for film studies. The kind of erudite knowledge Eisenstein envisioned for the students of cinema (certainly mirroring his own), however, would prove to be a challenge to implement.

14 L. Zarkhin, “Prevratit’ GIK v moshchnyi kino-VTUZ. O putiakh razvitiia so Vsesoiuznogo instituta kinematografii,” *Kino* 37 (July 6, 1931), in *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], I (1919–1934), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2000), 149.

15 Kepley, “Eisenstein as Pedagogue,” 7.

Looking at who was attending VGIK at the time that Leyda was at the school gives further insight into the social context that informed his experience. As a result of the newly instituted quotas, in 1932 the institute reported that 76 per cent of the newly registered students were from working-class or peasant backgrounds, and 68 per cent were members of Komsomol (the youth league of the Communist Party); 44 per cent represented national and ethnic minorities, including three foreign students. Since the required educational minimum was raised to nine years of formal schooling, the overall number of applicants was significantly lower than it had been previously.¹⁶ The admission process was being conducted under pressure to meet the required quotas of the students of working-class and peasant origin (until 1934 this was supposed to represent 75 per cent of admitted students), and students from the “provinces” (both, outside of the city centres and beyond the Russian Federation)—while simultaneously increasing the educational and artistic standards, which unsurprisingly, would quickly prove to be quite a disastrous combination.

By the early 1930s, the film institute had already attracted some international students: thus, Leyda joined a small but active group of foreigners headed by Herbert Marshall (a British writer and film and theatre director, who spent the last twenty years of his life in the US, as a director of the Center for Soviet and Eastern European Studies in the Performing Arts at the University of Southern Illinois). Eisenstein and Lebedev had plans to open film education to international students on a much greater scale. As Leyda in *Kino* quotes from his own letter to a friend, in 1933:

“GIK is going under a general supervision of Eisenstein this year—with his plans (at least for the regisseurs courses) and unifying method. Part of this plan is the formation within GIK of a foreign section with lectures and lessons in foreign languages. The first one to set up will be one in the English language. (Getting excited?) It should begin functioning about the first of December under his supervision and the direct leadership of Marshall. The patron of the foreign section is Mezhrabpom, who will take care of entries into the country, tuition at the school, and stipends for each pupil.” Though a few more foreign students arrived, nothing further came of this plan.¹⁷

16 “Itogi priema v GIK,” *Kino* 61 (October 30, 1932), in *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], I (1919–1934), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2000), 139.

17 Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.

The ambitious plans for the internationalization of the institute never materialized, while the gap between the educational level of the students attending the institute and the expectations placed on the curriculum continued to widen. The increasing politicization of education was both motivated and exacerbated by the intense political cleansings sweeping the country. Even academic debates on the topic of education and professionalization were mandated to yield “concrete positive results” instead of “scholastic word-pushing.” The relationship between Soyuzkino, the umbrella organization controlling cinema in the USSR, and VGIK was strained: Soyuzkino regularly failed to increase the institute’s budget or provide internships and jobs to its graduates. It was announced that the development of a technological infrastructure would be a priority, but no funds were committed. Achieving the actual professionalization of its cadre was where the institute was clearly failing. In this sense, we see the tensions which will mark film schools all over the world for decades to come between the demands of “the industry” and the inherently academic nature of film education—even in its most experimental forms—tensions which would become familiar to Leyda in a very different context several decades later.

In the meantime, Lebedev and Eisenstein’s solution to this problem was unequivocally in the direction of greater scholarly emphasis. In response to attacks on the institute for failing in its mission to supply the industry with highly trained professionals (based on the extremely low numbers of graduates actually working in cinema), Lebedev and Eisenstein began to petition for a new academic model. They identified the problem as stemming from the fact that young students lacked knowledge of either the realities of cinematic production or of culture more generally, and could therefore not be trained to be serious film professionals in such a short period of time. They would argue that for a director to get all the necessary training—academic and practical—to prepare for a successful career would require between six and eight years of education. Since the institute did not have the existing infrastructure (material as well as pedagogical) necessary for such a prolonged course of study, and the film industry urgently needed highly qualified specialists, Lebedev in particular proposed admitting only those students with prior professional or academic experience, limiting the number of applicants and raising the acceptance criteria. As a result, the length of this new advanced degree was reduced to two years. In effect, this also meant a radical departure from the existing quota system, which would now be met by having a separate track for “worker students” who were not integrated into the general curriculum. After an intense campaign, a compromise was achieved, and Lebedev succeeded in changing the status of the institute to

that of a specialized academy, which indicated a post-graduate university level of education.

In addition to the inclusion of the graduate school, this change had a particular impact on the training of directors. In order to raise the bar for admittance, the institute accepted applicants for a special advanced (academy-type) degree, who had already had significant artistic or production experience, and identified the main goal of such training to be “to master the knowledge of the treasures of the world culture and the achievements of the new, the highest and most perfect culture of the socialist period.”¹⁸ After the initial screening of applications, those admitted to entrance exams had to pass a special directing assignment designed by Eisenstein. In the first year of its existence, ninety people applied to this newly formed department, only twenty-three of whom were allowed to take the entrance exams; fifteen were accepted as a result. The programme of study was also changed considerably: for example, as part of their curriculum, students were required to attend twenty-five plays staged in Moscow in their first year as part of their required course on theatre history. The programme also included a two-week-long trip to Leningrad to visit museums as part of their art history course. Distinguished figures such as Alexander Dovzhenko, Grigorii Roshal', Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Medvedkin, Boris Barnet, and Béla Balázs were brought in to teach and participate in research. The much-contested internship programme was finally established for students to be able to go through practical training at the main film studios in the country; by the late 1930s graduates, unlike in earlier years, were placed at (mostly regional) film studios and given the chance to make their own films.

Somewhat ironically, as a result of this change in admission requirements, Leyda, lacking prior education or formal professional experience, would be forced to stop officially attending the institute. He did, however, continue to audit Eisenstein's workshop for the duration of his stay in Moscow, and although he left VGIK without any formal degree, he was still able to witness the drastic transformation that the institute was undergoing during that period.

Particularly important for the development of film studies (and specifically film historiography) was the establishment of the Sector for Scientific Research (NIS) by Eisenstein and Lebedev as part of VGIK. Its goal was to coordinate all the research and development of instructional materials,

18 “Slushateli rezhisserskogo fakul'teta VGIKa. Otkrytoe pis'mo,” *Kino-gazeta* 4 (January 22, 1935), in *Istorii VGIKa* [About the history of VGIK], II (1935–1945), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2004), 224.

as well as their publication and dissemination. NIS was set up as a semi-autonomous structure within the institute that had its own personnel in addition to those drawn from the existing faculty across different departments, and other artists and scholars brought in on a short-term basis to participate in individual projects.¹⁹ The specific goals of NIS were organized around two clusters. The first was the development of infrastructure for research and preservation, such as the creation of a film archive, film museum, and a research library. The second focused on the organization of research, both individual and collaborative, leading to the publication of instructional and scholarly materials to be used for teaching at the institute and its newly created graduate school. In the years between 1933 and 1938, NIS was responsible for producing the first systematized reference sources, including filmographies and bibliographies of Soviet and foreign films, archives of scripts and other production-related materials, and press clippings and other specialized film-related collections.²⁰ A series of research publications also took place under their auspices, although due to publishing capacity limitations (the institute did not have its own publishing house), many of the dissertations and edited collections representing their research either came out in fragments through journals and newspapers, or were not published at all. A large-scale project for translations of works on films from other languages was also undertaken at the same time—though that, too, would only ever be partially realized.

The creation of the first systematic film archive also took place during this time. While VGIK began collecting materials towards the creation of the museum of cinema as early as 1923, the regular practice at the time—in the Soviet Union, as well as everywhere else—was to destroy film prints once they were no longer in active circulation. VGIK started collecting prints of mostly foreign films in the late 1920s to use as illustrations for courses on the history of cinema. By the mid-1930s, the collection had grown to include several thousand titles, making it the first and the largest film archive in the Soviet Union at the time, with a particularly strong selection of early cinema.

This focus on the development of film archive was certainly not unique to VGIK: the time Leyda spent in Russia coincides with the very moment of

19 Lebedev, "Ot shkoly v VUZu," 365.

20 For more on this, see Natalie Ryabchikova, "When Was Soviet Cinema Born? The Institutionalization of Soviet Film Studies and the Problems of Periodization," in *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945*, ed. Malte Hagener (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 118–42.

the formal institutionalization of film archives in Europe (starting Germany in 1934) and the US, resulting in the formation in 1938 of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). It was as part of their efforts to build an international network that John Abbott and Iris Barry, the founders of the MoMA Film Library (soon to become the US member of FIAF and the hosts of the first FIAF conference in 1938²¹) met Leyda in Moscow in 1936 and recruited him as assistant curator of the Film Library. Their original plans to include VGIK in their international network failed due to ideological conflicts between the US and Soviet representatives, as well VGIK's lack of support in the higher echelons of the Soviet cultural apparatus (Souz'kino and Tsentrarkhiv), which were in the process of developing a centralized film archive, one that was designed to address the directives of the party and not the particular plans of the (largely ideologically untrustworthy, from the point of view of the party) film school. Thus, it was not the archive of the film institute but the State Film Collection, Gosfil'mofond, established in 1937 that would become the country's main film archive, eventually joining FIAF in 1957 (after having VGIK's holdings transferred there in 1948, the year of Eisenstein's death). This exclusion of the nascent Soviet film archives from the initial formation of FIAF has had the effect of obscuring VGIK's efforts, especially in attempting to integrate archival operations with film education, and concealing the uniqueness of the institution's initial vision.

The close attention that the Soviet state awarded this issue is not surprising. In fact, preservation and archiving was designated as having primary importance for the post-revolutionary state. As early as 1918, Lenin signed the "Decree of the Reorganization and Centralization of Archival Affairs of the Russian Federation," and although film was not explicitly included in the decree, as part of the process of nationalization of film production there were discussions in the press regarding the need for creation of a national film and photo archive, a "film museum of history."²² However, the concept of a national "kino-photo-archive" was focused on the material which was seen as having national (Soviet) historical significance—nor necessarily related to any assumptions of artistic or cultural value of cinema. The subsequent 1926 decree which specifically ordered the inclusion of negatives (of both photographs and films) in the newly created Central Archive of the Russian Federation concerned only "documents of historical-revolutionary topics"

21 The original members of FIAF included the British Film Institute, the Cinémathèque française, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin.

22 Vasiliï Lebedev, "Kinomatograf i istoriia," *Kino-gazeta* 16 (April 1918).

(i.e. newsreels, mostly filmed in Russia and Soviet Union), excluding all fiction and instructional (educational or scientific) films.²³

However, the attention brought to the status of films (and stills) and the need for their preservation in the 1920s, and the general “archive fever” of the post-revolutionary period certainly allowed for greater urgency behind the idea of creating a film archive as part of the film school. However, because of its status as an educational institution, VGIK was therefore not under control of either the film or archival state governing bodies, allowing it a greater flexibility in defining its own criteria for selection and organization of the material—but also resulting in considerably less support from the party and the state.

What makes VGIK’s efforts quite unique as compared to either comparable projects in Europe and the US, or the other archival projects within the Soviet Union at the time, is its expansive conception for accession criteria—encompassing a great variety of cinematic productions, from newsreels (which would be the staple for most historical archives), to educational and other forms of “useful” films (which tended to only be included as part of special collections, such as those planned by the failed archive of the Institute of Educational Cinematography in Rome, or of the educational wing of the British Film Institute), as well as all fiction films, both Soviet and foreign, with particular attention given to films considered for their artistic value (as part of the creation of a cinematic canon—as would be the case for most cinematheques and museum collections) but also films valued as material for the reconstructing the broader contexts for the study of historical development of cinema, such as its technological and industrial foundations. Such an acquisition policy was rooted in the primacy of scholarly objectives for the archive, which exceeded considerations of national patrimony or concerns for creating the documentary basis for the correct ideological interpretation of historical events.

It is worth noting that in general, one of the distinguishing features of early Soviet state’s approach to the institutionalization of archives has been its expansiveness: the 1918 decree, among other things awarded the Main Administration of Archival Affairs (soon to be renamed Central Archive, Tsentrarkhiv) unprecedented access to (and, subsequently, control of) all records, as according to the decree state institutions did not have the right to destroy any individual files, institutional records, or any other documents without written permission of the Central Archive. Even if in practice such total preservation proved to be impossible, the decree demonstrates the

23 V. M. Magidov, *Zrimaya pamyat’ istorii* (Moskva, 1984), 117.

intense concern with posterity and cultural heritage of the new Soviet state—and ultimately accounts for the kind of all-inclusive approach to archiving, which came to characterize Soviet archives, certainly including film archives.²⁴ So, the lack of state support of the VGIK library was not due to its particular conception of film preservation but rather to issues of political control.

Gosfil'mofond would, likewise, embrace the same all-encompassing approach as to acquisition and preservation.²⁵ The main official impetus for its creation of was the need to create the infrastructure which would enable the national film industry to keep copies of all of its productions, in addition to consolidating the existing collections of films as historical documents. VGIK, on the other hand, was explicitly concerned with the creation of a material legacy of film as a cultural, technological, and aesthetic form for the purposes of teaching, research, and artistic creation. The emphasis on cinema as an art form (and not only a form of documentation or didactic material) whose formal aesthetic dimensions constitute their own historical categories makes this conception close to those shared by Henri Langlois, Iris Barry, and Olwen Vaughan, in many ways combining the ambitions of many of FIAF's founding figures.²⁶

Inseparable from the questions of criteria were the issues of use and access. Unlike VGIK, Gosfil'mofond (the State Film Archive) was conceived of primarily as a repository (initially identified as *fil'mokhranilische*—literally, film storage), and like all other archives in the Soviet Union had classified and restricted access to many of its collections.²⁷ The conception of the film archive at VGIK, instead, was inseparable from its use—by researchers and students (if not, admittedly, by the “general public”). What would constitute such “use” would depend on the self-understanding of the scholarly and pedagogical mission of the institution. And in the case of VGIK of the 1930s, as we just saw, this self-understanding was as ambitious as it was expansive.

The rich collection of American and European cinema (which included the full range of now-canonical films and film-makers) enhanced the courses on the history of “foreign cinema.” These courses at VGIK were taught by Feofan Shipulinskii, one of the first Russian/Soviet film historians. Shipulinskii started as a journalist and translator during the pre-revolutionary period,

24 Kelly A. Kolar, “Bourgeois Specialists and Red Professionals in 1920s Soviet Archival Development,” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 53, no. 3 (2018): 243–70.

25 Vladimir Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond: Zemliaichnaia poliana* (Moscow, 2005), 68.

26 See Christophe Dupin, “First Tango in Paris: The Birth of FIAF, 1936–38,” *Journal of Film Preservation* 88 (April 2013): 43–61.

27 Malyshev, 69.

and began teaching at the film school from its first iterations in 1919. His film history courses started with a long prehistory of the technological apparatus of cinema, requiring students to spend considerable time learning about “thaumatropes, intermittent movement, Maltese crosses, Marey’s guns, zoetropes, magic lanterns” and memorizing the names and inventions of “Uchatius, Kircher and Anschütz” for the exams. Only after this prolonged history were students exposed to “Griffith, Mack Sennett, Linder, Chaplin, Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Monty Banks and Douglas [Fairbanks] [...] as well as Rene Clair, Fritz Lang and the whole “German” school [i.e. German Expressionism].”²⁸

Such a historical detour may have appeared a mere eccentricity (as it did to Iurenev, who came to be a highly influential film scholar and critic in the Soviet Union), but it is also worth noting that Eisenstein’s great unfinished project, which comes to us in the form of *Notes for a General History of Cinema*, starts its narrative of film history with cave drawings, and often transcending all medium-specificity in favour of a more all-encompassing and dynamic vision of artistic media.²⁹ While this approach may seem all too familiar to those of us who have been educated on such promiscuous understanding of “prehistories” of the cinematic apparatus, it is worth noting that this kind of a “deep history” was not part of the educational or scholarly programme at the time of the institutionalization of film studies as an academic discipline in Europe and North America (as well as, to some degree, in the Soviet Union) in the 1960s, as it was largely concerned with textual analysis and film theoretical discourses.³⁰ This process had the effect of obliterating this historiographic approach from what would be constructed as the (new) foundations of the discipline. It was only when the collection and preservation of early and silent cinema and the (re)conceptualization of a cinema in the *longue durée* as part and consequence of the so-called archival and cultural turn in film historiography took place in the 1970s–1980s, that these insights come back into focus in both scholarship and film curricula worldwide. And, indeed, Leyda played no small part in this process, both as teacher and scholar (it is certainly not accidental that some of the most influential US film historians, in particularly of early and silent cinema—Charles Harpole, Tom Gunning, and Charles Musser—were Leyda’s students).

28 Rostislav Iurenev, *Moi milyi VGIK* (Moscow: VGIK, 1994), quoted in *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], II (1935–1945), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2004), 302–3.

29 See Eisenstein, *Notes for a General History of Cinema*.

30 For example, Sadoul in his 1946 *Histoire générale du cinéma* begins vol. 1 with optical machines—albeit certainly not all going as far back as Kircher.

Leyda's departure from Moscow coincided with the beginning of a rapid decline within VGIK: despite the overall support from the government, the growth and reorganization of the institute was already accompanied by continuous ideological attacks and political purges, which created constant pressure on all pedagogical practices. Research on Russian and Soviet film history in particular became a very politically charged and potentially dangerous field of study, as Natalie Ryabchikova explores.³¹ In 1935, a special committee was set up to review all the materials at the newly formed archive in order to assess their ideological appropriateness and confiscate any counter-revolutionary content.³² By 1936, another committee was created to review all teaching materials, plans of study, and research produced by the institute for any signs of "formalism and other kinds of excesses in the theory and practice of cinematic arts."³³ This was followed by an evening of "discussion on formalism and naturalism" intended to underscore the danger of such aesthetic phenomena, attended by most of the leading faculty of the institute. Despite his attempts to mediate the political pressures, Lebedev ultimately failed to keep the forces of Stalinist cultural conformity at bay. The final break came in 1937, when Eisenstein, following his "political and ideological artistic errors in the making of *Bezhin Meadow*," was fired (temporarily—he was reinstated in 1938) by direct order of Boris Shumiatskii, then still the head of the State Management of Cinema (Soyuzkino). Shumiatskii would himself be arrested and sentenced to death only a year later. Lebedev was also removed from his position as director as NIS closed down, and with it, the film archive and all the plans for the creation of a film museum. By 1938, VGIK was officially reorganized yet again, reversing all prior changes and getting rid of the "academy-type," two-year higher degrees in directing and cinematography. All the research in the institute was now to be geared toward the development of textbooks. The wide range of scholarly work produced on the earlier period of film history (in particularly the period before the 1917 revolution) would never be published. Several of these historians would end up in Gulags.

In conclusion, I want to briefly suggest two additional contexts for placing Leyda's experience in Soviet Russia directly in relation to his own point of origin in the ongoing efforts to legitimate and institutionalize the study of

31 Ryabchikova, "When Was Soviet Cinema Born?," especially pp. 133–37.

32 "Prikaz 51 po VGIKu" (April 19, 1935), in *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], II (1935–1945), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2004), 18.

33 "Iz prikaza no. 24 po VGIKu" (March 17, 1936), in *K istorii VGIKa* [To the history of VGIK], II (1935–1945), ed. Vladimir Vinogradov and Konstantin Ognev (Moscow: VGIK, 2004), 55.

film. Two other examples of contemporary efforts to give cinema a status of a serious cultural medium and an academic discipline, this time in the US, stand out here. One is Harry Potamkin's unrealized plans for the alternative radical film school and film library, and the other is Iris Barry's fully realized institutionalization of film and film study through the Museum of Modern Art; both projects to which Leyda was personally connected.

Potamkin's work and ideas were an important point of reference for Leyda, both before and during his stay in Russia. Just prior to his departure, Potamkin and Leyda took part in the film courses and screenings at the New School for Social Research linked to the Workers Film and Photo League. Potamkin had already travelled to the Soviet Union and established the very connections that Leyda would draw on when arriving in Moscow. Potamkin's own plans for a Marxist film library and school (published posthumously in 1933 by *Hound and Horn*) similarly sought a way of mediating between the Soviet experience and that of the culture of the US socialist movement and its aspirations for the transformation of the working-class culture. And we know from Leyda's notes in *Kino* that he was not only familiar with and inspired by Potamkin's ideas and plans, but that he attempted to recruit his Soviet teachers (Eisenstein and others)³⁴ in helping realize them.

While Potamkin's project came to an end with his untimely death in 1933, perhaps the most consequential development in the history of archival preservation and institutionalization of cinema in the US ultimately took place in New York in the 1930s through the Museum of Modern Art, particularly through the efforts of Iris Barry.³⁵ In the summer of 1936, Barry was on a European tour to collect prints for the newly established MoMA film collection and came to Moscow, where she met Leyda and offered him a position as an assistant curator at the Department of Film at MoMA. Leyda left Moscow for New York via Berlin, Paris, and London, acquiring films for the MoMA collection in each city, and for a few subsequent years he would become actively involved in Barry's efforts to build their film library. These efforts included not only expanding the actual film archive, but also creating an educational section, which would be responsible for the production and publication of scholarly books on cinema and circulating them throughout the US and Canada in order to establish a foundation for formal film education.

34 Leyda writes about it, for example, in 1946 in his article "Advanced Training for Film Workers: Russia," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1946): 279–86.

35 See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: MoMA and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

It may be instructive to note that while it is clear that being exposed to a rare example of a highly organized and developed archival structure at VGIK must have impressed and served as an inspiration to Leyda, whose efforts for many subsequent decades in the US lead in the similar direction, the film library and archive at MoMA differed from VGIK in the most fundamental of ways. While at VGIK, Leyda participated in the efforts towards building a state archive as part of an educational institution of higher learning whose goal was training professionals for the national film industry, while MoMA's film library was a private art museum's efforts to educate the (elite) public, to create a cultivated audience for cinema. Yet both, VGIK and MoMA understood this to be part of cinema's educational missions (as VGIK certainly had a significant presence of educational and newsreel film-making as part of its understanding of the cinematic institution). And the role of the archive in both cases was closely linked to legitimizing cinema as a cultural form and film history as a legitimate field presumed to be of value to professionals (whether in the academy or the film industry) and to the general public alike; this assumption, it should be noted, was not widely shared in the 1930s.

As part of this initiative, MoMA's Film Library also developed an active programme of visiting writers, film-makers, and researchers that included Paul Rotha, Fernand Léger, Luis Buñuel, and Siegfried Kracauer. Leyda's position was likewise financed through the Rockefeller Fund, which supported the preparation of films for the library's circulating programmes, the research of students, writers, and other Film Library staff, the acquisition of material for museum collections, the preparation of an index system for the library's films, and the regular screening of films. Thus Leyda's involvement was instrumental to the development of this project, and he remained a key influence in its trajectory until his politically motivated dismissal in 1940, when the MoMA Film Library came under direct attack for the pro-communist stance of its programming choices. Leyda was the one identified as responsible for the "pro-Soviet Communist Party political propaganda" in this regard.³⁶

By 1942, having lost his position at the MoMA, Leyda moved to California to work for Warner Bros. as a technical adviser on Russian subjects and began

36 The main attacks on Leyda were made by Seymour Stern, one of the co-editors of the journal *Experimental Cinema*, on the pages of the socialist paper *The New Leader*, which early on took an anti-Stalinist position. Stern continued campaigning against Leyda and his role in the MoMA Film Library, including writing a letter to Nelson Rockefeller, whose foundation supported much of the MoMA film project. For more, see Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 272–73.

to focus more heavily on his translations of Eisenstein. It would not be until the 1950s that he would resume his film education and archival work (first in France, and then all over both Eastern and Western Europe, and by 1959, in China). However, well before that, his writings would have profound impact. Already by the end of the 1940s, the “Film Notes” he prepared for the MoMA Film Library were being used by university film courses, film societies, and clubs throughout the United States and Canada, and continued to be used for decades, thus shaping film education years before Leyda’s professional teaching career was formally established in the early 1970s. For him, the archive could be used to narrate a history of cinema, enabling this story to emerge with its dramatic complexity intact. Such a history has much in common with the story of his own life: one that dwells on discontinuities (geographic and temporal) and improbable conjunctures; the paradoxes and tensions were left unresolved, unexpected futures emerging from past failures.

We can see these complexities and parallels in the way that VGIK’s ideas from the 1930s (in the midst of Stalinist repressions) unexpectedly resonate with the 1970s return to the social, cultural, and political history of cinema. We can see them in the way that both Eisenstein’s and Potamkin’s ideas find a realization in Cuban film education of the 1950s and 1960s through the work of José Manuel Valdés-Rodríguez, who in the 1930s was the Latin American correspondent for the journal *Experimental Cinema* (ironically, the very journal whose co-editor was instrumental to Leyda’s removal from the MoMA project), and who also visited the Soviet Union and met Eisenstein in the mid-1930s. Thus the same networks laid the foundation of film education in Cuba of the 1950s (and further, after the 1959 revolution), and so many other historical conjunctures that formed Jay Leyda’s life and legacy.

In fact, one of the most striking aspects of Leyda’s understanding of the archive’s role as a source, foundation, and vehicle for the production and dissemination of cinematic historical knowledge, which emerges as a result of an international travel trajectory that began in Russia, is a fine-tuned appreciation for the particularities of its geographical (and geopolitical) positioning. Leyda’s engagement with the archive throughout his career was truly global, thereby producing a different geography of film history than American film culture typically allowed for at the time. From his stay in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, to his work in China in the 1950s–1990s, and his participation in the international film festival scene of the 1960s–1980s (in particular the festivals within the Soviet Bloc and the Global South), his travels and reflections on the cinemas provide us with a distinct—and early—vision of “world cinema” that is clearly linked to forms of both,

Marxist internationalism and modernist cosmopolitanism. By the 1960s, Leyda's regular contacts range from the radical political experimental film-maker and key figure in the Indian New Wave, Mrinal Sen, to Marxist critic Alex Viary, who was crucial for the formation of Brazilian Cinema Novo. This global vision is also reflected in his writings.³⁷

And Leyda's words perhaps resonate and inspire more now than they did when they were written in the 1970s, serving as a moving tribute to the difficulty of coming to terms with the turbulent history of the last century—of cinema, of political hopes and dreams, of opportunities lost, and unrealized pasts yet to be (re)discovered—words that to me come to offer more of an authentic historiographic methodology than entire scholarly volumes on *Histoires croisées*. The more I continue to immerse myself in the messy and self-contradictory business of film history I find:

An open investigation of any part of film history reveals a continuing drama that is more comfortable to conceal than to reveal. It takes courage to probe into this drama of lost opportunities, cutthroat competition, too little money, too much money, moral contradictions, defeats that were almost victories, victories in the face of impossible obstacles, the roles of chance and irrationality, personal brutalities, film failures that found audiences in the future or in other countries—to probe these, and emerge with undiminished enthusiasm for this extraordinary synthesis is the real test.³⁸

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37 For a strong formulation of a "truly international film history," and what we would now call both transnational and global, see Leyda's "Towards a New Film History," 40.

38 *Ibid.*, 41.

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7 A Film-maker's Film Histories

Adjacency Historiography and the Art of the Anthology

Benoît Turquety

Abstract

An artist should probably not be a historian of their art. But when they are, they produce specific kinds of histories. In this chapter, I argue that their position entails a reluctance towards literary forms of history writing, towards explanations and comments. Film-makers aspiring to historical construction have rather relied on paratactic forms of discourse, mainly through non-literary practices such as film programming. This idea implies a reconsideration of such endeavours within a wider network of mostly modernist conceptions of collecting and curating as historiographical projects. Juxtaposition, montage, and blank spaces are then the tools of a historiography based on the fundamental principle of adjacency, and the anthology becomes the major form of the artist's history of their own art.

Keywords: film history, historiography, poetry, anthologies, modernism

As any other science, history seems to require a scholar that is safely exterior to the object of study, in a supposedly “objective” position. But, of course, in the case of history that is not possible: no historical object can be considered completely separate from its historian, as ramifications extend from object to subject through the very historiographical work—as Michel de Certeau, among others, argued in *The Writing of History*. Yet there are differences in degrees of relations, in levels of implication.

These problems relating to the historian's position regarding the objects of their attention are probably more important in the fields that are not clearly structured, and where time distances remain relatively small. Film history, for instance, has developed for quite a while without an established academic structure. Early film historians were technicians of the trade—W. K. L. Dickson, Eugène Trutat, Charles Francis Jenkins, Henry V. Hopwood,

among many others. Most of them were in fact directly involved: working with either T. A. Edison, É.-J. Marey, or for themselves, their histories aimed at justifying their own precedence or prominence. Around the 1930s, a new distance was established as historians came rather from film criticism—Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, for instance. But it was always more complicated: Paul Rotha, Hans Richter, and Jean Mitry have been important film historians, but they were also film-makers. Mitry has moreover been involved in several institutions, from the Cinémathèque française to the IDHEC, the French national film school. Iris Barry and Henri Langlois have written critical and historical essays while being curators in major archives, as was still later the case with Eileen Bowser.

These multiple roles could have presented as some sort of obstacle, preventing them from claiming the authority of a proper historian's position—particularly those who were film-makers. In fact, these other job titles rather conferred on them a legitimacy that, in the absence of a proper academic field, was not easy to ascertain. Being involved in the film-making industry was about the only available criterion of expertise. Still, that authority came with potential partiality, all the more so when the supposed historians were young artists who had to fight for their recognition within a more or less hostile milieu—a situation essential to modernist legitimization tactics. History may then become a manifesto of sorts, while nonetheless subsumed under a claim for objectivity.

This tension makes for a complicated, perhaps impossible, epistemological stance within historiography. In this chapter, I will argue that such a strained position entails a reluctance towards literary forms of history writing, towards explanations and comments. Film-makers aspiring to forms of historical construction have rather relied on paratactic forms of discourse, mainly through non-literary practices such as film programming. This idea implies a reconsideration of such endeavours within a wider network of mostly modernist conceptions of collecting and curating as historiographical projects. Juxtaposition, montage, and blank spaces are then the tools of a historiography based on the fundamental principle of adjacency, and the anthology becomes the major form of the artist's history of their own art.

A Historical Exhibition

In 1976, the French National Museum of Modern Art together with the National Centre for Art and Culture Georges-Pompidou (CNAC) published a collective book titled *Une histoire du cinéma*. It was not an academic

collection, but an exhibition catalogue, with all the distinctive features of the genre. It began with a series of articles by specialists and artists, and a sort of *catalogue raisonné* of the exhibition: the filmographies of all the film-makers involved. The rest—127 pages, more than half of the book—showed illustrations from the presented works, mostly frame enlargements and photographs of the film prints or of the shooting. These pages did not bear any words—names and dates appearing only in the final list of captions. In a way, a rather traditional exhibition catalogue.

The exhibition itself though was not traditional at all. It was in fact a programme of 212 films, by ninety-five artists, from 1895 to 1975, from the Lumière brothers to Marcel Hanoun. They were shown in 30 screenings, each projected twice (one evening at 7:30, and the next day at 2:30 pm). The same films were also screened in parallel at the Cinémathèque française under the general title “Anthology Cinema Presents,” which slightly changes the perspective. In both institutions, the films were exhibited in strict chronological order, the works being grouped by artist within each year. At the Cinémathèque française, the programmes were inserted in the normal schedule: they lasted between one and two hours, and could be seen independently from one another. At the CNAC, the programmes lasted three to four hours, and could only be accessed through a subscription for the entire event. In a normal exhibition, of course, you wouldn't pay just part of the price to see only the Picasso painting you're interested in. The CNAC had thus adopted for the film presentations a model of spectatorship based on the museum: the exhibition was to be apprehended as a whole. If the traditional film programme is primarily the opportunity to see certain particular films, the CNAC subscription system moved the general coherence and claims to the fore. That event was not meant to be disseminated into the presentation of singular works; it was to be understood first and foremost as *curated*.

Several people were involved, at various degrees, in the selection of the works, among them Annette Michelson, Dominique Noguez, a French historian of experimental cinema, and Claudine Eizykman and Guy Fihman, film-makers and founders of the Paris Films Coop. But the exhibition was finally curated and signed by one person: Peter Kubelka. In his contribution to the catalogue, P. Adams Sitney emphasized this signature effect: “I will start from the connecting point between film theory and film practice in Kubelka's work to examine the history of independent cinema as he has conceived it in this exhibition.”¹ The exhibition thus seemed to be

1 Peter Kubelka, ed., *Une histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou/Musée national d'art moderne, 1976), 9.

entirely integrated within the Austrian film-maker's own body of work. Sitney, though, altered the project: the exhibition is not called "A History of Independent Cinema"; it's called "A History of Cinema"; and as Kubelka himself related several times, it should have been called "*The History of Cinema*"—"by that I meant that film history is not written by Hollywood, nor by Pathé, nor by Cinecittà, but by the works in our programme!"² Kubelka fought hard for that title against Pontus Hultén, then director of the Centre Georges-Pompidou, who had initiated the event—but he lost. A history of "independent cinema" or of cinema in general—or maybe of cinema as such—that makes quite a difference. In the context of such a programme-exhibition, the main difference lies in the status to be given to the absent names. *Une histoire du cinéma* shows no film by Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Flaherty, Jean Renoir, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Mizoguchi Kenji, Glauber Rocha, D. W. Griffith, Alice Guy-Blaché, Ernst Lubitsch, Yasujiro Ozu, Sembène Ousmane, Jean-Luc Godard, Ida Lupino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, etc. Their absence from a history of independent cinema could be read as an implicit definition of "independence" in the film production system or culture; their absence from a history of cinema makes for a quite different claim; and, of course, their absence from *the* history of cinema for yet another.

That 1976 "exhibition" has been a quite important event in the history of experimental cinema in Europe. It was shown again in April 1977 at the new Centre Georges-Pompidou of Beaubourg, which had been inaugurated only two months earlier. This innovative art centre, backed by the National Museum of Modern Art, was conceived as an extremely ambitious institution; it gave "independent cinema" a sudden visibility within the art scene, and the weight of the public institution participated in legitimating *film as art* on a new basis. But the exhibition had a history.

The connections between film and the museum or the exhibition are rich and complex, from its presence in international expositions as early as 1900, to its entry in museums and other sites dedicated to the presentation of "traditional" and more specifically modern arts. By 1925, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art "made and showed its own movies at the museum, as well as distributed and exhibited these [...] to interested institutions."³ Films then were conceived as educational tools, not as proper works, but "in 1935

2 Stefan Grisseemann, Alexander Horwarth, and Regina Schlagnitweit, eds., *Was ist Film: Peter Kubelkas Zyklisches Programm im Österreichischen Filmmuseum* (Vienna: Österreichischen Filmmuseum/SYNEMA-Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2010), 16.

3 Haidee Wasson, "Big, Fast Museums/Small, Slow Movies: Film, Scale and the Art Museum," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 179.

the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) announced its intention to collect and exhibit not just modern paintings and sculptures but also films.⁴ In Europe, major avant-garde exhibitions had already integrated the film medium. For example, *Film und Foto*, first presented in Stuttgart in 1929, combined film and photography as the two modernist arts. As Olivier Lugon noted, at the time “most of the important exhibitions tried to completely associate the two arts, by integrating a projection room to the visit.” Still, according to Lugon, “these attempts were unsatisfactory, and film [requiring a static spectator] remained a foreign body in these big events based on the circulation of spectators.”⁵ Film and exhibition spectatorships seemed to obey different dynamics. Modes of integration were being developed and tried out until the emergence of video and expanded cinema in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for different solutions and perspectives.

Though connected with this history, *Une histoire du cinéma* was nevertheless a different endeavour. At a time when moving images were entering the gallery, Kubelka's 1976 “exhibition” remained strictly within the movie theatre, even if that theatre had to belong to an art institution. It used art codes and practices—the catalogue, the ticketing system—but reaffirmed within them the cinema *dispositif*. It was not exactly the first of its kind, and was perceived already at the time as a culminating moment in a series of similar events.⁶ These typically used the vocabulary of the art *exhibition* or *exposition* to name what would otherwise have been called a programme or a festival, and moved the films from the commercial theatres or cinemathèques to the art world: to name but a few, the *New American Cinema Group Exposition* in Torino in 1967; the *New Form in Film* exhibition curated by Annette Michelson and presented at the Guggenheim Museum in 1972, before a new version was shown in Montreux in 1974⁷; and, of course, the foundation of the Anthology Film Archives in 1970.

4 Haidee Wasson, “Studying Movies at the Museum: The Museum of Modern Art and Cinema's Changing Object,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 121. See also Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

5 Olivier Lugon, “La Photographie mise en espace: les expositions didactiques en Allemagne (1920–1930),” *Études photographiques* 5 (November 1998), <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/168>. See also Olivier Lugon, ed., *Exposition et médias: Photographie, cinéma, télévision* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 2012).

6 See, for instance, Louis Marcorelles, “Une histoire du cinéma,” *Le Monde*, February 5, 1976, translated in François Bovier, ed., *Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks: French-Speaking Switzerland in 1974: A Case for “Minor History”* (Lausanne: ECAL, 2017), 239–41.

7 On *New Form in Film*, see Bovier, *Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks*, particularly Annette Michelson's interview (pp. 217–20) and the following documents.

Collecting and Programming as History Writing

The manifesto published for the opening of the New York-based Anthology Film Archives on December 1, 1970, read:

The cinemathèques of the world generally collect and show the multiple manifestations of film: as document, history, industry, mass communication. *Anthology Film Archives* is the first film museum exclusively devoted to the *film as an art*.⁸

Anthology Film Archives was the new museum for a new art. Again, it belonged in a way to a longer history of similar projects, but was an altogether different endeavour. When he proposed to create a film museum in the 1930s, Henri Langlois imagined a place where he would show objects, artefacts, machines, clothes or posters related to cinema but precisely *not film*. The Anthology Film Archives would be a museum of *nothing but film*. As any archive, its aim was to organize the preservation and access of films, but it didn't welcome anything that would be given to the institution. On the contrary, it claimed to be founded, as any museum, on a carefully selected collection, the *Essential Cinema*. Peter Kubelka was already part of that selection committee, together with James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Jonas Mekas, P. Adams Sitney and, for a while, Stan Brakhage.

Essential Cinema was not simply an exhibition; it was presented as a cycle of 110 programmes, screened on a regular—originally monthly—basis. The organizers had the student in mind, and in this perspective, the *Essential Cinema* series of programmes was conceived and presented as *a history of cinema*: “The cycle will also provide a unique opportunity for students of the medium to see a concentrated history of the art of film within a period of four or five weeks.”⁹

Essential Cinema and *Une histoire du cinéma* also have important common points. They are both a programme and a collection, and both constitute as such the foundation of an institution, symbolically but also concretely. The *Essential Cinema* list is the collection of the Anthology Film Archives, and before being an event, *Une histoire du cinéma* is the film collection of the newly formed French Museum of Modern Art.

8 P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and New York University Press, 1975), vi (emphasis in the original).

9 Ibid., vi.

Kubelka's task was first and foremost to establish that collection, that was to be prestigious and to correspond to the criteria and standards of "Modern Art"; once chosen, a print of each film was bought from the artist or their distributor, to enter the permanent museum collection. That is a specificity of a film museum: the reproducibility of the medium allows an institution with enough money to build a collection with all of the greatest masterpieces of history—which is, of course, impossible with painting.

In 1996, Peter Kubelka conceived yet another cyclical programme, this time for the institution he had co-founded in 1964 with Peter Konlechner: the Österreichisches Filmmuseum. Its title, *Was ist Film*, directly echoes (besides André Bazin) *Essential Cinema*, suggesting that the name of the New York institution should probably be heard as "Ontology Film Archives." The programme is based on the Filmmuseum collection, but it doesn't define that collection: it represents only a choice within a much wider corpus. The sixty-three screenings, featuring films by seventy-two artists—of which five are women: Maya Deren, Valie Export, Marie Menken, Leni Riefenstahl, Rosemarie Stenzel—are shown on a regular basis, and as their predecessors, they articulate a historical frame with pedagogical aims. The cycle is structured by an underlying chronological timeline, with a systematic contrapuntal line whose strong gestural presence shifts the spectator's position. For instance, the first programme features: a series of slides of Marey's chronophotographs; eight films by W. K. L. Dickson, from 1892 to 1897; thirty-two Lumière films from 1896 to 1897 (with none of the most well-known); and finally Marie Menken's 1964 *Go! Go! Go!*¹⁰ The sixth programme presents Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph des Willens*, preceded by Jack Smith's 1963 *Flaming Creatures*¹¹—which strongly comments, perhaps destroys, the ideological content of Riefenstahl's propaganda monument. All the films were made by independent artists, except for one: *To the Shores of Iwo Jima*, a 1945 Kodachrome film signed by the US Government Office of War Information.¹² *Was ist Film* appears then not only as a selection of works, but also as the precise arrangement of screenings. Once chosen, the films of *Une histoire du cinéma* were presented in strict chronological order; the massive, three-hour screenings would then confront a maintained continuous timeline with the diversity of each moment's production. Here, a different historiography is at stake, where the key thread

10 Grisseemann et al., *Was ist Film*, 28.

11 *Ibid.*, 45.

12 *Ibid.*, 50.

of a chronicle of film form from its beginnings is systematically critiqued by non-chronological juxtapositions.

In 2013, the Filmmuseum published a book about *Was ist Film*, analysing the works and the programmes. In the prefatory interview, Kubelka claims that the cycle “defines through examples—and not through attached discursive explanations—film as an autonomous art form.”¹³ Kubelka’s reluctance to explain, comment, or introduce language in general is striking throughout the interview, and remains deeply at odds with the book project itself. The interviewer seems to find it hard to understand, as it appears to contradict the pedagogical dimension that is inscribed in the very act of programming. But Kubelka insists on history as experience. To him, spectatorship can be compared to mountain climbing: if you are brought to the top by car, you won’t remember the mountain like you would if you experience the risk and fatigue of climbing. Discursive explanations are then like a helicopter, preventing the spectator from experiencing the historical process as such. The programme, taken as a whole, is a meaningful form of mediation, which doesn’t need to—indeed, must not—be remediated through discourse. It constructs sense through the bare assembling of the works, and becomes a work in itself, made only of film, and duly signed—by the curator. Certainly, what that signature implies regarding the status of the curator and former co-founder and co-head of the Filmmuseum is to be connected with the contemporary rise of the curator in the art world on a more general level. In any case, Kubelka has created with *Was ist Film* a work through the sole assemblage of pieces of film; he can then quite logically claim: “The model for my programme is film montage.”¹⁴

At this point in my argument, one possible move could seem quite obvious, and probably productive: it would involve referring to the modes of history writing explicitly or implicitly based on film montage. Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* would be here central, as he claims to use as a method “literary montage,”¹⁵ to “carry over the principle of montage into history,”¹⁶ or that he “needn’t say anything. Merely show.”¹⁷ Connections could then be made with Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, or to André Malraux’s *Musée imaginaire*. But as this sounds quite familiar, I propose to move in a slightly different direction.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 8.

15 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 460.

16 Ibid., 461.

17 Ibid., 460, 836.

Editing as History Writing: The Art of the Anthology

The name “Anthology Film Archives” should be taken literally: it is an anthology. *Essential Cinema*, *New Form in Film*, *Une histoire du cinéma*, *Was ist Film* are film programmes or exhibitions; they are also anthologies. Anthologies have a long history, particularly in poetry—longer than montage or than cinema itself—and are themselves deeply historical objects. They played a particularly important role within the modernist context. At that moment, they belonged to a set of practices that gave a new status to the acts of collecting, assembling, and exhibiting as artistic gestures—and commercial tactics. This could allow for strategic uses of symbolic value. As Jeremy Braddock noted, “throughout the 1910s, modernist anthologies repeatedly presented themselves (and were received) according to the logic of the art exhibition, in an effort to obtain the cultural currency of events like the [1913] Armory Show or the first Society of Independent Artists exhibition [in 1917].”¹⁸ The use of the “exhibition” vocabulary to qualify film programmes or festivals resonates with this context, and suggests that these later practices tried, consciously or not, to re-enact in the film world the tactics that had proven their efficiency for modernist poetry and art.

But modernist art exhibitions were not historical. Or, to say it more precisely, they were not concerned with the writing of history. They were meant as historical events, turning points in art as well as political history, and so deeply inscribed in their time that they could expose its complexity; but they presented only the young artists of the day. That was not always the case, though.

In his history of American poetry anthologies,¹⁹ Alan Golding has described the tensions at work in every constitution of an anthology, as well as their dependency on the historical state of the medium's relation with culture, and of its concrete mode of existence within the cultural market. In the early American context, for instance, poetry existed mainly within periodicals of very short lifetime and very narrow geographical diffusion. Anthologies thus first aimed at the preservation of an ever-vanishing landscape. Then, the logic of evaluation, of canon formation, came forward, involving comparative reading and the interaction between editor and

18 Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 158.

19 Alan C. Golding, “A History of American Poetry Anthologies,” in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 279–307.

readers. Anthologists have to be constantly “weighing historical inclusiveness against evaluation and exclusiveness.”²⁰ But the evaluation process is itself historical. According to Golding, a break occurred with Charles A. Dana’s *Household Book of Poetry* in 1858, as it introduced “an important new criterion of selection[:] the exercise of absolute rather than historically relative critical judgment.”²¹ This was due to local circumstances: “Earlier British anthologists had exercised absolute judgment as their main selective principle; Americans had not.”²² Until then, American anthologists did not claim literary “quality” as their sole criterion; they pondered aesthetic judgement with questions of geographic representativeness. The confidence in a putative local canon is necessary to be able to claim that it be judged on equal terms with the most established production. But as soon as such a statement is made, positions must be attacked and defended. Interestingly, in the few years after the *Household Book of Poetry*, three other anthologies were produced in the United States, each edited by a poet: William Cullen Bryant’s *Library of Poetry and Song* (1870), Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Parnassus* (1874), and John Greenleaf Whittier’s *Songs of Three Centuries* (1875).²³ These poets belonged to the canon, which granted them the expertise to exercise absolute judgement, but which also entailed some partisanship in the selection. This situation sounds quite similar to that of Kubelka or to the selection committee of the Anthology Film Archives at the time, which also claimed absolute judgement while being judge and jury. The problem of the confidence in a local canon was also similar, once “local” is heard as not geographic in the strictest sense but as designating a slightly different kind of place: the underground. The Anthology Film Archives’ manifesto reads: “That a film had an influence or that it was the first of its kind, have not been considerations of the film selection committee. In every case they have made their decisions on the aesthetic value of the individual work.”²⁴ The strictest conception of absolute, transhistorical aesthetic evaluation has thus been the sole motto of the selection committee.

20 Ibid., 280.

21 Ibid., 291; see also Charles A. Dana, ed., *Household Book of Poetry* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858).

22 Ibid., 291.

23 William Cullen Bryant, ed., *A Library of Poetry and Song; Being Choice Selections from the Best Poets* (New York: J. B. Ford & Co., 1870); Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., *Parnassus* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1874); John Greenleaf Whittier, ed., *Songs of Three Centuries* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1875).

24 Sitney, *The Essential Cinema*, xi–xii.

The Interventionist Anthology and Modernist History

All these historical variations begin to show two basic models for the poetry anthology. One is oriented toward preservation and the description of a historical evolution or landscape. It is supposedly neutral and basically inclusive. Its most accomplished form is probably the teaching anthology, aimed at mediating an already established canon for a public of students. The other model is what Braddock calls the “interventionist” anthology, whose most radical incarnation is the modernist collection. It is decidedly presentist, if not strictly contemporary. It claims absolute judgement, and exclusiveness: its aim is to propose and impose a counter-canon, disrupting the dominant trends and criteria. It is curated and signed by one artist. The most prominent example is probably Ezra Pound’s 1914 *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*.²⁵ A small volume of sixty-three pages containing only the works of eleven poets, sold in a very limited number of copies, it still was the foundational moment of American poetic modernism. After that, a great number of anthologies were published, and the poetry collection became one of the most important media for the spread of modernism. Pound himself edited several others which mostly contain only contemporary poems,²⁶ but to him, the anthology as such had to do with history: as Jeremy Braddock synthesized, “it is a medium preserving fragments of the ancient knowledge, and at the same time a salutary modern commercial form.”²⁷ Later, he would co-edit with Marcella Spann an explicitly historical anthology: *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*.²⁸ Confucius is nodal in Pound’s interest for the anthology as form, and particularly as a form of relation with history. He translated many Confucian works, among them the “Classic Anthology” (*Shih-ching: The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*).²⁹ In fact, the whole project of the *Cantos*, as the “tale of the tribe,” could be understood as an anthology.

In parallel, Pound also produced essays and anthologies concerned with the (re)writing of literary history. The *ABC of Reading*, in 1934, features ninety

25 Ezra Pound, ed., *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1914).

26 Ezra Pound, ed., *Catholic Anthology 1914–1915* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915); Ezra Pound, ed., *Profile: An Anthology Collected in MCMXXXI* (Milan: John Scheiwiller, 1932); Ezra Pound, ed., *Active Anthology* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933).

27 Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, 237.

28 Ezra Pound and Marcella Spann, eds., *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 1964).

29 Ezra Pound, trans., *Shih-ching: The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954).

pages of introductory essays on the art of poetry, followed by a hundred pages of “exhibits,” from Dante and Chaucer to Whitman. The extracts are sometimes only juxtaposed to one another, but most of them are commented and interspersed with exercises for students, and tests explained for teachers. At the beginning of that “Exhibits” part, Pound wrote: “The ideal way to present the next section of this booklet would be to give the quotations WITHOUT any comment whatever. I am afraid that would be too revolutionary.”³⁰ The *ABC* could be described as an interventionist mode of history writing and of pedagogy, but it remains within the domain of a recognizable past, and stops just before the modernist moment. It maintains a tension between the pedagogical and the interventionist models of anthologies, one being fundamentally historical while the other is not. But this opposition must be complicated, as some anthologies of the modernist era have involved history as part of the projected cultural intervention. This is particularly the case of the collections presenting the production of a marginal culture. Indeed, anthologies have been the main mode of presence of minor cultures within the dominant cultural space. For instance, George W. Cronyn edited in 1918 *The Path on the Rainbow*,³¹ an anthology of Native American transcriptions of songs and chants presented as poetry,³² and also as “genuine American Classics.”³³ Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, published in 1925, was possibly “the most important and influential anthology of the modernist period, irrespective of race, nationality, or aesthetic,” according to Braddock.³⁴ These were collectivist anthologies, like most modernist interventionist collections, but they relied more decisively on history.

The community aspect of these anthologies could seem at odds with their being signed works, assembled by one authority. This was an important tension. After the commercial failure of Ezra Pound’s *Des Imagistes*, poet Amy Lowell produced three annual anthologies, *Some Imagist Poets*,³⁵ in which every participant was given equal space, and the liberty to choose

30 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951).

31 The spine of the book reads: *The Path on the Rainbow: The Book of Indian Poems*. George W. Cronyn, ed., *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1918).

32 Mary Austin’s introduction insisted on this point, commenting these transcriptions as poetic classics. *Ibid.*, xv–xxxii.

33 *Ibid.*, v.

34 Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, 157, 209; also see Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Charles & Albert Boni, 1925).

35 Amy Lowell, ed., *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915); Amy Lowell, ed., *Some Imagist Poets, 1916: An Annual Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916); Amy Lowell, ed., *Some Imagist Poets, 1917: An Annual Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917).

among their poems those that should be included. Poets were then presented in alphabetical order. The Anthology Film Archives selection committee was also supposed to be a democratic regime with the films being elected by unanimous vote. When the system was changed to a simple majority requirement, Stan Brakhage left. Kubelka recalls that moment and the committee work in general as a quite violent process: "That was incredibly painful: I remember Brakhage running away in the snow storm, furious, while Sitney lied crying on the kitchen floor. [...] The New York jury was such an exhausting experience that I took alone the responsibility for the selection for Pompidou."³⁶ In contrast with Lowell's later versions, Pound's original *Des Imagistes* obviously appeared as an *edited* anthology. There was no preface or manifesto, but the very arrangement of the poems was obviously meaningful: some had much more space than others; the order was not alphabetical or arbitrary; and a clear thematic and formal line lead from one poem to the next. The collection thus became an argument as to what Imagists were, but also as to what contemporary poetry should be—among other things, a rediscovery of Greek light, against the false sophistications of classicism. Editing was part of the anthology as a foundational gesture for the collective—even though, as Braddock recalled, Pound simultaneously "worked to obscure the signs of his own authority as editor."³⁷ And, of course, from our perspective, this conception of "editing" can clearly be connected with montage, in the exact sense that Kubelka invoked.

It took some time and a younger poet than Pound to formulate this explicitly. In a 1931 letter, Louis Zukofsky wrote to his friend and mentor: "Advertising & montage, Mr. E.,—Eisenstein has nothing on us."³⁸ Advertising and montage make for a good definition of the art of anthology editing. Zukofsky was also very interested in the anthology as form, and edited several ones. In 1948, *A Test of Poetry* was a radical version of Pound's *ABC of Reading*. It was constructed in three parts, each consisting of twenty-five sections, or should we say "programmes," of two to four poems, gathered around a central theme or "consideration"—translation, speech, definition, sight, measure, movement, etc. The first and last parts present the poems without any comment, nor any date or author's name. These can be found in a chronological chart at the end of the volume. The middle part includes names, dates, comments, and theoretical notes. Each poem is identified by

36 Grisseemann et al., *Was ist Film*, 18. My translation.

37 Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*, 237.

38 Louis Zukofsky to Ezra Pound, December 14, 1931, in Barry Ahearn, ed., *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 121.

a number, followed by a blank space. As Zukofsky writes on the first page: “This space may be used by the reader who enjoys marking up his copy for evaluating the compared examples of similar object matter under each cardinal number in some such way as *great, good, fair, poor*.”³⁹ Somewhat resembling the Kubelka *Was ist Film* programmes, the sections have a fundamental chronological organization—beginning with classical translations of Homer and Ovid and ending with a “negro chain gang song” collected in 1931 and a 1932 poem by Marianne Moore—with an almost systematic contrapuntal line of radically non-chronological ordering. William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” from 1923 can thus be associated with an anonymous fifteenth-century song about a “gentil cok.”⁴⁰

Zukofsky’s poetic career had begun in 1931 with another anthology, assembled as a guest editor of the famous *Poetry* journal of Chicago for a special issue, titled “*Objectivists*” 1931.⁴¹ It was greatly influential afterwards—Parker Tyler’s anthology *Modern Things* in 1934 shows almost exactly the same line-up⁴²—but it was very violently received at the time. The problem was not so much that the choice of contemporary poets elected by the young, almost unknown editor, was focused on a new, so-called “objectivist” group, whatever that meant. The problem was that the editor had a historical claim. In the afterword “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931,” Zukofsky insisted: “Implied stricture of names generally cherished as famous, but not mentioned in this editor’s [recent essay] ‘American Poetry 1920–1930’ or included in the contributors to this issue, is prompted by the historical method of the Chinese sage who wrote, ‘Then for nine reigns there was no literary production.’”⁴³ The editor of the journal, Harriett Monroe, answered the next month with an article titled “The Arrogance of Youth.”⁴⁴ Wanting to call the 1976 Pompidou exhibition *The History of Cinema* also required some of that arrogance.

39 Louis Zukofsky, ed., *A Test of Poetry* (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1948), 3.

40 *Ibid.*, 100–1, 164.

41 Zukofsky, Louis, ed., “*Objectivists*” 1931, special issue of *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (February 1931). One year later, Zukofsky edited *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, published by the Objectivist Press, a small publishing venture based in Le Beausset, France, which he had founded with George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff.

42 Parker Tyler, ed., *Modern Things* (New York: The Galleon Press, 1934). Before becoming one of the important film critics of his time, working particularly on experimental and underground cinema, Parker Tyler was a poet. He notably co-edited with Charles Henri Ford the poetry journal *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*, which saw nine issues within two years, 1929–1930. William Carlos Williams was mentioned as a contributing editor.

43 Zukofsky, *Poetry*, 269.

44 Harriett Monroe, “The Arrogance of Youth,” *Poetry* 37, no. 6 (March 1931): 328–33.

Adjacency Historiography

Anthologies are precious historical objects. They materialize precise contexts, embody a set of aesthetic values but also networks and strategies, enact symbolic weight and commercial tactics, interact with the cultural market, and produce collective formations. But some anthologies, like Peter Kubelka's, also present themselves as a form of history writing. In this perspective, their main characteristic is probably erasure: deletion of discursive explanation or comments, absence of more or less important canonical works. These anthologies reveal, as Michel de Certeau had noted, history writing as an unavoidably institutionalizing process.⁴⁵ They are signed, their subjectivity at once exhibited and implicit, happening through selection and arrangement—"montage," should we care to call it that. P. Adams Sitney began his contribution to the *Une histoire du cinéma* catalogue with a question:

Can there be a History of Independent Cinema? Inasmuch as this cinema defines itself as independent or avant-garde, introducing a negative element in its epithet, it relates to another cinema—itself unnamed and undefined—whose obscurity contributes to make it shine. There is no shortage of histories about this other cinema: narratives relating to its technological changes, to its industrial growth or to national achievements, adorned with the accomplishments of an almost monomorphic hero, whether he is called Griffith, Chaplin, Méliès, Eisenstein, Von Stroheim, Dreyer or Bresson. This is in no way scandalous, for their films could be used as models for the meticulous fictions by the likes of Sadoul, Mitry, Gregor and Patalas, Toeplitz, Wright. If we have to take seriously the refusal of linear narration that constitutes a quasi-essential feature of independent cinema, how are we to account for more than fifty years of success in this context?⁴⁶

There is probably some degree of strangeness to this idea that the very form of history should emulate the form of its object. But should we adopt it even if only as a challenge to general historiography, then cinema and poetry as fragmented, flickering media based on montage require other forms of accounts of the past than traditional chronicles. In these forms, the

45 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 64–68.

46 Sitney, "Tableau historique," in Kubelka, *Une histoire du cinéma*, 9. My translation.

connections essential to the construction of history are the spectator's task, and blank spaces are left for them to evaluate and relate. As Pound famously wrote in "Canto XIII," quoting Confucius, himself a renowned anthologist:

"And even I can remember
A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,
I mean for things they didn't know,
But that time seems to be passing."⁴⁷

Commenting on the work of Charles Reznikoff, another objectivist poet, Charles Bernstein defined the specific kind of parataxis essential to his practice with the word "adjacency": "As a term of art, adjacency is distinguished from adjoining or abutting, as land that is adjacent to a common square, but nowhere touches. Reznikoff's is an art of adjacency, each frame carefully articulated and set beside the next."⁴⁸ Programming, composing a collection, curating a film exhibition, or editing an anthology are paratactic modes of discourse, but as forms of history writing they are more precisely based on adjacency. While the concept of montage can describe part of their specificity, they share moreover a refusal of adjoining and abutting. Each object, meticulously framed and situated, is organized with precision not only with regards to those before and after, but more largely within a wider common space.

As a historiographic practice, adjacency constructs a deeply different past. Instead of a line, even of a discontinuous one, it becomes a blanked-out map, where distances are maintained between events so that entire areas appear as empty, unknown, or erased. As I noted in this chapter's introduction, nearly all the historians I have here mentioned have also been artists. Probably, part of their historiographical procedures have been oriented by a transfer of their poetic or film techniques to their work as historians—though some of them have rather grounded their art in a conception of history. But these practices also result from tactics within the field, which have emerged with modern or modernist art. Here, linearity as a mode of history writing is not first opposed to tabular or rhizomatic modes, not criticized first for its oversimplification of complex processes. It is rather condemned for the illusory continuity and lack of space given to

47 Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 60.

48 Charles Bernstein, "Reznikoff's Nearness," in *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 218.

the possibility of future changes in the perceived past. Space should be left blank so that today's invisible, forgotten, neglected, or despised can have a place in tomorrow's history.

Linearity is also refused for tactical reasons: adjacency historiography developing no explicit justification, its only argument relies on (aesthetic) authority, and in return constructs that authority in the same movement as it constructs a community. Through their very existence as object or performance, anthologies affirm both at once: the community of those assembled, and the validity of the criteria for their gathering. These needn't be open for discussion, as it would only entail some fragility. These are guerrilla tactics: act as though you were powerful, and finally you will be.

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8 Hans Richter and the “Struggle for the Film History”

Yvonne Zimmermann

Abstract

Referencing avant-garde artist and film-maker Hans Richter’s materialist film history book *The Struggle for the Film*, this chapter looks at Richter’s “struggle for the film history” and his own place in it. Richter’s concern with history was a constant factor in his long career that spanned several art movements and two continents. Richter’s notion of history and his doing film (and art) history in writing, teaching, and film-making provide insights into the politics and material conditions of film history in the wider context of exile and the preservation of endangered cultural heritage and in relation to the historiographies and philosophies of history of his compatriots Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, who shared the fate of eviction and exile.

Keywords: film history, Hans Richter, Iris Barry, theory of history, avant-garde, exile

“Thank you so much for your notes. As a film writer, you know the difficulties involved in getting these things straight, and when the filmmaker himself lends a hand, it does make things so much easier—and more probably [sic] accurate.”¹ When Arthur Rosenheimer wrote these lines in a letter to Hans Richter on March 7, 1946, it was in his function as assistant to the curator of the Museum of Modern Art’s Film Library, Iris Barry. The writing was underpinned with Rosenheimer’s experience of being the freshly minted author of *The History of the Motion Picture, 1895–1946*, which was the catalogue

¹ Letter, Assistant to the Curator [Arthur Rosenheimer] to Hans Richter, March 7, 1946, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

accompanying the second part of the exhibition of films from the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library held at the museum from September 1946 through December 1947.²

Richter had contacted Iris Barry in a letter three days earlier and asked her "to correct some errors" in case the *Film Encyclopedia* should be reprinted.³ Richter addresses four points for correction. The first concerns the dating of Eggeling's first film. Richter explains:

Eggeling did not make any film in 1917, nor did he make any films or tests before 1921. There is an error in Rotha [and Manvell]'s book, *Movie Parade*, p. 139,⁴ which probably results from a caption under a drawing by Eggeling in the film number of the modern art magazine *G*, which I published from 1923–26. The caption reads: "Hier entstand der absolute Film 1917–18." This means "Here originated the absolute film 1917–18." At that time, neither Eggeling nor I (we were then already working together) had thought of movies; it was not until 1920 that we started to think of them. The first piece of modern art ever put on celluloid was one drawing of the ten in my scroll drawing, *Prelude 1919*. We did it as a test piece. It was between 30 and 40 feet long and still exists at the Eoscop Laboratories in Basel.⁵

This detailed rectification illustrates a meticulousness and fervour that would characterize Richter's entire practice of doing film history. Points two to four speak of a similar concern about misrepresentation of historical facts and Richter's own role in this history. In point two, Richter clarifies the relationship between Eggeling and him, underlining that he was "not a follower of Eggeling," but that they worked independently on the same problem. Point three is about the first screening of *Symphonie Diagonale* in Berlin in 1922 and *Rhythm 21* in Paris, which Richter dates to 1921, and

2 Arthur Rosenheimer, *The History of the Motion Picture, 1895–1946* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1946).

3 Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, March 4, 1946, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969. It is unclear which publication Richter is referring to here.

4 Something strange here: *Movie Parade* was first published in 1950 (Paul Rotha and Roger Manvell, *Movie Parade, 1888–1949: A Pictorial Survey of World Cinema* [London and New York: The Studio Publications, 1950]). Richter must have known Rotha's script. The page number Richter indicates in the letter does not lead to Eggeling's film. There is, however, a caption on page 150 of the published book that reads "Diagonale Symphonie 1917–22. Direction: Viking Eggeling German."

5 Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, March 4, 1946, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

point four lists the references to Richter's documentary films he had made since 1928—all of them sponsored films that can be (and have been) seen as artists films, commissioned films and/or useful cinema.⁶ Richter also mentions that he made "approximately 100 commercials with 'Epoche' in Berlin from 1928–30, sometimes one a week." Of these allegedly hundred commercials, only *Der Zweigroschen-Zauber* (*Twopenny Magic*, 1929) is extant, and it is questionable whether Richter's statement is correct. This also applies to Richter's dating of the Paris screening of *Rhythm 21*. Jeanpaul Goergen's thorough research into Richter's filmography has shown that the screening must have taken place in 1923 and not in 1921.⁷ Notwithstanding the factual inaccuracies of Richter's presentation of the (hi)story, or rather, in part because of these inaccuracies, Richter's comments speak of a concern to get the facts and figures of film history straight, in particular those concerning himself, and to secure them—and him—an "adequate" place in film history.

In this chapter, I am not interested in whether Richter or any other historian got the facts and figures of film history straight. Instead, I am concerned with Richter's practice of doing film history. It is a practice that might aptly be called the "struggle for the film history" in reference to Richter's book *The Struggle for the Film*.⁸ Richter finished the book in 1939 during exile in Switzerland, but it was not published until 1976, shortly after his death, and not in English until 1986 (however, parts had been in circulation in contemporary articles). *The Struggle for the Film* is a major contribution to film theory, but it is also involved, as Noël Carroll has put it, "in the attempt to map a materialist conception of history onto film history."⁹

The case of Hans Richter allows insights into the practice and politics of doing film history, or more specifically, into the "struggle for the film history" and one's own place in it at a crucial moment in time when, in the 1930s, film culture was institutionalized with film archives being founded,

6 See Yvonne Zimmermann, "Hans Richter and the *Filmessay*: A Media Archaeological Case Study of Documentary Film History and Historiography," in *A Companion to Documentary Film History*, ed. Joshua Malitsky (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 367–89.

7 Jeanpaul Goergen, "Hans Richter: Filme und Texte der Zwanziger Jahre," in *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, special issue of *Kinemathek* 40, no. 95 (July 2003), 88. See also Holger Wilmesmeier, "Entstehungsgeschichte: Le Film 100 Titres," in *Hans Richters Rhythmus 21: Schlüsselfilm der Moderne*, ed. Christoph Bareither, Kurt Beals, Michael Cowan, Paul Dobryden, Karin Fest, Klaus Müller-Richter and Birgit Nemeč (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2012), 40.

8 Hans Richter, *The Struggle for the Film: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema*, ed. Jürgen Römhild, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

9 Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 291.

film festivals being inaugurated, and film canons being built.¹⁰ Just as important, it was a moment when European film culture was displaced and transferred to the United States under the pressures of Fascism and World War II. Richter's work and career provides an idea of how film history had been negotiated and manufactured in this period, who was involved in it, and what was at stake for the actors. Richter's case also draws attention to the variety of tools that were used to practice film history; writing, lecturing and teaching, and film-making.

Hence, it is the process and not so much the outcome of film history that I am looking at, the dirty making of it and less its clean result. Retracing Richter's "struggle for the film history" involves a close reading of archival sources and contemporary writings on film history, but I also aim to put the elements of my micro-analysis into a larger framework of the philosophy of history and in conversation with Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, two German intellectuals who shared the fate of exile with Richter, wherever it seems appropriate.

Somewhat inevitably, my deconstructing Richter's practice of doing film history goes hand in hand with my own constructing a narrative of Richter's constructing film history. As a film historian, I am familiar with such circumstance; constructing narratives is what film historians do in their work. But I am not always as aware of it as I am here.

On the Function of Film History Writing: A Controversy in *Film Culture*

In 1958, facts and figures once again provided food for discussion between Hans Richter and Arthur Rosenheimer, who had in the meantime changed his name to Arthur Knight. And again, a book by Knight had just been published. But this time, Knight's book itself, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies*, was the reason for their conversation.¹¹ And this time, Knight was much less pleased with Richter's intervention than he was twelve years ago. Film historical facts and figures set the ball rolling, but there was more at stake. The real bone of contention was the very notion of film historiography.

10 See Malte Hagener, ed. *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

11 Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

It all had started with a review of *The Liveliest Art* in *Film Culture* by film critic and Richter's close friend Herman G. Weinberg.¹² Weinberg opened his review stating that for the layman, the book would be a lively introduction to the history of the movies. "For the advanced film student, however," Weinberg holds, "this 'panoramic history' (a redundant phrase) not only trods thrice-familiar ground without adding anything new but is wanting in that scholarship that would appear to be a sine qua non of any sort of historical writing."¹³ With "that scholarship," Weinberg means knowledge of the facts and figures of film history, a proficiency that Knight allegedly lacked, for his book, according to Weinberg, is partly based on misinformation, hearsay, and "misstatements on films that the author had not seen or about which his memory has played him tricks."¹⁴ In the rest of the review, that is, about three-quarters of the entire text, Weinberg, in a nerdy film geek manner, complacently dissects inaccuracies and faults Knight supposedly makes in the book.

Unsurprisingly, Knight was not amused, but "both distressed and disturbed" by Weinberg's review of his book, as he wrote in a letter addressed to *Film Culture* editor Jonas Mekas, which was published in the following issue of *Film Culture*.¹⁵ Knight divides his detailed answer into five categories: difference of opinion, matters of critical judgement, points of information weighed and rejected, points of information he would have rejected had he but known, and errors of Weinberg's "own devising."¹⁶ According to Knight,

A film historian must make up his own mind which sources to trust for his materials where the films themselves and the people who made them are no longer available. He must make up his own mind whether to tell the story of *Variety* as it existed in Germany or as it was shown in this country—and in the *only* form in which film students can study it today. Most importantly, he must define his own attitude towards films.¹⁷

At this point of the dispute, Richter stepped in, but not to judge which one of the disputing cinephiles was right or wrong. Instead, he upset both of the opponents with his explanations on the function of film history writing that

12 *Film Culture* 4, no. 16 (January 1958): 22–23.

13 *Ibid.*, 22.

14 *Ibid.*

15 "Arthur Knight Answers H. G. W.," *Film Culture* 4, no. 17 (February 1958), 19.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 20.

were published in the next issue of *Film Culture*.¹⁸ The anger of Weinberg and Knight must have been considerable, since, as Richter mentions in a letter to Knight following the controversy in *Film Culture*, neither Weinberg nor Knight showed up at the party that took place shortly after Richter's replica had been printed—and for the same reason.¹⁹

What did Richter do that both adversaries considered his intervention to be an attack on them? Richter was careful not to criticize Knight or Weinberg in his essay, but instead gave several examples: Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach's 1935 book *Histoire du cinéma*, of which Iris Barry's translation had been first published in English in 1938 under the title *The History of Motion Pictures*,²⁰ and the late Theodore Huff who was acknowledged as "one of the most conscientious fact and date-finders in the realm of film history" and whom Richter had hired to give a course in film history at the Institute of Film Techniques at City College of New York for this very reason.²¹ However, Huff's success as a film history teacher was tarnished according to Richter. At the end of the term, there were only a few students left. Allegedly they were bored with the facts and dates that alone had little meaning and needed interpretation. Richter chose Huff as an example in his essay to make a point against "this stickling about facts, which I consider of secondary importance," as he states in his letter to Knight.²² In his *Film Culture* essay, Richter explains that "facts and dates, though they are elements of history, are not history in the complete sense of the word. History has, besides dates and facts, a meaning, several meanings, according to its several aspects, and different meanings in different periods."²³

The example of Bardèche and Brasillach, on the other hand, served Richter to criticize an approach to film history that is written from the point of view of the newspaper or magazine film critic and that categorizes films as "good" and "bad." That, of course, was a side blow against film critic Weinberg, who got another rub down at the end of essay where Richter states that serious

18 Hans Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," *Film Culture* 3, no. 18 (April 1958): 25–26.

19 Letter, Hans Richter to Arthur Knight, April 29, 1958, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Hans Richter, C.XIV.I.

20 Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *Histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Denoël and Steele, 1935); Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures*, trans. Iris Barry (New York: W. W. Norton/The Museum of the Modern Art, 1938); reprinted in Great Britain under the title *History of the Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945).

21 Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," 26.

22 Letter, Hans Richter to Arthur Knight, April 29, 1958, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Hans Richter, C.XIV.I.

23 Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," 26.

students of film should beware of the voice of the so-called film critic, for the best they could learn from him was scepticism.

The few studies that look at Richter's engagement with history in film and/or art interpret this preoccupation as evidence of a professional reorientation that was instigated by the condition of exile in the United States. Doris Berger in her examination of Richter's paintings and films made in the 1940s and 1950s argues that due to Richter's personal circumstances as an émigré, his professional orientation as an artist in exile developed toward historicizing the avant-garde.²⁴ In a similar vein, Nora M. Alter in her analysis of Richter's filmic post-war work takes Richter's emigration to the United States as a significant rupture in his career that enacted a profound transformation on his filmic theory and practice and led to an increased engagement with history.²⁵ Ludger Derenthal in his study on Richter as a Dada art historian holds that Richter's turning to history started with commentaries on the (avant-garde) film in the late 1940s and 1950s and were followed by histories of art.²⁶

Without wishing to make any major criticism on these interpretations, I argue that they warrant revision in two ways: first, Richter's involvement with history long predated his exile in the US and represents an underlying continuity in Richter's entire work and career. Second, if the condition of exile did affect Richter's orientation towards history, it was the exile in Europe, and in particular the period in Switzerland between 1937 and 1941, that was the catalyst for Richter to accentuate his preoccupation with history. I elaborate on these two points in more detail in what follows.

For a Constructivist Art and Film History with a "Standpunkt"

Richter's presumably first explicit statement on history writing is a polemic manifesto on art historiography, which was published in 1926 in the magazine *G—Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, which Richter edited with

24 Doris Berger, "The Moving Canvas: Hans Richter's Artistic Practice in the 1940s," in *Hans Richter: Encounters*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2013), 139.

25 Nora M. Alter, "Hans Richter in Exile: Translating the Avant-garde," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, ed. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 225. See also Helmut G. Asper, "Filmavantgardisten im Exil," in *Exil und Avantgarden*, ed. Claus-Dieter Krohn, Erwin Rotermund, Lutz Winckler, and Wulf Koepke (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1998), 174–93.

26 Ludger Derenthal, "Hans Richter—der Künstler als Kunsthistoriker," in *Hans Richter: Malerei und Film: Ausstellung vom 24.2.–23.4.1989* (Frankfurt Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1989), 146–54.

the help of Werner Graeff. The short text “Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht” (“History is what happens today”) embraces Rudolf Kurtz’ 1926 book *Expressionismus und Film*²⁷ as a herald of an emerging model of art historiography that holds that “the reality of history is not read off the ‘facts,’ but—constructed.”²⁸ This constructivist model of historiography is pitched against a “*Geschmackskunstgeschichte*” (art history of taste) that, according to the manifesto, must stop: “Psychology is unfair competition. Art history is not the compilation of biographies of individual artists, but rather the history of the moving forces of the epoch.”²⁹ Kurtz’ *Expressionismus und Film* was a pioneering art historical treatise in that it examines film as an equal of the other arts. One of the chapters is devoted to abstract art, which includes an appreciation of the abstract films of Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Fernand Léger, and Francis Picabia. Kurtz characterizes these films as “anti-psychological,” for they reject, as is typical of Expressionism, the psychological experience, the dominance of feeling, and replace it with “construction from out of the conscious, metaphysically-determined Will.”³⁰

Obviously, Richter’s 1926 art history manifesto strongly resonates with his 1958 essay on the function of film history writing. In both texts, Richter sharply dismisses art and film history as a history of personal taste and preferences as art and film critics practiced it. The second parallel is the conviction that history needs a “*Standpunkt*” (point of view): “*Kunstgeschichte?! Wo ist Standpunkt, wie sieht er aus?*” (“Art history!?! Where is the point of view, what does it look like?”), writes Richter in 1926.³¹ As a third common feature, both texts reject an understanding of historiography as the accumulation of dates and facts. Herewith, Richter takes position against the classical historicist tradition of Ranke, which led to the crisis of historicism amongst German intellectuals, and champions instead a historiographical approach that studies the shaping forces of an era: that is, the political, economic, social and cultural phenomena that account for the processes and structures that shape both art and society.³²

27 Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926). In English: *Expressionism and Film*, trans. Brenda Benthien, ed. Christian Kiening and Ulrich Johannes Beil (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2016).

28 G [Richter, Hans], “Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht,” *G—Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* 5–6 (April 1926), 131, translated by the author.

29 Ibid.

30 Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, 89.

31 G [Richter, Hans], “Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht,” 131, translated by the author.

32 On cinema and the crisis of historicism, see Nicholas Baer, *Historical Turns: Weimar Cinema and the Crisis of Historicism* (forthcoming), and Baer’s article “Relativist Perspectivism: *Caligari* and the Crisis of Historicism” in this volume.

Richter was dissatisfied with the state of film historiography in the late 1950s, because he did not see these demands fully met yet. In the *Film Culture* essay, he writes:

As director of the Film Institute at the City College of New York, I taught film history to about 3,000 students during the last 15 years. I did not find a single book among the many written on this subject that I could recommend to the students as a reference work.³³

Richter had joined the faculty of the Institute of Film Techniques at City College of New York in late 1941, shortly after his arrival in the United States, and was appointed director in 1948, but was more or less in charge from about 1942, when Irving Jacoby, the founder of the institute, left to serve as film producer for the Office of War Information. The institute was founded in 1941 with the aim to "provide practical instruction in the production and use of educational and public-service motion picture," as Jacoby outlined in a mission statement of the institute.³⁴ Its original assignment was to train specialists in the production of wartime information films needed by the government. Among the US film schools, the Institute of Film Techniques was unique in specializing on documentary and educational film, or, as we would say today, on useful cinema.³⁵ Richter taught two standard courses per term: "The History of the Fictional Film" and "Fundamentals of Documentary Film History and Production," both designed as one four-hour session a week, changed to two two-hour sessions a week around 1950. The course descriptions published in the *City College Bulletin* from 1950 onwards read as follows:

The History of the Fictional Film.

The development of the film as an art form, as a technique, and as a mirror of the different intellectual and moral trends in our society. Its influence on society and the influence of society upon the film.

33 Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," 26.

34 Irving Jacoby, "Statement concerning the Film Institute and Unit at the City College," unpublished two-page manuscript, February 1943 (CCNY Archives, Institute of Film Techniques, Vertical File 353).

35 For a more detailed discussion of the Institute of Film Techniques and its place in the entangled transnational histories of avant-garde, documentary, and educational film, see Yvonne Zimmermann, "Advertising and Avant-gardes: A History of Concepts, 1930–1940," in *Advertising and the Transformation of Screen Cultures*, by Bo Florin, Patrick Vonderau, and Yvonne Zimmermann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 77–111, in particular pp. 102–5. See also Cecile Starr, "Notes on Hans Richter in the USA," *Film Culture* 79 (Winter 1996): 17–26.

Fundamentals of Documentary Film History and Production.
 Contribution of the documentary film as an art and as a social instrument.
 Analysis of the production of a film from the first concept to the recorded
 film, stressing the highly developed specialization in film work. Field
 trips. Guest lectures by leading film makers.³⁶

The list of the lecturers Richter invited to speak to his students reads as the who's who of documentary film-making of the time: Robert J. Flaherty, John Grierson, Leo Hurwitz, John Ferno, Joris Ivens, Alice M. Keliher, Stuart Legg, and Irving Lerner.³⁷ And this inventory only includes the names of those who visited the institute from its foundation until 1946.

There is an anecdote about Richter's pedagogy that documentary filmmaker and teacher George Stoney would tell his students at Columbia University around 1960. Stoney succeeded Richter as director of the institute in 1957 but left in 1958. The anecdote is recollected by a former Columbia University student and goes as follows:

[On] the first day on the job as film instructor at Richter's faculty, he [Stoney] got the cameras out, taught the kids to thread up, and led them all tumbling down the staircase with war cries, to begin shooting five minutes after they saw their first camera. Passing Richter in the hallway, Richter yelled at George—"But they haven't even analyzed the Odessa Steps sequence from Eisenstein's *Potemkin*!!!"³⁸

According to Stoney, the first course in film at City College under Richter *always* started with a screening of *Potemkin*.³⁹

A third standard course was "The Documentary Film as an Educational Tool." It dealt with the analysis of the different ways film would contemporarily be used in the classroom, in public life, in business, and as a political

36 *City College Bulletin*, no. 5, June 1, 1950, 42. Before 1950, the two courses would be listed as "The History of the Motion Pictures" and "Fundamentals of Film Production." See *City College Bulletin*, no. 5, June 1, 1948, 40.

37 Hans Richter, "The Institute of Film Techniques," *Film News: World Wide News of the Information Film* 7, no. 5 (February/March 1946): 10.

38 The source could not be identified. It is probably a newsletter, but it does not contain a name or a date or a publication. The one-page document is held at MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Clipping Files, Hans Richter.

39 George Stoney, "Breaking the Word Barrier," in *Film Study in Higher Education*, ed. David C. Stewart (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1966), 87. On Richter's teaching, see Richter's recollections in "Learning from Film History," *Filmmakers Newsletter* 7, no. 1 (1973): 26–27.

instrument. A second focus was placed on the study of the history, method, and potentialities of the documentary film movement.⁴⁰ The course was repeatedly taught by Albert Hemsing, head of the overseas non-theatrical operations of the Office of War Information.⁴¹ In 1952, however, Arthur Knight served as lecturer.⁴²

Richter had been retired from teaching at the Institute of Film Techniques for two years when he complained in his 1958 letter to Knight that "there is not a single standard work yet which shows film as a 'dynamic process,' encompassing at least the most important five trends: social, esthetic [sic], philosophical, psychological, economical that shaped film and conditioned it."⁴³ But there were some history books that at least point in this very direction. In his *Film Culture* essay, Richter cites Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*, originally published in English in 1947, for its thesis that film is a mirror of the social climate, a social symptom,⁴⁴ Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*, which comprises excerpts from Arnheim's 1932 book *Film als Kunst* translated into English and newly published in 1957, for providing a key to the aesthetic laws that film is based on with the help of Gestalt theory and its psychological implications,⁴⁵ Marxist film critic and author Guido Aristarco's 1951 book *Storia della teoriche del film* on the development of aesthetic film theories for offering "a valuable contribution to historical writing [...] if somebody would care to translate it,"⁴⁶ and his own 1929 book *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen*, which has not been translated into English, for depicting the development of the art film as a dynamic problem leading from film's purely reproductive stage to a creative one.⁴⁷ These books are presented as attempts "to approach film through a conviction founded on an idea," and thus as positive examples.⁴⁸

What is hardly surprising, but still worth mentioning about this list is that film historiography founded on an idea and written from a "Standpunkt"

40 *City College Bulletin*, no. 5, June 1, 1950, 42.

41 Richter, "The Institute of Film Techniques," 10.

42 *City College Bulletin*, no. 5, September 1, 1952, 87.

43 Letter, Hans Richter to Arthur Knight, April 29, 1958, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Hans Richter, C.XIV.I.

44 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

45 Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

46 Guido Aristarco, *Storia della teoriche del film* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1951).

47 Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* (Berlin: Hermann Reckendorf, 1929).

48 Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," 26.

appears to be the thing of European (white male) authors, many of them in exile in the US. Directly related to this is Richter's sardonic remark on the need for a translation of Aristarco's—and one might add his own—book, which clearly points to the issue of language and translation in film history and historiography, and, indirectly, to the hegemony that the English language had gained in this field. That Richter did not mention his *The Struggle for the Film*, which in its pronounced focus on the interrelations and interdependence of film, art, and society would make a prime example of Richter's materialist conception of film history and historiography,⁴⁹ is easily explained by the fact that the book had not been published yet, not in German, let alone English. This was to happen nearly twenty and thirty years later, respectively. I will come back to the nexus of language, translation, and film history later.

The Brief of History: On the Present-Interest Theory of History

Richter's conception of history is deeply functional in that history is considered as serving a pedagogical goal. In the 1926 manifesto, Richter writes: "History is what happens today. And from this—from the deep and affirmative understanding of the present, history becomes meaningful again."⁵⁰ The present is seen as having an epistemic function, which lies in its capacity to enhance the understanding of the past. But the epistemic relationship between present and past is mutual: not only does the present illuminate the past, but the past also illuminates the present. In his 1973 book *Encounters from Dada till Today*, which was published in English only in 2013, Richter writes the following about Robert J. Flaherty's documentaries:

We want to know what we did yesterday, a hundred years ago or a thousand years ago, and we want to know who we are. We keep searching this past, which extends our finite span and brings life and death into a relation we can understand. It is this going back (and forward) that attracts us to history. "History"—it is not a sort of adventurous fairy tale, but a pointer

49 Richter himself described *The Struggle for the Film* as "a materialistic-historic analysis of the film," Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, March 17, 1939, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

50 "Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht. Und daraus—aus dem tiefen und bejahenden Begreifen des Heute wird auch erst Vergangenheit wieder sinnvoll," G [Richter, Hans], "Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht," 130, translated by the author.

full of meanings. It shows us where we may be coming from and where we may be going.⁵¹

The enigmatic attraction that Richter attributes to Flaherty's films results from their searching for origins, for the deeds of human survival, the sources of perseverance, and the preservation of elemental forces. Richter was fascinated by these films because Flaherty found such examples from the past in the present of the twentieth century. Obviously, Richter was neither concerned about Flaherty's staging for the camera realities of life that had ceased to exist nor about his producing an image of a present interwoven with ancient traditions that was history itself. But that is not the issue here. The point is to illustrate Richter's captivation with the mutual relation between present and past and with the significance of the past for the present in particular. Or, as he states in his 1926 manifesto, art history is not written in retrospect, but "in the here and now and for the now."⁵²

Clearly, Richter saw in history use-value for the present, and it was this use-value for the present that prompted him to develop a conceptual framework for the production of several educational short films during World War II. All these projects, elaborated on both sides of the Atlantic, would use examples from history to teach the present a lesson on freedom, democracy, and human rights. Among these projects were "Zwei Belagerungen" ("Two Sieges"), developed in Switzerland, as well as "The Four Freedoms," "The Monroe Doctrine," and "The Role of Women in America," developed in the US. These projects shared the fate that Richter failed to acquire sponsors. Thus, the films were not made.⁵³

That misfortune does not undermine the fact that Richter advocates for a present-interest theory of history. His compatriot Siegfried Kracauer, who also emigrated to New York in 1941, dedicates an entire chapter to this theory of history in his book *History: The Last Things before the Last* (published posthumously in 1969)—if only to vehemently critique it.⁵⁴ The present-interest theory of history emerged in the wake of historicism and was indebted to the theory of art by Benedetto Croce and his follower R. G. Collingwood. It is based on two premises: first, that the historian is a child of his era, and that the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the era) accounts for, as Kracauer

51 Hans Richter, *Encounters from Dada till Today*, trans. Christopher Middleton (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 220–21.

52 G [Richter, Hans], "Geschichte ist das, was heute geschieht," 131, translated by the author.

53 See Yvonne Zimmermann, "Hans Richter and the *Filmessay*," 379.

54 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

puts it, “the why and how of his devotion to the past.”⁵⁵ And second, in a stronger version, the present-interest theory claims that the present is not only the point of departure of all historical reconstruction, but also its vanishing point. In other words, that historical research should be motivated by an interest in the present and proceed with an eye to it.⁵⁶ Or, as Croce’s dictum would have it, history is contemporary history.⁵⁷

Kracauer opposes the present-interest theory of history for its underlying claim that there is a principle that governs the whole of human history.⁵⁸ Gertrud Koch is certainly right to warn against hastily embracing Kracauer as a precursor of the postmodern critique of the link between a history of philosophy and historiography.⁵⁹ But it is remarkable how much Kracauer’s concept of history resonates with concerns that would be central to postmodern historiography; concerns such as history versus histories, macro- versus micro-history, non-simultaneousness, heterogeneity, and discontinuity.

Koch in her introduction to Kracauer’s oeuvre argues that critical distance is what unites his disparate works.⁶⁰ Richter, in contrast, had irons in the fire. The increasing attempts at historicizing film in the 1930s and 1940s was not something for Richter to be observed from a critical distance, but something to participate in, for at stake was his own place in this very history. While Kracauer asserts that the exile’s true mode of existence is that of a stranger, and that self-alienation and self-effacement is a precondition of genuine knowledge,⁶¹ Richter represents the opposite model of a historian who, instead of waiting in the anteroom like Kracauer, is involved; who is not an extraterritorial observer of history, but an entangled maker of it. And unlike Kracauer, for whom fragmentation, instead of a continuum, is

55 Ibid., 63.

56 See Inka Mülder-Bach, “History as Autobiography: *The Last Things before the Last*,” *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991), 151.

57 See Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960 [1921]), 19.

58 Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, 63.

59 Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 118.

60 Ibid., 120.

61 Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, 83–84. Kracauer’s study on “The Hotel Lobby” (1925) in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 173–85, entails a similar configuration of observation without participation. See, for example, Marc Katz, “The Hotel Kracauer,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 134–52, and Gertrud Koch’s chapter “The Early Phenomenology of Modernity and Mass Culture: Of Hotel Lobbies and Detective Novels,” in her *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11–25.

a precondition for experience, as Drehli Robnik in his study of Kracauer's theoretical entanglement of cinema and history underlines,⁶² Richter is committed to modern historiographical assumptions that include ideas of medium-specificity, chronological development, continuity, coherence, and progress both in art and society. Richter's idea of the "development" of film from a stage of mere reproduction of reality to an artistic production of it is a story of progress based on the notion that film history has a *telos* in that it pursues the goal to free film from representation of reality and reach artistic expression.⁶³ The same applies to Richter's idea that film history develops towards realism, which, as Richter would point out to his students at the Institute of Film Techniques, Griffith had tried to establish in *Intolerance*, "and Stroheim and Eisenstein much more."⁶⁴ Clearly, such ideas belong to an era of traditional film historiography.

Materialist History and the Materiality of History

What unites facets of Richter and Kracauer as well as Walter Benjamin's thoughts on history, however, is their mutual concern for the cultural artefact as image and object in relation to history. As Benjamin writes in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger.⁶⁵

Benjamin's formulation written in 1940 lends itself as a theoretical description of Richter's practice at the very same time, namely the practice of

62 Drehli Robnik, "Among Other Things—a Miraculous Realist: Political Perspectives on the Theoretical Entanglement of Cinema and History in Siegfried Kracauer," in *Culture in the Anteroom: The Legacies of Siegfried Kracauer*, ed. Gerd Gemünden and Johannes von Moltke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 263.

63 These ideas are expressed, for example, in Richter's *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen*, *The Struggle for the Film*, and in his essay "The Film as an Original Art Form," *College Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1951): 157–61, reprinted in *Film Culture* 1, no. 1 (1955): 19–23.

64 Richter, "Learning from Film History," 27.

65 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 255.

retaining images of the past which flash up at a moment of danger. The moment of danger is crucial in that it accentuates Richter's preoccupation with history in the 1930s and provokes him to devote a large part of his future career to the production of history.

From the correspondence, a key moment appears to be Richter's meeting with Hilla von Rebay and Solomon Guggenheim in Paris in 1939 shortly before the outbreak of World War II on the occasion of Rebay and Guggenheim's travelling Europe to collect abstract art. Richter comments on Guggenheim's enterprise in a letter to Rebay that he wrote from Paris twenty days after the declaration of war:

to carry over from endangered Europe—all the important stages and works, especially the future-laden ones of the last generation—into receptive America, to plant the “cultural plants” directly into the soil of America, that is a great thought—that is *history*—what the man does.⁶⁶

Involved in this transatlantic transfer of European works were two major New York art institutions that both had only recently started collecting films, the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (established in 1939), renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1952 and devoted to abstract art, and the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In the late 1930s, Richter had a vivid transatlantic exchange of letters with the directors of both institutions, with Iris Barry from MoMA's Film Library and Hilla von Rebay from the Guggenheim Museum.⁶⁷ The main reason for the correspondence was Richter's notable personal film collection that in addition to his own films included avant-garde works from the 1920s by Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, Jean Renoir, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, and Joris Ivens—about twenty titles in total plus art works, among them Eggeling's estate. In other words, Richter had a sizable part of the material legacy of the European cinematic avant-garde in his hands, an internationally sought-after asset that Richter traded in for museum preservation of his and Eggeling's work and for immigration assistance

66 Letter, Hans Richter to Hilla von Rebay, September 20, 1939, Solomon R. Guggenheim Archives, New York, NY, Hilla Rebay Records, A0010/3031/18, emphasis in the original; my translation.

67 On MoMA's Film Library, see Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Haidee Wasson, “Studying Movies at the Museum: The Museum of Modern Art and Cinema's Changing Object,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 121–48.

to the US for himself.⁶⁸ The transatlantic conversation between Richter and the two institutions illustrates the mechanisms of canon formation as a crucial part in doing film history and exposes the very materiality that film history is made with and made of. It draws attention to the role of objects—films, books, props, art works, etc.—and the material infrastructures in which these objects circulated, among them diplomatic circuits and in particular the “French consul’s diplomatic bag” for bringing film prints through customs.⁶⁹

Richter’s correspondence with Iris Barry also discloses what ultimately caused Richter to write a history of the European and German film avant-garde. In a letter to Barry from Carabetta, Switzerland, on September 24, 1939, four days after the Paris letter to Rebay, Richter writes:

Dear Mrs. Barry,

[...] I regret that the authors of *Histoire du cinéma* [Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach] don’t know so well the evolution and the importance of the (elder) [G]erman avant-garde films, than they know the importance and evolution of the [F]rench. [...] Being informed that you are translating now *Histoire du cinéma* I may give you all the details and documents you may perhaps need.⁷⁰

What Richter missed out was that Barry’s translation had already been published in English in 1938 under the title *The History of Motion Pictures*—which again points to the materiality of history, here to the book as a physical object and to knowledge depending in some cases on translation, in all cases on physical circulation and access. Obviously, Richter in Switzerland had no

68 On the transatlantic transfer of Richter’s film collection and Eggeling’s estate and their deposit at MoMA and Guggenheim Museum, see Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann, “Viking Eggeling and European Avant-garde Cinema,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries 1925–1950*, vol. 2, ed. Benedikt Hjartarson, Andrea Kollnitz, Per Stounbjerg, and Tania Ørum (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2019), 82–101.

69 Letter, Iris Barry to Hans Richter, December 21, 1937, in which Barry announces the return of Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* to Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque française after the Film Library had made a print for their archive and circulating library (MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969). The French government offered the Film Library use of its diplomatic pouch for the transport of films to and from Paris (see Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 117). For a larger study of the role of material infrastructures and material cultural practices in the organization of power and governance, see Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, eds. *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

70 Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, September 24, 1939, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

access to the book and lacked knowledge of it being already finished and printed. Richter had been offering Barry his expert advice and assistance since January 1937 after reading the MoMA Film Library's catalogue and film programmes that Barry had mailed to Richter's address in Switzerland and that—according to Richter—presented an inaccurate picture of the European interwar avant-garde movement.⁷¹

True to the French original, *The History of Motion Pictures* devotes a fifteen-line paragraph to the German abstract films of the 1920s. Mentioned by name are Eggeling, Richter, and Ruttmann. Their films are described without giving the titles and evaluated as “strange productions [that] were not without their uses, although their mathematical coldness lacked the emotional quality characteristic of French films of the period.” Singled out and lauded is Ruttmann for his *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) because he liberated himself from the formulas of the former films.⁷² Richter must have seen his and Eggeling's work underappreciated in these lines, fuelled perhaps by the fact that Eggeling's and his name do not appear in the index of the French original, which was possibly an oversight that Barry corrected in her translation. In response, Richter wrote his own paper on the avant-garde movement, which he submitted to Barry in 1942, explaining that “[t]here is nothing in film litterature [sic] about this movement up to now (except some nice pamphlets in [D]utch), but much confusion about it.”⁷³ Barry read the paper “with much interest” and wished she knew what she could do about it except keeping a copy in the Film Library's files.⁷⁴

Apparently, the German manuscript of *The Struggle for the Film* suffered the same fate. There is a nine-page typescript in English with numerous typing errors and handwritten corrections at MoMA's Department of Film Archive that summarizes the content of the book manuscript. The synopsis opens with a foreword that reads: “It is difficult to make a report about a book which has no clear conception. Some parts of the work may look confused but it is not always the translator's fault.”⁷⁵

71 Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, January 29, 1937, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

72 Bardèche and Brasillach, *The History of Motion*, 252.

73 Letter, Hans Richter to Iris Barry, July 26, 1942, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

74 Letter, Iris Barry to Hans Richter, August 13, 1942, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

75 Hans Richter, “Der Kampf um den Film,” typescript, 9 pages, undated, MoMA, Department of Film Archive, Correspondence Files, Richter, Hans, A-39, 1936–1969.

Barry read and translated from French to English, but apparently, she did not speak German. The first letters Richter sent to Barry, still written in German, are available in the archive in the original and in a handwritten English translation. Obviously, Barry had someone to do the translations. Richter soon took to writing in English and his mastery of the language quickly improved. While these observations may seem incidental, they illustrate Iris Barry and the Film Library's gatekeeping function in selecting and filtering not only films for the archive and the circulating library, but also writings on film history. Barry and the Film Library sorted out the "relevant" contributions, and writings in foreign languages had unequal chances to get past the gatekeeper. Thereby, French and German voices had still better chances to be heard compared to Dutch or Czech ones, for example, let alone non-Western voices.⁷⁶ Or, in other words, there were different degrees of marginality regarding the origins of writings and artistic production.

Richter had more luck with experimental film-maker Frank Stauffacher, who organized *Art in Cinema*, a series of programmes of avant-garde and experimental films, at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946. Stauffacher granted Richter's essay "A History of the Avantgarde," which Iris Barry had no use for, the prominent place as opener of his 1947 edited *Art in Cinema* catalogue.⁷⁷ This essay was the first published in the United States to present a comprehensive history of the European interwar avant-garde. The version of the origin, development and "decline" of the movement that Richter tells in this chronological story was followed by many more film historiographical accounts of that sort and cemented Richter's narrative into standard film history.⁷⁸ Among them were Richter's "The Avant-

76 The rich legacy of Czech film theory and criticism, for example, has only recently been acknowledged internationally with the edited collection by Jaroslav Anděl and Petr Szczepanik, *Cinema All the Time: An Anthology of Czech Film Theory and Criticism, 1908–1938*, trans. Kevin B. Johnson (Prague: National Film Archive, 2008).

77 Hans Richter, "A History of the Avantgarde," in *Art in Cinema: A Symposium on the Avantgarde Film Together with Program Notes and References for Series One of Art in Cinema*, ed. Frank Stauffacher (San Francisco: Society for Art in Cinema, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1947), 6–21. On the Art in Cinema's programmes, see Scott MacDonald, ed. *Art in Cinema: Documents toward a History of the Film Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

78 For a close analysis of Richter's essay in relation to Sara Kathryn Arledge's and Lewis Jacobs' accounts of a (pre-)history of the US experimental film movement, see Henning Engelke, *Metaphern einer anderen Filmgeschichte: Amerikanischer Experimentalfilm, 1940–1960* (Marburg: Schüren, 2018), 105–27; Richter, "A History of the Avantgarde," 6–21.

garde Film Seen from Within" in *Hollywood Quarterly* in 1949, which was published in German in the Viennese journal *Filmkunst: Zeitschrift für Filmkultur und Filmwissenschaft* a year later and in French in the journal *L'Âge du cinéma* the year after.⁷⁹ His 1949 essay "Avant-garde Film in Germany" was part of Roger Manvell's edited collection *Experiment in the Film*, also published in French in 1952 and in German in 1953.⁸⁰ The same interest had Richter's writing on "The Film as an Original Art Form," which was first published in *College Art Journal* in 1951 and reprinted in the first issue of *Film Culture* in 1955 as well as in P. Adams Sitney's 1970 *Film Culture Reader* and also included in a shortened German version in Gottfried Schlemmer's 1973 edited collection *Avantgardistischer Film 1951–1971: Theorie*.⁸¹

Historicizing modernist art became relevant after the war. Recurring debates about medium-specificity and film as legitimate art also fuelled respective discourses. And there was an increasing demand for the history of the interwar European cinematic avant-garde in the context of the emerging post-war US experimental film movement that looked for ancestors and a legitimizing tradition. Hence, Richter's history of the European cinematic avant-garde in the interwar period hit the nerve of time. Other histories that Richter could have written were not in demand, such as a history of the sponsored documentary film, in which Richter also had an important place in on both sides of the Atlantic, or a history of film pedagogy and the role of the Institute of Film Techniques at City College of New York in it. Hence, the "struggle for the film history" included the struggle of getting past gatekeepers, coming at the right time, and finding an audience.

79 Hans Richter, "The Avant-garde Film Seen from Within," *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1949): 34–41; Hans Richter, "Der Avantgardefilm von Innen gesehen," *Filmkunst: Zeitschrift für Filmkultur und Filmwissenschaft* [Vienna], 2 (1950): 135–40; Hans Richter, "Anatomie de l'avant-garde," *L'Âge du cinéma* 3 (June/July 1951): 3–6.

80 Hans Richter, "Avant-garde Film in Germany," in *Experiment in the Film*, ed. Roger Manvell (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), 219–33; Hans Richter, "Histoire de l'avant-garde allemande (1918–1930)," *L'Âge du cinéma* 6 (1952); Hans Richter, "Der avantgardistische Film in Deutschland (von 1921–1951)," *Cinéaste: Zeitschrift zur Förderung des guten Films* [Göttingen], special edition on *Deutsche Filmtage Göttingen* (1953): 13–26.

81 Richter, "The Film as an Original Art Form," 157–61; reprinted in *Film Culture* 1, no. 1 (1955): 19–23, and in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 15–20; reprinted in German "Der Film als selbständige Kulturform," in *Avantgardistischer Film 1951–1971: Theorie*, ed. Gottfried Schlemmer (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1973), 16–18. A shortened German version with the title "Vom Film als von einer werdenden, eigenen Kunstform" had already been published in 1954 in *Basler Schulblatt* 15, no. 3 (June 1954): 65–68.

Seizing the Past for the Present

Overall, Richter had a good sense of timing and knew how to attract attention. He was very aware of the flitting nature of the picture of the past and recognized that the moment to seize it at the outbreak of World War II had come. To quote Benjamin again:

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up again at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.⁸²

Richter's doing film history through writing, teaching, and film-making can be understood as producing visibility, as a practice of making the past visible to render it recognizable in the present "as one of its own concerns," to quote Benjamin again. This also accounts for Richter's post-war films, among them *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), which features surrealist episodes written and presented by Richter and his modern art companions Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Alexander Calder. *Thirty Years of Experiment* (1951) and *Forty Years of Experiment: From Dada to Surrealism* (1961) are anthologies of Richter's own films from 1921 to 1951 and 1961 respectively. Both compendia include an on-film introduction spoken by Richter in which he historicizes his own filmic work as well as Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*. Richter had nurtured Eggeling's legacy almost as carefully as his own, if not altogether altruistically, after Eggeling's untimely death in 1925.⁸³

Speaking with Bruno Latour, these films can be described as "polytemporal" encounters in which "the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled"⁸⁴—and thus made relevant for the present. This is certainly the case with *Dadascope Part I* (1956–1961) and *Dadascope Part II* (1968), the latter being Richter's last film in his long career. The two parts feature original Dada poems and prose from the years 1916 to 1922 spoken for Richter's film several decades later by the authors themselves. The list of authors features Hans Arp, Theo

82 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

83 On Richter's incorporating Eggeling's legacy, see Hagener and Zimmermann, "Viking Eggeling and European Avant-garde Cinema," 82–101.

84 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75. I thank Clara Podlesnigg for the reference.

van Doesburg (spoken by Nelly van Doesburg), Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Janco, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck, Man Ray, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, Vladimir Vogel, and Richter himself. The poems, delivered in Dutch, French, English, and Dada gibberish, are introduced with playful intertitles and hurdy-gurdy and fairground music and accompanied by images from various origins, among them photos of the artists, clips from earlier Richter films and film projects (*The Minotaur* 1951, for example), and newly filmed short sequences that restage, recreate, and reshuffle typical Dada and surrealist film motives (eye balls, billiard balls and marbles, chessboard and chessmen, colours dispersing in water, thighs climbing ladders) as well as special camera effects (prismatic images), repetitions of images, and rhythmic editing. *Dadascope* is an original collage of images flashing up again in which the past is not surpassed, but protected and reinterpreted, redone and renewed for the present.

At the beginning I stated that I am not primarily interested in film history as an output, but in its making. But “doing film history” cannot always—and perhaps never—be clearly separated from “film history done.” Upon Richter’s turning eighty in 1968, MoMA honoured the jubilee with a film retrospective in connection with MoMA’s exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, in which Richter was present with two canvasses. MoMA’s press release could be read as indicative of Richter’s success in securing himself a prominent place in film and art history.⁸⁵ Richter is credited as “the artist-filmmaker, a former Dadaist, who first brought the abstract and a sense of the absurd to the motion picture,” and his *Rhythm 21* is labelled as “the first of the animated abstract films.”⁸⁶

As mentioned before, my concern here is not whether these (and other) facts and figures of film history are correct, but how they have turned into facts and figures. Richter definitely got his work and his version of film history into “film history” as a result. At the same time, with his writing, teaching, film-making, and MoMA’s retrospective, this history was restaged, rearticulated, and reiterated. Film history is never done, but constantly redone and undone as a polytemporal encounter of the past in the present and for the present. This chapter is no exception. The “struggle for the film history” has no end.

85 Museum of Modern Art, “The Museum of Modern Art to Present Hans Richter Film Retrospective: Artist, Painter, Dadaist Exhibits Forty Years of Film Fantasies,” press release, no. 48, May 31, 1968, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4053/releases/MOMA_1968_Jan-June_0070_48.pdf.

86 Museum of Modern Art, “The Museum of Modern Art to Present Hans Richter Film Retrospective,” 1 and 3.

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III

Revisiting Film History: Institutions, Knowledge, and Circulation

9 **Historicizing the Gulf Moving Image Archives**

Firat Oruc

Abstract

This chapter aims to debunk presentist assumptions about film-making and cinema culture in the Gulf and excavate genealogies of the moving image rooted in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity. It traces the history of film and visual representation in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula in multiple historical stages. Despite the increasing appeal of the turn to archival research in film studies, any attempt to historicize the moving image in the Gulf, however, immediately encounters significant methodological and empirical challenges. In order to produce such a history, one has no other choice but to start with the official colonial archives of the British India Office Records or corporate archives of the oil companies that operated in the Gulf. Reading these archives against the grain, however, could enable us to critically reveal the transcolonial, transregional, and transnational set of directions that the history of the moving image in the Gulf followed.

Keywords: history of film in the Gulf, colonial archives, industry-sponsored films, post-colonial national cinemas, film and petromodernity, cinema spheres

In what ways is the moving image a key source for tracing the cultural and political history of the Gulf in the aftermath of the discovery of oil? The historical and contemporary trajectories of cinema and film-making in the Gulf display a set of characteristics that are different from other formations in the Middle East and North Africa and do not follow the histories of post-colonial cinemas of Algeria and Morocco, the exilic cinema of Palestine, the state-monopoly cinemas of Syria and Iraq, or the commercial cinemas

of Egypt and Lebanon.¹ Although film emerged in the last century as one of the most pervasive forms of aesthetic expression, its social, historical, and cultural role in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity in the Gulf is yet to be explored.

Until the recent global rise of the region as a financial and political power, Gulf cinema has traditionally been an absent presence.² In the recent decade, however, the establishment of film industry—as the sum of various agents, activities, networks, and organizations involved in the making of cinema and film culture—has been a shared ambition across the Gulf. As emergent new players in the regional as well as global media landscape, the Gulf countries have not yet achieved a commercially successful and globally influential film industry but rather, have begun “laying the foundations for a more sustainable cinematic infrastructure.”³ These efforts toward the development of film industry and film culture in the Gulf not only vary from one country to another but also take place on a peculiar terrain, where financial capacity clashes with cultural conservatism; the backing of the rentier state with abrupt official interventions; commercial goals with the art house model of festival circuits; global ambitions with local constraints.

This chapter places the current Gulf cinema phenomenon in a historical context. The historical dimension, I argue, not only debunks presentist assumptions about film-making and film watching in the Gulf but also brings forth important genealogies of film culture that are rooted in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity in the region. I trace the history of film and visual representation in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula—namely, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia—in five stages: (1) the colonial emergence of cinema in the region in the 1930s under the regulation and monitoring of the British network of administrative personnel; (2) the use of film for publicity and propaganda purposes by British Empire’s Gulf stations in the 1940s; (3) the production of documentary films by petroleum companies in the 1950s and 1960s to represent (make visible) “the magic of oil”; (4) visual ethnography and expedition films of the 1960s and 1970s; and (5) the emergence of indigenous film-making after independence. I argue that

1 See Roy Armes, *Arab Filmmakers of the Middle East: A Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 23–25.

2 Kiki Kennedy-Day’s article on “Cinema in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Kuwait,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 364–419, for instance, devotes only one brief paragraph to Kuwait.

3 Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 250.

the history of the moving image through these stages and beyond offers us an important critical lens to analyse the modern development of Gulf societies and cultures.

Despite the increasing appeal of the contemporary turn to archival research in film studies, any attempt to historicize the moving image in the Gulf, however, immediately encounters significant methodological and empirical challenges that are yet to be carefully considered by film scholars. In order to produce such a history, one has no other choice but to start with the official colonial archives of the British India Office Records or corporate archives of the oil companies that operated in the Gulf. Although this involuntary choice is a result of the petrocolonial origins of cinema and film culture in the Gulf, the limitations of having to rely on such official discourses and enterprises cannot be ignored. Reading against the grain, however, could enable us to critically reclaim the archives—something which I attempt to do in the following pages. In addition, we must take into account the “in-transit,” mobile, “come-and-go,” in-flux texture of the Gulf on many levels. This factor historically led to a plethora of “visiting lenses” in different periods of time: industry-sponsored directors, late imperial expatriates, travellers, expeditioners, military personnel, public relation officers, missionaries, revolutionaries, and government-hired experts, among others. Cinema culture in both non-theatrical and public commercial forms developed through films, entrepreneurs, and infrastructure that came from outside. In turn, the first generation of film-makers in post-independence Gulf went abroad to receive training, make films, participate in festivals, import films, and so on. From the very outset, the history of the moving image in the Gulf followed various transcolonial, transregional, and transnational directions.

The Colonial Prelude

Due to its ascendancy as the regional nodal point in the British colonial network in the early decades of the twentieth century, Bahrain became the first Arab Gulf country to experience cinema prior to the discovery of oil. In 1922, a Bahraini merchant, Mahmoud Lal Saa'ti, introduced the first impromptu theatre with about thirty seats and a makeshift screen in Manama near the traditional coffee houses by the sea, where merchants and families would gather to await the return of pearl-diving ships.⁴ A few

4 See Mansoor Mohammed Sarhan, *Tārikh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin* [The history of cinema in Bahrain] (Manama: AlAyam Publishing, 2005), 11.

years later, in 1927, another local entrepreneur, Ali Yateem, was granted permission to set up a public cinema with a three-year monopoly.⁵ The founding figure of a major entrepreneur family in Bahrain, Ali Yateem emerged as a successful businessman, particularly keen on introducing novel media technologies such as gramophones and cameras by the 1920s.⁶ Yet due to Bahrain's social unrest during the British-led administrative reforms of the 1920s, Ali Yateem's public cinema project did not materialize. The diary entries of Charles Dalrymple Belgrave (1894–1969), the British advisor (*al-mustashar*) to the government of Bahrain, suggest that cinema faced strong protest by some judges (*kadis*) on religious grounds.

Following the discovery of oil in 1932, Bahrain entered a new phase in its history. As hydrocarbon modernity generated new spaces of urban public culture in the form of clubs, associations, libraries, bookstores,⁷ the interest in establishing cinema in Bahrain gained a new momentum, overlapping naturally with the rise of sound film as a globally popular phenomenon of entertainment. But in contrast to Europe and America, where people from all walks of life had relatively easy access to “talking pictures,” in Bahrain and other Gulf countries film spectatorship remained restricted to a highly selective group of the British colonial administrative staff, members of the local ruling family, and foreign visitors from the West, especially through private screenings to end formal receptions. We learn from Belgrave's diaries that especially “the wives of the British administrative staff [were] fond of making movies” (amateur actuality films of local events and public spaces such as the Muharram celebrations and the *souq*) and that “they show[ed] their cinemas after dinner parties.”⁸

A “public” cinema outside the confines of the private residences of local rulers and colonial officials arrived in Bahrain with the oil company. In 1935, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO)—a subsidiary of Standard Oil of California (now Chevron)—acquired permission to equip its Club House with “a modern Talking Cinema.” Under the conditions ratified by the British political agent, the company management was given freedom over the selection of films, with a nominal right of censorship by the government and

5 See “Bahrain Cinemas,” R/15/2/817, File 32/7 (4/6) [3r], IOR, London.

6 See “Kingdom Mourns Death of Builder of Modern Bahrain,” *DT News*, December 20, 2015, <http://www.newsofbahrain.com/viewNews.php?ppId=11032&TYPE=Posts&pid=21&MNU=2&SUB=>.

7 See Nelida Fuccaro, “Shaping the Urban Life of Oil in Bahrain: Consumerism, Leisure, and Public Communication in Manama and in the Oil Camps, 1932–1960s,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 59–74.

8 Belgrave, *Papers*, 1099.

for non-commercial purposes.⁹ Similarly, the first movies in Saudi Arabia arrived in 1937 with the “early ARAMCO pioneers,” who were settled in the oil colony in Dhahran.¹⁰ In addition to the oil company, the early years of cinema in the Gulf were also connected to the British military presence in the region. Cinema licences were granted to ships at HMS *Jufair* British Royal Navy Base and the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Muharraq.¹¹ In the Emirates (then the Trucial States), too, cinema was introduced through the British Royal Air Force cinema in Al-Mahatta, Sharjah (c. 1945) to serve the military crew and their families.¹² In fact, by 1945, in order to meet the increase in the number of audience and showings across the club houses and military bases in the Gulf, BAPCO secured priority air freight from the British Overseas Airways Corporation to import 120 kilograms of film a week from Karachi.¹³

In addition to mediating film consumption in the Arabian Gulf, the oil companies took part in film production, too. The first visual narratives of the Gulf appeared in the form of industry documentaries commissioned to tell the story of oil. These documentaries—such as *Desert Venture* (California Arabian Standard Oil Company, 1948), *Petroleum and Kuwait* (Kuwait Oil Company, 1948), *Oil across Arabia* (The Trans-Arabian Pipe Line Company & ARAMCO, 1950)—promoted the companies’ image as creators of new energy resources and jobs for the recovering economies of the West after the Second World War, on the one hand, and as developers of “primitive” lands and harbingers of wealth and economic growth, on the other. Replete with footage of actualities and spectacles of development, oil discovery and shipment celebrations, and initial encounters of “natives” and “pioneers,” these documentaries aimed to lure their audience to a hydrocarbon utopia of modernity, where oil and technology performed its magic of creating a whole new place “out of nothing.”

9 “Bahrain Cinemas,” [6r], [8r]. In addition, the India Office Records contain a file on the cinema programmes of the BAPCO Club at Awali. The programmes include information on the date and time of screenings, film titles, principal actors, film production companies, and intended audience. The film repertoire consists of Hollywood films, with a small number of British-made films, ranging from Walt Disney animations, newsreels, and classics such as *Lassie Come Home*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Saratoga Trunk*, and *The Lady from Shanghai*. “Cinema Programmes,” R/15/2/1575, IOR, London.

10 See Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 60.

11 “Bahrain Cinemas,” [36r].

12 Ibrahim Al Mulla, “Cinema in the UAE: Beginnings, Memories and History,” *Al-Ittihad*, January 28, 2006, <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=47104&y=2006>.

13 “Priority Air Freight for BAPCO Cinema Films,” R/15/2/445, IOR, London.



Fig. 9.1. Sharjah Paramount open-air cinema at an RAF station in the Persian Gulf. © IWM CM 6015.

ARAMCO's first documentary, *Desert Venture* (1948) extended the limits of the American frontier. The film opened with a prologue that read:

This is the story of a venture by American capital in a strange and ancient land.... A story of reawakening of a slumbering civilization.... It has to do with men who went among suspicious strangers and won their friendship.... Men who challenged heat and sand, and a multitude of obstacles.... And who won a victory which is serving the interest of the United States, of the country whose resources they are developing, and of a world that moves on wheels. It is the story of oil in Saudi Arabia.

It is not until the end that we find out that the “ancient land” being spoken about is Saudi Arabia. The use of ellipses creates a space for viewers to speculate about where this place might be and to recall associations and preconceived notions they have about “ancient lands,” “slumbering civilizations,” “friendships,” and “a multitude of obstacles.” Through the use of a voice-over-narrator who made recourse to histories, cartographies



Fig. 9.2. Still shot from *Desert Venture* (1948).

and individual stories of influential figures to “empirically” substantiate the narrative claims being made, *Desert Venture* conjured up Arabia as a site in which fantasies of conquest, wealth, and patriotism could be realized.

The visual corollary to the voice-over narrative in *Desert Venture* was the use of numerous intersecting medium still shots that showed camels moving across the screen and towards the horizon at a slow pace. In contrast to a panning shot, which would have given a sense of movement and dynamism, the still shots affirmed a narrative of civilizational fixity and monotony. The pace of the camels and static shots visualized the civilizational decay that prevented that land of Bedouins from catching up to the accelerated pace of technological advancement. In short, *Desert Venture* universalized the dream, fantasy, and promise of oil, making it an unexpected possibility that was accessible to both the American worker and the Saudi Arabian nomad. The dream found its grounding in a narrative of an Arabian renaissance spearheaded by the oil company and the king.

The oil company films functioned as “foundational narratives” that were constructed through mytho-historic tropes borrowed from Orientalism. ARAMCO was the first oil company to stray from the documentary model and flirt with the possibilities of feature-length narrative film production.

It hired the Academy Award winning film-maker Richard Lyford (for his 1950 German documentary film *The Titan: Story of Michelangelo*) to direct the company's cinematic celebration of the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abd al-Aziz. Lyford made a feature film, titled *The Island of the Arabs* (1955), which narrated the rise of the Saud family thanks to the discovery of oil in Arabia. The film aimed to craft a narrative of the peninsula's history as the story of Wahabi conquest and oil pioneers. As historian Robert Vitalis ascertains, "the firm began to market its story beyond the borders of the United States to Europe and, more significantly still, the Arab world."¹⁴ One should recall that Arab audiences of this period were slowly being freed from the shackles of British and French colonialism, and that ARAMCO was facing a regional social and political trust issue that it needed to overcome to form long-lasting economic ties with the region.

The Island of the Arabs strategically referenced the history of the Middle East and Islam. Aiming to connect the film to its intended Arab audience, it regularly invoked known Islamic beliefs and texts. The director's most interesting use of Islam manifested in the Arab child character's recitation of a popular Quranic verse that encourages social tolerance and diversity, thereby invoking traditional Arab acceptance of foreigners. Hence, the Islamic historical references not only served the plot, but also conveyed an underlying political message that could be used as a safeguard against growing Arab anti-colonial sentiment and suspicion of the West.

The film's chronicling of a timeline of Middle Eastern history is predictably followed by scenes that depicted petromodernity as the culmination of Ibn Saud's vision of nation-building. Images of Arab and Western men flashed on the screen side-by-side and were accompanied by the following statement by the voice-over narrator: "This new discovery could mean many things." This scene aimed to signify the new political and economic East-West relationship that came about with modernity through the discovery of oil. Through successive scenes of machinery, the film projected modernity as a new historical epoch on the horizons of the Arabian Peninsula. The world premiere of *The Island of the Arabs* took place in the Cairo Palace, an art deco movie theatre run by 20th Century Fox.¹⁵ It would also serve as

¹⁴ Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121. The original title, *The Island of the Arabs* (*Jazirat al-Arab*), was later changed to echo the popular box-office hit *Garden of Allah* (1936).



Fig. 9.3. Still shot from *The Island of the Arabs* (1955).

the first film to be aired on Saudi Arabia's first Arabic-language television station, founded by ARAMCO in 1957.¹⁶

Despite the ideological and pragmatic objectives outlined above, the cinemas of the oil companies and navy ships, however, remained “confined to British and American audiences” only.¹⁷ Although the admission of the foreign workers was relatively less restrictive, we can infer from the British archival records that it was not always smooth. On April 25, 1950, for instance, a large group of Pakistani company workers (described in the report to be “a thousand,” a figure that clearly implies limited access to an extremely large audience at a time) were brought into the Kuwait Oil Company's facility in Ahmadi. Apparently, there was a mix-up in the scheduling, for “the show was arranged for another group of workers.” When the second group of workers arrived, the cinema manager ordered the first group outside. Upon the reluctant and slow departure of the first group from the movie theatre, the manager called in the police, who intervened forcefully, “using their

16 See *ibid.*, 123. In 1969, Richard Lyford returned to the Gulf to produce a ninety-three-minute feature film in Bahrain in partnership with Khalifa Shaheen. *Hamad and the Pirates* appeared in 1971 on the *Wonderful World of Disney* television series and was subsequently shown across Bahrain's schools as an educational insight into the island's culture and way of life of the local community. Asma Salman, “It's a Pirate's Life for Bahrain Star,” *Gulf Weekly*, May 30–June 5, 2007, <http://www.gulfweekly.com/Articles/15559/It's-a-pirate's-life--for-Bahrain-star>.

17 “Bahrain Cinemas,” [4r].

belts to give weight to their efforts.” In response, the workers defended themselves with chairs, and the cinema manager and the policemen had to take refuge in the projection room. The workers (“the mob which was by now unruly”) were eventually scattered by the deployment of further police forces. The incident left sixteen people hurt.¹⁸

The local Arab workers were still barred from access to the oil company cinemas. One of the iconic figures of ARAMCO's early “discovery” years, Tom Barger, records in one of his letters to his family that “Arabs were forbidden to attend” movies, although “they were about five deep all about the outside of the house peering in the windows.”¹⁹ In fact, local employees were not given access to ARAMCO's cinema facilities even in the later decades. In a letter addressed to ARAMCO's president, Abd al-Aziz Abu Sunayd, one of the leaders of the first workers' strike against the oil company in 1953, would complain about this unfair treatment, narrating how he was denied entry to the senior staff theatre in Dhahran to see Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952).²⁰ More strikingly, he criticized the company for implementing the Jim Crow system in his own native country, recalling how he was banned from entering a movie theatre while he was training in the United States due to the colour line that was in place during that time.²¹ Three years later, in 1956, the ARAMCO workers once again held a general strike for better working, living, and union rights. Col Eddy, an undercover CIA agent serving as an ARAMCO consultant (also known as “Eddy of Arabia”), expressed the Manichean division between the local workers and Western expatriates with a pronounced Orientalism. “The labor unrest,” he told the US embassy in Saudi Arabia, “was the result of the dissatisfaction of the workers who compared this primitive land of low pay, slaves, eunuchs, and harems to the comfortable conditions of US residents in Dhahran, plus probable Red stimulation.”²² On June 14, 1956, the Saudi workers' resentment against their exclusionary, discriminatory and unequal treatment by the company culminated in the storming of the cinema in the Intermediate Camp—which housed middle level foreign employees—in Ras Tanura.²³ The movie theatre,

18 Sd. J. A. F. Gethin Political Agency, Kuwait, to Sir Rupert Hay, Political Resident, Persian Gulf, Bahrain, May 26, 1950. *Records of Kuwait, 1899–1961: Volume 5: Petroleum Affairs*, ed. Alan de Lacy Rush (London: Archive Editions, 1989), 445–48.

19 Quoted in Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 60. The film that Barger refers to in his letter is Gregory La Cava's pre-code melodrama *Gallant Lady* (1933).

20 See Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 153.

21 See *ibid.*, 16.

22 Quoted in Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 152–53.

23 *Ibid.*, 159.

along with other elements of modern leisure and lifestyle available to whites only, exposed the uneven and segregated structure of the oil town. As the tensions rose, the workers tried to enter the movie theatre as a symbolic claim for the amenities that they demanded from the company. Storming the cinema was an act of transgressing the system of segregation and the racial colour line of exclusion. Not surprisingly, the oil company responded harshly to the strike, fearing in particular that it could spread to other oil conurbations. The workers were severely beaten, leaders were jailed, and unions were banned.²⁴

Throughout the early decades of hydrocarbon modernity in the Gulf, the British administrators were not at all positive about requests to establish a public cinema for local citizens as well as foreign immigrant workers. These requests were treated with suspicion or flat rejection. Indeed, the first document in the “Bahrain Cinemas” file of the India Office Records, a confidential letter (dated April 7, 1934) from Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Gordon Loch, the British political agent in Bahrain, to Charles Belgrave, reflected this sentiment as follows:

I hear a rumour that an “Arab” is arranging to establish a cinema here. [...] If the rumour is true, I think that prohibiting the establishment of a cinema should be carefully considered, and in any case that censorship should be provided for.²⁵

The “Arab” that Loch referred to was none other than Ali Yateem’s son, Hussein Yateem, who, together with his business partners, approached the government of Bahrain to obtain a licence to operate a public cinema.²⁶ Charles Belgrave, however, was not convinced that “Bahrain [was] sufficiently advanced for a cinema.”²⁷ He flatly refused other petitions that the British administration received from abroad, too. In 1935, an entrepreneur from Iran, who introduced himself as the owner of Kuh-i Nur Cinema in Khorramshahr (then Muhemmarah), sought approval to establish a public cinema in Manama. A public cinema in Bahrain, argued the entrepreneur, would not only fit the rising image of the country as “the most progressive” and “much more modern” nation, but would also provide a leisure outlet for

24 See Toby Matthiesen, “Migration, Minorities and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950–1975,” *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 3 (2014): 473–504.

25 “Bahrain Cinemas,” [2r].

26 See *ibid.*, [3r].

27 *Ibid.*, [15r].

the increasing “influx of large numbers of foreigners who are migrating to Manamah day in and day out.”²⁸ We learn about the British advisor’s response to this request from his diaries: “A M... from Abadan came & asked if he could open a cinema here—I said no.”²⁹ Roughly one year later, an Indian named M. A. Sam, a sound mechanic in a movie theatre called “The Paramount Talkies” in Bangalore, wrote a letter to the political resident in the Persian Gulf to petition for a licence to establish a public cinema. He also made his case from a labour-leisure point of view: “After a day’s hard work,” he wrote, “one requires some sort of amusement and diversion from the humdrum routine of life, in common with the rest of the world.”³⁰ Hence, the general public as well as immigrant workers in Bahrain should have access to the movies. But M. A. Sam was not granted a licence of operation, despite a “clear” background check by the British resident in Mysore.³¹

The British administrators’ strong resistance against the opening of a public cinema in Bahrain, in fact, reflected a set of anxieties that were circulating in the late colonial period. They shared the same concerns with, for instance, colonial governor Sir Henry Hesketh Bell in Northern Nigeria, expatriate journalist George Bilainkin in Malaya, and writer Aldous Huxley in Malaya. Look at how Belgrave’s remarks strongly echoed Huxley’s reflections on the local cinema audience in Java:

The violent imbecilities of the story flickered in silence against the background of the equatorial night. In silence the Javanese looked on. What were they thinking? What were their private comments on this exhibition of Western civilization? I wondered. In North Africa, in India, I have also wondered. [The “untutored mind” of the poor Indian] sees the films, he thinks they represent Western reality, he cannot see why he should be ruled by criminal imbeciles.³²

Bilainkin’s reflections in Penang were hardly different:

Many dancing girls shown on the screens in Penang had so little clothing as to excite the audible surprise not only of white people but of the

28 Ibid., [9r]; [10r].

29 Belgrave, *Papers*, p. 1099.

30 “Bahrain Cinemas,” [28r].

31 Ibid., [41r], [42r].

32 Quoted in Brian Larkin, “Circulating Empires: Colonial Authority and the Immoral, Subversive Power of American Film,” in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 173.

usually silent Asiatics. Again and again I have looked from my seat to see people turning their heads to one another in astonishment. [...] What is the average Asiatic [...] to think of the white people in his home town?³³

These instances of what Larkin calls “visual ventriloquism” reflected an increasing discomfort about how native subjects viewed and interpreted films.

Only after a long series of deliberations and through the mediation of two nephews of the Shaikh of Bahrain—Ali bin Mohamed al-Khalifah and Ali bin Abdullah al-Khalifah—did Hussein Yateem and his business associates acquire permission to open a cinema theatre in Manama in 1937, with a licence granting a five-year monopoly. Despite their earlier reservations, the British colonial administrators admitted that it would not be possible to prevent the coming of public cinema. In his letter to the government of British India, the political resident wrote: “If we cannot prevent a cinema being started and I do not see how we can, the only thing to do is to try and censor the films.”³⁴ Once again, for the colonial elite, the question of cinema was about exerting control over the film experience of “native” spectatorship. To this end, the British administration in the Gulf adopted the manual of the Bengal Board of Censors of the government of India for film and cinema house regulations.³⁵ In 1937, the first public cinema in the Gulf, named the “Bahrain National Theater” (“The National,” in short), opened in Manama with an Egyptian film titled *Wedad* (1936), a musical based on a story from *The One Thousand and One Nights*.³⁶ This film, we must note, was the Egyptian icon Umm Kulthum’s debut and Studio Mir’s first international success on its path to becoming the leading force in the Egyptian film industry under the directorship of German expatriate Fritz Kramp. By the late 1940s, the number of commercial public theatres in Bahrain reached four, including the “Pearl Cinema” of the merchant Gosaibi Brothers with seating for over 700 persons and an air conditioning unit.³⁷ In 1954, the Kuwait Cinema Company, now known as Cinescape-Kuwait National Cinema Company (KNCC), opened the first movie house, called the “Eastern Cinema” (Al-Sharqiah), to show imported films from Egypt,

33 Quoted in *ibid.*, 172.

34 *Ibid.*, [18r].

35 See “Bahrain Cinemas,” [19r].

36 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 15. “The National” continues to exist as Al-Hamra Cinema. During the Second World War, it was used to show newsreels on the Allies’ war effort and their victories over the Axis powers. *Ibid.*, 18.

37 “VII Annual Administration Report for the Year 1948,” R/15/2/304, [150r], IOR, London.



Fig. 9.4. Doha Gulf Cinema in the 1970s.

India, and the United States. In the 1960s and early 1970s, cinema as an affordable popular medium of entertainment spread to other Gulf cities, including Dubai (“Al-Nasr,” “Plaza,” and “Deria”), Muscat (“Al-Hamra” and “Rivoli”), and Doha (“Gulf”). During its heydays prior to television and video, the Muscat cinemas attracted as many as 500 movie watchers at a time, who would come to see Arabic and Hindi films. Similarly, Dubai cinemas gained popularity as a low-budget family entertainment. According to Ahmad Golchin (a merchant of Iranian origins and founder of the first privately owned distribution company in the region, Phars Film, in 1964), because of the logistical and economic difficulties of getting Hollywood films in the 1960s and 1970s, Dubai cinemas depended on Bollywood films (with questionable print quality) brought by gold merchants who traded with India.³⁸

In the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, which corresponds to the decline of British imperial hegemony and the rise of Arab nationalism in the post-colonial Middle East, the oil companies and the British political agencies in the Gulf began to make use of film as a public relations instrument geared toward what film historian Rosaleen Smyth calls a “new post-war policy of developmentalism.”³⁹ The Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) established

38 See Manjari Sexana, “A Walk down Cinema Lane in the UAE,” *GulfNews*, November 30, 2011, <http://gulfnnews.com/leisure/movies/a-walk-down-cinema-lane-in-the-uae-1.940086>.

39 Quoted in Todd Reisz, “Landscapes of Production: Filming Dubai and the Trucial States,” *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 2 (2018): 299.

its public relations office in Kuwait in 1956 in the aftermath of a significant spike in public criticism of the company, mounting around local support for Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser's historic move to nationalize the Suez Canal. KOC's public relations office planned efforts to reach local and regional populations through news broadcasts, lectures, magazine features and films that linked the company and its partnership with the state to the progress and modernization of Kuwait, often focusing on images of urban modernity in Ahmadi and Kuwait City.⁴⁰ KOC launched *Risalat al-Naft* (The oil newsletter), and in 1957 shifted the focus of its existing English-language magazine *The Kuwaiti* to feature articles and photographs illustrating modern architecture and urban planning projects in the capital, Kuwait City.⁴¹ Established in 1961, the Arabic-language sister magazine *al-Kuwayti* showcased KOC's contributions to modern living conditions of Kuwaiti employees in Ahmadi.

In Bahrain, BAPCO's public relations department set up mobile cinemas in villages and towns to educate the nation on health, hygiene, education, and other aspects of modernization. In addition, Khalifa Shaheen (a local director and an employee of BAPCO) oversaw a newsreel project called "The Bahrain News Bar," which included Arabic and English recordings that were between ten and thirty minutes long, covering main events on the island. The series comprised sixty-eight recordings over a time period from 1960 until 1971. The tapes were distributed to all the cinemas in Bahrain.⁴² Mobile cinemas were used by ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia, too. The company, moreover, commissioned Richard Lyford to make educational films on sanitary measures to fight the spread of malaria, titled *The Fly (Al-Thehub)* and *Water (Miyyah)*, both circa 1952. These films were screened in the towns and villages of today's Eastern Province.⁴³

Visual narratives of development, which strongly echoed the classical modernization theory of Daniel Lerner in *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), circulated in the Emirates as well. The first film that depicted the oil company as an economic, and the British protectorate as a political catalyst of the teleological of transition from traditional life to modern society in the Emirates was *These Are the*

40 See Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

41 See Reem Alissa, "The Oil Town of Ahmadi Since 1946: From Colonial Town to Nostalgic City," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 43.

42 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 25.

43 See Tim Barger, "The Island of the Arabs," *Aramco Ex-Pats*, August 28, 2012, <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/the-island-of-the-arabs/>.



Fig. 9.5. Still shot from *These Are the Trucial States* (1958).

Trucial States (1958), conceived by Dubai's political agent, Peter Tripp. Tripp's pitching of the film project serves as a case study to exemplify the overlap between colonial discourse and modernization theory:

This film would attempt to illustrate [...] the ways in which the Rulers of the Trucial States spend the money so generously provided by their old friend and benefactor H. M. G. [Her Majesty's Government]—in order to promote the well-being of their peoples.⁴⁴

Tripp's project would be followed by other films, including Kuwait Oil Company's *Close-up on Kuwait* (c. 1960), David Holden's *Farewell Arabia* (1967), and British Petroleum Company's *Abu Dhabi: The Beginning* (1970).

Film scholars such as Lee Grieveson have shown that in the formative decades of North American and European cinemas, the discourses and regulatory practices of cultural and political elites were geared toward containing cinema as "harmless and culturally affirmative entertainment," catered to "the common interest."⁴⁵ In the Gulf context, "policing cinema" not only extends into the post-World War II era but was also linked to the question of managing the forces of hydrocarbon modernity that the

44 Quoted in Reisz, "Landscapes of Production," 304.

45 See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

discovery of oil unleashed and was entangled with multiple modalities of circulation of individuals (colonial personnel, expatriates, labourers, entrepreneurs, and missionaries), texts (censorship manuals, inspection guidelines, confidential reports, circulars, and petitions), regimes of segregation (“coolie” from British Raj and “Jim Crow” from American south), conurbations modelled on colonial and industrial settlements, accommodation types (Victorian residence, California ranch, local *barastis*, or makeshift huts), and, of course, cans of film. The emergence of cinema in the Gulf, in other words, took place in a segregated and uneven world built through colonial practices, expansionist oil capital, and international labour.

The National Era

The end of the British protectorate in the Gulf in 1971 marked an important shift in the culture of cinema. Government ministries took the leading role in the sponsorship of film. In Kuwait, the ministries of education, public affairs, and information and guidance created cinema divisions to produce educational 16 mm films—at some point called “Encyclopaedia”—for television broadcast on a broad range of topics concerning national welfare. In addition to cinema departments, Gulf states began to establish film distribution companies. In Bahrain, the first such company appeared in 1968 and was put in charge of building new cinemas, importing and distributing films, and initiating the first steps towards a local film industry.⁴⁶ In 1970, the Qatar Cinema and Film Distribution Company was established to fulfil the same purposes.⁴⁷ During this period, we also witness the proliferation of cinema clubs and societies, which generated new public spheres through screenings, particularly of Arabic-language films, and paved the way for the development of a culture of film criticism.⁴⁸

46 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 26. In 1972, the Bahrain Cinema and Film Distribution Company was also commissioned to build the first cinema in the Sultanate of Oman.

47 See Mahmoud Al-Hakeem, “Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook,” *Al Raya Newspaper*, June 27, 2013, <http://www.raya.com/home/print/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/649628c4-df7b-4d96-8203-eba7f7ado468>

48 The Bahrain Cinema Club was established in 1975 and its Kuwaiti counterpart in 1976. The former also launched a magazine called *Cinematic Papers*. In 1986, both branches joined the Pan-Arab cinema clubs union. See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 42.

The most distinguishing feature of the first decade of independence was the emergence of indigenous film-making. Alongside documentaries and made-for-TV films such as Mohammed Al-Sanousi's *Al-Asifah (The Storm)*, Kuwait, 1965), a group of directors began to produce narrative feature films, despite deficiencies in technical infrastructure and cultural reservations not conducive to the growth of a local industry. The first feature film that is credited for cementing this shift is Kuwaiti director Khalid Al-Siddiq's *Bas ya bahr (Cruel Sea)*, 1972). Recruiting local Kuwaiti talent (mostly employed in various governmental offices), the film relied on limited theatrical and technical training as well as funds and equipment needed to carry out production in a timely manner. The opening frame of *Cruel Sea* signalled a conscious attempt at periodization, aiming to capture the harsh realities of the Gulf littoral communities by telling its audience that the story was set in "Kuwait before oil." Shuttling between family romance and social realism, the film saw the arrival of petromodernity as a historically decisive break in the history of Gulf societies, which depended on pearl-diving as the primary economic activity. The film's sense of historicity placed entry into Gulf modernity as one of death, destruction, and despair (similar to every country that struggled to create industry out of their available natural resources). Although the film shied away from any nostalgic feeling for pre-oil life (for all its economic, patriarchal, and traditional constraints), it also refrained from invoking a hydrocarbon futuristic utopia. In a sense, Al-Siddiq's *Cruel Sea* echoed the Gramscian philosophy of history: the old was dying; yet no one knew what the future held.

Al-Siddiq was followed by several other directors. Hashim Muhammad joined with another Kuwaiti feature, *Al-Samt (The Silence)*, 1979). In 1974, Mohamed Nabih produced the first Qatari feature film titled *The Sad Sail*, along with a short film titled *The Lighthouse*.⁴⁹ In Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Al-Muhaisen directed the first Saudi film, a documentary titled *Development in the City of Riyadh* (1975). In Bahrain, Khalifa Shaheen, Bassam Al-Thawadi, the Ali Abbas and Majed Al-Shams duo, and Khalid Al-Tamimi used short fiction and the documentary form to explore vernacular idioms in film. Despite oil wealth, we must add, Gulf auteurs had to cope with financial constraints in their efforts to make films. Ali Abbas and Majeed Shams often found themselves seeking financial help from their own actors and they had to learn how to do special effects makeup for their films themselves.⁵⁰

49 See Al-Hakeem, "Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook."

50 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 74–77.



Fig. 9.6. Khalid Al-Siddiq shooting *Cruel Sea* (1972).

Between 1975 and 1977, Bassam Al-Thawadi produced a series of 8 mm and 16 mm films: *Addiction* (1975), *The Blind* (1976), *The Two Brothers* (1976), and *Generations* (1977).

The most important point to emphasize about these early generation of film-makers in the Gulf is the extent to which they joined and interacted with the larger trends of Third World and pan-Arab cinema. For instance, in addition to receiving his film training at the Pune Film and Television Institute in Hyderabad, India,⁵¹ the Kuwaiti pioneer Khalid Al-Siddiq made *Urs al-Zayn* (*The Wedding of Zein*) as his second film in 1976—adapting a novel by the Sudanese author Tayeb Saleh, who is better known for his iconoclastic post-colonial Arabic novel *Season of Migration to the North*. Ali Abbas and Majeed Shams, who produced four short films (*The Stranger*, *Revenge*, *The Three Men*, and *Oh, Treacherous Time*) and a documentary (*Memories*) between 1972 and 1978, were greatly inspired by Indian cinema, primarily films that dealt with issues of colonialism and independence, such as Mehboob Khan's Bollywood epic *Mother India* (1957).⁵² These film-makers showcased their films in regional “Third cinema” festivals of the 1970s in Carthage, Cairo, and Tehran, which positioned themselves

51 See Roy Armes, “The Arab World,” in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 666.

52 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 74–77.

against Hollywood's cultural hegemony.⁵³ Khalifa Shaheen even went beyond the regional circle and screened his documentary work that he produced between 1967 and 1977 (*Pictures of an Island*, *People on the Horizon*, and *The Black Wave*) at the New Delhi, Manila, and Krakow film festivals.⁵⁴

Furthermore, while offering a realist lens to the social issues of the nation and a critical approach to the promises of oil modernization, the Gulf directors of this generation also engaged with larger political events in the Middle East. A graduate of the Higher Institute of Cinema in Cairo, Bassam al-Thawadi made two short films on the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel (*The Mask*, 1981) and the Sabra and Shatila massacres (*Angels of the Earth*, 1983). In the same spirit, Abdullah Al-Muhaisen produced *Ightiyal Medina* (*Assassination of a City*, 1977), a documentary narrative on the Lebanese civil war. In 1982, Al-Muhaisen made another film titled *Islam Is the Bridge to the Future*, in which he portrayed Arab-Muslim history as centuries-long effort to endure a series of foreign invasions. Reflecting the pan-Arab cultural orientation during this time period, in the early 1980s Qatar commissioned a series of documentaries and a feature film from Egyptian directors, including Khairy Beshara, one of the forerunners of realism in Arab cinema.⁵⁵ These early post-independence experiments in Gulf film have unfortunately been forgotten in the cultural memory as well as national media archives. Except for palimpsestic "antiquarian" interests in the past by certain Gulf citizens, this period has been conveniently kept outside the official commemorations of cultural heritage.

Finally, in the case of Oman, although Sultan Said Bin Taimur's tight control over the country prohibited the emergence of national cinema,⁵⁶ anti-colonial film-makers made "solidarity" documentary films celebrating the Dhofar rebellion against British imperialism and its regional allies. Journalist and documentary film-maker Gordian Troeller and his partner Marie-Claude Deffarge's *The Revolt of the Slaves* (*Die Revolte der Sklaven*/

53 On Carthage Film Festival's de-colonial vision, see Gideon Bachmann, "In Search of Self-definition: Arab and African Films at the Carthage Film Festival," *Film Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1973): 48–51.

54 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 57.

55 These titles are *Fine Arts in Qatar* (Khairy Beshara), *Fishing in Qatar* (Ibrahim Madkour), *Dive* (Ibrahim Sabbagh), and *Dana* (Ibrahim Sabbagh). The last one is a feature film and was shown at the 1982 Carthage Film Festival. See Mahmoud Al-Hakeem, "Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook."

56 See Ḥamid S. 'Āmirī, *Laqātāt Min Al-Sīnimā Al-'umāniyah* [Snapshots from Omani cinema], 2015.



Fig. 9.7. Film Poster of *The Hour of Liberation Has Struck* (1974).

La Revolte des esclaves, 1969) documented the rebellion of the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) against the Sultanate in Muscat in the framework of national liberation struggles across the global South. Similarly, the Lebanese woman film-maker Heiny Srouur's *The Hour of Liberation Has Struck* (*Saat al-tahrir daqqat/L'Heure de la libération a sonnè*, 1974) presented everyday revolutionary life inside the “liberated territories” and showed how the People’s Liberation Army in Dhofar gained ground among the people through communal practices of education, inter-tribal peacemaking, farming, and household management.⁵⁷

57 See Heiny Srouur, Salma Bacchar, and Magda Wassef, “For the Self-expression of the Arab Woman,” *Cinéaste* 9, no. 4 (1979): 37. Also see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution:*

These multi-sited attempts to institute film culture and cinema publics in the Gulf could not be carried forward. One can speculate on several factors. The first one had to do with the rise of cultural conservatism across the region. Especially in Saudi Arabia, following the Grand Mosque seizure of 1979, the government withdrew its policy of gradual progressive liberalization and in an effort to mitigate religious concerns about “over-Westernization,” it shut down commercial cinemas.⁵⁸ Furthermore, instead of supporting independent directors, the Gulf states chose to grant some resources for film projects conducted through ministries of information, culture and heritage or state-owned television and radio corporations.⁵⁹ The critical lens of the first generation of directors on questions of tradition, modernization, social relations, and cultural identity was largely replaced by visual narratives that celebrated and promoted national development and film was eventually subsumed under the category of media and information. As such, until the global rise of the Gulf in the 2000s, feature film production remained confined to a handful of individual exceptions: Khalid Al-Siddiq’s *Shahin* (Kuwait, 1985), Ali Al-Abdul’s *Wayfarer (Abr Sabeel)*, UAE, 1988), and Bassam Al-Thawadi’s *The Barrier (Al-Hajiz)*, Bahrain, 1990).⁶⁰ Equally important, the proliferation of video technologies and satellite channels in the 1980s diminished the already feeble public film culture and gave rise to the phenomenon of “non-public film culture” that congregated in private spaces.⁶¹ The absence of a full-fledged national cinema tradition increased dependence on more powerful regional industry markets as well as pirated masters of popular Hollywood blockbuster genres (thriller, mystery, romance) shipped from Asia.⁶² Egypt’s so-called “contractors’

Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–76 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 242–44.

58 See Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Viking, 2009).

59 In 2010 and 2011, the Ministry of Arts, Culture, and Heritage and several other institutions worked together with the Organizing Committee of Qatar National Day to produce documentary films that portrayed the traditional understandings and cultural values of Qatari society. One of the films that emerged from this endeavour was *Sons of the Sea and Sons of the Desert*.

60 See Anne Ciecko, “What the Sea Brings: Cinema at the Shoreline in Bahrain’s First Feature Production and Film Culture,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 5 (2013), 704–14.

61 See Anne Ciecko, “Cinema ‘of’ Yemen and Saudi Arabia: Narrative Strategies, Cultural Challenges, Contemporary Features,” *Wide Screen* 3, no. 1 (2011): 5.

62 See Douglas A. Boyd, “Home Video Diffusion and Utilization in Arabian Gulf States,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 30, no. 5 (1987): 544–55. For a parallel case during the same time period in the Nigerian film industry, see Jonathan Haynes, ed., *Nigerian Video Films*, rev. ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

cinema" (*sinimat al-muqalawat*) filled the gap by producing feature films in video format that were specifically catered to the cultural sensitivities and privacy expectations of consumers in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. By 1986, the number of productions reached ninety-five video films.⁶³ In the 1990s, contractors' cinema acquired a new label: "clean cinema" (*sinima nazifa*), or a cinema that applies self-censorship regarding moral codes. These pre-censored films made for the Gulf countries at some point reached 25 per cent of Egypt's film exports.⁶⁴

As in all other aspects, the rise of the Gulf in the global economy and politics has shaped the direction of the region's film industries and cinema culture in significant ways. Different from the earlier auteur attempts at establishing national cinema, the new direction has led to a more complex and globalized terrain. Gulf countries—United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular—have invested in the film industry as a way of generating soft power and making the national brand more visible in the global cultural landscape.⁶⁵ Yet Gulf film industries are still very much dependent on the fortunes of the rentier state in the global oil economy. Although the narrative presented in this chapter is linear and chronological in so far as it carries us from past to present, colonial to post-colonial, the contradictory and uneven mode of development of the Gulf cinematic spheres needs to be acknowledged and explicated in order to avoid a disingenuous presentation of the Gulf's film history as simply one of colonialism versus post-colonialism, but rather, to weave historical inquiry together with filmic analysis in order to better understand the constitutive relationships among hydrocarbon industry, nation-building, and modernization in the Gulf. While being cautious of Gulf exceptionalism,⁶⁶ it is important for film historians to attend to the specific cultural semantics that temporal and spatial terms (colonial, post-colonial, national, transnational, and so on) acquire in constructing a history of the moving image in the Gulf.

63 See Rebecca Hillauer, Allison Brown, Deborah Cohen, and Nancy Joyce, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 40.

64 See Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 215–16.

65 See Axel Scoffier, "Qatar, from Black Gold to the Big Screen," *INA Global: The Review of Creative Industries and Media*, December 13, 2012, <http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/cinema/article/qatar-black-gold-big-screen>.

66 For a critique of exceptionalist frameworks in Gulf studies, see Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

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10 British Cultural Studies, Film History, and Forgotten Horizons of Cultural Analysis

Charles R. Acland

Abstract

This chapter traces the deep connections between British cultural studies and film studies, reminding us how central the teaching and analysis of popular film was to the formation of cultural studies. Of comparable importance to British cultural studies was the History Workshop at Oxford University, which advanced politically engaged forms of “people’s history,” amplifying the historical impact of women, workers, and colonial subjects. In the 1970s and 1980s, the events and publications of the History Workshop were a point of intersection between the new theoretical frames of cultural analysis and the traditions of radical history. Consequently, and generally underappreciated today, just as poststructuralist continental theory secured its purchase on film scholarship and cultural studies, new methods and materials of historical research were being explored and expanded to situate “popular arts,” including film, within cultural history.

Keywords: British cultural studies, Stuart Hall, History Workshop

Cinema, no different from any cultural activity and experience, materializes in practices and forms. A study of moving image media—a history of film and media—requires a study of those practices and forms, what they are, what they have been, and what they were imagined to be. Such a historical enterprise includes attention to the situations, occasions, infrastructures, economies, and institutions in which moving images were produced, circulated, and encountered. And this materiality involves criticism and debate, inventories of information, publishing, conversation, merchandising, and

ephemera, if you will, the thingness of film and media ideas. The practices and forms are not static. There are no universals; cultural practices have varying geographies and are differently taken up by different populations; some such practices have receded from use and memory while others retain an influential residual impact. And new configurations of activity and affect are always evolving.

A fundamental point I want to make in this chapter is that the ordinariness of the way we have lived with movies directs us to an expansive realm of non-filmic texts and activities. At first blush, it may appear idiosyncratic or simply unconventional, but some of the best paths to the heart of filmic life are not through cinema at all, but through publishing, vernacular inventories, mass readership newspapers, magazines, websites, streaming apps, home video, and television. The historian and critic might best stand several paces away from the cinema, that too easily privileged and presumptive home of the cinephilic imaginary, or even from motion pictures themselves. As someone who has been elated and energized by the promise of the world of movies ever since it hit me that the names of actors and directors were important to remember, I understand deeply the impulse to valorize one's constellation of cinema superstars and rituals. But for so many, film practices had more to do with television than the cinematheque, more to do with rambunctious audiences than contemplative aesthetes, and more to do with lower genres than international prestige or personal films, leaving the majority far removed from the orbit of the tasteful cinephile. It would be a gross disregard for the importance and ordinariness of culture, for people's immediate and passionate commitments, to ignore this or to see those media engagements as substandard expressions of cultural life. Framing our media historical ambitions, one must gear up for a deliberate effort to both think about and rattle cultural hierarchies, an endeavour that must recognize and act on the fact that cultural life is not medium specific, and is a product of different conditions, communities, and experiences. Media are in constant flux, and their borders are porous and only ever so fleetingly stable, regardless of whatever inherent properties, biases, and affordances are supposedly in play. Indeed, a medium is never truly singular and is always a set of characteristics that cohere in relation to some other medium, meaning all static ahistorical outlines of medium specificity are inventions of the theorist. As Janet Staiger put it, signalling the contribution of cultural studies that I wish to discuss below, "scholars need to stop thinking of film history as *film* history and start thinking more about *media* history."¹

1 Janet Staiger, "The Future of the Past," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (2004): 127.

Staiger's call is no longer as controversial as it once was; the venue in which it appeared is no longer called *Cinema Journal* but the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. But for every public nod of assent and outward gloss of disciplinary expansion, there remain remarkably tenacious strains that keep traditional analytical modes and priorities centred on that sprawling literary-inflected film studies. My specific premise here is, in many ways, an impression as an insider-outsider, a scholar trained in communication, cultural, and media studies who has contributed to the scholarship of film culture. The impression is that even as many have expanded their sites of analysis, or made gestures toward other media materials, the full weight of the debates that emerged from cultural studies is often consigned by film scholars to omnibus footnote status. This ill-formed consideration is especially evident in film historical work. When I write this, I do not mean it as a simple matter of credit where credit is due; a profound contribution is being lost that instead should invigorate the work we do. In so much of the film historical work I read today, I see a wilful ignorance about cultural theory in what seems to be an unproblematic equivalence between history of film culture and exhibition history. I see it in research projects that are less arguments than assemblages of excruciatingly minute detail, which can make one's eyes feel like they have been laminated. And we can see the diminished grasp of British cultural studies in the way it has been lampooned in the people-draining versions of media archaeology.

Allow me to walk this back before you opt to skip ahead to the next chapter. The very best of the so-called "new cinema history" has effectively shifted research priorities internationally such that there is now a prominent place for a sociology of film, one in which contextual matters are paramount. This work has produced a resounding counterblast against the universalist film theory in favour of a grounded materialist approach.² Moreover, historical precision has benefitted from the "archival turn" of the digital era that has seen a spike in access to previously inaccessible materials, particularly those pertaining to generally devalued popular realms.³ And the best of media archaeology advances an engagement with the complexities of cultural

2 A representative survey of this strain of historical research is found in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

3 For instance, Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt, eds., *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities* (Sussex: REFRAME Books, in association with Project Arclight, 2016).

forces, not the simplicity of technological certitude.⁴ Nevertheless, rare is the appearance of the decades-long impactful efforts from British cultural studies scholars to write about culture as a site of struggle and as an arena for the organization of power, people, and ideas.

There have been those that have appropriately and usefully worked to chart the flow of influence between film and cultural studies. Graeme Turner has been a steadfast contributor to the “film as social practice” mode of analysis, and has surmised that cultural theory and film studies developed more closely in relation to one another in the UK whereas the US saw a more exclusive vision of film study develop that kept other formations at bay.⁵ Jane Gaines’ contribution to *Reinventing Film Studies*, “Dream/Factory,” saw a productive bridge between film and cultural studies in the centrality of movie culture’s historical relationship with consumer culture.⁶ British cultural studies offers non-totalizing models for understanding ideology, institutions, and mass culture. Social and cultural totalities only ever emerge from provisional forces that must be continually re-articulated, re-assured, and re-produced. As Gaines pointed out, many key conceptual contributions built on this uncertainty, this incompleteness, by offering glimmers of progressive possibility. Provisionality—the contingency of interpretation, meaning, uses, and impact—has been taken up by audience- and reader-centred media research. Here, Staiger and Barbara Klinger have had foundational impacts, making apparent that re-centring the film experience in history is a primary contribution of cultural studies to film.⁷

In what follows, I supplement these accounts by offering a sketch of the intersection of film, cultural history, and cultural studies. I begin by asking: where was film in British cultural studies? After all the second part of Raymond Williams’ seminal book *The Long Revolution* (1961) did *not* include a history of the development of the institution of cinema. The historical sweeps of the second part of that book deal with the press,

4 The vitality of media archaeological work is best exemplified by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

5 Graeme Turner, “Film and Cultural Studies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald and Michael Renov (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 271.

6 Jane M. Gaines, “Dream/Factory,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 100–13.

7 Janet Staiger, “Film, Reception, and Cultural Studies,” *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 1 (1992): 89–104; Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Barbara Klinger, “Film History/Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies,” *Screen* 38, no. 2 (1997): 107–28.

education, drama, and literature from the nineteenth century onward. The third part is “Britain in the 1960s.”⁸ Both sections might have encompassed film in British life. They do not. On this point, Stuart Laing noted that Williams’ book *Communication* (1962) was primarily about print media and advertising, with very little on moving image media, whether film or television.⁹

Yet film had been front and centre in Williams’ intellectual development, and it provided one of his early breaks with the Leavisite tradition of literary criticism. Where F. R. Leavis—a defining figure for literary studies in the mid-twentieth century—saw no place for film in the curriculum, Williams was incorporating film in Workers’ Educational Association extensions classes from the 1940s onward. Moreover, in his early book *Preface to Film*, co-authored with Michel Orrom, he placed cinema as continuous with a dramatic tradition, and introduced one of his most influential concepts, “structures of feeling.” The very idea of “structures of feeling,” which is among the most enduring, if unstable, concepts of British cultural studies, rests on a contextual understanding of representational conventions; or, as he put it, they are “the means of expression which find tacit consent.”¹⁰ “Structures of feeling” implicates a historical mode of analysis of lived cultural experience, and here, at its point of introduction, film is formative for thinking about that experience.

Raymond Williams, three decades after *Preface to Film*, directly challenged us in a way that deserves repeated hearing. He wrote, “What is the history of film? In considering this question, we are likely to pass lightly over ‘history’ and put a defining emphasis on ‘film.’”¹¹ He noted the limitations of work in which “film and cinema are treated as unitary subjects, which are then made to disclose their historical stages of development.”¹² Instead, he showed that film history results in “indefinite and multiple reproducibility,” rather than unified or linear historical development.¹³ To do so, he discussed four tracks, or bearings, on which to run our historical analysis, ones that strike me as still relevant today: technology and its material uses, and film’s relation to popular culture, established culture, and modernist

8 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

9 Stuart Laing, “Raymond Williams and the Cultural Analysis of Television,” *Media, Culture & Society* 13, no. 2 (1991): 155.

10 Raymond Williams and Michel Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954), 21–23.

11 Raymond Williams, “British Film History: New Perspectives,” in *British Cinema History*, ed. James Curran and Vincent Porter (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 9.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, 22.

culture.¹⁴ With these bearings, attention is drawn to infrastructural features and operations of cultural hierarchies, in this way making apparent the role of film culture in the organization of unequal power distribution. A truly important reappraisal of film in British cultural studies is found in Dana Polan's essay "Raymond Williams on Film," which unearths Williams' foundational engagements with film as a pedagogical advantage for adult education, a test for new concepts about culture and society, and a vehicle for understanding the potential for social progress.¹⁵ Polan effectively parses Williams' position in the 1970s poststructuralist challenges to realism, where Williams argues for the possibility of a Brechtian socialist realism that does not revert to a flat photographic naturalism or a cryptic avant-garde.

Other scholars have observed a parallel path to popular cultural critique for the prolific Williams. Laing noted Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) had been largely ignored by literary scholars and considered a minor part of his oeuvre, including his concept of "flow," which shortly after would be indispensably featured in television studies. Laing commented that in literary studies, Williams' cultural materialist approach tended to be gestured toward but was only rarely engaged with. In general, though, attention to television in British cultural studies developed only later in the 1970s and 1980s, and was slower to emerge as a major engagement, especially in comparison to a more consistent engagement with film. On this point, Williams wrote a monthly commentary for *The Listener* on television from 1968 to 1972, which Laing suggested was a platform on which to rehearse ideas about viewing "experience," which would fill the conceptual gap between broadcasting institutions and contexts, ultimately setting the stage for Williams' more fulsome scholarly contribution, *Television*.¹⁶

Williams, who powerfully shaped and guided the emergence of British cultural studies, was but one of a generation of scholars who wrestled with the politics of cultural analysis and who placed special stock in the popular. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel wrote *The Popular Arts* (1964), a guide to help teachers make sense of mass popular culture and its impact on students and classrooms, drawing from their experience teaching in secondary schools and in the Workers' Educational Association.¹⁷ You can see the central place of film in their thinking, starting with the frontispiece—a still from John Ford's film *My Darling Clementine* (1946). In fact, of the book's sixteen pages

14 Ibid., 12.

15 Dana Polan, "Raymond Williams on Film," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 1–18.

16 Laing, "Raymond Williams and the Cultural Analysis of Television."

17 Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London: Hutchison Educational, 1964).

of images, four are from magazine advertisements and the other twelve are from movies. And there are about as many references in the book to movies, cinema, and film as there are to television, radio, magazines, and books combined. Paddy Whannel's influence here deserves special note. Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey have referred to Whannel's founding of the Education Department at the British Film Institute—servicing extensions programmes and secondary teachers, where he was head from 1957 to 1971—as key to disciplinary development in the UK. Wollen specifically described the importance of *The Popular Arts* for British cultural studies as follows: “[I]t was the first book to use what you might call a theoretical approach to a subject that had no academic standing.”¹⁸ *The Popular Arts* moved away from blanket critical assessments of popular forms, opting instead for more context-based critiques. In the US, Roger Brown's contemporaneous review of *The Popular Arts* posed it as a refreshingly humanist approach to popular culture, rather than what had become the rigid methods of social science in American communication studies departments. Hall and Whannel asked questions of the quality of experience and social conditions.¹⁹ They wanted to talk about “majority art,” “majority taste,” and “majority audiences,” not tiny niches of experimental micro-cultures. And while they expose the phoniness of class stereotypes—like representations of working-class “mateyness”—they also sought to work with what was there, actual, present, and accessible in cultural life, in order to best identify the ways people live in the shadow of a system that disadvantaged so many.

In the 2018 edition of *The Popular Arts*, an introductory essay by Richard Dyer observes that Hall and Whannel's book was invested with Leavisite questions of discrimination and judgement, which may have been strategically used in order to ease acceptance of the then radical proposal that the popular would be considered with such seriousness.²⁰ The attention to the popular, as Dyer reminds us, made the book of a piece with anti-imperial, anti-authoritarian, New Left projects.²¹ To show this, he cites Stuart Hall's editorial in the first issue of *New Left Review*: “The purpose of discussing the cinema or teen-age culture in *NLR* is not to show that,

18 Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, with Lee Grieveson, “From Cinephilia to Film Studies,” in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 218.

19 Roger Brown, “Review: *The Popular Arts* by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel,” *AV Communication Review* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1965): 429–35.

20 Richard Dyer, “Introduction to the 2018 Edition,” in *The Popular Arts*, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), vii–xii.

21 *Ibid.*, xii.

in some modish way, we are keeping up with the times. These are directly relevant to the imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism—the growing points of social discontent, the projections of deeply-felt needs.”²² Critical engagement with all modes of and platforms for popular language was settling in as one of the distinctive concerns of this formation of cultural analysis. An engagement with the ordinary and the popular in action provided a point of continuity between *The Popular Arts* and subsequent developments in cultural studies, despite remnants of analysis that would soon mostly be left behind in favour of more discursive and poststructuralist critical schemas.

Realized in *The Popular Arts* were a number of themes that prefigure the shape cultural studies took: an exploration of ordinary, everyday, cultural texts and practices; an understanding of ideological formations as indeterminate, incomplete, and sites of struggle; and a commitment to work through popular culture to advance democratic and egalitarian potential. There is perhaps no more resounding statement about those critical priorities than Stuart Hall’s essay “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” in which we find a full rendition of the argument about the “double-stake” of popular culture, its dialectical pull toward resistance and containment.²³ For our purposes, know that Hall’s essay elaborates its case as a critique of standardized forms of historical periodization and as a response to historical work that imagines there are true popular traditions awaiting discovery, to be unearthed and celebrated for their authenticity. Instead, Hall argued cultural struggle is the proper object of inquiry—not a gated notion of medium singularity or authentic experience—to be examined “dynamically: as a historical process.”²⁴ To do this, he advanced an approach that was heavily indebted to Antonio Gramsci, where culture is an arena in which meanings, communities, and alliances are made, rather than predetermined and inscribed with absolute certainty on popular texts and forms. The ideational and semiotic elasticity of popular culture Hall described meant that “Not only is there no intrinsic guarantee within the cultural sign or form itself. There is no guarantee that, because at one time it was linked with a pertinent struggle, that it will always be the living expression of a class: so that every time you give it an airing it will ‘speak the language of socialism.’”²⁵ The

22 Stuart Hall, “Editorial,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 1 (1960): 1.

23 Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–40.

24 *Ibid.*, 236.

25 *Ibid.*, 238.

ethical and political drive in this argument had general implications for forms of cultural analysis. It pointed to intermedial and intertextual forms of analysis; it placed historicity, context, and contingency at the heart of cultural critique; it embraced the popular and the cultural materials that spoke to people; it had a strong current of humanism in that the actual experience and understandings of people mattered; and it valued critique, intellectual engagement, and cultural production as forms of work that helped to ameliorate the world we share. "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" titled as it is to suggest modesty or incompleteness, is anything but. There isn't much deconstruction, either, though the poststructuralist influence surfaces with its attention to signifiatory indeterminacy. Titular red herrings aside, the essay is a powerfully confident argument for the conjunctural historical analysis of popular media.

This classic work first appeared in 1981 as a chapter in Raphael Samuel's edited collection *People's History and Socialist Theory*.²⁶ A British historian of working-class movements, Samuel was a major influence on Hall. He led the History Workshop at Ruskin College at Oxford University, which featured a high-profile series of annual conferences of socialist historians running from 1967 until 1994. The Workshop began as a pedagogical effort in 1966 to develop historical research skills, using primary materials, among adult students. And the work was explicitly intended to add an experiential working-class voice to historical narratives. As Samuel wrote, "the Workshop was concerned to create a space for the discussion of themes which had remained 'hidden from history' not because there was no documentation available to study them but because they were at odds with the dominant modes of historical publication and research."²⁷ Bill Schwarz summarized the History Workshop's contribution "as an effective alternative historical apparatus. It countered the intellectual and political conservatism of the dominant historical profession, setting up an alternative means for producing historical knowledge which had roots deep in the subordinate groups of British society."²⁸ Its work of running conferences and courses, building networks, and encouraging research from people typically marginalized from scholarly knowledge production was responsible for expanding and

26 Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

27 Raphael Samuel, "History Workshop, 1966–1980," in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 411.

28 Bill Schwarz, "History on the Move: Reflections on History Workshop," *Radical History Review* 57 (1993): 203.

informing “history from below,” women’s, workers’, and popular history in the UK.

This particular volume—*People’s History and Socialist Theory*—consists of the proceedings of History Workshop 13 that ran in 1979, under the same name. The book was part of a series of thirteen books that originated in similar events and were published between 1975 and 1991.²⁹ Surveying the works in this series, one does not find very much about film culture; worker’s theatre movements, popular fiction, and the press all figure prominently, but the movies did not receive special attention. One exception is Raphael Samuel, who wrote on the re-articulation of the writings of Charles Dickens in film in his essay “Docklands Dickens,” a great title if there ever was one.³⁰ *People’s History and Socialist Theory*—the workshop and the book—ran the gamut of new historical orientations for scholarship, with work on the culture of fascism, the history of feminist movements, and the operations of colonialism. The workshop held sessions dedicated to labour history, peasant studies, religion, Ireland, and imperialism. Discussion about the state of cultural studies was prominent. The session on cultural studies promised to include noted historians Peter Burke and Carlo Ginzburg on early modern European popular culture, Hannah Mitchell and Peter Larsen on art history and Marxism, and David Laing and Alun Howkins on popular music. Stuart Hall joined Peter Burke and Hannah Mitchell for a plenary panel on “Problems in Cultural Studies,” where Hall presented what would become his “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’” essay. With an expanded focus on the British working class such as was encouraged by the History Workshop, *People’s History and Socialist Theory* gestured toward an international scope with essays on Africa, Continental Europe, and the US. The registration form for the workshop reveals some historical particularities for such intellectual events. Organizers offered child-care to attendees; the event cost £3 (about £14 in 2023); the attendance was capped at 500; and position papers circulated in advance for £2.

Today, the table of contents for the book that followed the workshop is a bit like a meeting of scholarly stars when they were young(er). Included in the sizable collection of fifty-two essays is work by Jacques Rancière, Barbara Taylor, Michael Ignatieff, Perry Anderson, and Catherine Hall. It would be

29 Details about the History Workshop that follow benefited from historical material posted on the History Workshop website, in particular Anna Davin and Luke Parks, “An Introduction & Index to the Material,” in *History of History Workshop*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-history-workshop-archives-an-introduction/>.

30 Raphael Samuel, “Docklands Dickens,” in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Vol. III: National Fictions*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), 275–85.

misleading to only focus on the participants who we can now see were part of an emerging intellectual vanguard. Many of the events and publications were generated via collective labour and much of the organization relied on and integrated students and their research. The History Workshop was in many ways continuous with other extensions and adult education efforts, designed as they were to bring non-traditional, and especially working-class, student populations into scholarly and intellectual currents. That said, there was considerable complaint that saw History Workshop 13 as a turn toward an exclusionary mode of academic analysis, using a critical vocabulary that alienated the traditional non-academic participants. This dissension led to further consideration by the Workshop, at subsequent events, about the commitments to accessibility versus the intellectual's prerogative to explore abstraction productively. At least at the level of the paratext, the book locates itself in a recognizable tradition of social realist aesthetics. Each section begins with a woodcut from renowned American artist Lynd Ward, noted for his depictions of working people and populist storytelling using only images that were precursors to and inspirations for today's graphic novels. Even the book's font has a DIY feel to it; this part of the paratext signals the people's media format of mimeograph pamphlet rather than the fact that it is included in a major book series imprint from international publisher Routledge.

The workshop event of 1979 and the subsequent publication in 1981 were notable points of intersection for an emerging conversation and debate between various versions of the new cultural history and the burgeoning British cultural studies. On this aspect, History Workshop 13 was the staging ground for one of the more legendary battles of cultural theory. As Anna Davin remembered, this gathering "was in part meant to bring different intellectual and political tendencies on the left into constructive debate, though unfortunately explosions and still deeper rifts resulted instead."³¹ At a plenary session broadly titled "History and Theory," on a Saturday evening, Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, chaired by Stephen Yeo, responded to E. P. Thompson's passionate critique of the rise of poststructuralist theory among left intellectuals in the UK, *The Poverty of Theory*, which had appeared the year before. Jane Caplan and Hans Medick were also scheduled to present.³²

31 Anna Davin, "The Only Problem Was Time," *History Workshop Journal* 50 (Autumn, 2000): 242–43.

32 The exigencies of an ever-changing line-up of speakers such as they are, a notice published shortly before the event appeared in *History Workshop Journal* and did not include Stuart Hall as part of the *Poverty of Theory* plenary. He must have been a later addition. "History Workshop Notices," *History Workshop Journal* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1979): 218.

Thompson, whose influential book *The Making of the English Working Class* was a classic in left cultural history, himself took to the stage to respond to his critics.³³ In the later book version, the section titled “Culturalism” reproduced this debate, with Samuel providing introductory context. He pointed out that the session responded additionally to Richard Johnson’s essay on cultural studies and British Marxist historiography in *History Workshop Journal*, which critiqued key works by E. P. Thompson and Eugene Genovese in relation to Althusser’s structuralist Marxism.³⁴ Samuel noted, too, that the debate continued reverberations of the fractures in the New Left that had existed from the 1960s onward. Hovering above it all was the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister earlier in 1979, which amplified the urgency of left intellectual engagement and accounts for some of the evident tensions. Schwarz remembered that the whole workshop “was, in the truest sense of the word, an event. A mass of people attended. At a moment when it seemed as if all these issues that mattered were taking place within the discipline of history, the conference arguably represented the peak of History Workshop’s influence in national intellectual life. Yet its climax proved a disaster.”³⁵ The climax was the Hall/Johnson/Thompson plenary.

At the risk of not doing justice to any of the positions, Thompson had, a year earlier, written an acerbic attack on what he saw as the rise of anti-humanist theoreticism in poststructuralism that was being newly embraced by Anglophone scholars. He went so far as to say that this anti-humanism was tantamount to Stalinism. In his original work, a long essay titled “The Poverty of Theory, or an Orrery of Errors,” Thompson constructed a detailed challenge to Louis Althusser, beginning by noting Althusser’s especially worrisome attack on historicism.³⁶ Others in the UK—more Althusser than Althusser—had pushed the logic to the extreme, and Thompson cited poststructuralists Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst as examples. How could Thompson, indeed anyone who had even the most glancing stake in historical materialism, not respond to this dimension of Althusserianism? But Thompson swung wide and took down, along the way, various other conceptual tracks, including those that sought to move beyond latent

33 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

34 Raphael Samuel, “Editorial Note,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 376–78; Richard Johnson, “Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History,” *History Workshop Journal* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 79–100.

35 Schwarz, “History on the Move,” 212.

36 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin, 1978).

automatic authenticity in the analysis of cultural life. Richard Johnson explained the debate as an encounter between “The Moment of Culture” and “The Moment of Theory,” not by any stretch of the imagination dismissing the former as Thompson claimed.³⁷ And Stuart Hall actually seconded many of Thompson’s critiques but found that Thompson still nestled into an unproblematic historical truth, where historical experience was relatively transparent and able to speak for itself. For Hall, this was as much a debate about readings and applications of Gramscian critique as it was about Althusser. Hall reserved special scolding for the polemical and absolutist approach of Thompson’s condemnation, arguing that it did little to advance intellectual debate.³⁸

Take note of what else was happening in media history contemporaneously. Thompson’s initial volley—the publication of *The Poverty of Theory*—was the same year as the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) conference in Brighton in 1978. There, so the story goes, under the conference theme “Cinema 1900–1906,” film studies experienced its own historical turn, reconsidering films that had previously been dismissed as “primitive” and embracing both a technological and social historical formation for film history. This historical turn began with the revaluing of the devalued, and a methodological refocusing upon archives as an essential site of film history. Thompson was noticing something else, more general, concerning British historical research: a turn away from history. The Brighton moment for film study was launched with a narrowly periodized “early cinema” and had all the enthusiastic hallmarks of having unearthed neglected texts and practices; there were lots of screenings of lost and neglected works. It showcased a revelatory re-discovery, and it generated research for decades to come.

In the collection *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, E. P. Thompson was alarmed about a different set of forces: “For a full decade a theoreticist and structuralist campaign had been directed at our positions, for their supposed “empiricism,” “humanism,” “moralism,” “historicism,” theoretical vacuity, etc. This campaign had almost overwhelmed the older Marxist tradition in Sociology, rooted itself deeply in criticisms of film, art, and literature, and massing on the borders of history.”³⁹ Note the reference to film; for him,

37 Richard Johnson, “Against Absolutism,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 386–96.

38 Stuart Hall, “In Defence of Theory,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 378–85.

39 E. P. Thompson, “The Politics of Theory,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 401.

the historical turn emerging from the FIAF conference in Brighton was not happening; or, more accurately, he worried specifically about a campaign of anti-empiricism setting up its fortifications. Thompson didn't even like the professional mode of academic critique and was brutally dismissive of new Marxist scholars as the bourgeois *lumpen-intelligensia* involved in "imaginary" and "harmless revolutionary psycho-drama." Though we are now forty years later, it's hard not to have the face of a colleague or two pop up in your mind's eye when you read that. Returning to what's left of the Thompson ruckus, it's not entirely apparent what was so irreconcilable to Thompson. His critique does not seem "anti-theory," but a principled conceptual and political rejection of the dangerous enthusiasm for the theological dimensions of Althusserian ahistoricism. Thompson was not alone, and others called such structuralist ahistoricism neo-Stalinist.⁴⁰ After all, this battle was apparent throughout the 1970s, importantly on the pages of the journal *Screen*. And one cannot—or should not—read Williams' magnificent and theoretically sophisticated work *Marxism and Literature* without understanding that it was in part an attack on the anti-empiricism of Althusser.⁴¹ Thompson was just meaner about it.

For British cultural studies, this debate about the politics of cultural historiography left us with the terminology of "culturalism" and "structuralism" as foundational strains in cultural scholarship. The former were the humanists who over-valued experience and the latter pushed toward ahistorical writing if unchecked. James Carey worried that the poststructuralist wave had been so vast that it had overwhelmed the initial culturalist critique of economism. As he put it, "When the oft-mentioned structuralist-culturalist crossroads was reached, the less travelled road, the culturalist one, was not taken." He continued, "I was appalled at the extreme polemics of *The Poverty of Theory* but I do think that E. P. Thompson (1978) pretty much got it right."⁴² But it was never either/or; there was productive potential in this encounter. Stuart Hall's now-standard rendition of the epistemological footing of cultural studies, the 1980 essay "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," was a contemporaneous effort to seal some sort of rapprochement between the culturalists and the structuralists, doing so via Antonio Gramsci's dynamic model of cultural politics, and with the *Poverty of Theory* attacks

40 James Green, "People's History and Socialist Theory: A Review Essay," *Radical History Review*, no. 28–30 (1984): 173.

41 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

42 James W. Carey, "Abolishing the Old Spirit World," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (March 1995): 83.

and responses clearly still fresh.⁴³ The title of History Workshop 13 and the subsequent book even suggested this rapprochement; it's people's history *and* socialist theory, not people's history *versus* socialist theory.

People's History and Socialist Theory was not the only moment in which we see radical history intersect with cultural studies. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, for instance, both had earlier presented at History Workshop 6 in 1972. And though the fractiousness of History Workshop 13 may be the most well remembered for many, Samuel's initiative continued as a platform for competing approaches to history, cultural analysis, and political engagement. No doubt still warmed by the heat of the previous year's flames, History Workshop 14, titled "Language and History," took place in Brighton in 1980 (a mere two years following the FIAF gathering there). Demonstrating intensified involvement with cultural studies, the participants included Dick Hebdige, Valerie Walkerdine, Cora Kaplan, Gill Frith, Jacqueline Rose, Angela McRobbie, Chris Weedon, and Colin MacCabe. The plenary speakers were Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel, and Gareth Stedman Jones. An editorial in *History Workshop Journal* published just prior to the fourteenth workshop outlined the valuable directions opened by structuralism and its denaturalizing of language, with reference to *Screen* and the work in film studies as well as the feminist journal *M/F*.⁴⁴ For many in film, media, and cultural studies, the historical turn was equally a linguistic turn, one in which discourse, semiotics, and poststructuralism advanced an analysis of historical location and conjuncture. This mutual reckoning was to some—those surely siding with materialist historical experience without the new French structuralism—an implausible theoretical partnership. Nonetheless, the following year, also in Brighton, History Workshop 15 featured a closing plenary from E. P. Thompson, "The Politics of Peace Now," who by that time was reasserting his leadership in the British anti-nuclear peace movement. As theories of cultural struggle show us, there are no once-and-for-all-time victories or defeats. Even in the realm of scholarly critique, a battle over the terms of historical, political, and cultural analysis continued with the grounded work on marginal experience and class formation responding to conceptual interventions from contemporary theory and philosophy on the nature of meaning and language.

What are we to take away from my effort here to make visible this slice of our intellectual history? I intend, at root, to remind us of the legacy of the

43 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (1980): 57–72.

44 "Editorial: Language and History," *History Workshop Journal* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 1–5.

traffic between cultural and film studies in the Anglophone scholarly world, and of the influential debates about historical method and cultural theory. But moreover, we can see that there is a shared moment in historiographic revitalization, if differently historicized in respective research domains. The FIAF conference in Brighton was not an isolated occasion of historical surprise, but an event that transpired in the context of a wider debate about radical history projects, forgotten and neglected practices, and cultural theory. Today, is film history and film theory interested in continuing to embrace these forces in the development of cultural historiography as part of its own formation? If yes, then we have to have the conviction to say that when we ask questions of history, we pursue practices that may not conform to legitimated and valorized taste formations, but instead those resonant with historical or contemporary populations. Such historical pursuits need to include unexpected, marginalized, and subalterned pockets of practices and forms. History is the study of dynamic forces that produced social relations. The attention to what cultural studies scholars called “practical consciousness” is that such study helps us conceptualize, activate, and “constitute classes and individuals as a popular force.”⁴⁵ Think what it does to our histories of film and moving image studies if we foreground that, like cultural studies, film history and study also came from workers’, adult, and extensions teaching situations, and emerged to help us decide how best to improve the lives of the disenfranchised or marginally enfranchised. By acknowledging this, we can begin to assure that our historical work exploits the full potential of cultural critique that is there for the taking.

That’s the link, that’s the leap: film history as part of a tradition of radical cultural history, including its efforts to develop new and inclusive modes of historiography, its exploration of neglected historical materials and narratives, and its ongoing struggle to develop appropriate theoretical engagements. You do not have to be an organic intellectual to take this on. Many a limelight starved scholar has mistakenly assumed that our job, our true calling, our anxious relevance, is found in combat fatigues, megaphones, and op eds. But we should orient our work such that we might produce an organic intellectual, armed with the analytical skills—about the immediate world and the historical elements that produced it—necessary to act effectively to build popular, democratic, and egalitarian blocs. Otherwise, as Hall ends his “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” we really shouldn’t give a damn about it.

45 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 239.

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11 The Rise and Fall of Secular Realism

Notes on the Postcolonial Documentary Film from India¹

Arvind Rajagopal

Abstract

In this chapter, I argue that a deeply influential turn in Indian history was signaled and influenced by a series of videos circulated by Hindu nationalists in the late 1980s. This turn in Indian history helped prepare the political sphere for its rejection of secularism, and for the onset of more exclusionary forms of nationalism. These videos conveyed a largely fictitious history in the style of a factual film, with soundtrack and voiceover mimicking newsreel or documentary footage. Rather than treat this cinematic detour as irrelevant or epiphenomenal, as the prevailing scholarly division of labor has assumed, this chapter seeks to outline a series of mediatic forms that accompany the ascendance of Hindu nationalism, and to clarify the mechanism of their succession.

Keywords: documentary, Cold War, communication revolution, Global South

Postcolonial Documentary Film

Documentary film was conceived as a form of propaganda, but in the name of reality itself. The authority that reality exercised was not decisive on its own, to be sure. Visual realism, where the unaided gaze of the spectator yielded socially approved perception/knowledge, could not be self-evident without supplementation. In fact, where cultural and other differences had religious and ritual sanction, such as in the heterogeneous contexts of

¹ My thanks to the editors Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmerman, and to Anupama Rao and Jyotika Viridi, for their advice and suggestions.

postcolonial society, the claim of an all-knowing perspective could only be external and superimposed. This was of course precisely what colonial rule sought to institute, and that postcolonial governments adapted for their own purposes.

The form of visual realism enacted in such contexts could not presume the incontestability of the viewing subject's own perspective. Rather it depended on the signs of what was originally colonial power, whose truth claims emerged and were certified in the metropole and subsequently introduced into the colonies. Assertions about the actuality of the world had to be adjudicated by referring not to nature so much as to the signs and stigmata of overarching authority, that might achieve dominance but rarely won consent. Realism, in other words, referred to the enunciating agent and its own authority rather than to a rationalized and disenchanted world where stable and replicable forms of knowledge could arise.²

Thus John Grierson remarked on the Indian documentary film in 1950:

The problems are huge and not least the problems of education and national planning which affect the film medium most. It would take a brave man to write a plan for India at the present time, and Nehru, who keeps returning to the film problem when he can, is right to hold his hand until the native genius in the matter has sorted itself out.³

The native genius did not sort itself out in this matter as conveniently as Grierson had perhaps expected, unfortunately, India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's endorsement of the importance of the cinema for national development notwithstanding.⁴

In this chapter, I argue that a deeply influential turn in Indian history was signaled and influenced by a series of propaganda videos circulated by Hindu nationalists in the late 1980s. This turn in Indian history helped prepare the political sphere for its rejection of secularism, and for the onset

2 This important argument has been made by Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 31-2 and *passim*. See also the excellent essay by Allen Feldman, "Faux Documentary and the Memory of Realism," *American Anthropologist* 100:2 (1998): 494-509.

3 John Grierson, "Reporting Progress," *Indian Documentary* 5 (March 1950). See also Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: a documentary biography*, 1979, pp. 38-39 and *passim*.

4 Jawaharlal Nehru, "Influence of the Cinema," speech at the inauguration of a film seminar, New Delhi, February 27, 1955, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, second series, 28 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 445.

of more exclusionary forms of nationalism. The videos in question conveyed a largely fictitious history in the style of a factual film, with soundtrack and voiceover mimicking newsreel or documentary footage.

The choice to work within the documentary genre suggests the invocation of visual realist codes of interpretation, that depended on the veracity attributed to those perspectives. The memory of documentary realism can be traced to the Indian Films Division's decades-long circulation of documentary films, that essentially, provided state propaganda on national development. Cinema halls were obliged by the Government to screen twenty minutes of Films Division-approved documentaries prior to the main feature, in addition to paying one per cent of their net receipts to support these documentaries. Unfortunately, it also ensured that cinema hall owners disliked the practice and sought ways to evade it.

The omniscient voice-of-God soundtrack, with its narrative linking and framing of documentary evidence presented, had its own uses, however. Now, the documentary had been envisaged as a means of improving the public's critical reasoning, by connecting image sequences with ideas that appeared to be inscribed in reality as such. Such expectations presupposed a rationalization of the social world through scientific education, industrialization and urbanization. In independent India, documentary cinema sought to advance inchoate processes of rationalization, through filmic devices that became the emblems and heralds of a distinct form of authority. This form of authority asserted its basis in reason, although in ways that were not themselves available for critique. It was continuous with colonial power, to the extent that its acceptance was a prior condition for its pedagogical efficacy. Not surprisingly, the dramaturgy and scenography of claim-making were influential, while the pedagogical content became dispensable.

Thus the Hindu nationalist documentaries offered claims about the world that were pre-certified by faith, that required political struggle to actualize as worldly truth. Ironically, the calls for national revolution that Nehru regularly made, that built on the prestige of the ruling party's anticolonial victory, had made little impact during the heyday of state-led planning. It was the conservative opposition's later attempts at mobilization, that gave the idea of revolution a new life, and a wholly different meaning.

Rather than ignore these Hindu nationalist videos or treat them as irrelevant or epiphenomenal within the history of Indian documentary film, I try in this chapter to clarify the mediatic forms at work. As should be clear, I am suggesting that the political shift towards Hindu nationalism was accompanied by a broader set of perceptual transformations that created the

conditions of possibility for the reception of Hindu nationalists' arguments as both viable and ideologically dominant.

The genre of the documentary film played a specific part in postcolonial development, at least until the end of the Cold War, which also accompanied the onset of market liberalization in India. Investment in documentary films, alongside other forms of communication, reflected the government's effort to institute fact-setting protocols aimed at legitimating its authority and instituting economic growth, albeit while espousing a kind of power that as a recent study has shown, could appear quite like that of the colonial government in the one-way character of its communication.

Not only the fact of religious diversity, which acquired a politically explosive character with independence, but the unreformed character of the religions involved, notably the majority Hindu religion, meant that state secularism lacked hegemony. The political eclipse of secular realism and the rise of Hindu nationalism in its place, while it has many facets, is unintelligible without an interrogation of media history more broadly. Film has a role in this history, but so too do other media such as the press, audio and videocassettes, and television. Any attempt to treat the category of film apart from these other media leads to a partial and potentially misleading account of historical developments. Film history may become artificially insulated from social and political currents dominant in the region; the task of understanding risks being sacrificed so the names of cinema and film can be affirmed. Instead, in this chapter I argue that the post- Independence history of Indian cinema, especially the dispersion of the filmic language of documentary realism into other media, has enabled new forms of popular visuality that have been crucial to the project of Hindu majoritarianism.

Developmentalism and the Indian Documentary

The Indian documentary tends to be treated as a genre unto itself, but its history is better understood in relation to that of the feature film industry. The two together are a specific instance of the relationship between the public sector and the private sector in India, with all the peculiar conditions applying to each sector. The feature film business, as symbolized by the Hindi film industry, evolved a formula that reflected both the scope and the limits of national development: the police always arrived after the crime was solved and the culprit apprehended. Indian society was self-regulating; the state merely endorsed this self-regulation, being external to the actual functioning of

society, according to the formula.⁵ Films Division documentaries, by contrast, championed the national revolution that the developmental state claimed it was driving. Documentaries presumed the centrality of the state, and affirmed the ethos of national development, which was future-oriented and as such, required a sympathetic imagination of their viewers. The fiction films reflected the lived truth of that development for their audience, together with the avoidance of social reform and the formulaic inclusion of minorities alongside a Hindu majority. Whereas the “factual” documentary films offered the vision of an orchestrated process of national development, that political leaders believed was a necessary fiction. Together, the two sectors can be understood as part of a passive revolution, in Gramsci’s terms, with a ruling coalition advancing capitalist growth from above in order to thwart the possibility of change from below going out of control.⁶ The different reception of commercial films and of Films Division documentaries, respectively, together reflects the mixed fortunes of the political project of secular national development.

Chroniclers of the Indian documentary have suggested that perhaps no other country produced more documentary films. By 1967, more than 40,000 35 mm prints of FD documentaries and newsreels circulated among Indian cinema houses, reaching as many as 25 million people every week in 5,400 cinema halls. Throughout its first two decades, the Films Division issued approximately 200 prints for theatrical distribution per week, half of which were newsreels and the other half documentaries. Each newsreel and documentary was dubbed into fourteen language versions: Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.⁷ Although business houses, notably, Burmah Shell, commissioned numerous documentary films, the principal sponsor was the Films Division. The majority of the producers were “outside producers” or OPs, in government language, however.⁸

5 See Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

6 On the relevance of the “passive revolution” for post-independent India, see the essays by Partha Chatterjee, “On Gramsci’s Fundamental Mistake,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 223, no. 5 (January 30, 1988): PE 24–PE26; and by Sudipta Kaviraj, “A Critique of the Passive Revolution,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 23, no. 45–47 (November 1988): 2429–44.

7 Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948–75* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91. See also <https://www.mib.gov.in/film/films-division>.

8 One indicator is an observation of the FD Controller-cum-Chief Producer K. L. Khandpur that more than three-quarters of the producers were external to FD. F. Da Gama, “Do Documentaries Communicate?” *Times of India*, July 16, 1972.

I refer to the documentary cinema to indicate a class of mediatic forms, incubated in the cinema, that subsequently morph across a range of media platforms. The documentary film genre claimed the authority of filmic truth, but it did so in a variety of ways. The claim of visual realism presumed that what was before the camera was what the viewer saw. The aesthetic processes of sense-making however, could vary, even if their political allegiances dovetailed. One chronicler notes:

Films of every conceivable genre were made: biographicals, [...] art films, [...] education, instructional and informational films like *Naya Paisa* [on the reformed currency system] and *Metric System*; films on social education like *Pause and Think* [...] and *The Case of Mr. Critic*; export and tourist promotion films like *Hill Stations of South India* and *Taj Mahal*. [...] When one thinks of the number of films that the FD had had to churn out over the years, in different genres and often at short notice, one cannot but excuse the varying qualities of the documentaries made. Besides, the quality or novelty of the films was not always the criteria. Speed and quantity were also important criteria since a network of all-India theatres had to be fed with new films 52 times a year.⁹

Not only was the range of films produced wide, the name “documentary” was not uniformly applied to all of them. Rather, there was an abundance of nomenclature, suggesting a range of attempts to inscribe reality claims onto the cinema. There was little attempt to reign in terminological variety: short film, factual film, actuality film and government film, in addition to documentary, and in addition, there were provisional names such as quickie and filler. They were not designated as fictional or feature films, but the ways in which they distinguished themselves from the former was not rigorously policed. It hinted at the limited market: the Films Division was virtually the only customer for most of the films. Within its remit of serving national development, films could adopt a personal tone, and try to establish rapport with viewers. Or a voice-of-God accompaniment could be used to cue viewers to correlate images with the stated notions about the world. The latter feature, often observable in FD documentaries, was in part an outcome of the technology; once mobile cameras and sync sound became available, that is, by the mid-1960s, the voices of the person on the street or in the fields began to be heard. Here, too, though, encouragement and support from bureaucratic heads was crucial; the

9 Sanjit Narwekar, “Rewind to 1948,” *Documentary Today* 1, no. 4 (2008): 8.

best FD films were produced when Jean Bhowmagry led the division in the 1960s, with films directed by Pramod Pati, S. Sukhdev, and S. N. S. Sastry, for example.¹⁰

The militant Hindu videos that emerged in the late 1980s, reflected a new trend. Taking advantage of the cheaper technology that became available by the late 1980s, private producers began to circulate video cassettes to serve election campaigns, that often did not receive an exhibition certificate or approval from the censors but achieved substantial audiences nonetheless. The New Delhi-based J. K. Jain Studios, run by an entrepreneurial surgeon who succeeded in winning the favour of some leaders of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the now-dominant Hindu nationalist party), produced the bulk of these Hindu videos. They presented Indian nationalism as a centuries-old Hindu struggle against Muslim oppression. The overt themes in this sub-genre were of critique, exhortation, and recruitment—themes that featured in government documentary films also, although in this case the critique was not of social practices but of the government itself, and recruitment was for a cause against, not on behalf of the government. In effect, they adopted a kind of documentary realism but in the service of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the World Hindu Council, the para-political “cultural” organization that in the 1980s and 1990s, oversaw much of the Hindu nationalist mobilization.¹¹

What Hindu militant videos included in addition, however, rule it out of consideration for most discussions of the documentary genre: reconstructed scenes of divine miracles performed by deities, set to voice-over and devotional music. The cinematic claim to realism however is the novelty here, carrying as it does the proposal to recalibrate political power with historical knowledge. Since these videos were first released, Hindu nationalists have shifted from an oppositional to a dominant position in India, and Hindu nationalism has become the backdrop and stage for an increasing proportion of Bollywood films.¹²

10 Paromita Vohra, “Dotting the I: The Politics of Self-less-ness in Indian Documentary Practice,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 9, no. 1 (2011): 43–53.

11 For the only book-length treatment of these videos, see Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

12 Haris Zargar. “How Bollywood Furthers India’s Hindu Nationalism,” *New Frame*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.newframe.com/how-bollywood-furthers-indias-nationalism/>; Sanjay Kak, “The Dangerous ‘Truth’ of *The Kashmir Files*,” *Aljazeera.com*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/13/the-dangerous-truth-of-the-kashmiri-files>; Snigdha Poonam. “How Hindutvavadis Are Successfully Trolling Bollywood.” *Caravan Magazine*, August 11, 2014, <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/how-hindutvavadis-are-successfully-trolling-bollywood>.

The socio-technical mediation of Hindu nationalist imagery began with bazaar, or calendar art. Cinematic treatment of Hindu imagery alternated between realist and mythological representation. The birth of the Hindu nationalist film appeared relatively late in the life of the Indian nation—in 1990, coincidentally, the year that the Eastern Bloc collapsed. The tone and tenor of the Hindutva videos was of an independence movement, as if the struggle against colonialism would not be complete until the Congress Party was toppled.¹³ If the government documentary aimed at nation-building, the Hindutva videos adopted the epistemological claims of that film form, albeit with an oppositional stance.¹⁴ The context of the Indian documentary film's making deserves discussion for this reason if for no other.

The Strange Career of Documentary Realism

The long “deep freeze” of the Cold War, which led to stable political regimes in many parts of the world, was also a time when the cinema and other mass media became more widely available. Relatively long-standing frames of perception became established at this time, matching the official wisdom in a given nation with what was shown on screen, more or less. This was visual realism, usually defined such that magical and religious modes of perception, even if popular, lacked official sanction. Secular modernization was a shared horizon across many nations during the Cold War, but since “godless communism” made religion an ally of “freedom,” no consistent position on secularism could follow.

The documentary film was the principal locus for the state's visual realism, the prosaic reference point amidst the effervescence of popular entertainment that formed the greater part of media production. Post-colonial societies the world over assigned the documentary film authoritative status, as a significant genre of communication of peculiar relevance for the nation state. They offered space for discursive engagement with a wide public, and hence became a genre of state discourse, where secular modernization was the rationale for nation-building. The documentary offered approved lessons in civics, history, and society, and it constituted an attempt by educated

13 This is the party that had led the country to freedom from the British, and that became the chief opponent of the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP.

14 Despite a ban on the Hindu nationalist video on their illegal attempt to attack the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, which was at the centre of their agitation, 100,000 copies of the video were circulated. See “Don't Black out Film on Ayodhya, govt. Told,” *Times of India*, December 3, 1990, 13.

elites, usually in concert with state institutions, to shape understandings of the past and the future in ways consonant with the prevailing political regime. The protocols it devised for distinguishing fact from fiction, such as a male voice-over framing the images shown, influenced other genres such as newsreels and news telecasts, and, to an extent, the feature film, too.¹⁵

Documentary realism represented the masses simultaneously as an ethical force, a source of legitimation, and yet, as also needing social uplift and education. As such, the documentary was a political tool and implicitly, an aesthetic project of the early Indian state, viewing society as a space porous to state intervention, without obstacles hindering such intervention, such as religious practices that could challenge state authority. Reinforcing this way of seeing was a range of state instrumentalities, from requiring cinema operators to screen government documentaries prior to every main feature, to funding for alternative cinema, and measures to contain and orient public debates, including the state monopoly over the airwaves, government advertisements for the media, newsprint allocations and other forms of controls on the press. Cinema and other communication technologies projected the state as an entity over and beyond its numerous and discrepant activities, and as a unified and far-reaching system. Implicitly exaggerating its coherence and extent, media were thus crucial as a basis for imagining the state not only for citizens, but for the state itself. The National Emergency of 1975–1977 was the high point of representing state power in this way, identifying it with the then-ruling Congress Party as the undisputed leader of the anti-colonial struggle.¹⁶

The representational practices of the state could obviously not remain unchanged, but had to adapt to the evolving character of political dynamics. Certainly the secular realism underwriting documentary film belongs to a “past future,” that is, to an anticipated future now declared moribund.¹⁷

15 Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 32–65; Priya Jaikumar, “Regulatory: The State in Films Division’s Himalayan Documentaries,” in *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (2019), 75–121; Sutoris, *ibid.*

16 See Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1988): 58–89. The National Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, 1975–1977, is a period when the kind of relation I note here, between state power and social perception, acquires heightened significance. See Arvind Rajagopal, “The Emergency as Pre-history of the New Indian Middle Class,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2011): 1003–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X10000314>.

17 See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

A political theology of Hindu nationalism has taken its place.¹⁸ Erstwhile devices of realism have been repurposed to attest to truths that oppose many of the old verities. For example, Hindu nationalists increasingly argue that secularism was a plot to subjugate the Hindu majority, conjured by colonial elites and India's minorities, and that only Hindu majoritarianism can ensure the well-being of both the majority and the minority. As a marker of how prevalent religious superstition has become, with market success providing sanction for all manner of concocted information, the following example is instructive. In 2008, a leading television channel, in its evening news report, conducted a "special investigation" in Sri Lanka to discover the "air force" of the demon-king Ravana, who is a mythological character.¹⁹ The fact-setting protocols of the documentary genre were retooled for altogether different ends by militant Hindu nationalists, who, since the early 1990s, had sought to dominate the media space as a prelude to seizing power.²⁰

Although many of the key contentions in the Hindu nationalist films contradicted existing evidence, their function was to mobilize a Hindu majority.²¹ Rapid cuts of fast-moving images and sounds commanded audience attention, while a voice-over commentary clarified how to make sense of the assemblage. Scorned by most filmmakers as low-quality, historically fallacious, and violent in intent, we can classify them as documentary less for their content, largely a patchwork of montage and staged sequences, than for their style, which mimicked the newsreel and the documentary with voice-over. Videos such as *Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jaye (Commitments Endure Even If Life Is Lost)*, *Bhaye Prakat Kripala (God Manifests Himself)*, and *Ekatmata Yagna (Unity Ritual/Sacrifice)*, were circulated in cassette form even as the government debated banning them for their incendiary character, during the height of Hindu nationalist mobilization in 1990–1992.²²

18 Anustup Basu, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

19 Nalin Mehta, "Ravana's Airforce: A Report on the State of Indian Television," *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 4 (October 2012), 614–25.

20 The historical culture of Indian-language news provides a quite different starting point for the growth of fake news, in relation to, say, Breitbart in the US. Rumour and the printing press are closely allied. Western norms of objectivity and balance in news have historically been variously interpreted over time in the Indian-language press. As such, "fake news" although exponentially more voluminous than before, is hardly novel.

21 For an earlier discussion along these lines on the Hindutva videos, see Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra, "On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation," *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 7–20.

22 See Christiane Brosius, *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

Within fifteen years, such content became normalized, and could air on mainstream television channels without remark.²³

At the time of writing, India's Hindu majority appears set for political dominance into the foreseeable future. If media were central to the task of secular national development, what scholars did not foresee was how rapidly they could be repurposed for a very different conception of the nation, one in which Hindu upper castes could be reassured of their status, while the content of state communication was adjusted to suit this end. Older definitions of the documentary genre have in effect, been left stranded by history.

Films Division as an Author of State Speech

Observers have often tended to assume that independent film constitutes the most important work produced in the documentary genre in India. Thus, international interest in the Indian documentary cinema has for many years, and until recently, focused mainly on independent film production. However, Hindu nationalism's widespread vilification and negation of Nehru and the secular style of nation-building he represented have been among the reasons scholars have begun to attend to what they took for granted before, namely the institutional bases of Nehruvian culture. Scholarship on independent documentary films began to address critical-realist interventions of a kind that appeared new in Indian cinema.²⁴

In terms of mass outreach, the Films Division was the single most important. The Films Division of India, with several thousand titles to its credit between its founding in 1948 and the present,²⁵ was, in the pre-television

23 See Mehta, "Ravana's Airforce."

24 E.g. Rajagopal and Vohra, "On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film," 7–20; Anuja Jain, "The Curious Case of the Films Division: Some Annotations on the Beginnings of Indian Documentary Cinema in Post-independence India, 1940s–1960s," *The Velvet Light Trap* 71, no. 1 (2013): 15–26; Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948–75* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro, *A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016); Giulia Battaglia, *Documentary Film in India: An Anthropological History* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017); Shweta Kishore, *Indian Documentary Film and Filmmakers: Independence in Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Tilottama Karlekar, "Can There Be Another Vikalp? Documentary Film, Censorship Histories, and Film Festival Publics in India," *South Asian History and Culture* 10, no. 4 (2019): 422–42; Jaikumar, "Regulatory;" Tom Waugh, "Words of Command: Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary," *CineAction* 23 (1991): 28–39.

25 See <https://www.mib.gov.in/film/films-division>.

era, the largest producer of non-fiction films in the country. Preceded by the Film Advisory Board (1940) and Information Films of India (1943), colonial organizations for wartime propaganda, the Films Division, founded in 1948, had a charter that encompassed not only the films it produced, but reflected the state's communication policy of assisting and activating national development. The films pursued this mission not only with the content of their messages, but crucially, through their realist form.

The film historian Philip Woods has noted, "the government of independent India [...] set up what must have been the highest level of state intervention in the cinema industry outside the communist world."²⁶ Since every cinema hall had to screen a newsreel or a documentary lasting twenty minutes prior to every screening, the cumulative exposure for Films Division documentaries has been enormous. Although chroniclers and historians of the documentary have drawn attention to fine achievements sponsored by the Films Division, for non-specialists the dominant impression of the history of Indian documentary films is that it made no difference.²⁷ And since the effects aimed for were not achieved, there is little point in studying this site of state practices, or so it is assumed. The following quote is illustrative:

The Films Division held a virtual monopoly on the documentary film in India during the first four decades of Independence, fattened by a regimen of omnipresent and compulsory (but little heeded) theatrical screenings. Only in the 1980s has its paralyzing grip—aesthetic, political, and economic—been eroded by upstart independents and television documentarists. [...] The Films Division has ensured at least one consensus among its independent successors [...]: Films Division fare has been [...] universally hated [...].²⁸

This observation by an insightful commentator on the independent documentary in India indicates the extent to which one of the key branches of a major government ministry could be treated as nugatory. The significance of the government's investment in the Films Division, however, was not reducible to its products, whatever the quality.

26 Philip Woods, "The British Use of Film Propaganda in India in the Second World War," *Indian Horizons* (January–March 2001): 23. My thanks to Peter Sutoris for this reference.

27 Most recent among these is Peter Sutoris, *ibid.* See also B. D. Garga, *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-fiction Film in India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

28 Waugh, "Words of Command," 29.

The government invested its documentary films with the sense of a political mission. Rather than ignore that mission or dismiss it as a failed enterprise, we should inquire into the character of the project, and what historical understanding sustained it. “Development” is the usual description, but the term conveys neither the energy nor the urgency that political leaders projected and sought to reproduce. Instead, we can refer to a word that swept across the world in the twentieth century, and was the focus of its most sustained geopolitical concerns, certainly in the West. That word was neither *capitalism* nor *communism*, not *development*, *progress*, or *modernization*, nor was it *freedom*, *markets*, or *commerce*. It was *revolution*, a word with an equivalent in every Indian language, a term indispensable for popular mobilization, one that is encountered on virtually every occasion of grassroots insurgency.²⁹ After World War II, the Cold War was the backdrop against which the spread of this word occurred. And the Cold War, of course, represented a battle between the superpowers over the fate of revolution in the rest of the world. Even if a communist revolution was not likely everywhere, revolution itself was an idea whose time had come, and political leaders found themselves obliged to claim the term to legitimate their activity. Here, for example, is India’s prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru:

Addressing the third annual conference of the Technical Cooperation Mission personnel in India today, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru said that [...] in India, unlike in Europe or America, political revolution had preceded industrial or economic revolution. [...] By political revolution he [...] meant adult franchise—the political consciousness of 300 million people raising their demands for a better life—and most of these demands were justified.³⁰

Simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of the category and reassuring his audience of foreign and Indian experts, Nehru was indicating the need for a balance between maintaining domestic order and satisfying urgent demands for change, already proven explosive in neighbouring China and elsewhere. The demand for political revolution could not be assuaged by incremental economic development alone, he was pointing out. The Cold War might be thought of as an inhibiting factor. In fact, the term “revolution” remained

29 See Arvind Rajagopal, “Communicationism: Cold War Humanism,” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 353–80.

30 “India’s Efforts at Development. Role of Cottage Industries. Mr. Nehru Stresses Importance,” *The Hindu*, November 22, 1957.

crucial in mediating the Cold War, certainly in nonaligned countries such as India.

Interestingly in India, the very name of the Cold War is a relatively rare occurrence in English-language writing. Hence the following mention, in an essay by a historian of the Indian documentary in the early 1960s, stands out. The author, Jag Mohan describes the period as “a time in our national history when there is a ‘cold war’ between the Public and Private Sectors in all industries and when the terms ‘Free Enterprise’ and ‘State Ownership’ have acquired peculiar connotations.” What Jag Mohan’s remark suggests is that national development, far from being a sovereign activity, in some ways reflected and reproduced geopolitics. Advocates for the private sector denounced state initiatives as socialist, while administrators and politicians could question the integrity or the developmental commitment of businesses. Parliamentary debates underlined this tension.³¹

Licences were granted by state authorities, but they were also tradable commodities within the nation’s thriving extralegal and black-market economies, which meant that licences extended state power while also becoming objects through which state authority could be ingeniously circumnavigated. Jag Mohan goes on:

At the very outset I must confess to the conflict within myself regarding my Socialist leanings and my close association with the Private Sector of the Indian Short Film Industry during the last two decades. [...] [I]t is my firm conviction that through the years the Private Sector, as represented by individuals who have got to be creative artists in this field, has played a dominant role and has even sustained the Documentary Movement in this country.³²

What Jag Mohan’s remark suggests is that national development, far from being a sovereign activity, in some ways reflected and reproduced geopolitics. He himself expressed no preference for one side or the other; his point was rather to survive the conflict, and if possible to make the most of it. In the historical survey of documentary cinema that he frames by invoking the Cold War, he provides a series of lists, of good films and directors, and of

31 See, for example, the debate between M. R. Masani and Jawaharlal Nehru in *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. XLIV, cols. 1665–1682, August 9, 1960. See also Arvind Rajagopal, “The Cold War Era as a Rule of Experts: A View from India,” in *Dipesh Chakrabarty and the Global South*, ed. Saurabh Dube, Sanjay Seth, and Ajay Skaria (London: Routledge, 2020), 122–39.

32 Jag Mohan, “Panorama of the Private Sector of the Indian Short Film Industry,” *MARG* 2, no. 4 (1962): 9.

good and bad patrons organized around government failures. Despite his awareness of its structuring condition, his own survey only reproduced the antagonism between public and private sectors.

If “Cold War” signals an impasse, there must be other terms in use that oppose this impasse whether expressed as a geopolitical stalemate, or as a clash between public and private sector, that nationalist discourse uses as either a lens or a shield. Within the documentary scholarship, it is instructive to turn to another significant historian of Films Division documentaries, B. D. Garga, who criticizes what the public sector itself produced:

None of the spirit of a nascent nation coming into her own or the new conception of citizenship found its way into [the work of the Films Division]. Their idea of expressing [...] national pride was too often treated in images of parades against a skyline with flags flying, and seldom in serious studies of India's people and their problems.³³

Here we have some clues. National spirit and citizenship are needed; they must be shown. These are abstract terms and pose problems of representation, but the author treats them simply as missing ingredients, as if anyone should know how to depict them. Problems of representation turn into issues of fact once again when he complains about the Films Division's portrayals of national integration. They are, he writes: “more often aesthetic than sociological. It is the colourfulness of the costumes, the pageantry of the festivals and rituals, rather than the socio-economic [issues] [...] that have been touched upon.”³⁴

One could object that it was precisely *aisthesis* (perceptual revealing) that was needed, but the author wants socio-economic data that would be numerical and hence abstract, but they are implied to be concrete. Questions of representation are thus suggested but again deflected.

An influential official report on government publicity, on the failure of the documentary film, offers a term which seems to be the missing element in Garga's account as well as Jag Mohan's: “[K]nown playwrights are reluctant to devote their pens to Plan and Developmental themes. [...] There appears to be no emotional involvement on their part in the revolutionary development process under way.”³⁵ Here I turn again to the most prominent theorist of

33 B. D. Garga, “A Critical Survey,” *MARG* 2, no. 4 (1962): 15.

34 Garga, *ibid.*

35 Amarnath Vidyalkar, *Report of the Study Team on Five Year Plan Publicity* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965), 82–83, Sec 8.1.

India's national revolution, selecting from one of Jawaharlal Nehru's many exhortations on the subject, where the prime minister is speaking to a conference of newspaper editors: "There is nothing more dangerous in this new age of revolution when we are building up India and when the world itself is changing rapidly, than to relapse into complacency." Nehru went on to ask editors and reporters to convey the feeling of excitement and spirit of adventure to readers. In doing so, they would merely be expressing the true feelings of people around them, he said.³⁶

The idea of "revolution" can be found in many government reports of the Nehruvian period. It confirms that even if we want to think of the state as a space of bureaucratic failure, we actually cannot understand the impetus for state actions without the concept. Here is the above-mentioned report on publicity:

Our planners have spelt out the aims and objects of the new society we are seeking to bring into existence in which the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the mighty and the humble, the farmer and the factory man will equally share the benefits of modern science and technology. [...] It is our considered view that radical socio-economic changes that the Plans are attempting to bring about require publicity to be organized on a war footing. The strategy of Plan publicity should be aimed at the generation of an atmosphere of urgency in the achievement of desired national goals.³⁷

The language is abstract; it indexes a rhetoric of exhortation that legitimates the activity of bureaucrats and leaders, and asserts equality in social outcomes without any evidence of it. Radical change on a war footing so that rich and poor can share alike is a fair description of "revolutionary development," the term used elsewhere in the same report. It is as if the idea of a national revolution were turned into a spectacle representing the state's oversight of nation-building.

The truth claims of the documentary film therefore had to be certified by the state before audiences were permitted to judge them; documentaries to be screened in cinema theatres had to receive the Films Division's approval. However, what the Films Division judged as suitable for the majority did not necessarily suit the majority itself. One author noted: "[N]ewspapers advertise

36 "Prime Minister Reaffirms Faith in Freedom of Press: Call to settle disputes by cooperative approach," *Times of India*, November 9, 1957, 7.

37 Vidyalankar, *Report of the Study Team*, 11. Sec 2.6 and p. 18, Sec 3.16.

the exact timing of the main features for the benefit of their patrons. [...] [This] has a grim story to tell about the popularity of the [documentary] shorts.”³⁸ Audiences were being assisted by the press in sidestepping the documentary; meanwhile the Censor Board itself eliminated friendly allusions to East Bloc countries and to socialism, while presenting pro-American views.

Assuredly, non-aligned development, far from being a smoothly orchestrated process, involved conflicts between rival visions and interests within the nation. However, what is more noteworthy is how the state’s media infrastructure provided the ground where the seeds of political division could be sown. People were liable to be mobilized for interests that they could not necessarily perceive, responding as they did to perceptual stimuli made available through new communications technologies. Infrastructures are the invisible basis of whatever common forms of life are available. They are meant to afford convenience and utility to all without discrimination, and arguably they usually do so in the West. But where demand far exceeds available resources, infrastructures may operate as switching systems, diverting resources according to prevailing constraints and conveniences. Thus, when describing the character of water availability, one resident of Mumbai noted, “See, if water comes, it’s because of politics, and if water doesn’t come, it’s because of politics.”³⁹

Historians have documented the resistance provoked by projects to build infrastructures for electric power, when the people being served realized they were being divided and partitioned at the same time.⁴⁰ In contrast, the material infrastructures assembling and channelling public attention conjured something new into being, and did not necessarily become sites of political opposition. It’s worth recalling that the arrival of television was typically welcomed as the onset of free entertainment. In a memorable remark, a Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting, justifying the government’s reliance on the cinema, explained that if films ceased to be broadcast, “No one will watch TV.”⁴¹ If the people’s attention could be harnessed, the government was going to do it. What was going to be done with that attention could be decided later.

38 Panna Shah, *The Indian Film* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1950), 211.

39 Lisa Björkman. *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 222.

40 Fredrik Meiton, “Electrifying Jaffa: Boundary-work and the Origins of the Arab–Israeli Conflict,” *Past and Present* 231 (May 2016): 231.

41 H. K. L. Bhagat, quoted in *The Indian Express*, June 22, 1983.

Secular Realism

Despite the typically polemical character of their content, independent documentary films shared with state films what I have called “secular realism,” representational conventions that portray culturally and phenomenologically diverse domains (e.g. of different caste and religious communities), with state reason as an implicitly meliorative connection across them. Secular realism is a concept that has come into view after a historical setback, as a receding representational protocol allied to a now bygone political *modus vivendi*. It was a recognizable ideal even if it did not become a lived reality for everyone; it was meant to afford a public realm of rational adjudication across social differences, with coercion as a last resort.

Secular realism could not be a purely descriptive mode of representation. It was always proleptic, anticipating a future in which social parity and communal harmony would be achieved. The present by contrast was a time of preparation; no nation was built in a day after all. As such, secular realism was a promissory schema rather than a code for empirically depicting the world. It was part of the state’s manifesto for change. We can understand it, in some respects, as the non-aligned Global South’s analogue to socialist realism under Soviet communism. What was shared between them was the idea of the masses as a new political subject with a set of representational protocols or aesthetic practices best suited to the ethics of bringing them into visibility/viewership. Secular realism was an aesthetic principle for post-colonial nation-building in countries such as India, where religious and sectarian issues could inhibit class solidarity and national unity. We can clarify the use of the term by discussing the contrasting concept of socialist realism in the East Bloc, mentioned here.

Communism in the East Bloc presumed the need to define a collective in positive and universal terms. Although it upheld the party as the supreme arbiter of what that collective ought to be, it enunciated the need for a transnational politics that bridged national and imperial rivalries. Its aesthetics, articulated by Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky in 1934, ruled Soviet art and literature until the mid-1980s. Until recently, socialist realism was understood relatively straightforwardly as a representational mode for depicting the concrete reality of the Soviet revolution.⁴² But since the revolution had to be imagined in order to be realized, the doctrine was

42 Alla Efimova, “To Touch on the Raw: The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism.” *Art Journal* 56, no. 1 (1997): 72–80.

subject to interpretation. How exactly artists did so has been subject to critical reappraisal over the last several years. In an influential account, Boris Groys has argued that the Soviet project was, fundamentally, an aesthetic one. In this conception, the real world was subsumed within aesthetic categories to constitute a perceptual order, rather than offering a mutely contradictory external referent. Soviet socialism was held to be a *fait accompli*; the task of socialist realist art was therefore to depict this accomplishment, judged by the accuracy with which the revolution's success was depicted, and by its ability to invoke feelings resonant with socialism's achievements.⁴³ While there are debates about the relationship between politics and aesthetics, not to mention the hollowing out of progressive potential of such art work with Stalinism, the main point to note here is that this twentieth-century revolution imagined the citizen-worker as someone whose mode of emerging into visibility was marked by a rupture or break in the order of bourgeois representation.

Secular realism by comparison did not have official status; it has to be reconstructed from partial and under-elaborated representations that circulated until the 1970s and are now relatively scarce. What we have here is an ideology that gave rise to a set of representational practices, as well as programming protocols in the media infrastructure, one that effectively established the state as a kind of sensorium.⁴⁴ Secular representation could extend beyond state communication to art and to cinema, as, for example, Karin Zitzewitz and Shyam Benegal have variously argued.⁴⁵ It's noteworthy

43 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Arvind Rajagopal, "The Cold War as an Aesthetic Phenomenon: An Afterthought on Boris Groys," *Javnost—The Public* 26, no. 4 (2019): 370–74.

44 Secularism itself was a concept the Congress Party did not officially endorse until, in the midst of a political crisis, when the forty-second amendment to the constitution was brought in for the purpose in late 1976. The amendment changed the official description of India from a "sovereign democratic republic" to a "sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic." Further, the words "unity of the nation" became "unity and integrity of the nation." Hardly three months later, the Congress Party suffered a historic defeat and was replaced by a coalition government in which, for the first time, Hindu nationalists occupied power at the centre. The political landscape changed irrevocably thereafter, even though it would be nearly thirty-five years before the Hindu nationalist party achieved the absolute majority it has today. The forty-second amendment stayed, but invocations of secularism have grown increasingly marginal. For a discussion, see Rajagopal, "The Emergency as Pre-history of the New Indian Middle Class"; Arvind Rajagopal, "What Eventually Emerged from the Emergency? A Reply to Gyan Prakash," *Economic & Political Weekly*, August 3, 2019, 61–63.

45 Shyam Benegal, "Secularism and Popular Indian Cinema," in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, ed. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (Durham: Duke University

that these arguments about the prevalence of secularism arrive in the wake of its political retreat. The beginning of the retreat can be dated, roughly, from between the end of the Cold War, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, with the latter event occurring about three years after the former.

The concept of secular realism is in fact a disintegration product of state secularism when the latter proved unviable, since the ruling party lacked the strength to confront Hindu orthodoxy. Intended as state doctrine, it had to become oppositional to survive, amidst a programme of historical falsification that attributed all the failures of independence to it. Retrospectively, we can observe the ways in which forms of communication that latently or patently endorsed secularism had existed in the past, for example, in the avoidance of overtly devotional or religious themes in government documentary film, or in communication that signalled a conscious balancing act between religious communities, e.g. in public sector advertisements or for that matter in popular film.

We can recall that the state had to serve as arbiter between competing forms of knowledge, and to assess the worth of truth claims that could interfere with the tasks it set itself. This was not only an epistemological task but an aesthetic one as well, governing the appearance of state reason and the perceptual field it creates. This was unavoidably, a balancing act, between agenda that leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru wished to pursue, and the preferences of the majority of his party, who he himself acknowledged were sympathetic to the Hindu majority. Communal harmony and inter-religious solidarity were, for the most part, themes that were treated cautiously, verbally asserted rather than visualized; the fear of backlash deterred state experimentation in political aesthetics.⁴⁶ Apart from this, the “look and feel” that government communication acquired was utilitarian and functional.

Secular realism may have been enabled and supported by the post-independence state, but in relation to the sheer semiotic excess of Hindu ritual, it was anaesthetic. It was an exercise in elimination rather than in expressivity as such. Apart from a gesture of inclusion that usually consisted in mechanically aggregating different communities, it provided no symbols, for example, that could be claimed for a movement or identified with a

Press, 2007), 225–38; Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

46 The use of Buddhist-identified symbols from the reign of the Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE) marked the state’s conscious distance from extant religious communities in the country, and its identification with Ashoka’s renunciation of war, albeit after having conquered most of the subcontinent.

programme. It was an unelaborated fragment of a prospective future, a facet of state speech that invoked a goal without indicating how it was to be reached, besides supporting the ruling party.

Bhojpuri Documentaries

Even if the word “secular” remained untranslated and was hence marooned in the English language, the idea of secularism had a grassroots resonance in popular ideas of morality and tolerance, as can be seen in a Bhojpuri video that circulated after the sequenced explosion of numerous bombs along Mumbai’s suburban railway network in 2006.⁴⁷ The vernacularized documentary form in the example I will discuss represents a demotic response to a contemporary event. It does not pretend to be objective by way of avoiding emotion or value judgements. The soundtrack is in fact largely sung, in the genre of a Bhojpuri *biraha* or lamentation song. A nineteenth-century Orientalist scholar locates the *biraha* genre using the words of a singer: “[I]t is not cultivated in the field, nor is it borne upon the branches of the fruit-tree. It dwells in the heart, and when a man’s heart overflows, he sings it.”⁴⁸

Even as an emotional outpouring, the *biraha* in the video under review is notable for its ecumenism, its avoidance of exclusive rhetoric, and its insistence on addressing not only Hindus, who constitute the great majority of Bhojpuri speakers, but Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs as well. Against demands for communal vengeance at the time, that would have been one stimulus for the video’s production, the presumption of a common humanity that transcends religious difference and the appeal to understanding and forgiveness rather than the likelihood of justice through the law mark this Bhojpuri documentary as constituting part of a hybrid genre, one that draws on secular realism and transcends it.

Bhojpuri is a demographically and politically minor identity; its minority status is compounded in the scholarly literature, certainly in anglophone publications. The audience for Bhojpuri cinema is estimated at 160 million,

47 The bomb blasts eventually led to 189 deaths. “All You Need to Know about the 7/11 Mumbai Train Blasts,” *The Hindu*, September 11, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/All-you-need-to-know-about-711/article60200196.ece>.

48 G. A. Grierson, “Some Bhojpuri Folksongs,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 2 (1886): 207–67. For a more recent discussion, see Sandria B. Freitag, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 95–98.

and yet the research on this topic is slight indeed. The Bhojpur heartland which straddles western Uttar Pradesh and eastern Bihar, in northern India, as well as the Terai region of Nepal, generates enormous male migration of mainly unskilled labour, previously to Mumbai and Delhi but increasingly to all the major metros in the country. Disproportionately poor and lacking the vote in their émigré locations (one can only vote in one's registered address, which is hard to change), Bhojpuri migrants tend to be politically unrepresented and hence subject to discrimination. The emergence of a cinema industry reflecting the life of this previously impoverished and fugitive social stratum is actually a sign of a nouveau riche client base, relative to what had existed earlier. This in turn gives rise to a new visibility of a previously little-noticed class of citizens. The process of mutual accommodation and struggle with older and more well-established Bhojpuri migrants is a tale of aspiration and betrayal, of intimacy and disavowal, one with Balzacian resonance, that Bhojpuri cinema portrays with varying levels of artistry. However, the extreme minoritization of Bhojpuri culture, and the absence thus far of a political force that could respond in any way to the social problems of the migrants, leads to a strange effacement, and even self-effacement, of the issues faced by this crucial but underserved segment of the working population.⁴⁹

Even within the Bhojpuri film industry, which provides a kind of cultural commons from which Bollywood has long drawn upon, the video cassette discs featuring documentaries is a minor and even fugitive form. They reflect the community need to respond to events overtaking them in their new metropolitan locations. I have found VCDs on floods in Mumbai, and on terrorism, that appear briefly at shops and then disappear after some weeks or months. Combining news footage, moral exhortation, and choral singing, they signal a desire for cultural assertion in a community that strenuously avoids seeking political distinction for fear of reprisal. Disowned or denied recognition by their wealthier and more established members who choose to "pass" as Hindi rather than as Bhojpuri, such cultural production seems unlikely to escape its ephemeral status soon.

Mumbai ki Train Yani Brain mein Dhamaka (*Mumbai's Train, or, Blast in the Brain*, published by Veena Music, Mumbai, n.d.) opens with a disclaimer about any connection between persons it names to actual individuals, but

49 On Bhojpuri media, see Ratnakar Tripathy, "Bhojpuri Cinema," *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 2 (2007), 145–65; "Bihar Society, Polity and Culture," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 15 (2015): 26–28; Kathryn C. Hardy, "Constituting a Diffuse Region: Cartographies of Mass-mediated Bhojpuri Belonging," *BioScope* 6, no. 2 (2015): 145–64.

intersperses music with clips and discussion of successive bomb blasts in Mumbai, beginning with March 1993, followed by bomb blasts at Ghatkopar in December 2002 and across the suburban train system in July 11, 2006, or 7/11, as the caption indicates, reversing the customary Commonwealth date notation to suggest the event's resemblance to 9/11. But the video itself dissuades from identifying with a "war on terror" which became a prominent political response in India.⁵⁰

Clips of news footage with captions, alternately in Hindi and in English, show crowds milling around the bombed trains, as policemen, medical workers, and journalists scour the sites, bringing out evidence, the dead and the wounded, and news for reportage. These scenes of forensic state apparatuses at work, drawing police lines, calibrating and repairing the damage, are intercut with victims' families mourning their loss. The sequence of images suggests a division of labour, of cogitation and lamentation, both being equally subsumed in the images' own circulation.

*Yeh dharti banaya zamano zamano
Nafarat ki dhaara mein khud se hai dhalta
Kahin hindu muslim kahin sikh isai
Danga karaake rajniti karte
Woh tan ke hi rachchagar bhachchag bane to
Apne se apna chaman woh jalate*

This Earth, made over countless years,
Is itself drowning in waves of hate.
Here [it is] Hindus and Muslims, there [it is] Sikhs and Christians.
They conduct politics by organizing riots
And consume each other in flames of hatred.⁵¹

Structured in an antiphonal pattern of call and response, a chorus shouts "Yes!" ("Hai!") as the singer finishes each line: the outpoured feeling of the singer is affirmed by the group. This has not only a musical and a dramaturgical structure; it also reflects a social and a juridical structure. Here the suffering expressed by the singer is recognized by the community, and a validating response is offered in turn. The antiphonal shout implies echo, response, and guarantee. The singer utters the discourse, and the

50 I have heard the term "documentary" used in the market, although it is absent in notations on the product itself. I am grateful to Naresh Fernandes for pointing me to this genre of videos.

51 This and the following are my translations.

witness “hears” it in an active moral affirmation, rather than a passive act.⁵²

*Arre baap re baap ek ek karke
Khar mein hua
Mahim Matunga Jogeswari Bandra
Borivali
Mira
Bhayandar mein hua sathiyon
Gyarah minat ke andar mein
aat dhamaka hua
iske baad yeh dhamaka sunkarke wahan ke rehenevale, nagarvasi, nagar
ke nazdeek ke log milkarke, janta ke saat saat kitna mehnat karte hein
wahan ke log.*

It happened in Khar, Mahim, Matunga, Jogeshwari, Bandra, Borivali, Mira [Road], Bhayander. Friends, in less than eleven minutes there were eight bomb blasts And after hearing these blasts, those living nearby came together and began to help.

The familiar geography of the city changes. Names of stations (Khar, Mahim, Matunga, Jogeshwari, Bandra, Mira Road, Bhayander) are signal bomb targets instead, and carriages become weapons, while railway lines trace a movement of violence faster than any train. The resulting destruction brings the people together, erasing distinctions between classes.

The album’s name—*Mumbai’s Train, or, Blast in the Brain*—the explosion outside is mimicked as a perceptual disorder in the collective mind—something that can only lead to a repetition of violence. Hence the need for healing, which accompanies the lamentation and the refusal to name an enemy:

*Tamaam jagah pe yeh paapi bum blasht kar karke janta ko mar rahe hein,
yeh aatankvadi sanghathan, tamaam sanghathan hai, kiska naam diya jai?*
In so many places these sinners have set off bombs and killed people.
These terrorist organizations, all these organizations,
By what name shall we call them?

52 C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago, 1991), 99-125 offers compelling analyses along these lines.

There is an explicit avoidance of a political response, dwelling instead on the moral plane, which frames the perception of the transgression and the nature of the recuperative task before the community.

*Jo hona tha woh to ho gaya; lekin jo log hai, unhe bachana zaroori hai.
Yeh sankat ki ghadi hai.
Sankat mein ghabrakar ke kaam lena achchi baat nahin hai.*

What had to happen has happened.
But it is now essential to save those who remain.
This is a time of danger.
To respond to danger out of fear is not good.

The dissuasion from a violent response as it happened was out of sync with the times; the VCD is hard to find today, and responses like it, that stand aside from the increasingly aggressive public discourse of today, are scarce. I don't wish to idealize this ephemeral response as the sign of an organic moral community able to make whole what has been shattered; that is not my contention. They are themselves fragmentary responses. The tradition being enacted here is not fully within the epistemic space of the modern state. It reproduces visual realist codes and protocols, but its inclusiveness is moral rather than political—the instigators of the bomb blasts are called sinners, for example, and thus deliberately avoids criminalizing them, as was customary. When state-led secularism is not available, this demotic secularism is always available, but it lacks the will to cohere; This cinematic moral-secular realism (so to say) has been overtaken by the mythological realism of contemporary Hindu nationalism.

Mythological Realism

The flow of money into the electoral sphere, which signalled the assertiveness of upper-caste and business interests hostile to redistribution, has grown manifold since the late 1980s. The flow of this money undermined the decades-long hegemony of the Congress Party, in preference to the upstart Hindu nationalist party. The former countered the weight of the Hindu demographic majority with the idea of a multi-religious polity in which pluralism and diversity were treated as inherently valuable. This argument, which was a utopian vision of a better future, abruptly became obsolete. Anyone invoking it was automatically regarded as anachronistic.

Now, the Congress Party had its ideology, albeit one entailing a big tent where a range of differences could be accommodated. The mass media presence it sought was relatively limited, as seen from the more intensively media-saturated environment of today. It did not aspire to become a cinema presence at all, or even to cultivate something that could pass for a screen identity. It had no serious competition as a national party and, even if it foresaw one, did not anticipate the battle moving beyond the arenas already familiar to political parties. Commercial entertainment film constituted the single largest part of the culture industry, and it was discouraged by law to engage in political issues. Perhaps because of this ban, filmmakers envisioned formulas for their market on their own, with no overt state guidance. Revealingly, it was through film music that this formula gained the greatest acceptance, blending classical melodic frames with Western rhythms and beats, while accomplished poets wrote the lyrics. Narratives adroitly reconciling the enduring force of tradition with the unavoidable ascendancy of modern institutions became the norm. Any sense that capitalist urbanity introduced a break from the past was allayed, a process in which the soundtrack, and specifically film songs, were crucial. Visual markers of secular realism were scarce, only available negatively when there was an avoidance of devotional imagery. Revealingly, film stars seldom campaigned for political parties in the (northern Indian) Hindi language regions, unlike in the south.⁵³

The introduction of television, and specifically, the introduction of devotional Hindu epics serialized for national audiences, transformed the relationship between media and politics. The Congress Party's decision, by choosing a Hindu religious programme, violated a decades-old rule of broadcasting policy, but it billed the serials as national culture rather than religious as such. Their reception, however, was overwhelming and unexpected. They were received as bygone political theology, and thus as history. The tele-epics were believed to index a time when a unifying moral order prevailed and the world made sense to everyone. A then-tiny Hindu nationalist party, which was in the opposition, launched a political campaign that built on themes from the broadcast and abruptly upended secular realism's precarious hegemony. The Hindu majority, till then usually latent, thereafter became the focus of an ongoing state-sponsored public

53 The south was another world, one where cinema and politics came together more directly. See S. Theodore Baskaran, *History through the Lens: Perspectives on South Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009); Rajan Krishnan, *Cultures of Indices: Anthropology of Tamil and Other Cinemas* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009).

spectacle, and, for Hindu nationalists, leverage to claim to be the only legitimate political party for the country as a whole.

There was more to this development than merely the return of the repressed. A bygone political theology acquired new form with technology. Television coexists with other mediatic forms, but the fact of a mass audience alters the way in which the medium's effects are understood. It was as if a skin were stretched across society, connecting its different parts and bringing them under a single logic.⁵⁴ The simultaneity of millions of private viewings across the country connoted public power. It required political intervention to actualize, but such an event augured the prospect of hinduizing all politics, harboured for many decades. The inversion of the relation between the media and the world, where a virtual assemblage could signal reality as it was desired to be and could, sooner or later, be taken for reality itself, was a potential ripe with possibility. The counterrevolution could begin.

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54 For a discussion relating to the Indian political context, see my "Watching the Ramayan in Turbulent Times," *Scroll*, April 3, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/957801/from-mandir-to-mahamari-watching-the-ramayan-in-turbulent-times>.

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12 What Was a Film Society?

Towards a New Archaeology of Screen Communities

Michael Cowan

Abstract

Focusing on German film culture of the early twentieth century, this chapter outlines a new approach for examining the emergence and development of film societies in the context of a broader associational culture. To that end, it draws on insights from media archaeology and histories of sociability to approach the film society as a phenomenon at once more diverse than generally acknowledged and held together by a desire to shape a nascent medium by influencing how the public engaged with it. Following a broad discussion of this approach, I outline three key categories—what I call *relations*, *productions*, and *ideas*—that can help us understand specific aspects of film societies: their genealogy, their operations, and their legacy.

Keywords: film societies, film culture, media archaeology, German cinema, Austrian cinema, useful cinema

How should we approach the history of film societies today in the age of “post-cinema”?¹ This question implies another one: What is—or what was—a film society anyway? Not long ago, that question might have seemed to have an obvious answer; film societies were those art house groups that flowered shortly after World War II as organizations where devoted cinephiles could come together and share their passion for cinema around a steady supply of quality films, ideally in a cinematheque. More recently,

¹ This chapter is also included, in a revised version, in the book *Film Societies in Germany and Austria 1910–1933: Tracing the Social Life of Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

the origins of what is often called the “film society movement” have been pushed backwards to the interwar period, with several studies illuminating the flowering of a cinephilic culture—and its attendant social formations with bases in specialty cinemas such as the Studio des Ursulines in Paris or the Filmtheater de Uitkijk in Amsterdam—in the late 1920s and 1930s.² At the same time, other scholars are examining how cinephilic sociability is transforming today in the context of online forums, where collective film appreciation and discussion no longer require a common physical space and anyone with an internet connection can watch, interpret, and debate films.³ But despite this expansion, most work on film societies still shares at least one assumption: namely, that the film society as an institution presupposes a fundamental shared attachment to *art house* cinema, or as one recent handbook puts it, “a cinema of quality, independent of financial interests.”⁴

There might be reason, however, to revisit this narrow definition at a time when communities around screen media are beginning to look very different. Today, social media groups, campus VR clubs, associations for “serious gaming,” and even data visualization societies are likely shaping people’s experience of screen media to a greater extent than traditional art house film clubs, which survive mostly as relics of a mode of screen experience that has become historical.⁵ But this shift is not simply about how we understand media communities in the present. We can also ask if the film society itself

2 See Christophe Gauthier, *La Passion du cinéma: cinéphiles, ciné-clubs et salles spécialisées à Paris 1920 à 1929* (École des Chartres: Association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma, 1999); Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 77–121; Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-garde in Europe, 1919–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014). See also Andres Janser, “Es kommt der gute Film. Zu den Anfängen der Filmclubs in Zürich,” in *Home Stories. Neue Studien zu Film und Kino in der Schweiz*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger, Jan Sahli, Alexandra Schneider, and Margit Tröhler (Marburg: Schüren, 2001), 55–71.

3 See Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (Montreal: Caboose Books, 2014).

4 “un cinéma de qualité non inféodé aux puissances d’argent.” “Ciné-Club,” in *Dictionnaire du cinéma*, ed. Jean-Loup Passek (Paris: Larousse, 2001), 260.

5 On data visualization societies, see, for example, Elijah Meeks, “Introducing the Data Visualization Society,” *Medium*, February 20, 2019, <https://medium.com/data-visualization-society/introducing-the-data-visualization-society-d13d42ab0bec>. On VR clubs, which are becoming an increasingly popular phenomenon in American universities in particular, see, for example, Mella Robinson, “Stanford Has Its Own Virtual Reality Club,” *Business Insider*, June 2, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/rabbit-hole-vr-stanford-2016-5?r=US&IR=T>. On serious gaming societies, see the web pages of the Serious Games Society (<https://seriousgamesociety.org/>) and the Serious Games Association (<https://www.seriousgamesassociation.org/>)

was *ever* as monolithic an institution as we sometimes assume. Examining the emergence of film societies in the German-speaking world, this chapter argues that we need to widen our view considerably to understand the historical film society not as an institution inherently or inevitably about artistic appreciation, but as a media association more broadly, through which spectators learned to interact with emergent screen media in different ways. The last sentence also implies a further methodological reversal. Rather than seeing the film society as a conglomeration of people with a pre-given passion for—and self-evident ideas about—cinema, we need to see it as a *productive* framework. Film societies helped to teach people how to think about cinema and also how to interact with it: not only what to watch, but also *how* to watch, how to love (and hate) the movies, how to engage with film culture more broadly, how to talk and write about cinema, and how to manage their own exposure to a new and evolving medium. In what follows, I discuss both the diversity of early film societies in the German-speaking world and some of the continuities linking them, before proposing three methodological theses for studying film societies more broadly.

Towards an Expanded History of the Film Society

Revisiting the film society with different historiographical questions in mind is also suggested by recent changes in the discipline of film history. In particular, the rise of attention to previously neglected types of “useful cinema” means that we no longer take for granted the assumption—once so central to the legitimation of film studies at the university—that film history is first and foremost a history of auteurs, styles, and aesthetic movements. Research into the long histories of scientific, educational, industrial and advertising film has brought into view entire sectors of forgotten film activity, which are arguably more consequential for our current media universe than the history of art and aesthetics.⁶ Not surprisingly, such domains of

6 Thomas Elsaesser long promoted the study of such films under the title S/M film-making (surveillance and military, science and medicine, sensing and monitoring, storage and memory). See, for example, Elsaesser, “What’s Left of the Cinematic Appartus, or Why We Should Retain (and Return to) It,” *Recherches sémiotiques* 31 (2011): 41. Key programmatic publications on useful cinema include Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009); Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Yvonne Zimmermann, ed., *Schaufenster Schweiz: Dokumentarische Gebrauchsfilme 1896–1964* (Zurich: Limmat, 2011); David Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with*

professional film production and exhibition came with their own forms of sociability, which means that film societies, too, came in a diverse array of models hardly limited to the art house scene. Hence, a series of questions arise: What aspects of historical film societies can we see anew today? What social phenomena can we see anew *as* film societies? And how might we reassess the film society's relevance as a historical institution, especially in cinema's early decades? In the German-speaking world, there were numerous groups in the 1920s and 1930s that could be classified as art house societies in the Parisian mould: groups such as the Kinogemeinde: Vereinigung der Kinofreunde in Vienna, founded in 1926, the Filmstelle ETH in Zürich (founded 1922), or the German groups Gesellschaft Neuer Film (founded 1928) and Deutsche Liga für unabhängigen Film (founded 1931), both dedicated to the screening of avant-garde and experimental film (see fig. 12.1). But there were also many other types of film society. This includes groups dedicated to a political understanding of film like the Volksverband für Filmkunst, colloquially known as the Volksfilmverband or "Popular Film Association" (founded 1928), which had close affinities to similar workers' film clubs in the UK, Holland, and France. But it also includes more professional societies, such as the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft (founded 1919), dedicated to the promotion of film as a technological industry (see fig. 12.2). All of these were preceded by a longer history of film societies, starting with the wave of educational groups—known as "kinematographische Studiengesellschaften" (cinematographic study societies)—in the 1910s, which were the first large-scale associations expressly designed to probe the possibilities of the new medium (see fig. 12.3).

An investigation of this expanded history of film associations can clearly draw on (and contribute to) useful cinema studies, but it might take another methodological cue from recent work in media archaeology. Media archaeology has been arguing for some time that we need to attend not only to the "winners" of media history—i.e. those phenomena often assumed to be the inevitable outcomes of media advancement—but also the dead ends and ephemeral or marginal developments, which might just as easily have come to define our media universe, and which can take on renewed relevance

the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Bo Florin, Nico de Klerk, and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Films That Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising* (London: Palgrave, 2016). Other studies have shown that these "other" sectors were by no means self-enclosed enclaves, but also intersected with the work of canonical film movements, particularly the avant-garde. See, for example, my own book: *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).



Fig. 12.1. General assembly of the Kinogemeinde.

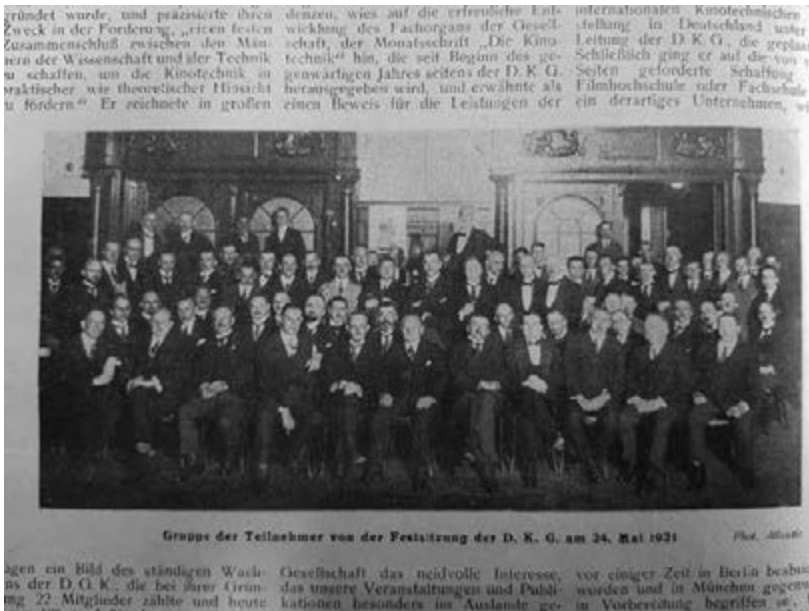


Fig. 12.2. Deutsche Kinetische Gesellschaft, 1921.

Kirche mit ihren starren Offenbarungsdogmen oder der als Besitzrecht beanspruchten Wahrheiten seitens metaphysischer Philosophie-Systeme, lediglich durch wissenschaftlich-kritische Forschung der Wahrheit immer näher zu kommen und die Menschheit hinaufzupflanzen strebt.

D'Alembert teilt mit allen Enzyklopädisten das tragische Schicksal, daß sie die Morgenröte der neuen Zeit, die Verwirklichung ihrer Ideale vorbereiten, jedoch nicht erleben durften. Keiner von ihnen war Zeuge der französischen Revolution, die den Menschen das Selbstbestimmungsrecht und das Recht der eigenen Persönlichkeit gebracht und sie von den letzten Eierschalen der mittelalterlichen Scholastik befreit hat, die mit Hilfe der staatlichen Macht, der unerbittlichen Inquisition und der unduldsamen Geistlichkeit der Menschheit fast das Denken selbst verboten hätte. Unter der Leitung dieser Philosophen wäre die französische Revolution von 1789 wahrscheinlich auch nicht zu der Blutorgie des leidenschaftlich aufgewühlten Volkes ausgeartet, wenn auch solche mächtigen Umwälzungen nach dem Ausweis der Geschichte gemeinlich nicht mit Rosenwasser gemacht werden. Wir müssen jene tapferen Geisteskämpfer als die Bahnbrecher der neuen Zeit feiern, die uns die Freiheit des wissenschaftlichen Forschens gesichert und dadurch ermöglicht haben, auf Grund einer tieferen Naturerkenntnis zu einer neuen, immer wahreren Weltanschauung zu gelangen. Das soziale Staatsideal, zu dem wir uns jetzt seit ungefähr einem Menschenalter bekennen und in seinen Anfängen praktisch verwirklichen, haben jene Männer uns gelehrt, und wir wollen diese kurze Abhandlung mit der hoffnungsvollen Prophezeiung des großen Weisheitslehrers D'Alembert schließen, daß die fortschreitende Aufklärung, ungeachtet zeitweiser Verdunkelung durch äußere rückfällige Einflüsse, ihre Leuchten unaufhaltsam aufstecken wird.¹⁾

Kinematographische Studiengesellschaft E. V. zu Berlin Treptow-Sternwarte

Eine Kinematographische Studiengesellschaft E. V. ist am 2. Februar 1913 im Hörsaal der Treptow-Sternwarte unter zahlreicher Beteiligung von Gelehrten und Interessenten begründet worden. Der engere Vorstand wurde wie folgt zusammengesetzt:

Dr. F. S. Archenhold, 1. Vorsitzender

Prof. Dr. Eberlein, derzeitiger Rektor der tierärztlichen Hochschule zu Berlin, 2. Vorsitzender

¹⁾ Herr Dr. Eugen Hirschberg stellt uns vorstehende Skizze zur Verfügung, die nach seinem Buche gefertigt ist. Die philosophischen und biographischen Erläuterungen nehmen teilweise fast den Charakter kurzer Abhandlungen an und enthalten eine Fülle wertvoller Belehrung für das Verständnis jener geistreichsten Epoche der modernen Geschichte. In gebotenen Umrissen behandeln sie alle bedeutenden Männer der neueren Philosophie mit ihren Systemen von Descartes bis Kant, bisweilen mit kurzen Hinweisen auch auf den heutigen Standpunkt der wissenschaftlichen Anschauungen. Mangels jeder philosophischen Propädeutik in unseren höheren Lehranstalten war es eine dankenswerte Aufgabe des Übersetzers des „Discours préliminaire“, mit diesem „Prunkstück akademisch-populärwissenschaftlicher Darstellung“, wie Dr. R. Salinger in der Besprechung des Buches sich ausdrückt, den Philosophiebefassenden, wie auch weiteren philosophisch interessierten Kreisen eine brauchbare Einführung in die Philosophie und eine vollständige Übersicht über ihren Entwicklungsgang von Bacon bis zur neueren Zeit in die Hand zu geben.

Die Redaktion

Fig. 12.3. Announcement for Kinematographische Studiengesellschaft.

today as sedimented forms of media interaction begin to frazzle.⁷ Like many media archaeological objects, film societies were highly ephemeral and unstable phenomena—most lasting only a few years—which came in a *diverse* array of forms, particularly in the early decades when cinema's calling had yet to be determined.⁸ It behoves us, then, not to limit our view of the film society to a single model of aesthetic appreciation. No less important were the educational, technological, and political groups that also studied the new medium in the early twentieth century and articulated templates for comprehending it.

Of course, one could argue that an archaeology of the film society would differ from media archaeology on account of its focus on social and cultural phenomena rather than technology. But it is important to remember that media archaeology is itself hardly a monolithic field. While “Berlin School” theorists such as Friedrich Kittler—whose work is foundational for media archaeology though he never identified explicitly with that term—and Wolfgang Ernst have tended to attribute historical agency to technological hardware and infrastructures, other scholars such as Kelly Gates, Lisa Gitelman, and Jonathan Sterne have argued for a more complex relation between technology and culture, showing, for example, that “culture” (discourses, expectations, uses, etc.) plays a crucial role in determining not only how certain technologies evolve, but also how they become intelligible in the first place.⁹ Film societies represent one key cultural context of cinema, and one that did not simply react to technological developments, but often helped to shape them—and indeed to create the space in which certain technologies became desirable. For instance, early educational groups were some of the first to articulate a need for projectors that could be paused, long before such projection technologies became a reality, and the same groups—combined with advertising societies—helped to establish the

7 See, for example, Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 12–13.

8 I use the term “diverse” in the sense outlined by Siegfried Zielinski who (drawing on Stephen J. Gould’s efforts to bypass teleological thinking in geological history) sought to restore a sense of the “great diversity [of historical media], which either has been lost because of the genealogical way of looking at things or was ignored by this view.” Siegfried Zielinsky, *Deep Time of the Media: Towards and Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

9 For representative publications, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Kelly Gates, *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

cultural framework in which portable projection devices (for classrooms, exhibitions, shop windows, etc.) could become a desideratum.¹⁰ Perhaps more important, for my purposes here, is the branch of media archaeology that explores the archaeologies of “imaginary media,” both in the sense of media that never realized and of the social imaginaries that surround exiting media.¹¹ As I will discuss further below, film societies were a key place for articulating various social imaginaries of cinema, and rather than measure them by their real-world success or failure, we would do well to understand what they imagined cinema to be, and what legacies those imaginaries have for us.¹²

A third postulate of media archaeology relevant to a new history of film societies is that an exploration of film culture need not—and should not—even begin with the advent of film as such. Rather, just as research on early cinema (and the media archaeology influence by it) has jettisoned the search for “beginnings,” attending instead to the complex links between film and other technological media that preceded it, so we can also examine the gradual emergence of “film-specific” societies from other sorts of groups that had long accompanied industrial modernity in the nineteenth century. In other words, as much as film societies looked forward (to the cinephilic culture of European art house film), they also looked *backward*.¹³ In particular, they could draw on a long tradition of what social historians generally call “voluntary associations”—ranging from amateur hobby clubs to professional societies—which helped to fill some of the gaps in social regulation left by the process of modernization and the concomitant retreat of traditional bonds (family, church, village, etc.) as people and information

10 See Michael Cowan, “Taking It to the Street: Screening the Weimar Advertising Film,” *Screen* 54, no. 4 (2013): 463–79; Michael Cowan, “Interactive Media and Imperial Subjects: Excavating the Cinematic Shooting Gallery,” *NECSUS* (Spring 2018), <https://necsus-ejms.org/interactive-media-and-imperial-subjects-excavating-the-cinematic-shooting-gallery/>.

11 See especially Eric Kluitenberg, “On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media,” in *Media Archaeology*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), 48–70.

12 Here I am drawing on a point first put forward by Malte Hagener, who wrote of the ciné-club movement of the late 1920s: “[D]espite the disappearance of many ciné-clubs’ activities in the course of the 1930s, they created something more durable than ephemeral events. What was at stake was not only a new public, but a new way of viewing films and a new way of thinking about film” (Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 119).

13 For an analogous argument about early cinema more broadly, see André Gaudreault, “The Culture Broth and the Froth of Cultures of So-called Early Cinema,” in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hildago (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 15–31.

became more mobile.¹⁴ In the German-speaking world, such societies were part and parcel of what had become known as *Vereinskultur*, a highly regulated sphere of voluntary organizations ranging from political causes to charity groups to preservation societies, which helped to structure leisure time in the early twentieth century.

Film societies took up residence within this social context, and while we can distinguish them from other groups by their (more or less) exclusive focus on film, they were still one type of *Verein* among others. Indeed, the earliest film societies drew explicitly on other models of voluntary associations ranging from reading clubs and amateur scientific circles to photographic societies and revolutionary theatre associations. Early film societies in Germany followed the rules imposed upon such associations by the *Reichsvereinsgesetz* of 1908, for example, by publishing statutes, electing a management board, informing the authorities of meetings, and often gaining entry to the official registry of associations, the *Vereinsregister* (see fig. 12.4). But they also followed the conventions of voluntary associations, such as the maintaining of a *Vereinsheim* (often a specialty cinema and its adjacent café) where discussion could take place. And like many existing *Vereine*, they understood their mission as one of regulating and “elevating” the leisure time of their members by providing frameworks for self-cultivation and self-betterment. In the words of one foundational study on voluntary associations, such groups served “to facilitate the transition of individuals and societies to participation in the modern world.”¹⁵

More specifically, the first film study societies had direct links to the world of popular education and amateur science. In Berlin, the “Kinematographische Studien-Gesellschaft” was founded in 1913 by Friedrich Simon Archenhold, the head of the Treptow Observatory and editor of the popular astronomy journal, *Das Weltall* (which also published the film society’s statutes).¹⁶ But the group hardly saw itself as a niche phenomenon, interested

14 There is a copious body of literature on voluntary associations. For overviews, see R. J. Morris, “Clubs, Societies and Associations,” in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950, Vol. 3: Social Agencies and Institutions*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 395–445; Robert T. Anderson, “Voluntary Associations in History,” *American Anthropologist* 73, no. 1 (1971): 209–22. For a good discussion of the function of voluntary associations within the process of modernization, see Alan R. H. Baker, *Fraternity among the French Peasantry: Sociability and in the Loire Valley, 1815–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 42–52.

15 Anderson, “Voluntary Associations in History,” 216. See also David H. Smith, “The Importance of Formal Voluntary Organizations for Society,” *Sociology and Social Research* 50 (1966): 483–92.

16 See “Kinematographische Studiengesellschaft E.V. zu Berlin Treptow-Sternwarte,” *Das Weltall* 13 (1913): 350–52.

screenings regularly included fiction film.¹⁷ A similar phenomenon can be observed in Austria, where one of the first film societies, the Kosmos Klub für wissenschaftliche und künstlerische Kinematographie, sought to associate itself with one of the most prevalent German clubs for amateur science, the Kosmos Klub der Freunde der Natur. Not by chance, the Kosmos film club chose as its central organ the journal *Film und Lichtbild*, published by the same “Kosmos” publishing house that ran the amateur science group’s journal: *Kosmos. Handweiser für Naturfreunde*, as well as other scientific journals, such as *Mikrokosmos* (the official journal the Deutsche Mikrokologische Gesellschaft founded by popular science author Raoul Francé) (see fig. 12.5). Of course, the very term *Kosmos* was clearly meant to harken back to the most popular book of amateur science in the nineteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt’s *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (1845–1862).¹⁸

But if early film societies drew on models of associations for popular science, they undoubtedly did so in order to confront a *new* phenomenon. In this sense, it is surely no coincidence that the rise of film study societies in the German-speaking world coincided with the cinema reform movement around 1912. Both movements were responding not to the “invention” of film as a medium, but to its institutionalization within daily life, at a time when movie theatres were rapidly expanding and moving into the city centres. (The key phrase of the time was that movie theatres were “shooting up out of the ground like mushrooms.”¹⁹) In many cases, the same players were involved in both cinema reform and early film societies.²⁰ What separated the two, at least analytically, was their focus: where cinema reform foregrounded efforts to curb cinema’s perceived nefarious effects, film societies sought out ways of elaborating productive uses of cinema. Thus the editors of *Film und Lichtbild*, the home journal of the Kosmos film club, repeatedly stated that their mission was to go beyond reformist complaints

17 Ibid., 351.

18 In Zürich, the aforementioned Filmstelle ETH actually began in 1922 as a film society in this scientific mould, before transforming into an art house society in the 1930s. See Janser, “Es kommt der gute Film,” 58–62

19 See, for example, O. D. “Der Worte sind genug gewechselt,” *Film und Lichtbild* 2, no. 4 (1913): 65.

20 Partly for this reason, Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk see early educational societies as *part* of the cinema reform movement. See Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk, “Kinoreformbewegung Revisited: Performing the Cinematograph as a Pedagogical Tool,” in *Performing New Media, 1890–1915*, ed. Kaveh Askari, Scott Curtis, Frank Gray, Louis Pelletier, Tami Williams, and Joshua Yumibe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 163–73. I prefer to see them as separate, though linked, movements.

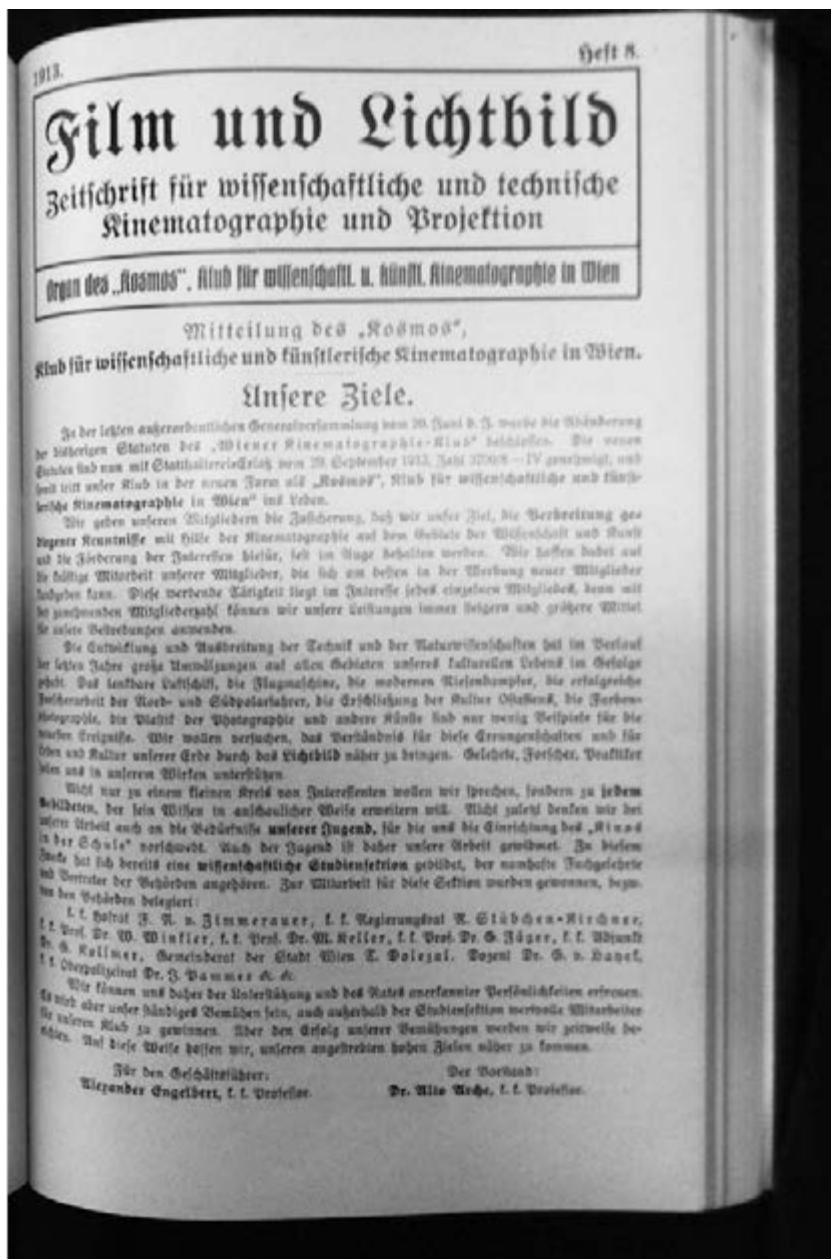


Fig. 12.5. Announcements by the Kosmos Klub für wissenschaftliche und künstlerische Kinematographie.

about cinema's "harmful excesses" ("*schädliche Auswüchse*") to "make the undeniable advantages of cinematographic technology useful for various sciences."²¹ The Kosmos club would take up where this opening editorial left off, recruiting members from Vienna's middle classes and creating a specialty cinema in the seventh district to explore cinema's uses as a tool for scientific learning.

The larger point here is that early film societies were involved in an effort to manage this new institution of cinema by elaborating templates for interacting with it and influencing the direction it took. Indeed, not unlike people confronting the digital turn today, those involved with early film societies tended to see themselves as living through a major media revolution, and one of the main objectives of any film society was to help to navigate that shift and steer the new medium in the desired direction. For the educational groups mentioned above, film was part of a visual turn—one that included the use of slide lectures, which these groups also promoted heavily—that would utterly change the way learning took place. For example, Adolf Mahel, vice president of the Viennese Kastalia Society for Scientific and Educational Cinema (founded 1912), presented the new film society as a response to a general transformation to a post-Gutenbergian universe, in which learning would now be visual and experiential rather than rational and bookish: "Letters only have flickering life, and even the most tasteful lecture by a teacher or professor, even the most compelling instructional methodology, can never attain the value of simply beholding something and experiencing it for oneself."²² The cinematograph would enable such "autonomous experiences" (for example, by virtually transporting school children out of the artificial environment of the classroom and into nature itself), and within this context, Kastalia would work to create the conditions in which educational film could thrive within the curriculum by systematically introducing projection equipment into schools in all of Vienna's twenty-three districts.²³ But they also sought to create an audience capable of channelling film's remarkable experiential power into productive education ends, primarily by working out detailed models of

21 *Film und Lichtbild* 1, no. 1 (1912): 1.

22 "Der Buchstabe hat nur flackerndes Leben, und selbst der gediegenste Vortrag des Lehrers, des Professors, die zwingendste Methodik seines Unterrichtsverfahrens, kann nie den Wert einer einfachen Anschauung, eines Selbsterlebnisses erreichen." Adolf Mahel, "Kastalia!," *Kastalia* 1, no. 1 (June 1912): 2.

23 See, for example, "Vereinsbericht," *Kastalia* 1, no. 4 (1912): 12–13.

film pedagogy—determining, for example, what times of day were most propitious to film reception,²⁴ how best to lead discussions of films after screenings, and so on.²⁵

For later political film societies, on the other hand, film—which by this point had assumed the shape of a vast entertainment industry—was quickly replacing newspapers as the key mass medium for political organization and the terrain on which the great battle of ideas would be waged. Thus Willi Münzenberg, a prominent left-wing journalist who collaborated with the Volksfilmverband, could write in that society's journal *Film und Volk* in 1928:

It is high time that revolutionary workers' organizations recognized that, just as their bourgeois enemies once founded printing presses, created newspapers, and covered the land with a network of literary distribution agencies, so they are today doing something similar—and to an even greater extent—in the domain of cinematography through the construction of cinema studios, the creation of distribution offices, and the acquisition of cinema theatres.²⁶

Hence groups such as the Volksfilmverband sought to create the infrastructural conditions in which left-wing film-making could thrive (which turned out to be a particularly challenging undertaking on account of resistance by both the film industry and the authorities), but also to produce a *critical* audience that could resist the seductions of the mainstream film industry and see through to the ideological underpinnings of bourgeois film, even in its seemingly “apolitical” manifestations.²⁷

24 See, for example, “Das Arbeitsprogramm der Kastalia,” *Kastalia* 1, no. 5 (December 1912): 1–2.

25 See, for example, Adolf Mahel, “Neue Bahnen,” *Kastalia* 3, no. 5–7 (1914): 52–53.

26 “Die revolutionären Arbeiterorganisationen müssen endlich klar erkennen, daß der bürgerliche Gegner, so wie er früher Druckereien gründete, Zeitungen schuf und das Land mit einem Netz seiner Speditionen und Schriftenvertriebsstellen bedeckte, heute das gleiche in einem gesteigerten Maße auf dem Gebiete der Kinematographie durch Bau von Kinoatelieren, Schaffung von Verleihbüros und Erwerb von Kinotheatern leistet.” Willi Münzenberg, “Film und Propaganda,” *Film und Volk* 2, no. 9–10 (November 1929): 5.

27 In the first article of the first issue of the society's journal, *Film und Volk*, Franz Höllering declared that one of the group's central objectives lay in the “Aufklärung der Massen über die Ausbeutung, deren sie noch in ihren kargen Ruhestunden durch eine Filmindustrie ausgesetzt sind, die ihr Klassenfeind [...] beherrscht und kontrolliert.” Franz Höllering, “Vorwort,” *Film und Volk* 1, no. 1 (March 1928): 4.

Film Society as Organization: Key Continuities

Examining groups such as Kastalia and Volksfilmverband side by side, the differences between them stand out, and one might ask whether such an expansive take on film societies risks inflating the contours of the object beyond any useful recognition. But we should not ignore some of the continuities between these different social projects. The earliest educational film societies may not look much like their art house or political descendants at first glance, but they helped put into place many of the protocols that would continue to characterize the more familiar film societies for decades to come. One of the most basic continuities was a dialectical relation to the developing film industry, where the organization of movie-goers (or, in some cases, film producers) was intended to influence the direction the industry at large would take. As already noted, film societies emerged at a moment when cinemas were going mainstream. That is, they accompanied and reacted to the transformation of the “cinematograph” into the “cinema” understood as an institutional form of mass leisure activity.²⁸ Within that context, these were self-consciously *prescriptive* undertakings (quite literally so, as they usually included manifesto-like opening statements in their journals), designed to influence consumer demand and thereby change the habits of film producers and distributors. To put that differently, they sought not simply to bring together people already interested in film, but also to *make* people take interest in film, and to shape the expectations, tastes, and behaviour of consumers in ways that would *force the industry to listen*.

Though they might have conceived of this endeavour in different ways, nearly all film societies described it as a mission to “elevate” cinema through the promotion of quality film. This goes almost without saying for art house groups such as the Viennese Kinogemeinde, which sought to legitimate cinema as a seventh art. Established in 1926 by film-maker Friedrich Porges, largely under the influence of the well-known Parisian ciné-club model, the group explicitly described as its central goal “the elevation [...] of the film industry in Austria” (“*die Hebung [...] des Lichtbildwesens in Österreich*”).²⁹ But thirteen years earlier, the statutes of the Kosmos educational film club sounded an almost identical note when they stated that the group

28 I borrow the distinction between “cinematograph” and “cinema” from André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 34.

29 “Die Kinogemeinde ist konstituiert! Eine würdig und hoffnungsvolle Gründungsver-sammlung,” *Mein Film* 44 (1926), 4.

sought to promote all initiatives “which serve to elevate and ennoble cinematography” (“*die der Erhebung und Veredelung der Kinematographie dienen*”).³⁰ Similarly, the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft, formed under the influence of the American Society of Motion Picture Engineers, sought to help the German film industry towards “the elevation of its own products” (“*die Hebung der eigenen Erzeugnisse*”).³¹ Of course, the content of these various calls for elevation (*Hebung, Erhebung*) might have differed from group to group, along with the understanding of “quality” film, which migrated from educational to artistic and/or ideological criteria.³² But they shared a certain relational position vis-à-vis the industry. They also shared certain strategies, such as encouraging members to shame distributors who included too many “bad” films, cinemas that showed films under suboptimal conditions (false speed, damaged screens, etc.), or equipment manufacturers who failed to take sufficient pride in their work. The basic idea was summed up already by the editors of *Kastalia* in response to a reader’s letter in 1914: “If anyone can reform cinema programmes quickly and radically, it is the public itself.”³³ Fourteen years later, a writer for *Film und Volk* would repeat the same sentiment in varied form: “It is a well-known fact that any improvements to the quality of a product—and film is one product among others—can only result from pressure by consumers. Only the dissatisfaction of purchasers forces manufacturers to produce better wares.”³⁴ In this way, film societies involved their members in a collective mission to *take hold* of the institution of cinema and steer its development.

A second defining feature of film societies was a tension between the desire to work within the existing industry and a desire to institute alternative circuits. This manifested itself concretely in questions of independent distribution networks and screening spaces, for example, in the ever-present question of *specialty* cinemas. I have already mentioned the most famous

30 Otto Theodor Stein, “Kinematographische Studiengesellschaften,” *Film und Lichtbild* 2 (1913): 139.

31 “Was wir wünschen,” *Kinotechnik* 2, no. 1 (January 1920): 6.

32 The Volksfilmverband wavered between artistic and ideological criteria, and this was in fact one of the major tensions within the group. As the more left-wing members came to the fore of the group in later years, they explicitly sought to subordinate aesthetics to political considerations (*Tendenz*). See, for example, Alfred Piepenstock, “Klassenkunst,” *Film und Volk* 2, no. 2 (December 1928): 6.

33 “Wenn jemand rasch und gründlich die Kinoprogramme reformieren kann, so ist es das Publikum selbst.” “Redaktionelles,” *Kastalia* 2 (1913), slide 10.

34 “Es ist eine bekannte Tatsache, daß jede Qualitätsverbesserung einer Ware—auch der Film ist neben anderem eine Ware—nur unter dem Druck der Konsumenten erzielt wurde. Nur die Unzufriedenheit des Abnehmers zwingt den Fabrikanten, besser zu produzieren.” S. Alher, “Revolution von Unten,” *Film und Volk* 1, no. 5 (August 1928): 4.

examples (Studio des Ursulines in Paris, Filmtheater de Uitkijk in Amsterdam). But such institutions had precursors in the period of cinema reform known in German as *Musterlichtbühne* (model movie theatres). Often funded by local councils in order to bypass profit-driven distribution companies, such specialty cinemas were promoted as spaces that would protect audiences from harmful films and direct them towards the good. But they were already the subject of some debate, as observers such as Otto Theodor Stein warned that too much “segregation” from the industry would harm efforts to influence film production at large.³⁵

The earliest film societies saw such independent cinemas as part of their remit. Kastalia, for example, set out from the beginning to build a dedicated educational cinema, which was realized in 1913 under the title *Universum Kino* in Vienna's fifteenth district (see fig. 12.6). A year later the *Kosmos Klub für wissenschaftliche und künstlerische Kinematographie* founded a similar institution dubbed the “*Kosmos Theater*” nearby in the seventh district. And here, the continuities between early and late groups take on a tangible dimension since Vienna's first art house film club, *Kinogemeinde*, would adopt the very same space in 1926, only changing the name to *Kosmos Kino*. The idea of the specialty cinema was still central to the *Volksfilmverband* in 1928, which included among its original three-point plan (alongside a regular events schedule and the eventual production of their own films) the founding of an independent “first-run theatre” (*Uraufführungstheater*) for workers' films in Berlin.³⁶ Although that goal was eventually abandoned, it once again went hand in hand with a larger tension around the relative values of working inside and outside the industry that informed the *Volksfilmverband* throughout its existence (with the more left-leaning members increasingly pushing to bypass the industry altogether).

But specialty cinemas weren't simply about film screenings. The desire for a dedicated space also illustrates another point of continuity between early and later film societies: the key role of discussion and exchange. Film societies were not about watching films naively, but about inculcating certain modes of watching guided by speech. This is evident in the earliest film societies, which were still navigating the line between illustrated lectures and film screenings; groups like the *Kosmos Klub* and *Kastalia*—along with many other associations that began to use film at the time—regularly accompanied their screenings with scientific lectures, as did affiliate institutions such as the *Urania Scientific Theatre*, which first introduced film into

35 See Otto Theodor Stein, “Musterlichtbühnen,” *Film und Lichtbild* 2, no. 2 (1913): 19–22.

36 See Rudolf Schwarzkopf, “Unser Ziel und Weg,” *Film und Volk* 1, no. 1 (March 1928): 20.

Lichtspielbühne „Universum“.



Durchwegs künstlerisch durchgeführte Filmprogramme mit
passenden Begleitworten und entsprechender Musik.

Nur das Beste ist gut genug.

Die genauen Wochenprogramme werden allwöchentlich affiziert.

Gegen Abgabe eines der vier untenstehenden Coupons und Vorweisung der
Mitgliedskarte der „Kastalia“ erhalten deren Mitglieder an der Kasse der Licht-
spielbühne „Universum“, Wien XV, Kriemhildplatz 7, zwei Karten zu 50%, Er-
mäßigung auf allen Plätzen.

<p style="text-align: center;">Anweisung auf 2 Ermäßigungs-Karten für das Jahr 1914.</p> <p>Mitglieder der „Kastalia“ haben gegen Abgabe dieses Coupons</p> <p style="text-align: center;">=== auf allen Plätzen 50%, Ermäßigung ===</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sämtliche Sitze sind numeriert.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Anweisung auf 2 Ermäßigungs-Karten für das Jahr 1914.</p> <p>Mitglieder der „Kastalia“ haben gegen Abgabe dieses Coupons</p> <p style="text-align: center;">=== auf allen Plätzen 50%, Ermäßigung ===</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sämtliche Sitze sind numeriert.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Anweisung auf 2 Ermäßigungs-Karten für das Jahr 1914.</p> <p>Mitglieder der „Kastalia“ haben gegen Abgabe dieses Coupons</p> <p style="text-align: center;">=== auf allen Plätzen 50%, Ermäßigung ===</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sämtliche Sitze sind numeriert.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Anweisung auf 2 Ermäßigungs-Karten für das Jahr 1914.</p> <p>Mitglieder der „Kastalia“ haben gegen Abgabe dieses Coupons</p> <p style="text-align: center;">=== auf allen Plätzen 50%, Ermäßigung ===</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sämtliche Sitze sind numeriert.</p>

Fig. 12.6. Universum Kino programme, 1913.

its programme in 1911. Speech was crucial here, as Adolf Mahel put it in the same Kastalia presentation cited above: “Eye and ear should be placed simultaneously into the service of understanding. The unfurling image accompanied by flowing speech! The ear hearing what the eye leaves in silence! The eye seeing what the word conceals!”³⁷

37 “Auge und Ohr sollen gleichzeitig in den Dienst der Auffassung gestellt werden. Das rollende Bild von fließender Rede begleitet! Das Ohr hörend, was das Auge verschweigt! Das Auge sehend,

But the presence of words wasn't just for film pedagogy in the narrow sense of educational cinema for schools. In fact, the film society is one place where the film lecture far outlasted its disappearance from most mainstream cinemas. The Viennese Kinogemeinde, for instance, still held regular lectures in the mid-1920s on topics such as "Welt und Natur im Film," "Die Gefahren des Kameramanns," "Tiere im Film," "Die Mode im Film," "Filmtempo in Amerika," and so on.³⁸ As for the Volksfilmverband, the group at first prescribed a rather standard programme of screenings accompanied by introductory lectures, but it increasingly turned to "stand-alone lectures" because it also wanted (here anticipating later apparatus theorists) to teach its members about the ideological work of the film industry—in production techniques, finance, and censorship—without the danger of "seduction" by the pleasures of film viewing.³⁹ For its part, the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft, which met in the rooms of the Photochemical Department of the Technical University in Charlottenburg, was perhaps the most formalized of all the groups in this sense; as its statutes prescribed, the group began each meeting with an expert lecture by one member on a particular aspect or domain of film technology, which was often followed by the screening of excerpts to demonstrate the points discussed.⁴⁰ (Sometimes the same material was screened back to back on different projection equipment to demonstrate distinctions in quality.) In each of these cases, lectures and discussion were part of an evolving mission to train certain types of film viewing and certain competencies. Film societies, that is, were never simply about watching films, but about blending vision and discourse in ways that would create certain types of viewers.

Of course, "discourse" here was clearly not limited to live speech. Most film societies—and nearly all of the ones discussed here—also ran print journals, part of whose mission was to model the kinds of competencies desired in members. This happened through the choice of articles, but also in the institution of film criticism, which developed throughout film society publications, from the early lists of recommended "quality films" published in the journals *Film und Lichtbild* and *Kastalia* through the "technological criticism" instituted by the Deutsche kinotechnische Gesellschaft to the

was das Wort verbirgt!," Mahel, "Kastalia," 2. Or as the director of *Kastalia*, Josef Kopetsky, put it in another article: "Es muß der Gesichtssinn durch den Hörsinn unterstützt werden." Josef Kopetzky, "Kind und Kino," *Kastalia* 1, no. 5 (1912): 7.

38 See "Mitteilungen der Kinogemeinde," *Mein Film* no. 50 (1926): 10.

39 The point was discussed in a pivotal article in *Film und Volk* announcing changes for the group's second year. See "Das zweite Jahr," *Film und Volk* 2, no. 3 (April 1929): 15.

40 See, for example, "Die zweite ordentliche Sitzung der D.K.G.," *Kinotechnik* 2.9 (1920).

aesthetic criticism of *Mein Film* (the journal of Kinogemeinde) and the more politically minded “critical film reports” in *Film und Volk*.⁴¹ Early on, groups such as Kastalia quite literally understood film criticism and reports as a means of preparing audiences to watch films and deepen their knowledge of visual material that went by too quickly on the screen.⁴² Film criticism remained one of the central mechanisms by which film societies sought both to anticipate and supplement the act of watching films. In many cases, journals also allowed for reader participation, not only in letter columns, but also in more “serious” contributions, such as the column “Mein größtes Filmerlebnis” in *Mein Film* or the practice of reader-authored film criticism introduced in later issues of *Film und Volk*.⁴³ Here, the journals sought to function in a manner akin to the newspaper in Benedict Anderson’s model. Through simultaneous reading and written exchange, readers could gain a sense of belonging to a community of shared values and tastes. But to do so, they had to learn its rules and its protocols and be able to demonstrate certain competencies in film viewing and film knowledge.

All of this suggests that film societies are not best understood as aggregate groups of pre-formed film aficionados. These were rather frameworks for learning how to relate to cinema: how to love the movies, how to behave in movie theatres, and how to watch with more informed eyes, but also what to read and know about cinema, how to judge film technology, how to become a political cinema-goer, and so on. And this is the final point of continuity I would underscore here. Film societies taught audiences the shared protocols for a kind “care of the self” vis-à-vis the new sphere of screen media that became part of everyday life in the 1910s.⁴⁴ And in this way, they taught audiences to cultivate particular models of a *cinematic self*. This pedagogical dimension—which happened through the combinations of word and image

41 For more on the development of film criticism, see especially Helmut Diederichs, *Anfänge der deutschen Filmkritik* (Stuttgart: Verlag R. Fischer und U. Wiedleröther, 1986).

42 See, for example, “Unsere künftige Jugendbeilage,” *Kastalia* 1, no. 4 (1912): 10.

43 See, for example, “Der Arbeiterkorrespondent meldet sich!,” *Film und Volk* 3, no. 1 (January 1929). For more on the columns in *Mein Film*, see my article “Learning to Love the Movies: Puzzles, Participation and Cinephilia in Interwar European Film Magazines,” *Film History* 27, no. 4 (2015): 32–33.

44 The phrase is obviously borrowed from Foucault, who used it to describe ancient philosophical societies. See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988). But Foucault’s analysis of the role of embodied practices in the service of group belonging could equally apply to film societies, and indeed to many types of voluntary association devoted to self-betterment.

in meetings, at events, and on the pages of society journals—was a key point of continuity from the earliest educational societies that appeared around 1910 to the political and artistic societies of the late 1920s.

Studying Film Societies: Three Theses

Having discussed some of the genealogies and continuities of film societies during cinema's first decades, I want to use the remaining space in this chapter to propose three theses for studying them. I will call these theses *relations*, *productions*, and *ideas*. The first (and properly interdisciplinary) thesis is that we should always look for *relations* when studying social formations like film societies. Such groups were never monadic or self-sufficient entities (even and perhaps especially when they spoke in the name of artistic or medium "specificity"), but always stood in relation to other groups: not only to other film societies, but also other *kinds* of social and professional communities or formations. Often, they imported questions, assumptions, and models formulated within these other spheres into the realm of cinematographic study. Hence, we can learn something about the how and why of a group's approach to cinema by asking: Where did its spokespeople come from? What was their own professional training? What else did they write? And what questions did they look to cinema to answer?

The writers for early film society journals came from the world of education and popular science (for example, microscopic societies), and they looked to cinema to answer pedagogical questions formulated in that other domain: for instance, how to create a more experiential form of pedagogy to counter the increasing proliferation of abstract knowledge that no individual could possibly assimilate. Members of the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft, on the other hand, came largely from the professional spheres of manufacturers and engineers (such as the Verein Deutscher Ingenieure), which is perhaps why this was the first group to approach cinema so thoroughly as an *industry*—the term being understood here not so much in the sense of workers and trades (as we would speak of media industries today) but in the sense of a national manufacturing sector that needed to be rationalized and standardized no less than other spheres of factory production. A group like the Volksfilmverband, for its part, found an obvious model in the long tradition in left-wing cultural organizations, including the *Volks theater* movement from the late nineteenth century, but also less-known groups (often in the orbit of the German communist party) such as the *Kultur- und Sportkartelle* that dotted German cities in the late

1920s. At the same time, many writers for Volksfilmverband came from the world of journalism (including pioneers of undercover investigative journalism like Leo Lania), which perhaps explains why they—more than any previous group—understood cinema first and foremost as a *mass medium*, one crucial to influencing the world view of the working classes. In each of these cases, film became an object of interest because it seemed to answer—at that moment in its development—questions that had emerged elsewhere. Hence, reconstructing those questions is one of the central tasks in researching these various societies. This doesn't mean ignoring the inevitable questions of cinematic specificity, but we need to understand how the ways in which various groups understood cinema's specific qualities depended less on any inherent traits of cinema than on exogenous factors. That is, it depended on *what these groups were looking for*.

The second thesis, building on the previous discussion, is that we should see film societies as *productive* organizations, understood in the Foucauldian sense of productive power. This means that we need to identify and analyse the mechanisms by which film societies sought to produce subjectivities, habits, and ways of relating to cinema. This goes for overtly pedagogical groups like Kastalia, but it goes no less for cinephilic and avant-garde groups of the 1920s. Identifying such mechanisms is not always easy. Some forms of pedagogy, like the lecture before a screening, are obvious starting points. But there were also many less obvious ways of inculcating models of self-cultivation, such as the many puzzles and contests run by groups such as the Viennese Kinogemeinde, which offered a more ludic form of cinephilic training designed to legitimate certain forms of film knowledge and “know-how” (particularly around stars) and to allow readers to demonstrate it in their submissions.⁴⁵ Thus in order to research film societies, we need to learn to read between the lines, as it were, and look for those moments in which the protocols and the pedagogy of film societies were being worked out in ways that might not be apparent at first glance.

There is an important caveat to make here. Examining modes of productive power does not mean that we can posit whether such productions were “successful.” Like all questions relating to historical audiences, the question of how film society members and audiences actually thought, felt, or acted is fraught with difficulties. In some cases, we can get an idea of who the members of a given film club were; the Kosmos Klub, for instance,

45 See Cowan, “Learning to Love the Movies,” 26-29.

published its member list in *Film und Lichtbild*, showing that most adherents came from middle-class professions (bank clerks, electricians, architects, attorneys, etc.) (see fig. 12.7). This provenance might tell us something about who was interested in the new cinematographic study societies (i.e. who saw them as a means of self-betterment), but not how audiences actually behaved within the group. Occasionally, one also finds telling anecdotes, such as the newspaper reports of Volksfilmverband screenings documenting audience interjections or the spontaneous singing of “The International.” We can also glean some information from the kinds of participatory activities mentioned above, such as reader letters, reader-authored film discussions, or submissions to prize contests. But it’s crucial to remember that such audience input was carefully curated and selected by journalists and magazine editors, and it cannot really tell us whether audiences actually followed all of the precepts of a given film society. We should, instead, be asking *why* certain letters and texts were selected (for example, in order to model a desired mode of engaging with film for other members). That question undergirds a more realistic research objective: not to reconstruct what audiences really thought or felt, but to reconstruct the kinds of *templates* of knowledge, affect, and behaviour—in short, the blueprints of cinematic selves—these groups elaborated. To put this in terms of the imaginary media discussion outlined above, what kind of engagement with cinema was being *imagined* within these groups and why?

Attention to this “imaginary” dimension leads to my third and final thesis: Film societies were one of the spaces—not the only one, but a key space—where *ideas* of cinema were worked out. I borrow the term “idea of cinema” from Francesco Casetti, who famously asked whether the idea of cinema familiar from canonical film theory could survive the “relocation” of film onto digital platforms.⁴⁶ I would take issue, however, with Casetti’s use of the singular here. Already in his reading, the “idea of cinema” turns out to harbour a conglomeration of different ideas about film experience, ranging from the modernist interest in perceptual stimulation to Eisensteinian constructivism to the Bazinian idea of film as a phenomenological revelation of the real.⁴⁷ And the need for plurality becomes all the more

46 See Francesco Casetti, “The Relocation of Cinema,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2012), <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-relocation-of-cinema/>.

47 To be fair to Casetti, he is well aware of this potential multiplicity, but his experiential paradigm nonetheless tends to insist on one common denominator of filmic experience. “I ought to write “ideas” in plural because of the variety of experiences that cinema elicited. Nevertheless, I use the singular to underline the core of this variety, the common ground of different experiences.” *Ibid.*



Fig. 12.7. Member list of the Kosmos Klub.

apparent if we factor in those seeming “losers” and “dead ends” that I have been considering here: cinema as experiential education, cinema as national technology, cinema as mass medium and political force, and so on. Such ideas were not only, and not primarily, the inventions of individual theorists, but the result of the kinds of negotiations at work in collective formations like film societies.

Not all of these ideas could emerge at the same time, and it is probably no coincidence that the paradigms I have been considering came onto the scene when they did. Educational cinema was a logical place for film societies to legitimate cinema in the 1910s, at the height of the movement for “visual instruction.” And even if there were many individuals writing on film technology before the founding of the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft in 1919, it is surely no coincidence that technological societies coagulated in the wake of World War I. This was a period when German industry, suffering under the Versailles reparations agreement, became the focal point for efforts to rehabilitate the national reputation on a

world stage.⁴⁸ While there was some attention to art in early film societies (particularly in the area of *Kunsterziehung* [art education]),⁴⁹ it was not until the mid-1920s, with the consolidation of the star system and the rise of auteurs like Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, that a society for the appreciation of “film art” could gain sufficient intelligibility and legitimacy to become a paradigm for a film society. And not surprisingly, Kinogemeinde saw as its central mission the legitimation of film art next to the powerful world of Austrian theatre.⁵⁰ Finally, the idea of cinema as a political medium, while it had some precursors in sporadic writings on film and mass psychology,⁵¹ could in many ways only take full shape after World War I, when the propagandistic powers of cinema and other media had been discovered and exploited. But the Volksfilmverband was also reacting—as they never ceased to repeat—to the increasing consolidation of power of the cinema industry, which seemed to be concentrating in a few powerful monopolies now in the hands of reactionary media moguls like Alfred Hugenberg (who purchased UFA in 1927, just one year before the Volksfilmverband was founded).⁵²

In each case, certain practices already existed and certain ideas were already in the air. Film societies did not invent them. But they did draw attention to cinema as a central vector of those ideas. They *attached* them to cinema, as it were, making cinema into an urgent object of study for anyone interested in education, art, technology, or politics. Here, we might borrow a term from one of the opening editorials from *Kinotechnik*, which described the journal’s (and hence also the society’s) effort to gather “film engineers” into a self-conscious community as a process of *crystallization*:

Die Kinotechnik was born at a propitious moment: the terrain had been prepared and its time had come. The profession of German cinema

48 As the editors of *Kinotechnik* put it in one of the many manifesto-like editorials that opened each issue of the journal: “Wir wünschen, daß die deutsche Kinoindustrie [...] den Beweis dafür erbringt, daß sie entschlossen ist, der deutschen Arbeit den Ruf in der Welt wiederzuerobern, den diese heute an andere Nationen hat abtreten müssen.” “Was wir wünschen,” *Kinotechnik* 2, no. 1 (1920): 5. See also, for example, A. Weber’s discussion of the Treaty of Versailles in “Einblicke und Ausblicke,” *Kinotechnik* 3, no. 3 (1921): 87–89.

49 See, for example, Alois Wurm, “Kunsterziehung und Geschmackssinn,” *Bild und Film* 1, no. 1 (1912): 1; Friedrich Felix, “Film im Zeichenunterricht,” *Film und Lichtbild* 2 (1913): 80.

50 See Cowan, “Learning to Love the Movies,” 19–28.

51 See, for example, Herman Duenschmann, “Kinematograph und Psychologie der Volksmenge. Eine sozialpolitische Studie,” *Konservative Monatschrift* 69, no. 9 (1912): 920–30.

52 For a typical discussion, see, for example, Ebbe Neergard, “Die Soziologie des Films,” *Film und Volk* 2, no. 5 (June 1929): 4–5.

engineers had developed far beyond the average technological sphere in its achievements and intellectual maturity. But that profession lacked a central organ, a point of crystallization, a form of cohesion.⁵³

Film societies quite consciously sought to act as frameworks for such processes of condensation and crystallization. By bringing people together in a common meeting space and in the pages of a shared journal, they would “give body” to ideas floating loosely in various contexts and with various sources. They would forge these multiple associations into a particular idea of cinema, and in the process influence the public’s view of what cinema is—or, more precisely, what it could and should be—and how people should relate to cinema: what questions they should ask of it and what answers they should seek.

Studying such processes of crystallization is also difficult, partly because it demands that we maintain a rigorous view of film societies not as static objects but as *projects*, as phenomena in constant formation and evolution. (And many of the terms we inevitably use, such as “organization” or “social formation,” have unhelpful overtones of status.) Here we might take a methodological cue not from media archaeology, but from the field of laboratory studies. That field, which emerged in the 1980s, might have little to do with cinema at first glance. But it is relevant to a topic like this one because it has sought to hammer home a view of laboratories as spaces of epistemological production, rather than spaces for the “discovery” of objective facts. In doing so, it draws attention to the conditions of knowledge production, including all of the contingent cultural, social, and political factors that inevitably influence such processes in the laboratory. And to do this, it must also keep its eye squarely focused on what Karin Cetina calls “unfinished knowledge,” knowledge in a fluid or gaseous state before it condenses into seemingly self-evident truths.⁵⁴

Analogously, film societies can be seen as metaphorical laboratories for the production of ideas of cinema. Such ideas are not objective qualities of a technology, and never the result of self-evident or spontaneous experiences,

53 “Die *Kinotechnik* wurde in einer glücklichen Stunde geboren: ihre Zeit war gekommen, der Boden für sie war bereit. Der Stand der deutschen Kinoingenieure war in seinen Leistungen und in seiner geistigen Reife weit hinausgewachsen über den Durchschnitt des technischen Mittelmaßes. Es fehlte ihm fraglos an einem geistigen Zentralorgan, an einem Kristallisationspunkt, an einem Zusammenhalt.” “Was wir erreichten,” *Kinotechnik* 2, no. 5 (May 1920): 173.

54 Karin Knorr Cetina, “Laboratory Studies: The Cultural Approach to the Study of Science,” *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, rev. ed., ed. by Sheila Jasanoff, Gerald E. Markle, James C. Petersen, and Trevor Pinch (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), 140.

but always historically and geographically situated. In order to approach film societies as laboratories in this sense, we need to study those historical and cultural contexts, as well as the “real-time” processes—including the negotiations, conflicts, and antagonisms—by which ideas of cinema were crystallized and legitimated.⁵⁵ What can documents like meeting minutes, protocols, screening reports, and letters tell us about how certain habits were encouraged, certain forms of knowledge legitimated, certain experiences modelled, and so on? What associations came to dominate in a given idea of cinema, and what competing associations or ideas were eliminated? And how might a given film society’s remit have changed over time? These are the kinds of questions that arise when we take the film society not as a static association resulting when like-minded people get together, but as an evolving project for the production of subjectivities and ideas.

The three keywords outlined above—*relationality*, *production*, *ideas*—answer different research questions. Looking for relationalities can help us identify where a given film society was *coming from*, what historical and social spaces it came to inhabit, and what assumptions it might have adopted. Examining modes of productive power tell us something essential about *what a film society was doing*: how it sought to influence its members, as well as film audiences and film culture more broadly. And following the process by which ideas of cinema crystallize can reveal something about *where a film society was headed*—not in the sense of a teleological or inevitable trajectory, but in the sense of what its legacy was, how it ended up among the winners or on the trash heap, and why it might or might not be relevant for us today.

As stated at the outset, not all of these models of cinema and movie-going were taken up by academic film studies, but all of them survive in one form or another, and film historians can chart their subsequent migrations. For instance, the educational paradigm that crystallized in groups like the Kosmos Klub did not disappear with World War I. There were important educational film societies still in the 1920s, especially in the orbit of the *Kulturfilm* movement, such as the Filmliga in Berlin (founded 1921), Munich’s Studiengesellschaft für das Film- und Kinowesen (founded 1919), and the Stuttgart Kinogemeinde (founded 1921).⁵⁶ And the educational paradigm

55 Ibid., 141.

56 On the Filmliga, see Konrad Lange, *Das Kino in Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1920), 180–87, 345–50. On the Munich group, see “...und immer wieder das Kino,” *Kinematograph* 13, no. 671; on the Stuttgart group, see “Kino-Gemeinde in Stuttgart,” *Der Lehrfilm* 2, no. 8 (1921): 19. Even the Berlin “Cinematographic Study Society” had a short-lived resurgence after World War I. See “Kinematographische Studien-Gesellschaft,” *Der Lehrfilm* 2 (1921): 18.

would go on, after World War II, to migrate into television (where educational programming peaked in the 1970s), only to merge back into cinema with the arrival of IMAX theatres and science centres in urban centres in the late twentieth century, which is partly why there is such renewed interest in the tradition in film studies today. The idea of cinema as a national industry, on the other hand, has remained fairly stable, even if it does not occupy the radar of most film scholars. Indeed, the Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft was one of the few groups, among my examples here, to outlast the 1920s, and it still exists today, having merged with the Society of Television Engineers in 1972 to become the Fernseh- und Kinotechnische Gesellschaft.⁵⁷

As we know, art house cinema and political cinema became the mainstay of most academic film studies in the 1970s. But as suggested by the discussion of useful cinema studies above, their status as the self-evident object of academic film studies may be losing ground today. Most self-proclaimed film societies today still follow the art house model, and they tend to exist around institutions that cling most tenaciously to the vision of film as art (universities, cinémathèques, film museums, etc.). But historically, film societies were something much more complex. More than associations of cinephiles, these were projects for coming to terms with a new and evolving medium and laboratories for crystallizing various ideas of cinema, undergirded by protocols of knowledge, affect, and spectatorial comportment. If we wish to understand their legacy today, we cannot limit ourselves to the narrow concept of the art house film club. We might do better to look at the kinds of societies mentioned at the outset of this chapter: gaming societies, VR societies, and so on. Those societies may not share the historical film society's letter, but they do share a certain *spirit*: namely the desire to make sense of our own experience of media change and to shape its future, which once again feels multiple and indeterminate.

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57 The Fernseh- und Kinotechnische Gesellschaft is still the major professional body of film and television scientists, engineers, and technicians in Germany and holds a biannual conference rotating through the major cities of the German-speaking world.

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IV

Rewriting Film History with Images:
Audiovisual Forms of Historiography

13 A Televisual Cinematheque

Film Histories on West German Television

Volker Pantenburg

Abstract

Research on film historiography usually focuses on academia and film cultural institutions. The contribution of public television to this field has largely been ignored. This chapter highlights TV as a multiplier and agent of film history, alongside cinematheques and film archives, university programmes, journals, festivals, and other practical and intellectual networks. It focuses on West Germany, and specifically the *Filmredaktion* (film unit) of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), based in Cologne. However, this case study also more generally indicates how, in the 1970s to the 1990s, the combination of public financing and state support, an educational mission, and a specific generation of cinephile auteurs and commissioning editors managed to turn European public television into an important site of film historiography.

Keywords: television, education, West Germany, emigration, early cinema, film history

Public Funding Meets Educational Mission Meets Cinephilia

Which media, channels, and infrastructures have been instrumental in promoting and disseminating film history and creating genuine forms of film historiography? An intuitive answer to this basic question evokes different moments, places, and contexts. Many of them are mythical and have long been canonized: Henri Langlois and his Cinémathèque française or MoMA's film library in New York, George Sadoul's six-volume *Histoire générale du cinéma* (1948–1954), the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) conference in Brighton in 1978 with its symposium on “Cinema 1900–1906” which epitomizes the (re)discovery of early cinema, or the Cinema Ritrovato

festival in Bologna (since 1986). Others refer us to historiographies within the moving image tradition, like Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), Thom Andersen's and Noël Burch's *Red Hollywood* (1996/2013), or to the well-established practice of appropriating and rewriting elements of film history in the “found footage” genres of experimental cinema and video art—Matthias Müller, Peter Tscherkassky, Gustav Deutsch and Hanna Schimek, Douglas Gordon, Candice Breitz, Peter Delpout, to name but a few. This spectrum of film historiographical sites and constellations could easily be enlarged and complemented by lesser known examples of the same type. To Sadoul's study, we would have to add more recent, equally impressive undertakings like Hamid Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (four vols., 2011–2012) or Elisabeth Büttner and Christian Dewald's experimental history of Austrian cinema (*Das tägliche Brennen* [2002] and *Anschluß an Morgen* [1997]); to the festival in Bologna, we might add Paolo Cherchi Usai's Nitrate Picture Show (since 2015); to the examples from found footage Klaus Wyborny's *Elementare Filmgeschichte* (1974), the works of Abigail Child, or Christian Marclay's 24-hour real-time installation *The Clock* (2010).

If we abstract from these individual examples and relate them to their structural contexts, the landscape of film historiography first and foremost includes the areas of academia and film cultural institutions (cinematheques and festivals), of cinema and contemporary art. Of course, the rise of the internet and the emergence of the “digital humanities” have changed the assets of film historiography considerably, as initiatives like “Project Arclight” demonstrate.¹

Conspicuously enough, television does not figure on this list.² Its contribution to film (and media) historiography has more or less stayed off the radar of scholarship.³ Reasons for this are manifold: Access to TV archives is notoriously difficult, the attention that has been devoted to the televisual contribution to film production (in Germany, that is) remained focused on the prestigious and well-funded “*Fernsehspiel*” departments and commissioning editors like Günter Rohrbach, Peter Märthesheimer, and Joachim von Mengershausen, who acted as co-producers of Fassbinder,

1 See Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt, eds., *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities* (Sussex: REFRAME Books, in association with Project Arclight, 2016).

2 It should be noted, however, that a work like Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* was essentially co-produced by French television.

3 An exception is Hans-Helmut Prinzler, “Filmgeschichte im Fernsehen,” in *Recherche: Film. Quellen und Methoden der Filmforschung*, ed. Hans-Michael Bock and Wolfgang Jacobsen (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1997), 247–55. Prinzler gives a useful overview that includes other channels than WDR and other important protagonists of the field like (amongst others) Hans Brecht (NDR), Hubert von Spreti (BR), and Brigitte Mehler (ORB).

Wenders, and Kluge, and were instrumental in the emergence of “New German Cinema.”⁴ The institutional division between film studies and TV studies is also likely to have its share of responsibility for the lack of interest within the community of cinema studies.

In the following essay, I want to shed light on the important role that television played as a multiplier and agent of film history, alongside cinematheques and film archives, university programmes, journals, festivals, and other practical and intellectual networks. My focus is West German television, and in particular the *Filmredaktion* (film unit) of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), based in Cologne. However, it should be emphasized that the field of research is larger than that. Ideally, its scope would be global, but there is reason to assume that the specific economic and legal framework of European public broadcasting TV of the decades between the mid-1960s and the 1990s has proved to be a particularly fertile ground for film historical thinking. Kevin Brownlow’s BBC and Channel 4 programmes including the thirteen-part series *Hollywood* (co-directed by David Gill, 1980), or Claude-Jean Philippe’s unparalleled *Encyclopédie audiovisuelle du cinéma* (1978)⁵ are cases in point. They indicate how, for some decades, the combination of public financing and state support, an educational mission, and a specific generation of cinephile auteurs and commissioning editors managed to turn television into an important multiplier and promoter of film historiography.

The Golden Age of Television

“Not one foot of film stock for television!” (“*Keinen Meter Film ans Fernsehen!*”)—this slogan, expressed by a film producer at a meeting of the

4 See, for instance, Wim Wenders’ speech when Joachim von Mengershausen was awarded the “Ehrenpreis der deutschen Filmkritik” in 2016: “Without the completely new approach to media of this editorial team, one can say with a clear conscience, the boom of German film in the 1970s would not have taken place, or only to a limited extent. The careers of people like Hellmuth Costard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hans W. Geissendörfer, Reinhard Hauff, Klaus Lemke, Edgar Reitz, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Volker Schlöndorff, Rudolf Thome, Margarethe von Trotta or my humble self would not have taken place. Also, directors like Peter Beauvais, Tom Toelle, Peter Zadek and last but not least Wolfgang Petersen grew up here.” Wim Wenders, “Rede für Joachim von Mengershausen,” *Verband der deutschen Filmkritik*, February 15, 2016, <https://www.vdfk.de/joachim-von-mengershausen-2487>.

5 Made in 1978, the *Encyclopédie audiovisuelle du cinéma* covered French Cinema from its beginnings to the 1950s in forty episodes. It was produced by the French channel FR 3 in collaboration with “Seuil audiovisuel,” a short-lived attempt of the publisher Éditions du seuil to establish an audiovisual branch.

Spitzenorganisation des deutschen Films (Association of Film Producers, SPIO) in 1955, is typical of the antagonism between TV and cinema that was prevalent in the 1950s, when TV started to spread and become popular in West Germany.⁶ Mutual distrust, ignorance, or even boycotts were the norm. In the mid-1960s, however, things changed, and TV began to cooperate with and embrace its former enemy. ARD, ZDF, and the third channels⁷ started to implement film/cinema units into their structure whose primary mission was to select and schedule movies from both the past and present, and to accompany them with specifically commissioned educational programmes. First Reinold E. Thiel and Wilhelm Roth, then Georg Alexander and Wilfried Reichart were the pioneers in this field at WDR. In 1970, Alexander and Reichart were joined by Werner Dütsch. Some years later, Helmut Merker and Roland Johannes also became members of the (all male, one has to remark) editorial team.

A number of factors coincided and helped turn the period between 1970 and the mid-1980s into a “golden age of television.”⁸ Most importantly, the young commissioning editors running the film unit all had cinephile backgrounds. Before joining the WDR, they had been active in film societies, film clubs, and cinematheques (Dütsch), they worked as film critics (Reichart), or served as members of editorial teams at film journals like *Film* (Georg Alexander) or *Filmkritik* (Roth and Thiel). Secondly, licensing German and international films for television was comparatively easy and inexpensive. Once an interesting auteur was spotted or rediscovered, the budget allowed for the scheduling of an extensive series of films. This led to comprehensive retrospectives of John Ford, Max Ophüls, Ernst Lubitsch, Yasujirō Ozu, and many others, but also of B-movie directors like Jack

6 See Dietrich Leder, “Theater, Literatur, Kino: Vermischte Künste,” in *Am Puls der Zeit. 50 Jahre WDR. Vol 1: Der Sender: Weltweit nah dran. 1956–1985*, ed. Klaus Katz et al. (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2006), 211–18, and Prinzler, “Filmgeschichte im Fernsehen.”

7 Until the advent of private television in the 1980s, public television in Germany was structured according to the federal political structure and organized regionally, with a nationwide umbrella institution called ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) forming the first TV channel. It was only in 1963, after a long debate, that the Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) was established to add a second public channel to the existing one. One of the tasks of the “third channels” was to provide news programmes and cultural content that took regional specificities into account. Financing and political inclinations between the different channels within ARD varied substantially.

8 See Michael Girke, “Das goldene Zeitalter des Fernsehens. Ein Gespräch mit Werner Dütsch,” *Film-Dienst* 12 (2006): 8–11. In the following paragraph, I draw on arguments that I have developed in more detail here: Volker Pantenburg, “TV Essay Dossier, I: The Case of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR),” *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 1 (2019): 106–38.

Arnold or less established movements such as the Brazilian Cinema Novo and other exponents from Third Cinema. A recollection of Georg Alexander, head of the film unit from 1969 to 1980, conveys the range of possibilities in those days:

We had an annual budget, from today's point of view, just peanuts. And then we sat together as film enthusiasts and cinephiles and everyone brought forward their favourite director. When you checked the lists of available films, you said: "Oh, it would be nice to do a John Ford series or an Ozu series or a Sternberg series." [...] It was that simple back then.⁹

Thirdly, TV audiences grew in number while cinema was in decline. In 1976 only 115.1 million tickets were sold—a modest fraction of the all-time high of 817.5 million tickets sold twenty years earlier that was never matched since. Television had become an important competitor (and economic factor) since audiences preferred to stay at home and the supply of cultural goods diversified. Moreover, for films that would not have had a chance to be theatrically released, television became an option to be considered.

Finally, a fourth factor is important to note: the first West German film schools—the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dffb) and the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München (HFF)—had been established in 1966 and 1967, respectively. Hence, in the early 1970s, the first generation of graduates (or, in the case of dffb, expelled students) were in the job market and looking for opportunities to work. Many students at dffb had undergone (political) radicalization in 1967 and 1968, involving the occupation of the school and its renaming as the "Dziga Vertov-Akademie," and the production of agitational films like *Herstellung eines Molotow-Cocktails* (*How to Build a Molotov Cocktail*) (attributed to Holger Meins, who later joined the Red Army Faction) or *Brecht die Macht der Manipulateure* (*Break the Power of the Manipulators*) (Helke Sander, 1967–1968), opposing the Springer press (infamous for its tabloid *Bild*) and its promotion of the Vietnam War. The confrontation between students and the school's directors, which had been palpable since the beginning, eventually led to the expulsion of eighteen students from dffb in November 1968, including Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki, while Günter Peter Straschek had already been expelled

9 Michael Baute and Stefan Pethke, "Was wir machen wollten, haben wir gemacht.' Gespräch mit Georg Alexander über die WDR-Filmredaktion," in *Kunst der Vermittlung*, <http://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de/dossiers/kino-im-fernsehen-wdr/gesprach-mit-georg-alexander/>.

earlier in the same year.¹⁰ Commissioning editors at WDR like Angelika Wittlich (one of the few women), Dütsch, or Thiel had known aspiring directors like Sander, Bitomsky, or Farocki either from their time at film school, common publication platforms—particularly the monthly journal *Filmkritik*—or other cinephile and political contexts.

In the political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, WDR had the reputation of leaning much more to the left than other public channels—a tendency that provoked the designation “Rotfunk.”¹¹ Significantly, Harun Farocki’s first film after his expulsion, *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), about Dow Chemical’s involvement in napalm production, was produced hastily at the end of 1968, since WDR had budget to spare.¹² Finally, the situation also benefitted from the fact that, among the so-called “Dritte Programme,” WDR, located in Cologne, covered the biggest terrain and hence had a considerably larger budget at its command than the other third channels.

Headed from 1969 to 1980 by Georg Alexander, the WDR film unit of the 1970s pursued three different interlocking agendas. First and foremost, it licensed old and new films, many of which had never been shown—neither on TV nor in German cinemas. Initially two, then later three slots in the weekly schedule were reserved for either existing films or self-produced programmes. Reichart recalls:

We had a budget for the whole year and knew how much we could buy. And then we went to many festivals and bought new films there: one or two of us went to Cannes, someone else to Venice and yet another one to Montreal or San Sebastian and so on. This way, we informed ourselves about the latest productions. And, of course, we read most of the international film magazines, compiled lists, and then organized screenings. We often went to other countries and watched the films we had on the lists. All over Europe and then also in Asia and America.¹³

10 See Hans Helmut Prinzler, ed., *dffb. Zehn Jahre Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin* (Berlin: dffb, 1976), and Fabian Tietke, “Dies- und jenseits der Bilder—Film und Politik an der dffb 1966–1995. Teil 1: 1966–1969,” *dffb Archiv* (2016), <https://dffb-archiv.de/editorial/dies-jenseits-bilder-film-politik-dffb-1966-1995>.

11 See Josef Schmid, “Intendant Klaus von Bismarck und die Kampagne gegen den ‘Rotfunk’ WDR,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 41 (2001): 349–81.

12 See Harun Farocki, *Zehn, zwanzig, dreißig, vierzig. Fragment einer Autobiografie*, ed. Marius Babias and Antje Ehmman (Cologne: Walther König, 2017), 138–40.

13 Michael Baute and Stefan Pethke, “‘Nicht nur Filme zeigen.’ Ein Gespräch mit Wilfried Reichart über die WDR-Filmredaktion,” in *Kunst der Vermittlung*, <http://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de/dossiers/kino-im-fernsehen-wdr/nicht-nur-filme-zeigen/>.

The activity of broadcasting the films and making geographically or historically unknown terrain visible for the viewers was often complemented by commissioning educational programmes about the directors and movies, fulfilling the so-called *Bildungsauftrag* (educational mission) prescribed by official regulations. The form of these programmes showed a great variety, and they ranged from interview-based reports about current cinema via monthly or weekly magazines to close readings of individual auteurs or single films. Early on, Enno Patalas had produced a seminal forty-five-minute programme entitled *Ernst Lubitsch. Eine Lektion in Kino* (*A Lesson in Cinema*, 1971) that accompanied a Lubitsch retrospective.¹⁴ Rearranging motifs and recurring patterns in Lubitsch's films and adding a sharp voice-over, Patalas provides a sophisticated structuralist reading without resorting to any academic jargon. In Lubitsch's movies, he recognizes "not works, singular, self-contained, distinctive, but series, processes, progressing in changing mutations."¹⁵ Patalas' engagement with Lubitsch is close to the material and analytically precise, but at the same time theoretically informed and poetic in the way he reveals the consistency of Lubitsch's forms and constellations. In a similar fashion, programmes, often comprising several episodes, were devoted to Fritz Lang or to the British documentary tradition, focusing on Humphrey Jennings and Basil Wright.¹⁶

Two different temporalities of "film history" in the programming endeavours of the WDR can be distinguished. The first type of programmes, addressing film history in a straightforward manner, has already been mentioned: Large retrospectives of films by Mizoguchi, D. W. Griffith, or specific Hollywood genres as well as of more popular genres and movements like science fiction showed an ongoing engagement with cinema's past. On the other hand, there were programmes that focused on current trends by showing and contextualizing new developments in world cinema. By allowing ample time to assess what was happening in the present, the programmes provided rich material for future film historians. Three examples can illustrate this kind of "anticipated historiography": Wilfried Reichart, one of the founding members of "X-Screen" in Cologne (Wilhelm and Birgit Hein's crucial venue for avant-garde cinema), conceived a multi-part series on "New American Cinema" in 1968, when films by Brakhage, Mekas, and

14 See Hans Helmut Prinzler and Enno Patalas, eds., *Ernst Lubitsch* (Munich and Lucerne: Bucher, 1984), 60–80.

15 *Ibid.*, 62.

16 *Fritz Langs Deutsche Filme* (Klaus Kreimeier, three parts, 1971), and *Telekritik: Über "Song of Ceylon"* (Harun Farocki, 1975).

many others had begun to make a splash in Europe;¹⁷ Adolf Winkelmann and Christian Rittelmeyer—members of the Kasseler Filmkollektiv—shot a three-part series “The Other Cinema,” which gives a panorama of the political and aesthetic avant-garde in West Germany in 1969; finally, Peter B. Schumann, one of the experts on Latin American culture and cinema, presented *New Brazilian Cinema* (1968; three parts of thirty minutes each).

To give a more detailed account of the film historiographical approaches, I now want to turn to three programmes that feature different subjects and topics and used significantly different methods, thus highlighting the amplitude of the spectrum of engagement with film history on television.

Straschek: Film Emigration from Nazi Germany

Günter Peter Straschek’s *Film Emigration from Nazi Germany* is 289 minutes long. It was broadcast in five episodes in late 1975 by WDR each week on a Tuesday at 9:15 pm—practically prime time. The filmmaker conducted over eighty interviews in Europe and the US.¹⁸

Straschek’s concept for the series was deceptively simple: He attempted to track down and interview as many film people as possible who were forced to emigrate from Germany in 1933 and the following years. In doing this, he was determined not to restrict his research and the interviews to well-known directors or screenwriters. On the contrary, he insisted on covering every activity that had a bearing on film: secretaries, copyright lawyers involved in the film business, cinema owners, etc. In doing so, he explicitly turned against the “widespread barbarism disguised as modernism” with which the fates of the emigrants are graded according to their level of fame, as he noted in a radio programme at the time: “In some circles [Albert] Einstein’s emigration is regarded as worse than the gassing of little Abie, of communists, homosexuals, gypsies, and other so-called ‘elements.’”¹⁹

17 Reichart later ran a WDR series called “Experimente,” that showcased work by experimental film-makers and video artists.

18 At a shooting ratio of 1:8, around forty hours of film must have been exposed. Unfortunately, no interview material apart from the finished series has been preserved. Thanks to the research done by the curator Julia Friedrich at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Straschek’s *Film Emigration* and his earlier short films have attracted new attention. See her excellent catalogue: Julia Friedrich, ed., *Günter Peter Straschek. Emigration–Film–Politik* (Cologne: Walther König, 2018).

19 Günter Peter Straschek, “Die deutsche Filmemigration nach 1933, Teil 1: Der tägliche Gang zum Konsulat,” radio feature, *Sender Freies Berlin* (SFB), broadcast on May 21, 1974.

More than forty interviews made it into the finished programme, including directors like Arthur Gottlein, John Brahm, Anatole Litvak, and Frank Marischka; composers like Bronislaw Kaper; secretaries like Renata Lenart; actors and actresses like Camilla Spira, Herbert Grünbaum, Carl Heinz Jaffé, Gitta Alpàr, Paul Henreid, Dolly Haas, and Ingeborg Theek; screenwriters like Egon Eis, Jan Lustig, Georg Froeschel, and Frederick Kohner; film historians and journalists like Lotte Eisner and Käte and Hans Feld; editors like Lothar Wolff and Rudi Fehr.

When Straschek contacted Werner Dütsch at WDR in 1973, the project had already been on his mind for several years. Its first idea goes back as far as 1967, when Straschek published an article entitled “Before, during and after Schicklgruber” (Schicklgruber was the name of Hitler’s father, before he changed his family name) in the journal *kino*:

The history of the German talkies was determined in part by the film workers fleeing the country: producers, cinematographers, screenwriters, composers, actors, and directors Benedek, Berger, Bernhardt, Brahm, Dieterle, Kosterlitz (Koster), Lang, Litvak, Marton, Ophüls, Oswald, Preminger, Sierck (Sirk), Siodmak, Thiele, Ulmer and Wilder. [...] This great loss, unparalleled in the history of film, which the German talkies had to deal with in the early 1930s, was not followed after 1945 by what are termed reparations.²⁰

Five years later, in 1972, Straschek planned an interview with William Dieterle, but the director died before they could arrange a meeting. Time was pressing, contemporary witnesses who had personally experienced film emigration more than three decades prior were getting old. In 1973 and 1974, shooting was carried out for the television series in Europe and the United States. The initial plan for four forty-five minute episodes grew during the course of production to five episodes lasting almost one hour each.

Film Emigration is remarkable first and foremost for the time it allows the interviewees to convey their recollections and stories of increasing oppression and humiliation in Germany; of the different stages of exile in Switzerland, France, England; of the difficulties of leaving their home country and trying to start again in a different context with different rules, a different language, and often under dire circumstances. Straschek films the interviews in long and static, uninterrupted takes. As with Straub/Huillet, whose work Straschek saw as representing the greatest possible

20 Günter Peter Straschek, “Vor, während und nach Schicklgruber,” *kino* 6 (November 1967): 3.

aesthetic and political integrity, the dynamic occurs elsewhere, above all in speaking—in this case, in the gradual production of words and sentences while remembering. In watching this, we are turned into witnesses who experience how film-makers, screenwriters, editors, actresses, daughters, sons, and secretaries themselves bear witness to departures and arrivals under violent duress, to the difficulties and defeats of exile, of the loss of language and employment. This experience is only possible because the conversations are allowed to develop without cuts, so that apart from the act of speaking and remembering, the gaps and absences are also thoroughly registered. One senses not only the violence of expulsion and exile, but also the double dispossession of language and memory. By giving time and space to both, *Film Emigration from Nazi Germany* is also a gesture of retribution.

In conventional television journalism (then as now) it would be unthinkable to show Anatole Litvak's hesitancy for six whole minutes, without editing, as he tells of his arrest and subsequent interrogation in Berlin: his struggle for words, the pauses and tentative corrections of what he has just said, his gestures (tapping out the pipe in his hand), the attempt to make up for missing terms by explanatory hand movements. Hartmut Bitomsky has pointed to the political dimension of this faltering: "It seems to me that exile is chiefly evinced by a transformation of language and expression, the destruction of vocabulary and grammar while retaining the old ideas and maxims, and a great deal of caution and self-censorship," he writes. "The series is an anthology of how pauses, slips of the tongue, faltering and forgetting are politicized."²¹

In *Film Emigration*, such linguistic and gestural movements between speech and lapsus, making a start and faltering, are embedded in a more comprehensive historiographic movement that extends throughout the five episodes in both time and space. The conversations begin with memories of Germany and Austria, with the reasons for emigration, accompanying the emigrants to their various places of exile and chosen countries (England, France, China, and the US), and looking at the circumstances there before finally returning with a number of the exiles to Europe in the last episode.

Straschek also uses excerpts from films. Again, their duration defies the conventions of journalism: The first episode starts with a three-minute segment from *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, the film about the concentration camp Theresienstadt that the actor and KZ inmate Kurt Gerron was forced to make for the Nazis in 1944; an extract from a speech by Joseph

21 Hartmut Bitomsky, "Straschek lässt Emigranten sprechen," *Filmkritik* 227 (November 1975): 527.

Goebbels from February 1933 is shown at much greater length than we are accustomed to see on TV, so that we hear how his defamation anticipates the physical terror carried out against the Jewish population and culminates in the open threat that “one day our patience will run out, and then the Jews will find their impudent, lying traps plugged.” In later episodes, Straschek quotes extensively from Hollywood productions in which German emigrants were typecast as Nazis, thus cynically putting them into the role of their persecutors.

Film Emigration exceeded the scope of a TV programme. Together with his wife, Karin Rausch, Straschek also pursued the plan to publish an encyclopaedia of film emigration in two, maybe three volumes. It was supposed to become a comprehensive compendium with biographical entries of all the exiles they could find. Straschek was immersed in the project for over three decades, but the constantly growing reference book was never to appear. “All things considered I must, however, admit,” as Straschek said in 1988 during a two-part radio programme on libraries, “that we had taken on much too much; hopelessly overtaxed and toward the end simply drained, we were often at the end of our tether”—also or, indeed, above all because the researches in archives and libraries were for him like “wading through blood and murder.”²²

Bitomsky/Dütsch: *The Golden Age of Cinematography*

If Straschek's *Film Emigration* is a monument of memory and confronted the West German TV audience in 1975 with their (not too distant) past, the WDR film unit was also invested in unburying and recovering earlier moments of film history. *The Golden Age of Cinematography* (Bitomsky/Dütsch) is a three-part documentary on early cinema.²³ It attests to the close links between the WDR film unit and the monthly journal *Filmkritik*. Bitomsky, who directed and wrote the script, had become part of the editorial team and one of its most prolific and polemic authors in 1974.²⁴ As a director/

22 Günter Peter Straschek, “Besuch mich mal im Lesesaal: Erfahrungen mit dem materiellen Gedächtnis,” *Sender Freies Berlin* (SFB), radio feature, part 1, broadcast on March 21, 1988.

23 *Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie*, dir. Hartmut Bitomsky and Werner Dütsch, script: Hartmut Bitomsky, production: WDR, Cologne, Part I: 44 min, first broadcast September 14, 1976; Part II: 43 min, first broadcast September 21, 1976; Part III: 44 min, first broadcast September 28, 1976.

24 For a comprehensive analysis of Bitomsky's oeuvre, see Frederik Lang, *Hartmut Bitomsky. Die Arbeit eines Kritikers mit Worten und Bildern* (Wien: Synema, 2020).

author at WDR, he had made two programmes on Humphrey Jennings for the editorial department “Telekritik,” and a ninety-minute essay on John Ford that accompanied an extensive Ford retrospective.²⁵ *The Golden Age* was co-directed by Werner Dütsch. Its forty-five-minute segments were devoted to the first twenty years of cinema and its predecessors in the nineteenth century. It was broadcast on September 14, 21, and 28, 1976. Parallel to this, the September issue of *Filmkritik* was entirely devoted to the project. The baroque subtitle of this issue reveals the scope of the endeavour and reveals the Benjaminian subtext that runs through the project: “About inventing, the economy, the interior design, about the medium of traffic and the capital cities, about the discovery and the exhibition of the world, about reproduction, crime and fun, about Méliès and the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century.”²⁶ Both manifestations of the project, the TV programme as well as the *Filmkritik* issue, are montage pieces compiling a variety of written documentation, photos, and drawings. The nucleus of this impressive fresco are films from the first two decades of cinema whose source material came from the Cinémathèque Gaumont in Paris, the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin, the British Film Institute, and Degeto,²⁷ amongst others.²⁸ They cover a wide spectrum and range from anarchic comedies like *Première sortie d'une cycliste* (Pathé frères, 1907), via documentary views like *Ein Lokomotivtransport der Sächsischen Maschinenfabrik in Chemnitz durch die Straßen am 28.6.1898 nachmittags 2 Uhr* (Guido Seeber, 1898) to early pornography and colonial footage shot in Tangier and Morocco.

Many of the films are shown from beginning to end; this is the primary impulse: to provide evidence of the variety, anarchy, and liveliness of early cinema at a time when the public image of silent films was reduced to the comedies of Laurel and Hardy, Chaplin, and others, that were often ridiculed by adding a Dixieland jazz soundtrack and making fun of their antiquatedness. In broadcasting early cinema on TV, a substantial component of the

25 In chronological order: *Unter einem Himmel schwarz von Häusern von erloschenen Bränden schwarz*, dir./writer Hartmut Bitomsky, production: WDR, Cologne, 34 min, first broadcast October 14, 1975; *Der Schauplatz des Krieges. Das Kino von John Ford*, dir./writer Hartmut Bitomsky, production: WDR, Cologne, 91 min, first broadcast May 12, 1976; *Humphrey Jennings*, dir./writer Hartmut Bitomsky and Angelika Wittlich, production: WDR, Cologne, 67 min, first broadcast November 3, 1976.

26 Hartmut Bitomsky, “Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie,” *Filmkritik* 237 (September 1976): 393.

27 Degeto (an acronym for Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ton und Bild) is the company that acquires and licenses films and other programmes (above all fiction films and TV series) for ARD. It also acts as a producer and co-producer, commissions dubbing of foreign films, etc.

28 For a detailed list, see the production file of the programme at the WDR archives.

turn-of-the-century vernacular culture was transmitted via the medium of popular culture of the 1970s—transcending the realms of academia and the archival world.

Despite the variety and heterogeneity of the films and visual material of the three episodes, the episodes have individual focal points. At the beginning of the first part, after the coloured shots of a serpentine dancer, we see numerous horses pulling blocks of stone into a city. At its end, we are shown footage of the construction of skyscrapers in New York. The big city is (dramaturgically) the framework of this first episode of Bitomsky's programme, and at the same time it is (sociologically, mentally) the context in which early cinema was born. Within this loose framework, consideration about the metropolis (Friedrich Engels about London), about the importance of chase sequences, about the voyeurism of early erotica and the complicity between photography and film with criminology and identification find their place.

In the second episode, cinema is contextualized in the series of inventions of the nineteenth century culminating in the Paris World Exhibition in 1900. In a Marxist inflection, cinema's alliance to colonial wars and the globalization of capitalism is also touched: "Imperialism spreads like infections that, in turn, spread with it. The visual exploitation of the world follows. Cameramen, camouflaged as tourists consuming the visible world, show how blacks paint white socks on their calves before going to work."²⁹

In the third episode, programmatically starting with the Lumière film *La Sortie des usines* (1895), the proximities and distance between cinema and labour are explored. *The Golden Age* ends on a melancholy note:

The era of tinkering, improvising and magic is over. The films are getting longer and they look more elaborate. They begin to be sophisticated and try to control their effect on the audience. The history of cinema as an art begins. Above all, this means that directors and actors and authors can make their mark. And that means, above all: they can calculate their saleability better. The first stars appear whose names are known. For the movie audiences, that means that the ticket prices went up.³⁰

As this quote (and many others in the *Filmkritik* issue) shows, Bitomsky and Dütsch argue against any notions of primitivism. Early cinema is not

29 Bitomsky, *Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie*, 425.

30 Bitomsky/Dütsch, *Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie*, episode 3.

seen as the deficient starting point of a medium and cultural technology that came to perfection in the twentieth century, but as the peak of various technical and cultural inventions of the nineteenth century. This entails a revisionist concept of progress and history that is explicitly stated in the journal. A paragraph entitled “To distance oneself from contempt” formulates a critique of any kind of retrospective feeling of superiority when faced with the early years of the moving pictures:

However, the cinematograph is not the beginning of film history, but the end of a cultural history of the nineteenth century. And just like we must learn to see the cinematographic apparatus as a variation and a partial composition of different experiences and devices of the nineteenth century, we must also learn to see the films as an archive of images, stories, places, and imaginations of people which nineteenth-century culture had produced.³¹

One of the primary models for Bitomsky's approach is Walter Benjamin; he is referenced early on in the *Filmkritik* issue with quotes that belong to the *Arcades Project*, and the amalgamation of discourses around modernity, art, technology and capitalism is obviously indebted to him (even if the *Arcades Project* was only published a few years later, in 1982). However, as Frederik Lang reminds us in his dissertation on Bitomsky, there is a second, less canonical model for the assemblage of quotes and fragments that, in sum, add up to a cultural historical mosaic: Humphrey Jennings' *Pandæmonium*, which was not published in the mid-1970s, but had been available to Bitomsky in a copy while he was working on his two WDR programmes on Jennings. Similar to Benjamin, Jennings attempted to recount cultural history by compiling and composing quotes and excerpts that span the period from 1660 to 1886. The subtitle of the published version of his comprehensive manuscript is “The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers.” As Jennings specifies in his introduction of the final book, which contains 372 excerpts on almost 400 pages: “In this book I present the imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution. Neither the political history, nor the mechanical history, nor the social history nor the economic history, but the imaginative history.”³²

31 Bitomsky, *Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie*, 401.

32 Humphrey Jennings, *Pandæmonium 1660–1888: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (New York: The Free Press, 1985), xxxv.

If Jennings and Benjamin provided the blueprint of a history told in fragments and quotations, Michel Foucault's concept of archaeology is also present in *The Golden Age*. His *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969) had been published in German translation in 1973. Following the programmatic statement "TO REWATCH THE OLD FILMS IS, ABOVE ALL, AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LABOUR," Foucault is quoted at length:

Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules. It does not treat discourse as *document*, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent, but whose unfortunate opacity must often be pierced if one is to reach at last the depth of the essential in the place in which it is held in reserve; it is concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a *monument*. It is not an interpretative discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be "allegorical."³³

In *The Golden Age*, this kind of materialistic discourse analysis is present in privileging presentation and juxtaposition over interpretation. While the *Filmkritik* issue displays the large amount of research in the background, Bitomsky only sparingly uses commentary and quotation in the TV series. The journal, however, hints at the scope of research behind the TV programme. An attempt of illuminating the diverse components of practical and intellectual discourse that came together in the "cinematographe": Marxist theories of commodification and globalization, Freudian insights into scopophilia and voyeurism; a complex reflection of realism, vitalism, and animism.

It is worth noting that this programme was produced two years before the FIAF conference in Brighton with its focus on "Cinema 1900–1906" took place—an event that put early cinema on the map of film historiography and initiated what was (later) termed "New Film History." A number of approaches to the subject in TV programmes—Noël Burch's *Correction, Please* (1979) and his *What Do Those Old Films Mean?* (1985) or Charles Musser's *Before the Nickelodeon* (1982)—may well be seen as televisual epiphenomena of this event. However, they could also indicate that the Brighton event was less singular in its period than it has come to be seen retrospectively. Bitomsky himself continued his foray into early cinema and its rich cultural

³³ Bitomsky, *Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie*, 395. The quote is from Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 138–39.

milieu with a four-part programme called *Kulturrevue* (1979), again produced by the WDR film unit and Werner Dütsch.

Film in Germany: Rewriting German Film History

My final example is a series of five to seven programmes that Werner Dütsch conceived in 1981–1982. It was not realized in its projected form, but is highly significant in its take on film history. Two conceptual papers of eleven pages each have survived and give a good impression of the project.³⁴ The title of the draft (and of the potential series) is “Film in Germany.” Neutral as this title may sound, it already implies an argument, as Dütsch writes: “‘German film history’ is explicitly not mentioned in the title, since it is supposed to be about identifying the white spots left by the previous film historiography.”³⁵ Hence, what is at stake is a revisionist perspective, a counter-narrative that runs against the grain of the established classifications. To specify its impulse, Dütsch first sets up the common historical grid usually attributed to German film history: “1895 to 1913: Early history; 1914 to 1918: The apprentice years; 1919 to 1929: The blossoming of silent cinema; 1929 to 1932: Sound film/realism; 1933 to 1945: Relapse and abuse; since 1945: Bad echoes, not much positive from East or West; since the 1960s, with young and new German cinema, a big recovery.”

In this conventional sequence of distinct periods, Dütsch detects “comparisons from biology (growing up)” and “a dubious concept of progress: from early history to the shabby industrial products to auteur cinema.” Moreover, he criticizes the fact that the historiographic parameters usually come from different disciplines: industrial history for the early years (“primitive beginnings, improvements, etc.”), art history (“willingly employed for silent cinema”), and sociology (“for everything failed—Nazi- and post-war period”). The recipe that is meant to counter these deficits of conventional film historiography is then given. “The series is supposed to enter areas that are missed out in the scheme sketched above—in constant change (of authors, methods, topics).” Suggested topics that Dütsch then briefly lays out include “Cinema in Germany before 1914,” “Popular cinema of the 1920s,” “Foreign

34 Werner Dütsch, “Film in Deutschland, 1895–1981,” programme draft, August 22, 1981. The two versions of the exposé have been preserved in Harun Farocki’s estate. Thanks to Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki GbR. The following quotes are from this draft.

35 In German: “‘Deutsche Filmgeschichte’ kommt im Titel ausdrücklich nicht vor, soll es doch gerade darum gehen, die weißen Flecken auszumachen, die die Filmgeschichtsschreibung hinterlassen hat.”

films in German movie theatres,” “The tradition of subsidies/lacking capitalism in cinema,” “From Wintergarten to shoebox theatres” (“A ‘History’ of film spectatorship from 1895 to 1982”), “German cinema and Hollywood,” “Silly audiences and bad movies,” “Kracauer, taken at his word,” “Kracauer II: The redemption of physical reality,” “Nazi cinema: Contradictions,” “Propaganda and how it potentially does not work,” “Middle-class cinema,” “Ernst Lubitsch in Germany,” “Germany 1945 to 1948: Seen and heard at the movies,” “The Selpin case and cinema in the Nazi era.”

The second draft, dated May 6, 1982, basically confirms these parameters.³⁶ Again, Dütsch begins *ex negativo* by explicitly stating what this series is not aiming at: not at a “systematic account,” not “a ‘history’ (with early history, progress, etc.)” not the usual historiographic approaches. Some of the suggested topics have become more specific, individual authors are projected. A programme with the working title “Cecil B. DeMille meets Konrad Adenauer” is supposed to shed a different light on film culture in Germany in the 1950s, a period that usually connoted “seamless continuation of Nazi film people, provincial fug, ‘Americanization.’” Instead, the popularity of cinema in this decade is to be taken seriously—“never have so many people gone to the movies, never were there more film releases.” Manfred Blank, a member of the editorial board of *Filmkritik* and the director of WDR programmes on Bresson, Antonioni, and Huillet/Straub, is listed as the projected author.

We are left to speculate about the reasons why this series did not see the light of day. Since Dütsch intended it to be a loose sequence of individual programmes without an explicit serial framing, some existing programmes can be linked to Dütsch’s initial plan. *Deutschlandbilder* (1983), for example, is explicitly mentioned in the 1982 outline. Its synopsis reads as follows:

On a detour via the Kinemathek in Denmark, well over a hundred documentary films from the Nazi era are now accessible at the Kinemathek in Berlin: short films which were produced not primarily for the cinema than for all kinds of teaching. Traffic education, sports, culture, highways, hygiene, country, and people. All in all, films that show how something should be, but whose modest means of production unintentionally make them permeable to documentary aspects (more so than Nazi feature films, for example). Of course, also a lot of ideology (which is easy to decipher today). Enough material for a new documentary film to be compiled.

36 Werner Dütsch, “Film in Deutschland. Überlegungen zu einer Sendereihe,” programme draft, May 6, 1982, Harun Farocki GbR.

As it turned out, Hartmut Bitomsky and Heiner Mühlenbrock, dffb students at the time, took on the task to make this film. Their *Deutschlandbilder* was broadcast in October 1983, and it became the starting point for Bitomsky's trilogy on Germany, together with *Reichsautobahn* (1986) and *Der VW-Komplex* (1989). A programme on Peter Lorre (*Peter Lorre: Endless Exile*), planned to be done by Wolf Eckart Bühler, most likely became *The Double Face of Peter Lorre* (1984), made by Harun Farocki and Felix Hofmann.

The End of Film History on Television

The three projects from the decade between 1975 and 1985 show the spectrum with which film history was approached by means and within the parameters of television. Even if the choice does not claim to be representative, they highlight different types of cinema and different approaches: There is Günter Peter Straschek and his particular take on oral history, carried out in a Straub/Huilletian manner, with compositional rigor and the necessary patience; there is Bitomsky and Dütsch's media archaeological excavation of early cinema and its contextualization in the cultural history of the nineteenth century. And there is Dütsch's elaborated, albeit unrealized, attempt at rewriting German film history by concentrating on individual disjunctive and heterogeneous case studies. What the examples have in common is that they make ample use of the specific capacities of the moving image. Approaching cinema with its own means (images, sound, montage, commentary, duration, etc.), they offered an answer to the conundrum of the "unattainable text" described by Raymond Bellour in 1975.³⁷ As has often been proclaimed for the video essay of the last decade, they benefited from the potential simultaneity of the film (the object of study) and various modes of commenting (analysis, historiographic thinking, etc.).³⁸

How and why did this "Golden Age of Television" end? In the 1980s, a number of factors changed and made it increasingly more difficult to integrate film history in the programme. With the implementation and success of private television—in 1984, RTL and the channel which later became Sat1 started, followed by Pro7, Vox, MTV Germany, and other music channels—audience ratings became more important. In a long interview

37 Raymond Bellour, "The Unattainable Text," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 19–28.

38 On some connections between WDR programmes and the format of the video essay, see Volker Pantenburg, "Towards an Alternative History of the Video Essay: Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Cologne," *NECSUS* (Autumn 2017), Section "Audiovisual Essay."

after his retirement, Dütsch recalls the early years, where the quantity of spectators did not have immediate effects on programming:

Audience figures were measured from time to time, but the discussions were about the quality of the programme, not about these figures. The results had a rather modest influence. Television addresses a huge audience, but at the same time you know nothing of its opinions. You may have satisfactory or unsatisfactory audience figures, but you still do not know how the audience reacted. These surveys did not clarify if someone really liked the programme. [...] Ratings started to get important with the increasing success of private broadcasters and then they became more and more relevant. For certain departments, and budgets, it could mean either promotion or death.³⁹

Legal issues of copyright also became increasingly complicated since studio archives began to realize that their assets were of monetary value. In 1997, Hans Helmut Prinzler noted: "Film historical work on television is increasingly made more difficult by the inappropriate licensing ideas of rights holders for the compensation of used film clips."⁴⁰ To circumvent licensing and expensive rights, Bitomsky devised an elegant *dispositif* by either quoting films via frame enlargements as photographs (*Cinema and Death*, 1988) or resorting to VHS tapes that were explicitly shown on monitors in an experimental setting of live commentary (*Cinema, the Wind and Photography* [1991] and *Kino, Flächen, Bunker* [1991]).

If the presence of film history on television increasingly diminished in the 1980s, cinema's centennial in 1995 provided one last opportunity to approach film history on a large scale: Martina Müller produced *Cinématographe Lumière*, a series in seven parts of around ten minutes each. Harun Farocki focused on one of the first motifs of film history in *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), Hartmut Bitomsky directed a workshop in the Nederlands Film Museum on films from the 1910s and transformed it into an essay film called *Playback* (1996).

Today, in retrospect and almost thirty years later, it seems that the celebration of a hundred years of cinema ironically marked the final moment of a serious intellectual discourse on cinema on German public television. The "End of Cinema," much discussed at the time, might in fact have been the "End of Film History on Television."

39 Michael Girke, "Das goldene Zeitalter des Fernsehens. Werner Dütsch im Gespräch mit Michael Girke," unpublished, longer version of the interview published in *Film Dienst*.

40 Prinzler, "Filmgeschichte im Fernsehen," 254.

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14 The History of Film on Film

Some Thoughts on Reflexive Documentaries

Eleftheria Thanouli

Abstract

The history of cinema is an object of study in numerous academic publications, which seek to recount and explain the filmic past. This chapter focuses on how non-fiction films perform the same operation by narrating the history of the medium with its own tools, namely images and sounds. Using two reflexive documentaries as key case studies, Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (1984) and Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), the author aims to investigate how the formal parameters of these works determine the historical explanations that arise from their respective portraits of Marlene Dietrich and Alexander Medvedkin. In addition, she discusses how the aspect of self-reflexivity in historical film-making invites a more complex and contextual approach to the filmic past.

Keywords: historical documentary, film history, self-reflexivity, historical explanation, media archaeology

Introduction

Writing the history of cinema is an enterprise riddled with a series of formal, philosophical, and ideological assumptions that are rarely discussed in the open. Like any other type of history, books on cinematic history aim to provide an account of the medium's past by identifying its fundamental determinants and organizing them into a temporal, spatial, and causal order. Thus, a long list of films, film-makers, actors, technological innovations, and production and exhibition practices are embedded in written historical narratives that, on the one hand, appear primarily to present "what really happened" in cinema's past, while explaining, on the other, how and why

things happened as they did. This double function of written histories was first pinpointed by Hayden White in his monumental work *Metahistory* (1973), where he defined the historical work as “a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them.*”¹

This often latent process of explaining the past will be the focus of this chapter with a slight modification; instead of investigating how books on film narrate its historical past, I will look at how non-fiction films perform the same function. Specifically, I will discuss how two reflexive documentaries, Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (1984) and Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), could qualify as pieces of film history with particular historical and philosophical explanations. My argument is twofold: firstly, I maintain that historical documentaries about the cinematic past, depending on their formal arrangement, are capable of expressing the same explanations as written histories of cinema. Secondly, the reflexive documentaries, in particular, thanks to their self-conscious form, are able to accommodate explanations about cinema's past that have not been dominant so far in written historiography. As I will explain shortly, *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik* are two cases that can help us unravel the standard assumptions of written histories and allow us to glimpse the possibility of a more complex and contextual approach to the filmic past.

Histories on Paper/Histories on Film: Their Shared Philosophical Assumptions

Any research into the filmic, or more broadly, the audiovisual histories of the cinema should begin by taking into account the corresponding historical accounts in written form. In other words, the historiophoty² of the medium should be viewed in close relation to the historiographical strands that developed in the course of almost a century now. According to Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, the first histories of the cinema in the United States are found in Robert Grau's *Theatre of Science* (1914) and

1 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2, emphasis in the original.

2 Hayden White coined the term “historiophoty” to define “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” in order to indicate its significant correspondence to the concept of historiography. Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Winter 1988): 1193.

Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926). Therein, one can note some of the elementary principles of film historiography that would persist for decades, such as the idea of progress towards cinema's technological and aesthetic perfection, the importance of discovery and innovation as well as the focus on "great men" as primary agents of change and success.³ Film history books steadily flourished after the Second World War, while a surge in publications was witnessed in the 1970s when the study of film became increasingly institutionalized. Writing in 1977, Charles F. Altman astutely observes the following: "During the past decade the literature on the nature and history of the American film has more than doubled. Major new books now appear once a month, rather than once a year as they did during the fifties, or scarcely once a decade as in the twenties and thirties."⁴

The growing terrain of film historiography may comprise numerous studies on all of cinema's dimensions (aesthetic, technological, economic, social) but the underlying assumptions of these historical accounts are not necessarily as varied as one would assume. In fact, metahistorical approaches on the history of film have noted that throughout the twentieth century historical research has largely fallen into three or four categories.⁵ According to David Bordwell, who surveyed the history of film style in particular, there are four distinct historiographical schools categorized as follows: (1) The Standard Version of Stylistic History found in the works of Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, which regards film history as a linear development toward the revelation of cinema's inherent aesthetic nature; (2) the Dialectical Programme pioneered by André Bazin, which seeks to explain aesthetic change and continuity through dialectical tensions that ultimately serve cinema's fundamental purpose, namely the tendency towards greater realism; (3) the Oppositional Programme of Noël Burch, which accounts for stylistic change through the opposition between mainstream and experimental film practices and makes room for the impact of politics and ideology on film form; and (4) other recent programmes, such as "Piecemeal History," which emphasize the close scrutiny of early cinema

3 Richard C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 54.

4 Charles F. Altman, "Towards a Historiography of American Film," *Cinema Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 1.

5 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *Cinemas: revue d'études cinématographiques/Cinemas: Journal of Film Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (Spring 2004): 75–117; Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

and revise a series of established hierarchies and long-held assumptions of all the three previous schools of thought.⁶

Even though Bordwell's metahistorical account openly concentrates on the history of film style, a similar blueprint of film historiography results when Thomas Elsaesser switches the focus to digital cinema. In the latter's take, it is digital cinema that may serve as the pivotal moment to rethink the history of the medium. His recent publication *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (2016) is a collection of ideas and suggestions that he developed over the years in order to surpass the deadlocks of traditional historiography. In Elsaesser's work, the great divide initially lies between Old Film History and New Film History, a term that emerged among film historians in the mid-1980s.⁷ Specifically, New Film History was put forward as a reaction to "traditional (or 'old') film history's tacit assumption of linear progress," which came in the form of "a chronological-organic model (e.g. childhood-maturity-decline and renewal), a chronological-teleological model (the move to "greater and greater realism"), or the alternating swings of the pendulum between (outdoor) realism and (studio-produced) fantasy."⁸ Even though Elsaesser does not adopt the same terminology as Bordwell, the correspondences between their historiographical maps are evident. New Film History is what Bordwell includes in the recent programmes, and particularly "piecemeal history," while both scholars maintain an openly prescriptive tone in their writings. In other words, they not only seek to chart the various strands of film historiography but they also aim at offering suggestions about the ways film history should be written in the future. Their insights for prospective historical research will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, as we now need to dwell a little longer on the history of film history and the underlying assumptions of the three, or even all four, aforementioned historical traditions.

Despite the passage of time and the changes in film form, economics or technology, the writing of film history maintained a steady level of Hegelian undercurrents, according to both Elsaesser and Bordwell. In fact, the latter explicitly characterizes the first three schools as "Hegelian," as they all base their observations on an underlying teleology that supposedly guides cinema's progress in the course of time. For instance, Bordwell writes, "In significant ways Bazin is even more Hegelian than his predecessors. He recasts the history of art in the light of the advent of cinema, tracing

6 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 12–139.

7 Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History," *Sight and Sound* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 246–51.

8 Elsaesser, "New Film History as Media Archaeology," 80.

photography back to ancient impulses that only now find fulfilment.”⁹ And then, when it comes to Burch, he notes, “Despite his explicit desire to overturn ‘idealist’ historiography, Burch sustains the research tradition in important ways.”¹⁰ Similarly, Elsaesser criticizes Old Film History for its linearity, its clear-cut chronology, its search for origins and teleology, while he appears to be troubled by New Film History as well. As he puts it, “Wherever the New Film History charts its *longue durée* accounts around ‘multimedial,’ ‘immersive,’ ‘panoramic’ or ‘haptic’ media experiences, it also serves to legitimate a covert but speculative and, in all likelihood, transitory teleology.”¹¹ In other words, Elsaesser feels that the pitfalls of Hegelian thinking, i.e. the need to interpret the past according to a higher logic, are endemic even in the New Film History.

The philosophical arguments of film historians that both scholars identify and criticize in a century-long film historiography demonstrate that the written history of cinema so far has been predominantly of an organicist kind. “Organicism” is a term that White introduced in his poetics of history in order to describe one of the four philosophical arguments that underlie any historical writing, the others being formism, mechanism and contextualism.¹² According to White, historical works not only describe “what happened” but also seek to explain—openly or not—“why it happened” by appeal to general laws of causation. In the case of organicism, history is viewed as an organic process that integrates the events into a higher-level entity. When a historian subscribes to this tradition, they are inclined to depict the particulars of the historical field not as unique occurrences but rather as components of synthetic processes.¹³ Idealists like Hegel are exemplary in this practice, as their search focuses less on the details of the historical facts and more on the general ideas and principles that appear to govern the historical process. Likewise, narrating the history of cinema as a series of events that build up to a greater purpose, whether you call it “maturity,” “realism” or “binary oppositions,” reveals an organicist form of explanation that is constantly seeking to unearth some integrated entity whose importance is greater than the sum of the individual historical elements.

9 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 74.

10 Ibid., 112.

11 Elsaesser, “New Film History as Media Archaeology,” 89.

12 White, *Metahistory*. White formulated the four historical arguments (formism, contextualism, organicism, and mechanism) employing Stephen Pepper’s taxonomy of philosophical systems or world hypotheses. For a full account of these four world hypotheses, see Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

13 White, *Metahistory*, 15.

What I find intriguing is how the majority of the historiographical approaches in the case of cinema belong to the organicist tradition whereas, when it comes to general history, organicism is only the exception. According to White, among academic historians the option to explain history in organicist terms tends to be regarded as “unfortunate lapses from the proper forms that explanations in history may take” or as “a fall into the nefarious ‘philosophy of history.’”¹⁴ And yet, the history of cinema opted from the beginning for an approach that singles out historical objects, such as stylistic devices, film-makers, films, or technological innovations not for their unique occurrence (formist argument) nor for the ways they interrelate in particular historical fields (contextualist argument) but for their capacity to confirm a particular cinematic essence or a linear progression towards an ideal or a destiny of sorts. One possible explanation for this crucial digression of film historiography from general historiography may be related to the inextricable ties between film history and film theory. The fact that the very object of film history, the cinema itself, was not (and still is not) fully described and settled at an ontological level has been creating a special conundrum for historians, whether they acknowledge it or not. The historical accounts have been struggling with the question “What is cinema?” as much as they have with the question “What happened in the cinema?” Unlike general historians, who are free to take ontological matters as givens (for better or worse), film historians are constantly bound to encounter problems with the shifting boundaries of the cinematic medium, while the temptation to fall into the nefarious philosophy of film is only too great.

This is also probably why the organicist view of film history persists even when we switch from film history on paper to film history on film, which is the main focus of this chapter. My concern here is to discuss the complex relation between these two modes of history and raise the following two points: firstly, film history in the documentary form carries similar philosophical presuppositions as the bulk of the written accounts, and, secondly, documentaries on the history of cinema are able to accommodate other types of arguments, which could, in turn, pave the way for new approaches in the written form. This two-way relationship between historiography and historiophoty of cinema that I outline here, admittedly, presupposes a level of equivalence between the two forms of history that is far from given, especially among traditional academic historians. Indeed, the very notion of historiophoty is still open to debate as well as a series of issues, such as its relation to historiography, its forms, its genres, and its philosophy. All these will be briefly sketched out below.

14 White, *Metahistory*, 19.

First and foremost, I do not consider the filmic representation of the past to be inferior to its written counterpart. As I extensively argued in *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (2018), doing history or “historying,”¹⁵ as it is often called, signifies the act of narrating the past according to certain epistemological principles, regardless of the materiality of the historical discourse. Whether in words or in images, our access to the past is bound to be mediated and the modality of this mediation does not guarantee either accuracy or truthfulness. And yet, the capacity of the cinematic medium to represent the past, despite being present from the very beginning,¹⁶ is far from being recognized as equally legitimate as that of written language. It has only been a couple of decades that scholars, such as Robert Rosenstone and Robert Burgoyne, have made a case for taking history on screen seriously and have provided insights as to how this could be achieved.¹⁷ In my effort to carry this discussion further, I argued that we can best understand the potential of cinema to approach the past not by separating history on film from history on paper, as has been the tendency so far, but by looking closely at their shared poetics. In fact, I meticulously drew on White’s poetics of history, as laid out in *Metahistory*, for the analysis of a number of films, both fiction films and documentaries, and I investigated how the poetics of written history relate to historical poetics, i.e. the various forms and shapes of films that have developed over the years.¹⁸ From this large-scale project, I would like to focus here on the historical documentary in order to see how documentaries about the history of cinema relate to the historiographical perspectives that we can find in written form.

Historical documentaries may not be the same as historical books but, depending on their formal construction, they are able to articulate the

15 The term “historying” was popularized by Alun Munslow in his effort to unveil the diverse epistemological assumptions of practicing historians and to break the unity and opacity of the term “history.” See Alun Munslow, “Genre and History/Historying,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015): 158–76.

16 Jonathan Stubbs traces the interest of the cinema in the depiction of the past back to its kinoscope years. Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62.

17 Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Rosenstone, “The History Film as a Mode of Historical Thought,” in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 71–87; Robert Burgoyne, ed., *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

18 Eleftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

same philosophical arguments about the meaning of history. Particularly, documentaries that are cast in the expository or the interactive mode are likely to host organicist arguments about the historical process. The terms “expository” and “interactive” are borrowed from Bill Nichols’ typology of the documentary, and each of them describes an ensemble of formal and narrative elements.¹⁹ For instance, expository documentaries rely on a voice-of-God commentary, which addresses us as viewers and guides us through a certain topic of the historical world. In expository films the nonsynchronous sound of the voice track dominates over the visual elements; images serve either as illustration or counterpoint for something that has been verbally expressed in the soundtrack. The meticulous assembly of images and their careful visual orchestration around a dominating commentary are more likely to accommodate arguments that focus on clusters of elements and favour synthesis. The specificity of each person or moment documented is often surpassed by the general logic that binds all evidence together. In most cases, this synthesis breeds generalizations causing the argument to veer towards the organicist side. For instance, in *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War* (Becker, 1998), Martin Sheen’s voice in the commentary narrates the history of the combat film, intertwining three different forms of history: the general political history, the history of cinema, and the historical representations in particular films. As a result, the combat film is presented as following all the linear stages of traditional historiography: gradual maturity, greater realism, and a progressive step towards a better understanding of the American nation.

On the other hand, interactive documentaries that contain several individual interviews may also present organicist arguments of history. Like written micro-histories, they give voice to the individuals and take note of their particularities—often not in order to stress their uniqueness but to generate safer generalizations about the historical world. As Carlo Ginzburg explains the purpose of micro-history, “Evidence must be collected according to an agenda which is already pointing towards a synthetic approach. In other words, one has to work out *cases*, which lead to generalizations.”²⁰ When we watch a documentary like *Visions of Light: The Art of Cinematography* (Glassman, McCarthy, and Samuels, 1992), to have

19 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

20 Carlo Ginzburg, “Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian’s Craft, Today,” in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, ed. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 113.

another example, the tendency to build a general argument about the nature of cinema quickly becomes obvious. The film-maker has carefully selected a series of talking heads who, with the help of film clips, begin narrating the history of cinematography in a chronological order, singling out all the standard masters and masterpieces, while rehearsing arguments, such as “the camera being free in the silent days” or “now in the 1990s, just like in the 1950s, we have the technology to be innovative again.” In other words, the documentary replays all the typical arguments of traditional historiography in an oblique effort to understand the inner logic of the cinematic medium.

This orthodoxy breaks, however, when we look at reflexive documentaries. The reflexive mode of representation in Nichols’ typology is an inclusive category that contains all those documentaries that employ self-conscious narrative devices and draw attention to the process of representation. In these films, the presence of the film-maker is exceptionally felt not as a means of interaction with a chosen subject, as is usually the case in the interactive mode, but, rather, as a play aimed towards the audience. As Nichols explains, “Whereas the great preponderance of documentary production concerns itself with talking about the historical world, the reflexive mode addresses the question of *how* we talk about the historical world.”²¹ Therefore, the intriguing question that arises is: How applicable is the choice of the reflexive mode for the presentation of issues pertaining to the history of the cinema? Admittedly, when it comes to history, *any kind of history*, the reflexive mode is a difficult choice for film-makers and viewers alike, as both ends need to face head-on serious epistemological questions and address the complexity of historical knowledge.²² However, when reflexive documentaries do rise to the occasion, they challenge critics and theorists to rethink their categories and expand their vocabulary. Such is the case with the two historical portraits found in *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik*. Looking closer into these two biographies helps us to better understand how this form of cinema can accommodate a different approach to historiography, one that exchanges organicism with contextualism and

21 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 56–57.

22 In historical studies, this discussion entails the workings of “experimental history” and it is not surprising that it is led by historians like White and Rosenstone (Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* [New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006], 103–6). However, experimental history remains to this date a particularly marginal form of history, as the majority of professional historians tend to adhere to the principles of empiricism in order to write about the past. To acknowledge the interference of art, philosophy, and ideology in the historical profession would jeopardize the mechanisms of power entailed in the production of knowledge within academia (Thanouli, *History and Film*, 229–49).

opens up to the possibility of a cinematic history unburdened by the search for a unique essence or spirit.

Case Studies: *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik*

Marlene is Schell's creative struggle to portray the life and personality of Marlene Dietrich in a way that reconfigures all the historical elements that have become known through most traditional histories of cinema. Dietrich, a film legend across the world for many decades, features prominently in various historical narratives, whether they focus exclusively on her life or they embed her into wider developments in Hollywood film-making, national politics, acting and stardom, cinematography and lighting, to mention a few. The burden of this long and wide-ranging discussion surrounding her career, however, does not seem to weigh down on this new effort. Schell's portrait does not aim to unify all the documents and all the testimonies under one concrete idea of who Dietrich really was; instead, it is through dispersion, self-consciousness, and contingency that he seeks to build a powerful historical presence that is equally revealing, if not more, than any previous biography.

In this documentary the interview becomes the main investigative tool. Dietrich, at the age of eighty-three, agrees to be interviewed in her apartment in Paris but she refuses to be filmed. This critical obstruction compels Schell to evoke her presence only through photographs, scenes from her films and a few stand-in actresses while it also gives him the opportunity to discuss head-on the problem of representation and historical truth. Unlike interactive documentaries, where the interview functions as objective testimony used to build generalizations, in this highly reflexive portrait, Marlene's stubborn refusal to appear on camera keeps our ears constantly on the ground and traps us in a situation where what we hear and what we see are often in direct contradiction.

In *Marlene*, Schell openly parodies traditional historical accounts that follow a linear chronology and claim to reveal the objective truth about the past. He also underlines how Dietrich's complex personality could not possibly be contained within a single film or a book. In fact, when it comes to books, the interview regularly dwells on how most of her numerous written biographies have gotten various facts wrong whether about her films or her personal life. Painstaking accuracy is not the point in the documentary either. Instead, the goal is to capture Dietrich in a very specific moment in time and space and give her the opportunity to think back on her

immeasurably rich life in order to reinvent it once more. In a sense, Schell and Dietrich work together and against each other, trying to do history while defying the principle elements of traditional historiography. Her past, her career, her films, and her songs are re-assembled in a historical narration that constantly undermines itself. Through the tug of war between film-maker and subject and between archive and memory, *Marlene* becomes a very synchronic biographical portrait that communicates abundant information about its subject, without integrating it, nonetheless, into a greater whole of any kind.

As in most reflexive documentaries, Schell deploys Dietrich's absent presence in order to emulate the very quandary of historical cinema or even historiography in general, namely the need to build a narrative out of elements that are long gone. It also reminds us that knowing what *really* happened is nothing but a chimera; we are bound to re-imagine the past just as much as we are to discover it. Yet, this predicament does not discourage us as viewers nor does it discourage Schell as a historian. Through a relentless antagonism with his defiant subject, through endless contradictions or disagreements even about the "hard facts" of her life—such as the existence or not of a sibling—Schell convinces us that the effort to get to know Marlene Dietrich was truly worth it. By employing a wide range of formal tools, such as complex chronology, ironic juxtapositions of images and sounds, as well as graphic editing, Schell builds a remarkably rich portrait of Dietrich that denies us, however, both closure and causal clarity.

A similar predicament is found in the case of *The Last Bolshevik*, an equally intriguing piece of film historiography. Chris Marker's biographical documentary about the Russian film-maker Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin is a fascinating example of how an artist's life can be explored for all the ways it relates to the powerful historical events surrounding them. Marker crafts a highly reflexive account of Medvedkin's inextricable ties to the history of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. This demanding task is even further complicated by the fact that Medvedkin's career and several parts of Soviet history are not so widely known. Whereas the expository mode would have ensured a more customary introduction to Medvedkin's trajectory in Soviet cinema and politics, Marker decides to plunge us into an unknown territory, which we have to figure and refigure all at once.

The film begins with an intertitle bearing George Steiner's words: "It is not the past that dominates us. It is the images of the past."²³ Then, the

23 The intertitle says in French "Ce n'est pas le passé qui nous domine. Ce sont les images du passé."

opening sequence sets the rules of the game: *The Last Bolshevik* will focus on Medvedkin as a historical figure and a prominent film-maker, who is simultaneously connected both to a wider historical reality (the Soviet Union) and a very specific individual (Marker himself). Marker's authorial intervention in the project is firmly established and amply justified not only because of their personal relation but also because of his own distinct aesthetic, philosophical, and ideological preferences. We know that this is going to be a reflexive documentary, which will bear the traces of Marker's authorial signature and it will craft a highly mediated portrait of a complex personality.

The reflexivity of the form in this documentary takes on many shapes; the personal tone of the commentary and its self-conscious treatment of the subject matter, the discordance between the visual material and its aural accompaniment, the manipulation of the images with freeze-frames, colours, or superimpositions, the repetitions, the direct address at the camera, and the constant mixture of factual with fictional elements. Just as in the case of *Marlene*, all these expressive strategies reiterate the initial premise, namely that images are our key access to a vanishing past, while their inherent malleability blocks us from ever having a single true and definitive version of it. Unlike an expository biography, *The Last Bolshevik* presents Medvedkin as an enigma; on the one hand, he was a sensitive and kind idealist who fought for his country and for a better world. On the other hand, the reality of Stalinist communism was relentless. Marker documents the poverty, the purges, the censorship, and, ultimately, the suffocating fear of the communist regime. The question that Marker does not seem to resolve is how Medvedkin chose to comply with that reality until the very end. In this audiovisual posthumous letter to Medvedkin, Marker prefers to refrain from a conclusive judgement on his friend's personality. The formal reflexivity allows him to attribute to his subject a high level of complexity and to maintain a tenuous connection between Medvedkin and Soviet history, a connection that can be visited over and over again.

However, complexity should not be confounded with ambiguity. As I argued in *History and Film*, the reflexive mode and its scepticism about the status of truth and objective knowledge tend to generate arguments of the contextualist kind.²⁴ This means that the historical argument in *The Last Bolshevik* is synthetic and dispersive; it traces a considerable number of historical elements but refuses to integrate them in larger historical clusters. With communism as a topic and Medvedkin as a film-maker,

24 Thanouli, *History and Film*.

Marker could have easily veered towards organicist views about human nature and happiness or Soviet cinema and ideology. Yet he keeps pointing to the immanent character of individuality and ideological beliefs, rejecting their hierarchical positioning. As Ilona Hongisto observes, “*The Last Bolshevik* proposes a non-hierarchical ‘flat ontology’ between Medvedkin and cinematic characters, between cinematic fables and the history of the twentieth century. This allows the documentary to rewrite the memories of Alexander Medvedkin and his era in film.”²⁵ Marker explores the triangle “Cinema–Medvedkin–Russian history,” moving from one point to another without ever being able to rise to a greater truth. Medvedkin’s biography is scattered with movie fragments, newsreels, political figures, fellow filmmakers, friends, and relatives, each giving away a piece of the puzzle and, yet, knowing that many of those pieces will never appear. Not because they are hidden or difficult to discover but because the very idea of reaching the essence of a person or a historical moment is not pertinent. Like Schell’s *Marlene*, *The Last Bolshevik* builds a meticulous biography of Medvedkin and situates him in a very specific historical context, acknowledging the limitations of the enterprise as well as the power of invention that it entails.

Conclusion

Viewing the history of cinema through reflexive documentaries like those presented above generates a different perspective on the past of the cinematic medium. By replacing narrative realism with reflexive mechanisms, these works seek to explain the historical process in novel terms. Instead of pretending to discover the essence of history, they focus on specific historical events or personalities for the fragmentary and contingent traces they have left behind. This means that the organicist explanations of history that dominate in film historiography and historiophoty (expository or interactive documentaries) are exchanged with a contextualist explanation that is open to multiple mappings and provisional conclusions.

But let us unravel the contextualist argument a little more. The principal characteristic of a contextualist view of history is that a historical event cannot be examined autonomously from its context; instead, we need to examine every historical occurrence in conjunction with other events and agents in the historical field and to reveal the specific relations between the diverse participants in

25 Ilona Hongisto, *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 54.

the scene that have rendered the event possible. Thus, contextualism stresses the significance of particular historical elements not for their unique existence but for the ways these elements interact with each other to produce certain results or fulfil specific functions. At the same time, however, the detection of these results or functions does not make the next step to formulate general goals as in the case of organicism. Contextualism refuses to integrate every circumstantial historical observation into a greater interpretative scheme. It chooses to remain particular and dispersive. As Pepper²⁶ puts it,

Contextualism is accordingly sometimes said to have a horizontal cosmology in contrast to other views, which have a vertical cosmology. There is no top nor bottom to the contextualistic world. [...] There is no cosmological mode of analysis that guarantees the whole truth or an arrival at the ultimate nature of things.²⁷

The ultimate truth about the past, viewed from a contextualist point of view, will never be revealed. What we have is a “here and now” and we can make approximations as to what may have happened. Our analyses are never definitive truths; they are investigations that begin and end in a rather arbitrary manner and they are open to change and revision, whenever new elements come into the picture. Of all the historical arguments, contextualism is the only one that can handle disorder and tolerate the idea that the “whole truth” or the “essence” of this world may not be attained.²⁸

This great divide between organicism and contextualism can be further understood through Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” despite the differences in the terminology. Even though the focus of this long article falls on Leon Tolstoy’s view of history, Berlin identifies two broad categories of thinkers and observes the following:

For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in

26 It is often useful to return to Pepper’s original work in order to clarify White’s use of these terms.

27 Pepper, *World Hypotheses*, 251.

28 White, *Metahistory*, 18.

some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.²⁹

Organicist historians are hedgehogs, while contextualists are foxes; the former know one big truth, whereas the latter know many little ones. In fact, the Greek proverb, on which Berlin bases his metaphors, goes like this: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” This probably means that, for all its cunning, the fox is defeated by the hedgehog’s one defence.³⁰

As it turns out, the Greeks were right, at least when it comes to the history of cinema. As we have seen so far, the organicist views on film history continue to dominate the field, although the promise of a different perspective put forward by reflexive documentaries should not be underestimated. Not only because works like *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik* are important in their own right but also because influential film scholars like Bordwell and Elsaesser seem to advocate a paradigm shift in the writing of history, too. Going back to their metahistorical accounts, with which I opened this chapter, we can trace two prescriptions for future writings of the history of cinema, both of which could be classified as contextualist or as foxes, despite the lurking dangers. Bordwell, on the one hand, with his focus on film style calls for a problem/solution model of historical causation, one that “does not commit itself to a neat outline of overarching change” and that does not guarantee “a rise and fall, a birth or maturity or decline.”³¹ The task of the historian of style should be the reconstruction of a “choice situation” as a “node” within a “hypothetical network” of agents both individual and collective, both human and material. In this historical reconstruction, what matters is the particularity of the historical agents (human/non-human) and the interrelations we can trace, without obliterating the possibility of errors, unintended consequences, or decisions that cannot be fully fathomed.³² Bordwell’s scheme is carefully laid out in direct dialogue with the previous organicist approaches to the history of film, trying meticulously to transform their integrative impetus into a dispersive force. Elsaesser, on the other hand, adopts a broader scope and asks the historian of cinema to become a media archaeologist who occupies “a placeless place and timeless time [...]

29 Isaiah Berlin, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 436.

30 Ibid.

31 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 156.

32 Ibid.

when trying to articulate, rather than merely accommodate, these several alternative, counterfactual or parallax histories around which any study of the audio-visual multi-media moving image culture now unfolds.”³³ Elsaesser’s vision is thus more radical than Bordwell’s; he replaces film history with media archaeology, bringing in several of Foucault’s arguments against the teleology of traditional historiography and emphasizing the role of contingency and alternative pasts. Whether this idea could be better explored by a film-maker like Schell or Marker is hard to tell. What matters is that, whether on paper or film, the past of the cinematic medium can be narrated in a wide range of forms and can be explained with a wide range of philosophical arguments. Which forms and which arguments dominate at different times is a matter worth investigating further, particularly by bringing in several other parameters, most notably the institutional and ideological factors that affect the process of historying whether within academia or the film-making business.

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33 Elsaesser, “New Film History as Media Archaeology,” 112–13.

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15 Audiovisual Film Histories for the Digital Age

From Found Footage Cinema to Online Videographic Criticism

Chiara Grizzaffi

Abstract

The essay focuses on videographic criticism as a form of audiovisual historiography. The introductory section proposes a brief reflection on those material and cultural changes which make it possible for cinephiles and scholars to resort to practices of appropriation and reuse of film images that were once the prerogative of smaller groups of artists and professionals. The second section aims at historicizing online videographic criticism, thus retracing its steps from the work of early practitioners to its progressive institutionalization. Finally, the essay addresses some examples of audiovisual essays that focus on film history issues to argue for the innovative potential of the audiovisual approach.

Keywords: film history, digital media, video essay, found footage

The students of a film history course of today would have a hard time imagining the struggles their colleagues had to face sixty, fifty, thirty or even twenty years ago to watch those films that, for them, are just a click away. It is quite possible they also ignore how difficult it was, for scholars, to study films they could only watch in a movie theatre, or on precious 16 mm prints, or in low-resolution VHS. Students are rarely invited to reflect upon the material conditions in which film history, as a discipline, has been built, conceptualized, and institutionalized. And yet, the paradox at the core of these conditions troubled film scholars and critics for many years, as their

talking and writing about cinema was the chase of an “absent object”¹ that could not (yet) be owned, or quoted, or be fully explained through verbal language.

As a matter of fact, as Michael Witt recalls in his extensive study of Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), the first attempts at film histories using images, the same material of their subject, date back at least to the 1920s—he mentions two films, Lepage and Duvivier’s *La Machine à refaire la vie* (1924) and *L’Histoire du cinéma par le cinéma* by Grimoin-Sanson (1926).² Throughout the history of cinema, there have been numerous attempts at analytical and critical writing through images and montage. Found footage cinema, for instance, as a self-reflexive form that focuses on images as a construct, questions the very nature of representation through a set of operations of editing, deconstruction, reconfiguration.³ Through formal strategies such as alteration of motion and duration of shots, freeze frames, superimpositions, isolation of single details, re-filming with analytical camera or physical interventions on the film strip, found footage cinema aims at uncovering the deep structure of cinematic representation, as well as its underlying ideological system. Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* (1936), by way of example, is a tribute to the actress of *East of Borneo* (George Melford, 1931), but most notably an invitation, for the viewer, to reflect upon the transfiguration of stars’ bodies and gestures on screen; in several of his films—from *Home Stories* (1990) to *Phoenix Tapes* (1999) and *Kristall* (2006), the last two made with Christoph Girardet, Matthias Müller obsessively catalogues visual and narrative motifs: their works are so accurate in pondering on the essential features of cinematic genres and of film language that Christa Blümlinger describes *Phoenix Tapes* as “a form of video analysis, [...] an equivalent of the film theory of the last decades.”⁴

These experimental practices have inevitably been concerned with both history (consider, in this regard, the work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi) and cinema history, thus renegotiating the memory

1 Raymond Bellour, “The Unattainable Text,” in *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 26.

2 Michael Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 106–7.

3 See William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Arts and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); Nicole Brenez, “Montage intertextuel et formes contemporaines du remploi dans le cinéma expérimental,” *Cinémas: revue d’études cinématographiques* 13, no. 1–2 (2002): 49–67; Christa Blümlinger, *Cinéma de seconde main. Esthétique du remploi dans l’art du film et des nouveaux médias* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2013), among others.

4 Blümlinger, *Cinéma de seconde main*, 84 (my translation).

of the images and challenging that of the viewer, “always aiming, through repetition, transformation, adaptation, rewriting and rearrangement, to the uniqueness of a renewed viewing and hearing.”⁵ Such an interest in film history is demonstrated by the “return to the primary scene[s]” of artists like Harun Farocki and Peter Tscherkassky who, in *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (1995) and *L'Arrivée* (1999),⁶ respectively, confront themselves with two foundational views—*La Sortie des usines Lumière* (1895) and *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895), as seen through its quotation in *Mayerling*, by Terence Young (1968). For Farocki, the film is an opportunity to denounce an absence, the systematic obliteration of work in cinema; Tscherkassky, for his part, in his work deconstructs and at the same time instils the essence of classical narration: action, movement, the human face.

The *relocation* of cinema out of the theatre and into other media, such as television or home video, gave further impetus to these reflexive practices, encouraging, for example, the production of television programmes or documentaries on cinema and, later, of DVD commentaries.⁷ Compared to the experimental found footage cinema, these works have often a more argumentative and pedagogical aim, to which corresponds the use of formal elements, such as the voice-over, that fit such purpose. This distinction, however, is somehow reductive: indeed, even the more institutional practices could present an openness to experimentation. Furthermore, the essay film, an elusive form, situates itself precisely in-between experimentation and documentation, in-between the inner, subjective sensibility and the rigorous investigation of the outside world⁸—or of cinema, as in the monumental project of the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, by Jean-Luc Godard.

5 Ibid., 142.

6 *L'Arrivée* is the second film devoted by Tscherkassky to the Lumière views after *Motion Picture* (1984). In 2021 the artist presented in Cannes a third work, *Train Again*, that is both an homage to Kurt Kren and to the fundamental motif of the train in cinema.

7 There are countless documentaries on cinema, and very few attempts to map the field. The book edited by Adriano Aprà, *Critofilm. Cinema che pensa il cinema* (Pesaro: Pesaro Nuovo Cinema 2016), offers one of the most accurate and detailed filmographies. About film studies and the DVD, see Mark Parker and Deborah Parker, *The Attainable Text: The DVD and the Study of Film* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

8 On the issues of a strict distinction, within the recycled cinema, between the tradition of the documentary and experimental forms, a distinction that undermines “the hybrid strategies of the essay film,” see Blümlinger, *Cinéma de seconde main*, 78–84. Jaimie Baron also concurs with this position, claiming that such dichotomy risks concealing “the continuities between documentary and experimental appropriations.” Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), ch. 1.

Cinema's relocation, however, according to Francesco Casetti, also entails the shift from *attendance*—that is, going to specific places for watching movies (“experience of a place”), thus entering a liminal world, in-between the reality of the spectators participating in a collective rite (“experience of a situation”), and the fictional world of the film, a world in which to project and identify oneself (“experience of a diegetic world”)—to *performance*.⁹ With the television broadcasting of films, and then with the introduction of VHS and DVDs, domestic space becomes a private space for film consumption; what defines the performance, however, is not only this individualization of consumption, its transformation into an activity guided by personal choices, but also an active “doing” of the viewer, essential to enjoying the film experience. This activity unfolds on several levels: emotional and cognitive, technological, relational, expressive, and textual.¹⁰ The textual “doing” refers to practices of appropriation, manipulation, and reuse of the film allowed by the introduction of digital media:

[T]he spectator increasingly possesses the chance to manipulate the text that she/he is consuming, not only by “adjusting” viewing conditions (keeping or transforming the format, choosing high or low definition, and so on), but also by intervening in it (as with the clips, and the reedited and new soundtracks, on YouTube). Thus, filmic experience is a performance based on an act, rather than a moment of attendance.¹¹

The new conditions of filmic experience also affect the work of film analysis as well as the didactic and research methodologies in the field of film studies. Scholars, students, and critics now have the opportunity to manipulate images in almost infinite ways. The practices of appropriation and reuse of film footage, once the prerogative of smaller groups of artists and professionals with cultural and economic resources and specific technical knowledge, have now been adopted by viewers and cinephiles and are becoming part of the methodological toolbox of film critics and film studies scholars on a global level.¹² This is demonstrated by the increasing diffusion in our field

9 Francesco Casetti, “Filmic Experience,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 60.

10 Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 186–88.

11 Casetti, “Filmic Experience,” 64.

12 It should be observed, however, that as a practice relying on the availability of digital media, infrastructures, software and editing tools, as well as on the circulation of films and other media, videographic criticism suffers, in its diffusion on a global scale, the consequences of economic, political, and social inequalities in access to such resources.

of the so-called audiovisual essays, works that reuse and reassemble clips from films or images from other media to conduct an audiovisual argument, resorting to montage to suggest critical and analytical readings.

A Bit of History of Online Videographic Criticism

As it is often the case, establishing a birth date for what is known today as videographic criticism is an almost impossible endeavour, especially considered the proximity with its precursors as well as with other online forms such as remixes and mash-ups. However, it is quite reasonable to affirm that its first appearance coincides with the diffusion of video-sharing platforms.¹³

In 2007, Kevin B. Lee posted on YouTube and on his blog *Shooting Down Pictures* an audiovisual essay on Fritz Lang's *While the City Sleeps* (1956).¹⁴ It is the first attempt at the form made by Lee, today one of the most prolific and well-known practitioners. It is particularly interesting to compare this work with another audiovisual analysis on the same subject conducted almost thirty years prior. At the end of the 1970s, on the Italian TV channel Rete 2, scholars Gianfranco Bettetini, Francesco Casetti, and Aldo Grasso hosted a programme, *Studio Cinema* (1978–1979; 1983), dedicated to the analysis of films. In the first cycle of the show, devoted to the Hollywood years of Fritz Lang, there is an episode on *While the City Sleeps*.¹⁵

13 As noted by Michael Witt, among others, who recalls that his first experience in teaching an audiovisual criticism course coincided with the birth of YouTube. See Michael Witt, "Taking Stock: Two Decades of Teaching the History, Theory, and Practice of Audiovisual Film Criticism," *NECSUS* (Spring 2017), <https://necsus-ejms.org/taking-stock-two-decades-of-teaching-the-history-theory-and-practice-of-audiovisual-film-criticism/>.

14 *Shooting Down Pictures* was a cinephile project carried out by Lee with the aim of sharing notes and critical reflections while attempting at watching all the thousand titles indicated by the website *They Shoot Pictures Don't They* as the essential masterpieces in the history of cinema. Lee's blog is not online anymore, but his video can be watched on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/showcase/4397711/video/197704817>). A detailed account of this early stages of Lee's path as a video essayist has been offered by Lee himself in the official blog of the Harun Farocki Residency, which Lee attended in 2017 (<https://www.alsolikelife.com/video-essays-the-first-ten-years>). For a brief account of this early stages of online videographic criticism, see also Miklós Kiss and Thomas van den Berg, *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (Scalar, 2016), <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/index>.

15 Part of the episode can be watched on *Rai Cultura*, <https://www.raicultura.it/cinema/articoli/2020/01/Fritz-Lang-beb3a69b-cc18-443d-a32f-30e0c5fe25c6.html>. On the TV show and its relationship with videographic criticism, see also Chiara Grizzaffi, "Dal taccuino del

The three scholars rely on a professional—the editor of the TV programme—who used an editing table positioned in the studio set, winding the film forward and backward, or arresting the images of the film in order for the hosts to discuss specific scenes and shots. On the one hand, therefore, there is a professional production context, with a precise division of labour and an expert who handles a complex and expensive technical tool; the editing table was also, for many years, the only means through which scholars—at least those who were lucky enough to have access to it and to a 16 mm copy of the films they wanted to study—could watch multiple times and analyse a film when film history itself was established as a discipline. On the other hand, there is a film critic, Lee, who uses editing software accessible at very low costs to create a video on his computer, in complete autonomy, that can immediately be shared online to receive feedback from other users.

It did not take too long for scholars to take advantage of digital technologies, thus embracing the “attainability” of the cinematic text.¹⁶ In 2008 the journal *Mediascape* published Eric Faden’s essay “A Manifesto for Critical Media,” in which the author, building on Alexandre Astruc’s infamous notion of the *caméra-stylo*, advocates the adoption, within the field of film studies, of the “media stylo,” that is audiovisual works “using moving images to engage and critique themselves; moving images illustrating theory; or even moving images revealing the labor of their own construction.”¹⁷

Another manifesto is posted in 2009 by Catherine Grant in her blog *Film Studies for Free*. This “Multiprotagonist Manifesto” is, quite appropriately considering its subject, a collage of quotations from scholars, film-makers, and film critics that stress the innovative approach and the creative potential of the video essay, while also establishing the continuity with the tradition

critico alla timeline digitale. Il rimontaggio del film come pratica di analisi,” *Bianco e nero* 584 (January–April 2016): 42–50.

16 The reference is, obviously, to Bellour’s “The Unattainable Text,” quoted in recent years by many scholars who acknowledge its prophetic quality. Bellour himself has commented on his essay and on the current situation of cinema and film studies in “35 Years On: Is the ‘Text,’ Once Again, Unattainable?,” in *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*, ed. Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020); for a discussion on the legacy of Bellour’s essay for the theorization of the audiovisual essay, see, in the same volume, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, “To Attain the Text—But Which Text?”

17 Eric Faden, “A Manifesto for Critical Media,” *Mediascape* (Spring 2008). The journal doesn’t seem to be online anymore, but the essay can be found at https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/media/FADEN%20Manifesto%20for%20Critical%20Media_Spring08.pdf.

of the essay film (the first quotation is from Hans Richter's "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film").¹⁸

In the same year, Grant also begins to make audiovisual essays; introducing such works in the "About" section of another blog, *Filmanalytical*, she writes:

The audiovisual essays, in particular, represent my attempts to study films in ways which are informed as much by my affective experiences of them as by my cognitive (sense-making) efforts. Unlike all of my earlier academic publications, the video essays here will have been created using free-associative, and playful, techniques, albeit following on from numerous viewings of the films and the usual scholarly surveying of relevant critical work by others. If the essays come to be published here, it means that I have been moved and informed by the experience of creating them.¹⁹

This early remarks on her work already posit some elements that are crucial in her approach to videographic criticism, and in that of many other scholars: the importance of the affective experience as well as the combination, in her method, of study and research with creative and playful exploration.

Grant's definition resonates with the reflections of Christian Keathley. In addition to having made, in 2006, one of the earliest examples of a scholarly audiovisual essay (*Pass the Salt*), Keathley wrote, in 2011, an essay that can rightly be considered the first attempt at defining and even systematizing videographic criticism. According to Keathley, the new digital tools allow for

a new way of thinking about film, [...] a new way of conducting and presenting film research. What that kind of critical "writing"—still in the process of being invented—looks and sounds like marks a dramatic broadening in our understanding of what constitutes the meaning of such terms as criticism and scholarship, supplementing them with features that resemble art production.²⁰

18 Catherine Grant, "Video Essays on Films: A Multiprotagonist Manifesto," *Film Studies for Free* (July 2009), <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.it/2009/07/video-essays-on-films-multiprotagonist.html>.

19 *Filmanalytical* (June 2010), <http://filmanalytical.blogspot.it/p/about-filmanalytical.html>.

20 Christian Keathley, "La Caméra-stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia," in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 179.

Furthermore, Keathley states that such critical, audiovisual “writing” is developing in a continuum between two poles: an explanatory mode and a poetic one. Despite resorting to images and montage in order to conduct their argument, works tending towards the explanatory mode rely on verbal language and an argumentative tone; conversely, for videos in the poetic mode verbal language may be an option among many others, and the form is more opaque, less assertive, and more suggestive. These two modes are not mutually exclusive: video essays often combine poetic and explanatory strategies.²¹

The notion of the two modes immediately gained great popularity among the community of scholars interested in videographic criticism: Keathley doesn’t propose a rigid taxonomy, and thus his intuition seems particularly effective in order to understand a heterogeneous phenomenon, which still had to be institutionalized. Furthermore, the idea of two different poles is exemplary of another dichotomy that characterizes videographic practice since the beginning: on the one hand, there is the desire to bring its expressive strategies back into the familiar realm of analytical and academic writing; on the other hand, there is the ambition of getting rid of certain consolidated scholarly conventions, so that videographic criticism can represent a truly new methodological and research approach.

The debate about the appropriateness of the expression “video essay” to indicate a varied array of works reflects such a dichotomy. Defining what is, or what is not, the video essay is the aim of many writings at this stage, and the adoption of the term “essay” raises several issues.²² On the one hand, in fact, it declares an affinity between the video essay²³ and the essay film, although videographic criticism does not always share the latter’s self-expressive strategies and purposes. On the other hand, the word “essay” is in itself problematic, as Álvarez López and Martin argue: its nature is ambiguous because it designates, simultaneously, the rather rigid structure of the five-paragraph essay and a more digressive and open

21 Christian Keathley, “La Cámara-stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia,” 180–83.

22 See Erlend Lavik, “The Video Essay: The Future of Academic Film and Television Criticism?,” *Frames Cinema Journal* 1, no. 1 (July 2012), <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-video-essay-the-future/>; Drew Morton, “Beyond the Essayistic: Defining the Varied Modal Origins of Videographic Criticism,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (2017): 130–36.

23 The term “video essay” is also adopted within the field of visual arts to indicate, more broadly, works “somewhere between documentary video and video art” that borrow their strategies both from the essay film and experimental video art and explore the potential of digital technologies while also critically with them. See Ursula Biemann, *Stuff It! The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003), 8–9.

to experimentation form, that “belongs to the tradition of Roland Barthes, Judith Williamson, Walter Benjamin, Christa Wolf, or Ross Gibson.”²⁴

The expression “video essay,” therefore, may recall the subjective rumination of the essay film and the structured, argumentative scholarly text, but, in fact, it also indicates works that may have little to no connection with both.²⁵ The terminological debate reflects a desire for a precise definition that would help to establish the audiovisual essay as a legitimate form of film criticism and film analysis. And yet, the video essay remains an elusive object that has a hybrid nature. It shows influences from historically consolidated models (the experimental found footage film, the documentary, the essay film), reclaiming their formal elements, or even explicitly paying homage to them—consider Richard Misek’s video essay *The Black Screen* (2017), conceived as a response to Chris Marker’s *Sans soleil* (1983), or Catherine Grant’s *Mechanized Flights* (2014) and David Verdeure’s *The Apartment* (2019), that adopt formal strategies similar to those employed by Martin Arnold in *Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998) and *Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost* (2002)—but its scopes, methods, and its outcomes may differ significantly.

Found footage films pondered about cinema and its history often using discarded footage painstakingly or fortuitously recovered, focusing on the *materiality* of cinematic images and interrogating not just the thematic, narrative, or stylistic features of films, but also the *dispositif* itself. Online videographic criticism, on the other hand, confronts itself with the “digital plenitude,” “a universe of products [...] and practices [...] so vast, varied, and dynamic that is not comprehensible as a whole,”²⁶ and with the proliferation of *dispositifs* and viewing modes. At the same time, is the quintessential product of such plenitude, the result of the cross-contamination of high culture models and “vernacular”²⁷ forms (mash-up, tributes, vidding, etc.) that were apparently more playful and less critical. The audiovisual essay transforms avant-garde strategies into a new norm and blurs the boundaries

24 Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, “Introduction to the Audiovisual Essay: A Child of Two Mothers,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2014), <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/introduction-audiovisual-essay-child-two-mothers/>.

25 It is precisely for this reason that scholars like Catherine Grant propose and adopt the expression “videographic film studies” instead. See Catherine Grant, “How Long Is a Piece of String? On the Practice, Scope and Value of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism,” *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* (September 2014), <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualexamples/frankfurt-papers/catherine-grant/>.

26 Jay David Bolter, *The Digital Plenitude: The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of Digital Media* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2019), 7–8.

27 Kevin B. Lee, “New Audiovisual Vernaculars of Scholarship,” *The Cine-Files* 15 (Fall 2020), <http://www.thecine-files.com/new-audiovisual-vernaculars-of-scholarship/>.

between experimentation, pedagogy, and playfulness; however, it does not give up on assuming a critical and reflexive function, once again based on a rip, on a violation, not of the film strip, but of the undifferentiated image flow of the internet and of streaming platforms, more and more interested in “domesticating,” guiding, and limiting the “textual doing” of users.

Despite its complex status, since the 2010s the audiovisual essay has gradually been embraced by a growing number of film critics, scholars, and cinephiles: as a critical practice it is adopted in magazines such as *Sight and Sound* and *Little White Lies*, or websites like *Film School Rejects*, which commission original contents or curate columns on the growing variety of videos and channels on YouTube; as a research methodology, it is increasingly explored by scholars from all over the world, whose work is published in journals such as *[in]Transition*, *NECSUS*, *Tecmerin*, *MAI*, *Frames*, *Movie*, among others; moreover, it has proved to be a valuable didactic tool for school and university courses. Finally, it has also become a means for promotion and advertising for subscription video on demand (SVOD) platforms such as Mubi or Netflix (which has commissioned video essays about its original productions).

Within the academy, videographic criticism’s process of legitimization is fostered not only by its diffusion in institutional venues such as journals, university courses, or conferences, but also by its conceptualization as a subject through the publication of essays, special issues of journals, and even books dedicated to video essays, which focus on multiple aspects of this practice.

Such discussions, however, do not occur only in institutional places. From its very beginning, the field of videographic criticism has been marked by a collective dimension: practitioners have created a lively exchange of ideas and an informal debate alongside the more formal one in traditional scholarly venues.²⁸ Such informal platforms include the comment section of video-sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, social media, and, more recently, podcasts like Will Di Gravio’s *The Video Essay Podcast*.²⁹

It should also be noted that very often video essays are accompanied by writings and commentaries that are not focused exclusively on the same subject of the video, but assume a self-reflexive form: the authors dwell on videographic criticism itself as a methodology, detailing those aspects of their research that have been made possible or enhanced through the

28 See Tiago Baptista, *Lessons in Looking: The Digital Audiovisual Essay* (PhD diss., Birkbeck University of London, 2016), 37–40.

29 Will Di Gravio, *The Video Essay Podcast*, <https://thevideoessay.com/work>.

audiovisual form. Several scholars and critics, such as Catherine Grant, Kevin B. Lee, Cristina Álvarez López, Adrian Martin, Christian Keathley, and Jason Mittell, have pondered on the methodological aspects of their work. The research process plays such a pivotal role that Alan O' Leary has described his experimentation with "deformative" videographic criticism³⁰ "not as the activity of answering questions about a given topic, but as a practical enquiry into the affordances of a method."³¹

At any rate, the theoretical debate on the audiovisual essay has developed mainly around some crucial aspects:

- *The genealogy of videographic criticism*: Several studies try to trace a genealogy, focusing on video essays "precursors"—the above-mentioned experimental found footage films, documentaries, and essay films. This genealogical excavation has a double purpose: trying to understand, more generally, how images and montage can produce meaning and, specifically, articulate a visual discourse on cinema, but also dignifying a recent practice by relating it to other, already recognized experiences, thus stressing how such "new" approach to film studies has actually a longer, well-established history.³²

30 Deformative criticism "strives to make the original work strange in some unexpected way, deforming it unconventionally to reveal aspects that are conventionally obscured in its normal version and discovering something new from it." Jason Mittell, "Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180#ch20>.

31 Alan O'Leary, "No Voiding Time: A Deformative Videoessay," *16:9* (Autumn 2019), <http://www.16-9.dk/2019/09/no-voiding-time/#>.

32 See, among others, Drew Morton, "Beyond the Essayistic: Defining the Varied Modal Origins of Videographic Criticism," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 130–36. Morton draws on Bill Nichols' seminal study on documentary to suggest a taxonomy of the audiovisual essays based on Nichols' modes; for this purpose, he traces some analogies between Nichols' examples and video essays. About the relationship between found footage films and video essays, see Corey Creekmur, "Compilation and Found-Footage Traditions," [*in*] *Transition* 1, no. 2 (June 2014), <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2014/06/28/compilation-and-found-footage-traditions>, or Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, "The One and The Many: Making Sense of Montage in the Audiovisual Essay," *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* (September 2014), <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/frankfurt-papers/cristina-alvarez-lopez-adrian-martin/>. The latter is a paper presented at the international workshop "Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory," offered by the Film, Media and Theatre Studies Department of Goethe University and the Deutsches Filmmuseum of Frankfurt in November 2013 and organized by Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, with support from Vinzenz Hediger. Significantly, the workshop—probably the first event entirely devoted to the

- *Videographic criticism and written text*: Written text often accompanies the publication of video essays; in the early stages of its diffusion, it served to introduce this new practice by illustrating its advantages. However, this soon raised doubts about the nature of video essays: were they autonomous, or rather ancillary to the more conventional written essays? Scholars such as Miklós Kiss advocate for more straightforwardly argumentative and explanatory video essays, arguing that “videos that remain unclear without their textual accompaniment—lacking in offering independent, rounded-out argumentation in themselves—could be seen as merely improved illustrations to traditional textual criticism.”³³ Conversely, other scholars, such as Catherine Grant, are more inclined to consider the interaction between written commentaries and accompanying text as a resource and to compare such commentaries to the written exegesis that complement artefacts of creative practice research in a way that they both concur to articulate meaning.³⁴ Significantly, [*in*]Transition adopts an open peer review policy, publishing, together with the video essays and written statements by authors, two reviews. Behind this decision, as explained by Jason Mittell, there is once again the need to legitimize the video essay as scholarship: “What we actually publish are the creator statements and peer reviews that strive to answer the question ‘How does this video function as scholarship?’ [...] We offer validation of videos you could easily watch elsewhere by framing them as scholarship that ‘counts.’”³⁵
- *Modes and forms of videographic criticism*: The reflections on videographic criticism were not only aimed at demonstrating its validity: they soon focused on the need to understand concretely the modes and forms of such practice. Kiss and van den Berg’s book offers a detailed

audiovisual essay in Europe—provided, besides the talks of scholars and film critics, screenings of some of the most important found footage works, including *Rose Hobart* and *Kristall*. On the connection between videographic criticism and film education on television, see Volken Pantenburg, “Towards an Alternative History of the Video Essay: Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2017), <https://necsus-ejms.org/towards-an-alternative-history-of-the-video-essay-westdeutscher-rundfunk-cologne/>; Kiss and van den Berg in *Film Studies in Motion* focus in particular on the essay film and on DVD extras; in my book, *I film attraverso i film: dal testo introvabile ai video essay* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2017), I offer a general overview on the precursors of online videographic criticism.

33 Miklós Kiss, “Videographic Scene Analyses, Part 1,” *NECSUS* (Spring 2018), <https://necsus-ejms.org/videographic-scene-analyses-part-1/>.

34 See Catherine Grant, “The Audiovisual Essay as Performative Research,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2016), <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-audiovisual-essay-as-performative-research/>.

35 Jason Mittell, “Opening Up [*in*]Transition’s Open Peer-Review Process,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 138.

taxonomy organized according to what the authors identify as the main types of video essays present online as well as their formal and thematic features.³⁶ Other scholars focus on the formal aspects of videographic criticism,³⁷ or propose an analysis based on an “auteurist” approach—that is, addressing the defining features in the works of well-known video essayists such as Grant, Lee, or Kogonada.³⁸

- *Videographic criticism and pedagogy*: The value of the video essay as a teaching methodology has also fostered reflections centred on its pedagogical function,³⁹ as well as how-to guides⁴⁰—extremely useful for those approaching the video essay without basic knowledge of editing software and other technological resources. The most significant pedagogical project has certainly been the workshops run by Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley at Middlebury College since 2015, “Scholarship in Sound and Image.” The workshops represent an important training opportunity aimed at junior and senior scholars interested in learning how to adopt videographic criticism as a research method. The pedagogical approach of the workshop, formalized in a volume in two editions, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image*, has become an international model.⁴¹

Such a set of discourses on and practices of videographic criticism have determined its progressive institutionalization. A certain rhetoric of the “novelty” that dominated (and sometimes still resurfaces today) the debate

36 Kiss and van den Berg, *Film Studies in Motion*, ch. 2.1.

37 Grizzaffi, *I film attraverso i film: dal testo introvabile ai video essay*. On specific formal strategies of videographic criticism see, by way of example, Ian Garwood, “The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2016), <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-place-of-voiceover-in-audiovisual-film-and-television-criticism/>; Catherine Grant, “Déjà Viewing? Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies,” *Mediascape* (Winter 2013).

38 Baptista, *Lessons in Looking*.

39 *The Cine-Files*, for example, has published since 2014 several articles that describe and reflect on teaching videographic criticism; other reference includes Jennifer Proctor, “Teaching Avant-garde Practice as Videographic Research,” *Screen* 60, no. 3 (2019): 466–74; Drew Morton, “Use the Force, Luke!: Teaching Videographic Criticism to Students and Colleagues,” *Flow* 22 (2015), <https://www.flowjournal.org/2015/09/teaching-videographic-criticism/>; Michael Witt, “Taking Stock: Two Decades of Teaching the History, Theory, and Practice of Audiovisual Film Criticism,” among others.

40 See, for example, the how-to guides section of *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory in Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/resources/>.

41 Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant, *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy* (Scalar, 2019), <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/index>.

early on has gradually been replaced by greater integration and “normalization” within film studies.

The most evident traits of this institutionalization process do not lie so much in the specific features of the video essays. There are, indeed, some distinctive elements in the scholarly audiovisual essay, such as the use of theoretical references, often made explicit through direct quotation in subtitles, intertitles, or through the reference list at the end of the video; or a certain predominance of the explanatory mode, even if many of the academic journals mentioned above are open towards more poetic and experimental forms. Rather, such affirmation is marked by a shift from the tentativeness, the “amateurish quality” Patricia Pisters ascribes to video essays,⁴² to a sort of “professionalization”: that is, a greater confidence in the use of tools that are becoming increasingly sophisticated, as well as a better understanding of strategies and rhetorical forms already consolidated.⁴³ Such understanding has been fostered and enhanced by the above-mentioned theoretical reflections, which are now part of a shared knowledge that allows the more confident integration of the video essay into research and teaching practice.

This process, however, does not necessarily imply giving up looking for videographic approaches that diverge from more established research practices; in fact, the multiplicity of strategies for the study of cinema through videographic criticism is confirmed by the numerous definitions and proposals (some even antithetical) given by scholars in the special issue of *The Cine-Files* dedicated to scholarly videographic criticism.⁴⁴

Such variety mirrors the numerous, converging influences that are shaping the field of videographic criticism, a field that is still lively and not rigidly codified, as demonstrated by some inventive and compelling experiments for a videographic history of cinema.

A Videographic Film History?

As a methodology, videographic criticism addresses cinema history from the same entry points of traditional forms of film scholarship—auteur or genre theory, feminist film theory, close reading and formalist analysis, history

42 Patricia Pisters, “Imperfect Creative Criticism,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 145.

43 See Johannes Binotto, “In Lag of Knowledge: The Video Essay as Parapraxis,” in *Practical Aesthetics*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 84.

44 Tracy-Cox Stanton and Allison De Fren, eds., special issue on the scholarly video essay, *The Cine-Files* 15 (Fall 2020), <http://www.thecine-files.com>.

of technology, media archaeology and so on. Some of these approaches have been more successful than others: it is undeniable that auteurism was one of the most adopted perspectives right from the start. The editing software becomes the ideal tool for identifying, isolating, and analysing the visual and stylistic distinctive features of authors—as demonstrated by the obsession for directors like Wes Anderson (fostered by the viral success of the video essays made by kogonada), Spielberg, or Tarantino, among others. The adoption of new technologies, then, does not necessarily entail giving up on more traditional, even conservative, approaches to film studies: in fact, videographic criticism is still mainly concerned with a Western-centric canon of works, also because of their wider circulation and availability.⁴⁵

However, there are aspects of films and of the viewer's experience that the video essays convey with unprecedented immediacy, thus opening new paths also for historiographic approaches. By way of example, there is a line of inquiry that traces a compelling and innovative audiovisual history of techniques and aesthetics. The use of film stills as an analytical gesture, as Raymond Bellour argued, comes at the price of interrupting movement, thus losing the essential element of cinema as moving pictures.⁴⁶ Stills and frames accompanying written essays and books freeze in a series of poses what otherwise moves before our eyes. Videographic criticism, on the other hand, allows movement to be preserved, thus offering new possibilities for the study of stardom, performance, and gesture, as demonstrated by video essays of scholars such as Laura Mulvey (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 2013), Catherine Grant (*Not a Grand Dame*, 2017; *Mechanised Flights*, among others), Jaap Kooijman (*Success*, 2016). However, it is not just the movement of the bodies on screen that is difficult to convey: as Volker Pantenburg points out, “camera movement confronts us with transitions, flowing developments, gradual and continual shifts that are difficult to describe. [...] [T]he characteristic of a horizontal pan can actually only be reproduced as movement.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the audiovisual essay is the ideal means through

45 Some efforts have been made, however, for a more inclusive research agenda, and for increasing the visibility of marginalized groups: consider, by way of example, journals like *Tecmerin*, that promotes linguistic plurality and the overcoming of a Western-centric perspective, or the “Black Lives Matter Video Essay Playlist,” curated by Kevin B. Lee, Cydnie Wilde Harris, and Will Di Gravio (<https://thevideoessay.com/blacklivesmatter>), aimed at making more visible videographic production concerned with the representation of Black people in film and media, with systemic inequality and with the Black Lives Matter movement.

46 Raymond Bellour, “The Unattainable Text,” 25–26.

47 Volker Pantenburg, “Videographic Film Studies and the Analysis of Camera Movement,” *NECSUS* (Spring 2016), <https://necsus-ejms.org/videographic-film-studies-and-the-analysis-of-camera-movement/>.

which analysing camera movements, restoring not only their complexity, but also their effect on the viewer. The work of the cinematography scholar and video essayist Patrick Keating is exemplary in this respect: In *A Homeless Ghost: The Moving Camera and Its Analogies* (2016), Keating addresses camera movements in 1920s and 1930s' Hollywood cinema from a cultural perspective, investigating the relationship between their aesthetic qualities and their conceptualization through the debates in trade magazines.⁴⁸ Keating's video lets the viewer literally "experience" the two metaphorical definitions—the omnipresent eye and the ghostly presence—adopted to conceptualize camera movements.

The video essay *Feeling and Thought as They Take Form: Early Steadicam, Labor, and Technology (1974–1985)* by Katie Bird (2020) is as effective.⁴⁹ Bird focuses on the first decade of the introduction of stabilizing technology, comparing Steadicam with the less successful Panaglide. Juxtaposing clips from films of that decade—from the most well-known, like *Rocky* (John Avildsen, 1976) or *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), to minor genre films—with other non-theatrical materials such as industrial and training films, Bird adopts a media-archaeological and cultural perspective "to expand and disrupt our notion of technological emergence and stylistic origin narratives," focusing on the complex intertwining between visual experimentation and technological research, labour culture, and cinematographic aesthetics. The expressive and formal richness of the video—which uses different strategies, including voice-over, split screen, graphic elements, cropping, and zooming—reflects the different, entangled layers of the argument. But, most importantly, such audiovisual approach allows the viewer to feel, "to experience embodied stabilizers aesthetics."⁵⁰

The focus on the experiential and affective dimension, explored by several video essays, allows the tracing of alternative paths and unexpected connections within the history of cinema. Catherine Grant's work, for example, addresses the issue of intertextuality through a "material thinking" that makes visible, "dense," almost tangible, the memory of films, the stratification of forms and models, the ghosts of a cinematic past that haunts

48 Patrick Keating, "A Homeless Ghost: The Moving Camera and its Analogies," [*in*] *Transition* 2, no. 4 (2016), <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2015/12/29/homeless-ghost>.

49 Katie Bird, "Feeling and Thought as They Take Form: Early Steadicam, Labor, and Technology (1974–1985)," [*in*] *Transition* 7, no. 1 (2020), <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/feeling-and-thought-they-take-form-early-steadicam-labor-and-technology-1974-1985>.

50 *Ibid.*

films.⁵¹ In *The Haunting of the Headless Woman* (2018) Grant investigates the eerie similarities between *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962) and *The Headless Woman* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008) through superimposition, thus “introduc[ing] us to the ‘unconscious optics’ of particular instances of intertextuality, allowing us not just to know about these, but also to experience them, powerfully, sensually, in this and other cases in [her] work, through an affectively charged morphing aesthetic.”⁵² But the intertextual connections on which Grant lingers may concern not only the memory of films, but also that of the viewer. In “The Use of an Illusion: Childhood Cinephilia, Object Relations, and Videographic Film Studies,” Grant and Keathley present works—*Uncanny Fusion: Journey to Mixed-up Files* (2014) and *SFR* (2014)—which draw unexpected connections between films (or, in Keathley’s case, even between actresses of the same name, or between actors and politicians): these two videos are indeed a journey into the authors’ unconscious, into their personal and spectatorial experience through images assembled like fragmented, confused, and incomplete childhood memories.⁵³

In videographic criticism the biographical and subjective dimension is often merged with critical and theoretical reflections, and the history of cinema encounters the individual stories of its spectators:

The technology of film today—notes David Colangelo—indulges and amplifies personal reflections and compulsions as it relocates films to places and spaces where we can explore its relationality to itself and to ourselves, and at the same time explore its expressivity through ourselves and through digital tools.⁵⁴

Video essays can even work as a time machine for the cinephile of the digital age, allowing one “to re-create in and through the textual manipulations, but also through the choice of media and storage formats that sense of the unique, that sense of place, occasion, and moment so essential to all forms

51 See Catherine Grant, “The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking,” *Aniki* 1, no. 1 (2014): 49–62; Grant, “Déjà Viewing? Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies.”

52 Catherine Grant, “The Haunting of *The Headless Woman*,” *Tecmerin*, no. 2 (2019), <https://tecmerin.uc3m.es/en/journal-2-1/>.

53 Catherine Grant and Christian Keathley, “The Use of an Illusion: Childhood Cinephilia, Object Relations, and Videographic Film Studies,” *Photogénie*, June 19, 2014, <https://photogenie.be/the-use-an-illusion-childhood-cinephilia-object-relations-and-videographic-film-studies/>.

54 David Colangelo, “Hitchcock, Film Studies, and New Media: The Impact of Technology on the Analysis of Film,” in *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, ed. Santiago Hidalgo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 139.



Fig. 15.1. Jessica McGoff's desktop documentary *My Mulholland* (2020).

of cinephilia, even as it is caught in the compulsion to repeat,⁵⁵ as in the case of the desktop documentary *My Mulholland* (2020), by Jessica McGoff. The video is a sort of re-enactment, through screen-capture technology, of her experience as a precocious preteen cinephile frightened by *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001).⁵⁶ McGoff's singular experience becomes the starting point for a deep dive into the history of the internet, allowed by the Internet Archive and the digital repository Wayback Machine, and a meditation about the pervasiveness and the ambiguous nature of images.

Videographic criticism, therefore, can become an invaluable instrument for the approaches to the history of cinema that consider not only the "texts"—the films' formal features or thematic issues—but also the spectatorial experience. The relevance of the subjective and embodied aspects of viewing experience for videographic criticism is demonstrated by a renewed interest in phenomenological approaches to film studies; and by putting together those videos that address, more or less in detail, the modes of consumption of films and media,⁵⁷ from cinemagoing to home video, one

55 Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment," in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 40.

56 Jessica McGoff, "My Mulholland," *The Cine-Files* 15 (Fall 2020), <https://www.thecine-files.com/on-mulholland-drive/>.

57 Besides McGoff's *My Mulholland*, example of such videos could include Kevin B. Lee's *Explosive Paradox* (2020) and the other works in Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer, eds., "Once

can obtain an interesting, transgenerational account of the movie-going and movie-watching experience between “classical” cinephilia and the new cinephilia of the digital age. Some works also address the context of reception of films from a historical perspective: *Public Controversy and Film Censorship: The Release of All Quiet on The Western Front (1930) in Berlin* by Manuel Palacio and Ana Mejón (2020) resorts to archival documents to reconstruct and even re-enact the protests organized by Nazis during the first screening of Milestone’s film in Berlin.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the audiovisual essay can be a useful research method for those theoretical perspectives which favour non-linearity, rupture (new cinema history, media archaeology, visual culture). In *The Cine-Files* dossier on the scholarly audiovisual essay, Tracy Cox-Stanton and John Gibbs discuss two of their works to argue precisely for the potential of videographic criticism to enable “non-linear, non-hierarchical approaches to film history.”⁵⁹ Cox-Stanton’s video essay *Gesture in A Woman under the Influence* (2019), moving from the backyard dance scene in Cassavetes’ film “re-invokes” “the ghostliness of gestures” by tracing the connections between the performance of the dying swan by Gena Rowlands and the images of other female bodies, other gestures that explicitly or implicitly recall those movements. Once again, the superimposition of the images allows for the presence of these “ghosts” to become immediately visible, for bodies that are distant in time and space to “touch,” “creat[ing] a point of view that short-circuits the easy objectification of the video’s aberrant bodies by recontextualizing them within scholarly considerations of gesture and within a broader history of society’s disciplining of the ‘feminine’ body.”⁶⁰

Cox-Stanton’s “charting of relations” beautifully resonates with Gibbs’ audiovisual “mind map,” one that connects Rio de Janeiro’s Cinelândia to Hitchcock’s Hollywood, *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) to *Macunaíma* (Joachim Pedro de Andrade, 1969). His video essay, *Say, Have You Seen the Carioca?* (2019), aims at exploring the encounters and connections

upon a Screen: *Audiovisual Essays*, a special issue of *The Cine-Files* 15 (Fall 2020), or Cormac Donnelly’s “Pan, Scan, Venkman,” [*in*] *Transition* 6, no. 3 (2019), <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/pan-scan-venkman>.

58 Manuel Palacio and Ana Mejón, “Las polémicas públicas y la censura cinematográfica. El estreno de *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) en Berlín,” *Tecmerin* 4, no. 1 (2020), <https://tecmerin.uc3m.es/revista-4-4/>.

59 Tracy Cox-Stanton and John Gibbs, “Audiovisual Scholarship and Experiments in Non-linear Film History,” *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (Fall 2020), <http://www.thecine-files.com/audiovisual-scholarship-and-experiments-in-non-linear-film-history/>.

60 Tracy Cox-Stanton, “Gesture in *A Woman under the Influence*: A Charting of Relations,” *NECSUS* (Autumn 2019), <https://necsus-ejms.org/gesture-in-a-woman-under-the-influence-a-charting-of-relations/>.

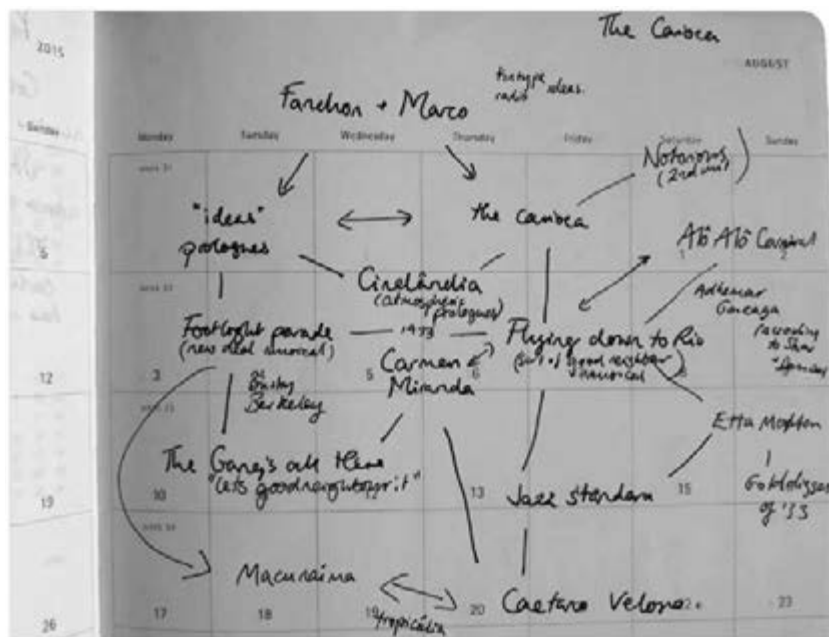


Fig. 15.2. The draft of the “mind map” in John Gibbs’ *Say, Have You Seen the Carioca?* (2019).

between North American and Brazilian cinema.⁶¹ A mind map scribbled in a notebook is the visual expedient through which the viewer is invited to a journey from one node of the map to the other (see fig. 15.2), experiencing those connections as well as the richness of an intermedial method that combines written text, photographs, recordings from re-enacted silent movie prologues, film clips, and live music recordings. Through the similarities between their works, the two scholars conclude that

Both videos experiment with non-linear methods as opposed to “historiographies drawing on evolutionary chronologies and classical–modern or centre–periphery models,” and both achieve this, at least in part, through embracing intermedial connections. They also deploy a range of audiovisual techniques to make these leaps and connections—layering of dissolved images, split screens, quotation of other works, dialogue and sound. In doing so they uncover the complexity of cultural relationships in their respective areas of enquiry, and suggest new ways of approaching

61 John Gibbs, “Say, Have You Seen the Carioca? An Experiment in Non-linear, Non-hierarchical Approaches to Film History,” *Movie 8* (June 2019), <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/carioca.pdf>.

and revealing the intricate histories and the fusion of elements which shape media objects.⁶²

In the path toward its institutionalization, therefore, videographic criticism has been successfully integrated with more conventional and well-established approaches for the study of cinema history, but it has also enabled scholars to think about different forms and methods for historiographical research. The horizon of such “audiovisual histories” is still expanding: there are new, promising experiments that, for example, combine audiovisual essays and technologies such as VR. By way of example, one could mention *Montegelato* (2021), a VR film made by videomaker and video editor Davide Rapp and dedicated to Monte Gelato, a filming location just outside Rome. Its waterfalls have been the background for over 180 films, starting with Rossellini’s *Francesco giullare di Dio* (1959): they are very often genre films, ranging from Westerns to pepla, from comedies to science fictions, but there are also auteur films like *I Knew Her Well* (1965), by Pietrangeli (1965), or *Don Quixote* (1964/1992), by Orson Welles. Over the span of five years of study, research, and recovery of materials—some of which were almost impossible to find—Rapp has conceived a 360-degree work, an immersive experience in the decades of cinema history that have passed through Monte Gelato. Given the peculiar conformation of the location, the camera position was very similar in each film: this allows Rapp to superimpose the film clips on each other as they appear on the virtual screen, following an order that is not chronological, but rather a sort of narration that juxtapose the scenes according to micro-motives (the arrival at the clearing, the bivouac, the fight, the “bathing beauties”). The images accumulate, stratify, surround the viewer: *Montegelato* is an immersive experience of spatialized time. Through its engaging, riveting nature, the film also raises several crucial issues for film studies, because it offers the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the camera and space, between cinema and landscape, and between film locations and production models, as well as on *topoi* and clichés of genre cinema, offering itself as a groundbreaking methodology for a historical geography of cinema.

Montegelato has been selected for the official competition of Venice VR Expanded (a section of the Venice International Film Festival). Concluding this brief overview with the film made by Rapp—who is not a film studies scholar himself—I would like to offer some final remarks. The path towards the institutionalization of videographic criticism as a creative form and as a

62 Cox-Stanton and Gibbs, “Audiovisual Scholarship and Experiments in Non-linear Film History.”



Fig. 15.3. A still from Davide Rapp's VR film *Montegelato* (2021).

methodological tool has not held back the hybridization between languages, between fields and areas of film studies, and between practitioners from different backgrounds that has characterized its birth and development. This hybridization allows video essays to circulate in platforms and contexts that range from festivals and events to online magazines, from streaming platforms to university classrooms, and helps such form to reach an audience that goes beyond film scholars or professional film critics.

The inventive, affective, intimate, creative, and pioneering forms that this research methodology can assume demonstrate that the purpose of videographic criticism exceeds that of simply illustrating already written cinema histories. Rather, it aims at reimagining film history, inviting us to new, adventurous time travels.

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V

Into the Digital: New Approaches and Revisions

16 Future Pasts within the Dynamics of the Digital Present

Digitized Films and the Clusters of Media Historiographic Experience

Franziska Heller

Abstract

Nowadays, digital media frame how we experience our physical “presence” and the temporal category of “the present.” At the same time it seems that it has never been easier to access the “past” of moving images: This comprises the films but also film historic knowledge about restorations, etc. This chapter sheds a light on the *experiential* historiographic effects. A first case study discusses the representation of film restorations on the internet. It demonstrates “comparative vision” to be a pivotal element within the context of an *aesthetic historiography* which operates in *digital dispositifs*. The term “*dispositif*” reflects the institutional structures as well as digital spatial arrangements that establish “*the politics of time*”: A public debate in 2020 serves as a second case study. The *politics of time* turn into methodological questions that emerge when working with digitized historic material. The spatiotemporal dynamics point towards the necessity of a performative notion of film history.

Keywords: digital media, Reinhart Koselleck, phenomenology, film restoration, Criterion Collection, digital hermeneutics

Digital media have become an integral part of our day-to-day lives. Not only are they omnipresent, they have become so habitual, that they define—often subconsciously—how we experience our (physical) “presence” and the temporal category of “the present.” In such an entropic media environment, it seems that it has never been easier to access the “past” of moving images,

the history of film, and to share film history with others. This comprises the films themselves but also (popular) film historic knowledge (about restorations, historical contexts, etc.), which often comes in the form of bits and pieces (images, written or aural quotations, clips, documentaries, and video essays on film history) that circulate in various *dispositifs*¹ and thus enter specific discourses.

This chapter aims to shed a light on the specific experiential historiographic effects that emerge when we are accessing, watching, and experiencing moving images in a digital environment. The main objective is to analyse the medial practices that convey moving images as being “historic.” The approach conceptualizes phenomena of digitized moving image history as experiential *spheres*. The methodological framework thus takes into account the complex spatiotemporality which entails the historiographic effect as sensual and bodily experience.

The contribution follows the volume’s general approach that highlights the epistemological and methodological shift that started with the proclamation of New Film History in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s when, among others, the *preconceptions* of *writing*, *doing*, and *making* film history moved into the centre of interest. The approach introduced here picks up on that perspective by investigating the spatiotemporal (pre)conceptions which come into play when digital moving images are referenced as stemming from an “older” (often associated with the vague label “analogue”) production and distribution context.

One theoretical term that has been popular since the end of the 1990s is Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *remediation*. It describes phenomena where older media are situated in relation to newer ones: How can the relation between quotation, embracement, adaption, and remix be systemized? Bolter and Grusin offer a double perspective that identifies two coexistent layers

1 Following Frank Kessler, the French term *dispositif* is deliberately and consequently used here. Kessler reflects on the history of the term as well as the differences of meaning deriving from translations into other languages. In the context of this chapter, it is important to note that Kessler understands *dispositif* as a specific mode of address. Methodologically, Kessler’s approach combines several analytic dimensions: an interconnected analysis of a film’s content, the aesthetic structure as well as the perceptual dimension is situated in close relation to the performative aspects of watching moving images in a specific spatial arrangement. See Frank Kessler, “The Cinema of Attractions as *Dispositif*,” in *The Cinema of Attraction Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 57–69; Frank Kessler, “Notes on *Dispositif*: Work in Progress” (2007), <http://www.let.uu.nl/~frank.Benjamin/personal/dispositifs.html>; Frank Kessler, “Programming and Performing Early Cinema Today: Strategies and *Dispositifs*,” in *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (New Barnet: Indiana University Press, 2011), 137–46.

at work in the perceptual process between *hypermediacy* and *immediacy*: The ostentative demonstration (hence conscious realization by the user) of the opportunities for the usage of the current “newer” medium of access (*hypermediacy*), on the one side, and, on the other side, the effects of the older medium which is re-mediated in such a framework. The remediated medium still conveys its *immediate* perceptual effects (*immediacy*, as, for example, archival moving images from the period of the early cinema of attractions whose content still can create immersive effects by the specific aesthetics although they are presented on a YouTube channel²).

In order to incorporate this double logic methodologically, I propose the concept of analytical *clusters*.³ It addresses the specific challenge to systemize the contradictory and layered interplay of perceptual, experiential effects of “historicity”; a problematic that is already present in Bolter and Grusin’s reflections. But in view of today’s digital media the tension becomes even more obvious when such a dynamic media environment as the digital frames how we *see* and *experience* moving images that originated in analogue production contexts. Within the digital environment the former analogue materiality becomes in many cases a rhetorical means that serves specific contextual interests, often affirming the logic of (commercial) circulation and the teleological idea of technological progress. The aesthetic practices of digital media referencing the temporal dimension of a media historic “before”—often vaguely identified as the “analogue qualities” of moving images—entail historiographic effects in particular. These effects interact with the paratextual and perceptual implications of the framing digital *dispositif* which presents the images as being “historic” by contextualizing them in a specific way.

From a more general, methodological point of view the perspective could also be understood as a critical approach to digital audiovisual culture and the conveyed politics of temporalities: What notions of “history” are conveyed by such modes of contemporary media historiographic experience?

In order to systemize the dimensions of the historiographic experience, I focus on two key aspects: Firstly, on the critical role of the perceptual

2 See, among others, Joost Broeren, “Digital Attractions. Reloading Early Cinema in Online Video Collections,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: Wallflower Press, 2009), 154–65.

3 The idea of clusters is used as a model in order to describe the simultaneously coexisting layers of temporalities that are implied and come into play as perceptual affordances through digitized moving images. Spielmann uses the model of clusters as analytical tool to characterize the layered quality of intermedial art forms. See Yvonne Spielmann, *Intermedialität. Das System Peter Greenaway* (München: Fink, 1998).

mode termed “comparative vision” or respectively “comparative perception”; secondly, on the performative, situational aspect of the filmic work.

In the following, I detail the methodological challenges and the understanding of digitized films as spatiotemporal clusters.⁴ The theoretical claims are subsequently illustrated with the case study of a specific mode of representing film restoration on the internet. The findings are situated within the broader context of an *aesthetic historiography* which operates in digital *dispositifs*. The term “*dispositif*” implies critical reflections on the institutional and political structures of power as well as on technological spatial arrangements that establish specific *politics of time*. The latter are further discussed using the example of a public debate in 2020 that relates digital edition practices to the current sociopolitical climate.

I end my argument with turning *the politics of time* into concrete methodological questions that emerge when working with digitized historic material within a digital media environment. The spatiotemporal dynamics analysed point towards the discussion whether we need a much more performative notion of film history; even more so, if we consider the fast-changing *futures* of digital media environments which will also frame our experience of future digitized moving images, our future access to media historic pasts.

Methodological Challenges: Spatiotemporal and Perceptual Clusters

The crux and the complexity of film digitization and its historiographic impact derive from the many layers of perception and from the *flexible* (because *digital*) remediation of a time-based audiovisual medium. The term “digital” implies here different selective and interpretative, technological as well as sociocultural processes such as the actual digitization process which entails the quantization of analogue information into digital code, the (mathematical as well as aesthetic) interpretation of the code as (moving) images, which is framed by sociocultural norms and specific (distributional) interests.

I expand the idea of *remediation* towards the term “reprise” in order to focus on the perceptual layers of the complex “digitized analogue film.” François Niney uses “reprise” to describe *effects* of authenticity and historicity in found footage films.⁵ The term is adapted here to characterize the effects

4 See also footnote 3.

5 See François Niney, *Die Wirklichkeit des Dokumentarfilms. 50 Fragen zur Theorie und Praxis des Dokumentarischen*, trans. and ed. Heinz-B. Heller and Matthias Steinle (Marburg: Schüren, 2012).

of reviving pre-existing moving images. Niney's term implies that by reusing and recontextualizing archival moving images there is always a testing, probing dimension to it, a trial for possible meanings and tentative modes of experiences. The perception of images is shaped by the specific framing of current discourses and cultural imaginaries. In the context of analogue *reprises* in the digital realm, the categories of "analogue" and "digital" are not to be understood as ontological nor technological oppositions. They rather form a ratio of difference that manifests itself through different mediated practices. The relation *analogue/digital* as a rhetoric figure serves always a specific purpose—e.g. within the context of economic interests in form of (not yet standardized) labels such as "remastered" or "new" digital version. Thus, the promotional labels contrive a temporal logic in media history—most often "before" = analogue and "after" = digital. But it is quite difficult to determine what the "digital" in the *digitized*, former analogue film actually means. One probably won't see the real extent of the digital "quality" of a remastered film version—unless one can somehow compare it to an analogue element (or an older digitized version). The problem needs to be understood as a perceptual effect. Digital editions of archival films offer plenty of examples in the so-called bonus features of how comparisons to the former analogue materiality are established: they present images *before* and *after* the digital remastering. And although such audiovisual paratexts that, for example, illustrate film restoration processes do not always explicitly refer to the analogue originals, they often use signs of decay and patina associated with analogue film to connote "older" practices of film production and projection. They re-narrate and literally re-arrange film history in a popular and mediated manner—via the specific spatial arrangement of the images. Similar practices can be observed on the internet.

Comparative Perception and the Co-presence of Past and Future: Digital Performances

The official website of the Bologna film festival Il Cinema Ritrovato has a category devoted to the history of film restoration that is titled "A New Life." Frames taken from film restorations are positioned below an explanatory, introductory text. The first still stems from the silent movie *Rapsodia Satanica* (1914/1917). The image functions as a symbolic illustration of the general process of film restoration: the user is invited to move back and forth along a line over the film still with the cursor which is firstly positioned in the middle of the image. The vertical line splits the image into two parts

of the same size. With the gestural execution of a wipe over the image the user can cover the damaged part of the image with the restored image (see fig. 16.1). The prevalent suggestion to the user is to compare the different states of the image—by executing the gesture and thus experiencing a change in the image. The connoted message is that the user is performing the restoration him/herself if the cursor is moved to the right side. However, one can also playfully move the cursor to the left, thus *unrestoring* the film image. By experiencing the (reversible and repeatable) process of change between “old” and “new” of a historic image with this gesture, the user is discerning time differences that can be interpreted as different historic layers ascribed to the film still. The isolated film frame becomes a symbol for the whole film and its historicity. Through the montage of the headline (“A New Life”), the accompanying text and the suggested interaction with the image, the website conflates the idea of the probing reviving of a film by digital restoration—with the possibility of interactive modulation of the (digital) film image by the internet user. (Another example from the website with the same principle is shown in figs. 16.2 and 16.3.) From this perspective, the paratext of the website carries special significance as it hints at the temporal and historic relativity of digital restorations and digital imaging which always depend on individual, subjective interpretations and decisions of the executing individuals: “Every restoration is a child of its time. It is subject to the limitations and possibilities of the technologies employed, but also to the interpretation of the work by those individuals carrying out the restoration.”⁶ The way film restoration is presented here implies a specific historiographic concept where the interactive gestural execution—limited as it might be—implements the physical presence of the user. Within the playful process of covering and uncovering the image, temporal categories of past, present, and future (the constant possibility of changing the image again) conflate.

The Film Foundation introduces the topic of film preservation and restoration in a similar way—using film stills “before and after preservation” where the user can move the cursor and thus experience the history of the image back and forth—wiping out damages in the image, refreshing and sharpening the colours (see fig. 16.4). Interestingly, the website also offers advice for so-called *do-it-yourself* (DIY) film restorations. The wording seems to be an apt description of the historiographic concept that lies beneath the wipe-images of film restorations: the co-presence of past and present where, with a movement, the promise of future improvement is implied. The effect

6 Il Cinema Ritrovato, “A New Life,” <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/restauro/>.

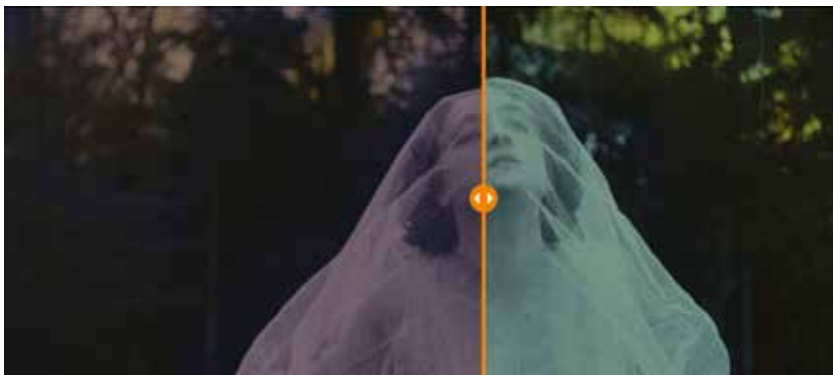


Fig. 16.1. Screenshot of an interactive restoration of a still from the silent movie *Rhapsodia Satanica* (1914/1917).



Fig. 16.2. Screenshot of a digital restoration with the possibility of interactive modulation of the (digital) film image.



Fig. 16.3. Screenshot of a digital restoration with the possibility of interactive modulation of the (digital) film image.



Fig. 16.4. Screenshot of an interactive film still from Michael Curtiz' film *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933) "before and after preservation."

of the image being historic, albeit openly shown in its digital modifiability, lies between the relational experience of "old" and "new." The effect results from the specific clustered temporality which is integrally related to the actual physical gesture. The executing subject becomes physically part of the historiographic perceptual effect. It is the experiential paradox of the term "do-it-yourself history" as the notion of *history* also always connotes an objective, collective temporal reference beyond the individual.

One crucial element in the aesthetic organization of the images that is displayed (and subsequently set in motion) is the split screen. Split screens are often used in documentaries about film restorations to convey knowledge about film restoration practices and decision-making. The method of purposely positioning two images next to each other and thus encouraging a specific way of comparison has long been discussed in art history⁷: art historian Heinrich Dilly conceptualized, with reference to Heinrich Wölfflin, the implication of this method also on the perceptual level and

7 See Lena Bader, Martin Gaier, and Falk Wolf, eds., *Vergleichendes Sehen* (Munich: Fink, 2010), 14. Film scholar Malte Hagener has worked on the media historic significance and aesthetic potentials of the split screen; for further reading, see Malte Hagener, "The Aesthetics of Displays: How the Split Screen Remediates Other Media," *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media* (2008).

introduced the term “comparative vision” (“*vergleichendes Sehen*”). The approach questions the perceptual and hence methodological implications of creating an analytic viewing option based on the juxtaposition, thus staging a comparison. The specific comparative constellation of two or more images entails meaning making within the viewing process. Within the film historic context, the arrangement of the images, e.g. their organization along the reading direction from left to right, implies a temporal organization from “older” to “later.” In brief, this organization establishes a temporal succession in the perception that can be already understood as historiographic, especially within the framework of the website that hints at the temporalities of “old” images getting a “new life.”

In the context of digitally mediated film history, it is not only important to question the implications of the “comparative vision” at hand, but also to take into account the medially spatialized as well as temporalized experience that it produces. When it comes to relating archival moving images within digital realms, there are multiple elements involved—aesthetically and on the level of the *dispositif*—which constitute our distinction of temporal differences between past, present, and future. The effect is based on the individual experience where one is relating one image to another by comparing them. This—as already mentioned above—constitutes a paradox: The experiential sphere is established by the suggestion of actively *re-doing* film history. This paradox culminates in the impression of *doing-it-yourself*, even involving a bodily gesture of the *presently* active user.

Screen Spheres: Aesthetic Historiography and the Plurality of Time

The focus on the implications of perceptual modes and preconditions of spatiotemporal arrangement is linked to tendencies in film theory that conceptualize audiovisual phenomena in specific relations to our sensory experience. Such approaches place a particular emphasis on spatiotemporal dynamics and analyse moving images and the conditions of their appearance as lived experience—with the focus on the spatial organization of the encounter. The methodology results from the use of phenomenological concepts to describe filmic perception processes. Somatic and bodily experience is deemed to be central to the way we experience moving images. Filmic perception is thus understood as an interactive, intertwined reciprocal process between body and moving images. The notion of the *body* becomes the key figure of thought in order to grasp the tactile and haptic qualities of moving image experience. The cinematic body touches the spectator’s body

and vice versa. The intertwined somatic process creates a form of meaning making in its own right. Therefore, spatiotemporal dynamics become pivotal as they orchestrate the processes of sensual contact. In such a perspective, comprehending moving images is primarily understood as happening before and beyond cognitive comprehension. Especially publications in the fields of queer and gender studies have shown how the concepts—although they deal with a precognitive dimension of film comprehension—can inhere sociocultural and sociopolitical meaning.⁸ Vivian Sobchack took her by now canonical phenomenological approach to filmic perception further when she applied the phenomenological viewpoint to digital media. She factored in the habitual omnipresence of such media and the mediatization of everyday life. Sobchack put an even bigger emphasis on the spatial dimension as she used the term “screen-spheres.” She thus placed a focus on the spatiotemporal dimension of the digital preconditions of the appearances of moving images in relation to the lived, experienced, and moving body.⁹ Sobchack’s reflections can be productively applied to phenomena like the one discussed above where the user’s body plays an important part in the comparative and performative arrangement of temporal relations connoted with film historic significance. This constitutes one element of what might be called a form of *aesthetic historiography* within digital cultures.

The specific understanding of the term “*aesthetic*” refers to the German philosopher of technology Gernot Böhme, who applies modalities of aesthetic perception to environments in the real world.¹⁰ In the sense used here, *aesthetic* historiography designates the experiential dimension of media phenomena in which popular culture, perceptual modalities, and digital spheres coincide in a cluster conveying temporal differences that can

8 See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Katharina Lindner, “Questions of Embodied Difference—Film and Queer Phenomenology,” *NECSUS* 1, no. 2 (2012): 199–217.

9 Vivian Sobchack, “From Screen-scape to Screen-sphere: A Meditation in Medias Res,” in *Screens*, ed. Dominique Chateau and José Moure (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 157–75. Such a perspective of social critique via modes of mediated sensual perception can also be applied to phenomena of the remediation of film history and mediated film memory culture within the context of digital media; all the more as the topic has already provoked various reflections on the specific modes of experiences related to the body within the concept of (post-)modernity and the mediatization of our everyday life (Thomas Morsch, “Filmische Erfahrung im Spannungsfeld zwischen Körper, Sinnlichkeit und Ästhetik,” *montage AV* 19, no. 1 (2010): 55–77; Eugénie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Thomas Elsaesser, and Malte Hagener, *Filmtheorie zur Einführung*, 4th ed. (Hamburg: Junius, 2013), 217–218.

10 See Gernot Böhme, *Ästhetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre* (München: Fink, 2001).

develop historiographic significance and meaning. With such a focus on the experiential dimension of filmic reception, it is worth noting that the terms “history” and “historiography” are not used in the strict disciplinary sense of historical scholarship,¹¹ but rather as the concept of a specific form of *aesthetic* historiography.

On a conceptual level, a second element of *aesthetic historiography* centres on the phenomenon of temporal clusters. The idea that temporal clusters can be understood in their historiographic effect leads to the seminal reflections of German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who refers to traditions of the philosophy of time as well as to the philosophy of history. Within the media studies contexts my approach can be characterized as a media theoretical modification of Koselleck’s reflections on the semantics of historical time: Koselleck investigates the preconceptions of temporal differences such as *past—present—future* which he comprehends as historically contingent.¹² Similar to the idea of the temporal clusters, Koselleck does not operate with the concept of *one* historical time but with a *plurality* of historical times where different times overlap.¹³ Within a methodological perspective, this leads to a pragmatic approach towards temporal relations. Specific analytical questions Koselleck asks in his book *Future Pasts* can be productively adapted:

- How is the temporal dimension of a past construed within a present which is dominated by media with specific dynamics?
- How do the temporal dimensions relate to each other?¹⁴

11 For the discussion of the relationship between academic historical scholarship, the theoretization of historical knowledge production and film analysis, see Simon Rothöhler, *Amateur der Weltgeschichte. Historiographische Praktiken im Kino der Gegenwart* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2011), 9ff., and André Wendler, *Anachronismen. Historiografie und Kino* (Munich: Fink, 2014), 17ff., 85ff.

12 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 9–11; for an English translation, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Future Pasts: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

13 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 11.

14 Ibid. In the context of this chapter, the English edition of *Future Pasts* (2004) summarizes aptly in its blurb: “History, Koselleck asserts, emerged in this crucial moment [of the rise of modernity], as a new temporality providing distinctly new ways of assimilating experience. In the present context of globalisation [sic] and its resulting crises, the modern world once again faces a crisis in aligning the experience of past and present. To realise that each present was once an imagined future may help us once again place ourselves within a temporality organised by human thought.” The perspective can be extended as a critical question to our concrete field of study: How do we place ourselves within complex temporalities organized by already ephemeral practices within digital cultures that embrace “older” media which—for their part such as film—*also* re-organize temporalities.

Koselleck links the distinction *past* and *future* to the notions of *experiences* and *expectations* (towards a future). With *experiences* and *expectations* interplaying, ideas of historical time realize themselves. Such a pragmatic perspective allows a focus on the preconditions of the *impressions* of history and historicity.¹⁵ Applied to the case study outlined above, this means that the analytical perspective is directed towards the way the gestural performance of changes in the images imply (on a micro-level) the experience and the expectation of past, immediate present, and future—within the changing process of the image between “before” (vaguely connoted as “analogue” with typical signs of material decay and damages) and “(digital) after” (connoted with the “cleanness” and “sharpness” expected from digital images). The paratextual information of digital *dispositifs*—in this case the website—open up further discursive dimensions: the *reviving* of the film through the restoration process, thus the possibility of the lived experience of the moving images within the present media culture. On a metalevel, the connotation of lived experience is translated into a comparative gestural performance on the digital *dispositif internet*.

The Historic and Discursive Dimensions of Digital *Dispositifs*

The focus on the digital conditions of the actual visibility and experiential dimensions in current media cultures can be situated alongside French film and media historian Pierre Sorlin's insightful reflections. In his observations on the possibilities of writing cinema history, Sorlin states that history does not exist outside the discourse that is enunciating said history. History thus can appear in different forms, depending on the means of its realization and expression.¹⁶ The special twist of the approach outlined here lies in the double perspective: history depends not only on the means of the specific enunciative mode of expression but also on the perceptual and sensual dimension of the particular *dispositif* in which the enunciative is expressed.

Historically, since the late 1990s, the DVD medium has been pivotal for the digital *dispositif* connected to film and film history. In regard to the DVD's own historicity, current statements diagnosing once again the death of physical carriers (DVD and Blu-ray) illustrate the shortening of time spans of what we perceive as “older” media. The perceived obsolescence of access to films via

15 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 351, modified by the author of this essay.

16 Pierre Sorlin, “Ist es möglich, eine Geschichte des Kinos zu schreiben?,” *montage/av* 5, no. 1 (1996): 25.

DVD poses an illustrative example. In light of the rise of streaming platforms, the University of Regensburg held a conference in 2020 with the title “This Is/Was the DVD.” With this telling title the organizers already situated the DVD culture within a tension between the past and the present. One of the conference’s main questions focused on the (historic) influence of practices introduced with the DVD on digital cultures in general. Among others, German media scholar Jan Distelmeyer, who had already demonstrated in his book *Das flexible Kino*¹⁷ how the DVD in the late 1990s and 2000s functioned as a specific and significant transitory *dispositif* in the early stages of *digital* film culture, reflected in his keynote on how the cultural preconceptions of the “digital” have changed since then—especially the ideas of interactivity and participation in the digital realm. Nevertheless, practices around the DVD fed strongly into the imaginary of “the digital” in regard to film and access to filmic universes. Distelmeyer emphasized the fetishist relationship between hyperlinked, networked structures (such as the DVD menu) and imaginaries of space interconnected with the idea of an immersive navigational space for the user, highlighting the potential of non-linear access to film and film’s linearity. The specific form of access has become enriched by multimedia paratexts. Already in its early forms, digital access to films was linked to computer games, entailing a general tendency of gamification within a larger context of media convergence as described by Henry Jenkins.¹⁸

Jenkins discussed the phenomena when multimedia was still “new.” Today, the current digital *dispositifs* for moving images—as well as the digital version of films themselves—have become habitual but they keep multiplying and changing. In addition to these dynamics, the ephemeral impressions of presence and immediacy of moving images on an experiential level still pose a particular challenge for the notion of pastness and historicity. Therefore, the preconditions of the experience of the images as well as the framing *dispositifs* have to be addressed as they form the idea of *history* at one specific media historic and sociopolitical moment.

Within the larger cultural analytic context, the challenges relate back to fundamental definitions of *film*, *art work*, *aesthetics*, *history*, and *edition*, which, in the case of film, are closely intertwined with dynamics of popular culture, media technology, and the entertainment industries. A

17 Jan Distelmeyer, *Das flexible Kino. Ästhetik und Dispositiv der DVD & Blu-ray* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2012); update by the same author in Jan Distelmeyer, *Kritik der Digitalität* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2021).

18 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

central factor of the specific historiographic networks in digital *dispositifs* at play is the systematic correlation that has already been described in regard to edition philology and the history of literature. The practices of text publishing, editing, and mediated modes of access correlate with the logic of the (re)construction of history. The dynamic becomes most evident in the critical debate about the formation of a “classical” canon driven by publishing practices. Referring to Michel Foucault, German literary scholar Gerhard Mattenklott conceives publishing politics, as they are manifest in book editions as “dispositiv of power” (sic!).¹⁹ Mattenklott follows a line of argument that emphasizes the aesthetic properties of editions in relation to the different aspects of editorial work including the formation of the reception process. He problematizes how to convey the materiality of the original artefact, the specific (original) carrier of the texts (and thus its material aesthetic qualities); a question which is also seminal for the digitization of analogue films and hence the edition of moving images.

While discussing the aesthetic dimension of modes of access (still in the realm of literature), Mattenklott’s reasoning leads to a more fundamental statement which can be applied to questions revolving around film editions: Mattenklott highlights the particular role of the technological advancement of media in historiographic meaning-making—which challenges more than ever the notion of a stable work of art (and thus also a stable “textual structure”). He calls for a more performative understanding of the (art) work. Such an understanding situates the work of art in relation to the actual moment in time of its production and *dispositif* of reception. Within this context, *digitization* acts as an accelerant that renders the temporal aspect even more dynamic and crucial. The term “*dispositif*” also implies critical reflections on institutional and political power structures as well as technological spatial arrangements as a specific set of discourses at a certain moment in time.

Digital *Dispositifs* in 2020 and the Politics of Time

The scope can be expanded to the institutional level where the social and collective memory of film history is shaped—where specific *versions* of the past and future memory are conditioned: The following thoughts pick up on

19 Gert Mattenklott, “Ästhetische Erfahrung und Edition,” in *Ästhetische Erfahrung und Edition*, ed. Rainer Falk and Gert Mattenklott (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2007), 6. Mattenklott’s notion of “dispositive” (sic!) is obviously closer to Michel Foucault’s concept as it is to the cinematographic *dispositif*.

the aforementioned quote by Mattenklott that describes (digital) editions as “*dispositifs* of power,” which unfold their impact within a conflation of sociocultural selection processes, aesthetics of medial reproduction, of modes of access, reception, and experience within a specific historic situation.

In 2020, a discussion arose that, on the one hand, broached the issue of the shift in distribution from DVD editions to streaming platforms; on the other hand, the (not completely new) debate highlighted the cutting-edge sociopolitical dimension of building a canon by institutionalized distributors in the historic situation of the beginning 2020s. In late August 2020, Kyle Buchanan and Reggie Ugwu published a piece in the *New York Times* titled “How the Criterion Collection Crops out African-American Directors.” Analysing the corpus of the Criterion Collection and the catalogue of the editions, the authors came to the conclusion that the Criterion Collection comprises more than a thousand films by more than 450 directors. But the authors found that “[t]here are just four African-American directors with feature films in the collection overall, or less than 1 percent.”²⁰ This observation weighs heavily as Criterion is one of the most important players within digital film memory culture. Their editions define—in the words of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—the cultural and symbolic value not only of the edited films as works of art, but also of the digital editions supplementing them with “bonus” features and thus with a specific aura. That way Criterion has set standards for how the cinephile aura is created within the realm of *digital* distribution via their famous and frequently cited film editions:

If there is a cinematic canon even more highbrow than the Oscars, it's the Criterion Collection, where directors are treated with a level of awe usually afforded to movie stars and a film's critical reputation outweighs its box office receipts. [...] Its physical collection continues to grow by 50 to 60 new or reissued titles each year, all digitally reproduced to exacting specifications and packaged with eye-catching original artwork. [...] [The] extensive range has created the impression among some cinephiles, including many who work in the industry, of an authoritative survey.²¹

Buchanan and Ugwu highlight the aspects of Criterion's cultural authority in an interesting way as they emphasize the spatial as well the museal

20 Kyle Buchanan and Reggie Ugwu, “How the Criterion Collection Crops out African-American Directors,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/20/movies/criterion-collection-african-americans.html>.

21 Buchanan and Ugwu, “Criterion Collection.”

dimension of Criterion's editorial practices: The journalists quote a newsletter circulated by Criterion, in which the collection is called a "Louvre of movies."²² The reference to the iconic Louvre museum is crucial. The "Louvre" has become today a household name, a synonym for a globalized franchise, for the notion of an "art museum" that assembles "art" from different historic times spanning centuries establishing their eternal value. Already the architecture and the style of exhibition of the original Louvre in Paris plays with the blend of historical layers and with the conflation of different times. It is famously situated within the building of a historic palace which has been changed multiple times over the centuries, the (ancient) archaeological exhibits such as Greek and Roman sculptures blend into the historic architecture.

The rhetorical comparison by contemporary director Wes Anderson reaffirms the image of cultural authority and historic weight. Regarding the history of digital film editions—also recapped by the *New York Times* journalists—Criterion played a key role in forming our *expectations* towards DVD editions "where the value lied, how digital editions should look like in the 90s and after the 2000s."²³ Criterion has been setting industry standards for film editions since the 1980s, starting with the laser discs and with several special features such as letterboxing, director's commentary tracks, and deleted scenes.²⁴

Against this backdrop, it stands out that in the Criterion catalogue, which takes such an important role by determining what to *expect* from digital editions and how to *experience* film history in the digital present, African-American film-makers are relatively absent. The authors determine further: "Women and other people of color appeared in slightly larger numbers. About 11 percent of directors were Asian; 2 percent were Latino; and about 7 percent were women."²⁵

In an interview with the writers of the *New York Times* in 2019, the co-founders of the film heritage distribution company Milestone Film & Video, Dennis Doros and Amy Heller, expressed fundamental criticisms. Amy

22 Ibid. The original quote stems apparently from contemporary film director Wes Anderson.

23 Ibid. See Distelmeyer, *Das flexible Kino*; Matthias Christen, "Das bewegliche Archiv. DVD-Editionen als Schnittstellen von Filmwissenschaft, Philologie und Marketingstrategien," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Vinzenz Hediger, and Oliver Fahle (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 93–108.

24 See Buchanan and Ugwu, "Criterion Collection"; Distelmeyer, *Das flexible Kino*; James Bennett, and Tom Brown, *Film and Television after DVD* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

25 Buchanan and Ugwu, "Criterion Collection."

Heller, in particular, described the politics of canonization within practices of digital film editions. She pointed out that there were several politics of time implicated which led to a monumentalization conveying *eternal* cultural value which is continuously reaffirmed by reiteration and medial reproduction. She stated that historically many film-ranking systems have been forged within echo chambers: “The overwhelming majority of the film-makers anointed, like the people who chose them, were white men.” Furthermore, Heller adds: “The world they live in affirms their knowledge, acumen, taste and authority. The result [...] is a canon iterated so often that it can begin to feel ‘monumental and eternal.’”²⁶

Fortunately, the *New York Times* authors report that things are changing and that Peter Becker, who owns a minority stake in the company, had expressed regret about the lack of black representation in the collection: “We have to fix that.”²⁷ It seems that the media transition becomes also the ideological, yet still limited corrective. The transition seems to build different kinds of filmic monuments: With the push towards streaming platforms, several aspects of editing film history come into play. According to Becker, *The Criterion Channel* had been at the forefront of the diversity push.²⁸ Such corrections within the canon are intertwined with film preservation preconditions. Buchanan and Ugwu further point to how streaming rights were available at relatively lower costs compared to DVD and Blu-ray. And because the Criterion Channel did not require the resource-intensive special features of the physical collection, the company had quickly generated a less homogeneous streaming catalogue.

In view of the line of argument of this essay, the transition of digital editorial practices and the significance for film historiography can be situated within the context of the contemporary *historic* present. It is worth noting that the debate quoted above took place in 2020. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global lockdown experience intensified the cultural significance and the valuation of streaming services, thus also enhancing and reinforcing the experiential, culturally significant impact of having the “Louvre of Movies” *at home*. Secondly, “political earthquakes”

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. It should be noted that this debate only focuses on one aspect of the selective character of a canon. For example, exclusions or negligence in edition practices of formats other than feature films or documentary features are not addressed here.

28 Ibid. Buchanan and Ugwu quote Becker in saying that his company began trying to address the racial and gender disparities in its catalogue around five years earlier: “That had been one of the objectives of FilmStruck, the now defunct streaming service that Criterion started in partnership with Turner Classic Movies in 2016.”

such as the Black Lives Matter movement had a huge (emotional) impact on the social and political awareness of institutional racism and the lack of diversity; a perspective that was mirrored in concrete digital editorial practices—and resulted in the publication of the article quoted here which critically addressed practices in digital film culture and film historiography within a specific scope of exclusion practices.

There is a need to expand the analysis of how the unexamined racial and hegemonic biases of cultural institutions can have pernicious and long-lasting effects to the dimension of medial experience.²⁹ This would include the analysis of the spatial intrusion into the private home via streaming affordances, which today create the sphere of auratization and cultural value in its own right—using the conflation of the individual private experiential sphere and the collective value and social memory.³⁰

Future Pasts in the Digital Present: Contradictions, Paradoxes, and Politics of Comparisons—Towards a Performative Notion of Film History

The approach that I have suggested so far can be translated into the following questions to be considered (either implicitly or explicitly) when dealing with digitized moving images referenced as being historic:

- When and under which preconditions in terms of *dispositif*, aesthetics, and effects of (technological) presence is the digital “reprise” of a film accessed and assessed in its historical significance?
- When and how do we perceive and grasp the historic value and the value within the memory culture of said film?³¹ How is the historical

29 Boyd, quoted in *ibid.*

30 Buchanan and Ugwu give as an example the film *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), which never appeared in the Criterion Collection. But in 2016, it was reissued in a digitally restored special edition by another company, the Cohen Film Collection, and subsequently added to the Criterion Channel, the company’s streaming service, in spring 2020. Ugwu and Buchanan describe how in June, following the global protests prompted by the police killing of George Floyd, the film was made available and then featured prominently on the home page as part of a special “Black Lives” package.

31 One might also use the terms “age-value” and “memory-value” here which stem from Alois Riegl’s study “The Modern Cult of Monuments.” Riegl develops a relational matrix of values that can be useful to classify decisions within the restoration process of a monument: How one approaches the restoration, how far the restorative work interferes with the current state of the artefact. Riegl’s terms also help to determine which value the goal of the restoration defines.

context conveyed within a digital spatiotemporal structure? How does the digital structure influence the gestural and tactile relationship with the user?

- In what way and how is the digital “reprise” of an archival film staged as an advancement in media history, as a manifestation of projections towards the potential of “digital technologies” or “digital media”? Is it presented as “the best possible” version within the current digital present? Is the digital quality of the source even exposed? How is the digital access naturalized and habitualized? Are (prior) processes of selection and exclusion made transparent?
- And, last but not least: Which consequences do these configurations of perceptual effects of historicity entail regarding our experience of temporal differences? What is perceived as “past” in close relation to an (implicit) future in the realm of digital media?

Koselleck’s reflections on the plurality of historic times prove to be fruitful in order to describe further complications within the interrelation of the realm of digital media and the history of film. Within the context of digital media, boundaries between collective and personal spheres become increasingly blurred.³² The forms of usage and consumption often follow the paradoxical logic of a *personal and personalised mass culture*.³³ In this regard, one of Koselleck’s further assessments stands out: that impressions of historical time also develop between individual experiences and collective notions of time. Koselleck describes an interplay between experiences and expectations referencing biographical as well as extra-biographical frames of reference where also the personal (life) time span can become relative.

Practices within digital cultures reveal specific characteristics in regard to the tension between the individual/personal/private and dimensions of collectivity. Digital media are closely linked to the imaginary that *everything* is easily and instantly available and can be accessed in an immediate, interactive, and especially *participatory* way. Already in his canonical book

Barassi comments on the importance of the terms for contemporary analytic approaches: “The terms still provide a valid analytical framework for the study of key theoretical issues surrounding the transmission to the future of works of art” Sebastiano Barassi, “A Rieglian Analysis of Values in Replication,” *Tate Papers* 8 (2007).

32 See José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

33 Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Franziska Heller, *Update! Film- und Mediengeschichte im Zeitalter der digitalen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Munich: Brill/Fink, 2020).

on *New Media*, media scholar Lev Manovich has explicitly used the term “myth” in order to point out that the digital code allowing interactivity and its programming are firmly embedded in cultural practices and ideologies.³⁴ Interactivity and participation are always programmed within specific limits along specific economical and institutional interests as well as sociocultural norms. The invitation to interact and to participate means also becoming a performative and, to a certain degree, affirmative part of the medial *dispositifs*. It entails the acceptance of its logic of usage. The term “digital affordances” has been used within the critical analysis of the different forms of interaction digital media and platforms offer.³⁵ Among others, Bucher and Helmond discuss in detail the origin of the term which lies in ecological psychology.³⁶ The study of the possibilities for the individual to interact with the physical environment based on concepts of cognitive psychology has proven useful for design studies. The approach enabled to reflect on design patterns and on structures shaped by technologies as well as on their usability.

But despite the usefulness of the term, I would put less emphasis on the cognitive and psychological aspects than on the phenomenological ones where the whole body becomes part of the affirmative performance via the gesture. Thus, the approach I suggest recognizes and even emphasizes the vital role of the concrete feeling of *being present in the presence*.

On a methodological level, the perspective translates into a pragmatic approach towards temporal differences where the distinctions of temporal qualities are the results of ephemeral, situational, contextual, and performative relations. Moreover, within the context of media technologies and industries, there is an additional twist to the already complex philosophical and theoretical perspective. The performative temporal constellations are to be seen within the context of economic interests, within discourses where the logic of “updating” prevails and where filmic entertainment is primarily handled as a commodity (cf. the promise of improved aesthetic entertainment as it is expressed by the label “remastered”). The logic of updating is pivotal for the circulation in a constantly changing media environment.

34 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2001).

35 See Janet Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Catherine Grant, “The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking,” *Aniki* 1, no. 1 (2014): 49–62; Taina Bucher, and Anne Helmond, “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell (London: Sage, 2018), 233–53.

36 Bucher and Helmond, “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms.”

But this logic also bears severe consequences for the experience of the difference between past and present.

Distelmeyer's observations regarding the DVD and Blu-ray seem to be a forerunner of what digital historian Andreas Fickers describes in his recent "update" on the methodology of digital hermeneutics.³⁷ Both Distelmeyer and Fickers point to the importance of questioning the different layers of digital sources—such as the code/programming structure as well as the spatialized modes of access to digital sources. Thus, they also take into account aesthetic and structuring qualities. The digital quality of digital sources (and especially the conditions of their origins = actual digitization process, e.g. scanning³⁸) has to be critically reflected in view of the different layers that have an impact on practices of historic research and hence on the historiographic effect. When *doing* history with former analogue and now digitized sources, we need not only be aware of the selective process that is the actual digitization process (which images even make it into the digital domain?), it means also to be aware of the aesthetics of the *dispositif*, the menu or the interface that allow us to access and use the digitized objects, films, and documents within navigational spaces. Hence the methodology I suggest here could be understood as a (phenomenological) complement to existing approaches within the field of digital source criticism.³⁹ It conceptualizes the whole ensemble of digitized film history as experiential *spheres*. The specific perspective focuses on the layered spatiotemporal qualities of digitized films which are deemed crucial for the historiographic effects—especially in their sensual, experiential dimension.

All aspects discussed point towards a much more performative notion of film history within the realm of digital media. The cluster "digitized films" has been addressed on the spatiotemporal level by differentiating three analytic layers: the experience of the images or the films themselves; the spatiotemporality of the *dispositif* closely linked to the body of the user; and the accompanying and overlapping sociocultural discourses and habitual

37 Andreas Fickers, "Update für die Hermeneutik. Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur digitalen Forensik?" *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 17, no. 1 (2020): 157–68.

38 Fickers refers to Gitelman and Jackson very aptly when he states: "Raw data is an oxymoron." See also Lisa Gitelman, ed., *"Raw Data" is an Oxymoron* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

39 See, among others, Julia Noordegraaf, Kathleen Lotze, and Jaap Boter, "Writing Cinema Histories with Digital Databases: The Case of Cinema Context," *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 21, no. 2 (2018): 106–26; Julia Noordegraaf, "Zooming Out: Towards Scalable Digital Film Studies," presentation and discussion at the workshop "Teaching Digital Methods for Filmhistoriography," February 18–20, 2021, Johannes-Gutenberg University Mainz, within the DFG-Network New Directions in Film Historiography.

rituals of use. “Historicity” is understood as a medial impression, a sensual (*aesthetic*) effect which is constituted by the (performative) experience of temporal differences. Often the specific effect is intertwined with expectations, the habitual forms of usage of specific digital media platforms at one specific, situational point, and current political context. The experience and the expectations are furthermore embedded in the specific dynamics of digital media: their multiple forms of remediating and emulating (historic) film culture are very short-lived, ephemeral, and transitory. As a result, the actual moment of access, of usage and, especially, the conditioning of the actual interacting (historic) subject, its own felt temporality (being physically present and sensually experiencing) gain special importance for the understanding of the historiographic effects.

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17 Tipping the Scales of Film History

A Note on Scalability and Film Historiography

Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger

Abstract

Research in film studies has a long history of productively borrowing theories and concepts from other fields. Today, film culture and moving image practice are mostly based on computational technologies, and computer science has emerged as an important new source for models, scripts, and concepts for film research. “Scalability” is increasingly used to describe a desired feature in computational research designs, but also to characterize the medium of film itself. In response to advances in format theory and the emergence of computational methods in film history this contribution proposes to discuss the meanings and uses, but also the potential side effects, of the concept of scalability for film research. The contribution asks four interrelated questions: How do historical facts become data? Is film a scalable medium? Are film histories scalable? And what, if anything, about film is non-scalable, i.e. which are the facts of film history which do not compute?

Keywords: film historiography, scalability, history of film studies, digital methods, format theory

*A theory of nonscalability might begin in the work it takes to create scalability—
and the messes it makes.*

—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing¹

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 38.

As film culture increasingly morphs and in some ways dissolves into a broader media culture evolving around the production and circulation of digital moving images, concepts from computer science gain currency in film and media theory, and in film historiography. One such concept is scalability, which describes the potential of a system, network, or process to change scale, and, more specifically, the ability to change its scale continuously and adapt to future changes without affecting its basic structure and operating conditions. Usually, scalability refers to growth through marginal input or, in economic terms, to a type of growth in which fixed costs remain stable or increase only marginally relative to growth. So far, the concept of scalability has two main applications in film-related research: It refers to a property of computational research designs relating to film and film history, and it refers to a property of film itself, one which the medium has always had, but which only recently has been described in those terms. For instance, in their recent work on early cinema-going in Amsterdam Julia Noordergraaf and Thunis van Oort combine spatial models and maps with demographic data to create inferences about actual behaviour and “detect audiences” at both the micro-level (neighbourhood) and the meso-level (city). This model can then be further scaled across spatial and temporal dimensions to create a plausible historical view of movie-going and its transformation even in the absence of fine-grained specific data.² Furthermore “scalability” has been used to describe film itself as “scalable across a variety of formats and standardized with a view to global circulation,”³ and “scalability” has become an important concept in the emerging sub-field of format studies. In particular, the concepts of format and scalability offer a way of accounting for the digital transformation of film and film culture and of bracketing together the pre- and post-digital periods of film history. If analogue moving images had a gauge and an aspect ratio, digital image formats are defined through resolution and are embedded in systems and networks which are both scalable.⁴ Format studies thus opens up an avenue to project the question of scalability back unto the entire history of film to date. Furthermore, picking up from format studies’ retrospective projection, “scalability” can also be used for an assessment of current modes of film historiography in

2 See Julia Noordergraaf and Thunis van Oort, “A Digital Toolkit to Detect Audiences of the Silent Era: Scalable Perspectives on Film Exhibition and Consumption in Amsterdam Neighborhoods (1907–1928),” *Studies in European Cinema* 18, no. 2 (2021): 252–73.

3 <https://meson.press/series-page/configurations-of-film/>.

4 See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider, eds., *Format Matters: Standards, Practices and Politics in Media Culture* (Lüneburg: Meson Press 2020).

the transition to post-digital film culture: to evaluate not only the degree to which they have been accounting for the scalability of the medium itself, but also the degree to which film historiographies have always already conceived of film history as scalable across time and space, at the possible expense of the non-scalable dimensions of that history.

“Scalability” is, in other words, a concept which has been brought in from another field to solve specific problems in film-related research. In the process, it has opened up new possibilities for research but also created awareness for potential pitfalls associated with this very concept. In particular, when such a conceptual transfer happens in a moment of fundamental transformation of a field, of its objects and methods, as is the case of film studies right now, the new concept has the potential to radiate beyond the narrow problem which it was brought in to address, particularly if the application to the new field broadens the concept’s original meaning. This carries a danger of over-promise. The two major incidents of over-promise in film theory so far have been the mind-film analogy and the language-film analogy. The mind-film analogy started with Hugo Münsterberg in 1916, who likened cinematic techniques like the flashback to mental operations like memory. It carried over into apparatus theory, which conceived of the cinematic apparatus in analogy to the psychic apparatus as described by Freud, and into cognitive film theory, which conceived of the mind of the spectator in analogy to an information processing device, i.e. a computer. The language-film analogy can be traced back at least to Bazin but became a powerful research paradigm with film semiotics and the confluence of structural linguistics and film studies in the work of Christian Metz. The mind-film analogy exerted a strong fascination on theorists, which was probably grounded in the persistence of what Phillippe Descola has called the ontology of analogism,⁵ but it ultimately only yielded a limited set of resemblances and homologies between film and the respective models of the mind, with limited explanatory power.⁶ The language-film analogy mainly produced evidence that the conventions of cinematic narration are much less robust and stable than the syntactics and semantics of natural languages, and the semiotics of film were saved by Roger Odin’s turn to pragmatics and a rigorous modelling of various modes of reading rather

5 See Phillippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2013).

6 Noël Carroll has offered a forceful critique of the limitations of the mind-film analogy in Münsterberg and apparatus theory, but failed to address the pitfalls of the mind-film analogy in cognitive film theory, with which he was associated. See Noël Carroll, “Film/Mind Analogies. The Case of Hugo Münsterberg,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 4 (1988): 489–99.

than the study of the purported linguistic structures of film.⁷ So, mindful of the dangers of over-promise in the transfer of concepts from one field of knowledge to another, what we propose to offer in this contribution and at this particular juncture of the growing efflorescence of the concept of scalability across a variety of fields, including film and media theory and film historiography, is a critical evaluation of the concept's uses, limitations, and—to use a pharmacological metaphor—its potential side effects.

To offer such a critical evaluation we want to ask four related questions. Our first question is whether historical facts, including the facts of film history, are scalable. Our answer will be that contrary to a belief which is the bedrock of historicism, facts cannot speak for themselves but depend on conceptual constructs and relations to become meaningful. Incidentally, the same goes for data in the broadest sense. This requires an inquiry into the process by which facts become data and data become historical facts, a metahistory of datafied historical facts. We then want to discuss the various layers of meaning of the concept of scalability and address whether film itself can indeed be seen as a scalable medium. To do so we discuss a strong claim that the emergence of machine learning marks the point at which film finally becomes scalable and weigh it against our own earlier claim that film, in a way, has always been scalable. The third question moves on from film as a potentially scalable medium to film historiographies as potentially scalable systems for processing film historical facts. Our point will be that particularly the founding paradigm of film historiography, the auteur/nation approach to cinema, can be described as a scalable system, with distinctive downsides for much of what belongs to film history but does not match the paradigms' definition of a historical fact. And finally, we want to turn to the question of non-scalability and address the messes and omissions created by ways of thinking about film historically in terms of scalability.

Are Historical Facts Scalable?

In a paper first delivered at the forty-first annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Rochester, New York, in 1926 but published only in 1955, historian Carl L. Becker asks a seemingly innocuous question: What are historical facts?⁸ Becker's starting point is the observation that there

7 See Roger Odin, *Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

8 See Carl L. Becker, "What Are Historical Facts?" *Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1955): 327–40.

is a broad, if unspecific consensus about what historical facts are, which includes the assumptions that facts provide a solid, reliable foundation for inquiry, and that they are largely self-evident, i.e. that they “speak for themselves.” This consensus could be described as the dogma of historicism, a nineteenth-century approach to historiography which has survived well into the twentieth century in some quarters. To the self-evident facts according to this dogma the historian relates as a mere conduit, a transparent medium which will show “how things really were,” to quote German historian Leopold von Ranke, “*wie es wirklich gewesen ist.*” Becker unsettles the historicist consensus with three interrelated questions: What is a fact? Where is a fact? And when is a fact? His answers are: (1) A fact is an affirmation, a “statement about the event [...] which affirms the fact that something occurred”⁹; (2) as a consequence, facts are not in the records or sources, but in people’s mental representation of that which they affirm to have occurred¹⁰—which also means that historical facts are inexorably linked to the present, in the sense that “it is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral actual event, which makes a difference to us now; and the historical fact makes a difference only because it is, and so far as it is, in human minds”¹¹; and (3) a historical fact is when there is a mental image of an event in the past which is relevant in the present with a view to the future, i.e. a conscious mental representation with an element of retention (of the past) and protention (as openness to the future), to put it in phenomenological terms. Becker, in other words, connects historical facts to mental representation and to the acts of enunciation—speaking and writing as the basic operations of historiography—and to the specific concerns of those who write and speak history. Becker’s approach to historical facts and his critique of the dogma of historicism thus prefigures Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, an influential reading of the classics of nineteenth-century historiography in terms of their narrative structure, by almost fifty years.¹² Like White, who attracted the misplaced ire of some parts of the historical profession for his purported postmodernist relativism, Becker is no relativist. Rather, steeped in German philosophy and particularly in Nietzsche, who he quotes directly, he proposes a perspectivist view of historical facts. Most importantly for our concerns, however, Becker treats historical facts as what we could describe

9 Ibid., 330.

10 Ibid., 331.

11 Ibid., 332

12 See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

as *information* in the sense of Gregory Bateson, i.e. as a difference which makes a difference: “an ephemeral actual event which makes a difference to us now.”¹³

In his recent book *Engines of Order*, philosopher and computational media theorist Bernhard Rieder offers a critique of another dogma, a dogma of data science which says that “data speak for themselves.” Rieder writes:

[F]or any sufficiently complex data set, the idea that “the data speak for themselves” is implausible; developers and analysts select from a wide variety of mathematical and visual methods to *make* the data speak, to filter, arrange, and summarize them from different angles, following questions that orient how they look at them. Rather than ideas of a natural order, there are guiding interests that drive how data are made meaningful.¹⁴

Once again, an analogy suggests itself: An analogy between the dogmas of historicism and of data science, the dogmas of facts and data which speak for themselves. To this, we can add a parallelism of the proposed remedies. If Becker introduces his three questions—what, where, and when a historical fact is—to demonstrate that facts do not speak for themselves, Rieder proposes what he calls, in the subtitle of his book, a “mecnology of algorithmic technics” to analyse how data are made meaningful. Drawing on Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of technology, he proposes to delineate “technical elements, individuals, and ensembles, to conceptualize algorithmic techniques as central carriers of technicity and technical knowledges in the domain of software.”¹⁵ But then, analogies only go so far. Data, of course, are usually defined as sets of measurable facts. Historical facts, by contrast, typically refer to ephemeral events which leave no traces which lend themselves to mathematical formalism. The history of cinema is a case in point. Pierre Sorlin once argued that the true object of film history would be the act of projection and the viewing of films. But since neither produces archivable traces which could serve as sources it is not possible to write the history of film.¹⁶ A research design like that of Noordegraaf and van Oort proposes to close what we may call the “Sorlin gap” by substituting combinations of

13 Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979).

14 Bernhard Rieder, *Engines of Order: A Mecnology of Algorithmic Techniques* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 32.

15 *Ibid.*, 17.

16 See Pierre Sorlin, “Ist es möglich, eine Geschichte des Kinos zu schreiben?,” *montage/av* 5, no. 1 (1996): 23–37.

relevant available data for missing historical facts. Thus, data and historical facts converge when algorithms create historical facts much in the same way that Becker's "affirmations" create relations between events to conjure a mental image of a historical fact, or rather the historical fact as cognitive operation. And at this juncture, when historiographical research designs turn into systems for processing data sets historical facts do in fact become scalable. At the same time, the resulting historiographies call for something like a mecanological metahistory which helps us understand where, when, and how facts become data, and when, where, and how data-processing algorithms produce historical facts. But if film history is understood not just as the history of projection, but as the history of the medium, which includes its form, and if the medium itself can indeed be described as scalable, as a scalable system for processing inputs and creating outputs, then what exactly are we to understand as the scalability of film, and how does it inform the historiography of the medium?

Is Film a Scalable Medium?

In Charles and Ray Eames' film *Powers of Ten*, a camera zooms away from a couple on a picnic blanket in a Chicago park to outer space and then back in and into the microscopic realm beneath the ground on which the couple is sitting. The film shows a continuous, or to use Nelson Goodman's terminology, an analogous movement, but breaks it down into discontinuous or digital steps, the "powers of ten," in which each power of ten marks a difference that makes a difference.¹⁷ In his recent book *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation*, Zachary Horton uses the Eames film as a starting point to develop a theory of scale as mediated difference.¹⁸ One could argue that film lends itself as a model for such a theory not just because of the appeal of a remarkable individual artistic success like the Eames film. Film can also be used to provide a model for scale as a measure of difference along a continuum precisely because it is both analogous and digital in Goodman's sense—because it creates a perception of continuous movement from discontinuous, but distinct and regular elements. In that sense film always already maintains a privileged relationship to scale which

17 See Scott Curtis, "Vergrößerung und das mikroskopische Erhabene," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 3, no. 5 (2011): 97–110.

18 See Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

is embedded in the medium, and not just because frame and format provide a visual measure for objects in the visual realm (through framing, aspect ratio, and shot length), or because film is scalable across a variety of technical formats. This is important to keep in mind when we now turn to claims about the scalability of film which are informed by economic and computational understandings of scalability.

In a guest post in 2019 on *OnlineMarketing.de*, a trade portal, German digital marketing specialist Lars Reinartz writes: “2020 could be the year when the hitherto rather static medium of film will finally become scalable and dynamic.”¹⁹ Now, Reinartz is not an academic, let alone a media historian. He uses the term “film” in the broadest possible sense to include digital video. By implication his concept of film includes cell phone films, home movies, and any other type of moving image, which incidentally is how film studies over the last two decades has come to redefine its own object. But Reinartz is a practitioner working at one of the most significant intersections of contemporary media culture and the digital economy, namely video-based marketing, and he is trying to formulate a theory of his practice. Reconstructing theories of practice from statements of practitioners about their craft is an established method of film and media historiography, and it can also contribute something towards a mecnological metahistory of computational film historiography.²⁰

Reinartz’ projection that the medium film will finally become scalable in 2020 is significant for two reasons: because it involves a strong claim about film history, and it invokes and combines multiple meanings of the concept of scalability to make that claim. More specifically, Reinartz references the two contexts in which the concept first emerges, namely computer science and business management (or business intelligence), applies the concept to media theory (“medium of film”), and invokes a specific philosophy of history, namely a concept of history as a process of development and growth (“finally become scalable and dynamic”). It seems appropriate to address these layers of meaning in turn and provide an understanding, however limited, of the meaning(s) of the term in its original context of use.

19 Lars Reinartz, “Smarte Video Strategien—Wie digitale Tools und skalierbare Konzepte das Video Marketing verändern” [guest post], *OnlineMarketing.de*, September 30, 2019, <https://onlinemarketing.de/social-media-marketing/unfertigsmarte-videostrategien-wie-digitale-tools-und-skalierbare-konzepte-das-videomarketing-veraendern>.

20 See, for instance, Vinzenz Hediger, *Verführung zum Film. Der amerikanische Kinotrailer seit 1912* (Marburg: Schüren, 2001); John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

Reinartz' argument goes as follows: Since 82 per cent of online traffic now consists of video content, more than half of all advertising executives consider personalized video marketing the most effective marketing tool. In this environment "scalable concepts" in video production and distribution have the potential of fundamentally transforming marketing. "Scalable concepts" in Reinartz' understanding of the term refers to three different things. First, one problem in video-based marketing is that there is no consensus whether short or long formats, properly produced, are more effective in attracting attention and eliciting viewer engagement. The solution is that one should always be able to deploy a wide variety of formats, making the content suitable to the context. "Scalability" thus refers to the ability to scale content up and down across formats. Second, to be able to adapt to changing contexts one should have the ability to develop and modify content and formats quickly and "automatically"—without input from human professionals. "Scalability" in this second sense of the term, then, refers to a kind of autonomy and self-sufficiency of resources and skills in content and format production and adaptation which allows one to respond to changing environments independently from third-party input. And thirdly, one should have the ability to quickly deploy contents and formats in their optimal environments independently of the input and interference of outside or third-party actors, such as advertising agencies and other booking agencies. "Scalability" thus refers to self-sufficiency of resources and skills not just in production but in distribution. All of this could finally become possible in 2020, Reinartz argues, because the requisite digital technologies and infrastructures, particularly machine learning devices, are now easily available at the click of a mouse and can be mastered without years of training even by content specialists, i.e. advertising "creatives." Such technologies include tools like the "bumper machine" developed by Google which scales down video content by extracting and condensing the six "most important seconds" into a new format.²¹ Coupling personalized data extraction with AI, Reinartz further envisions such advances as customized videos in which cars are automatically made to change their finish to appear in the supposed favourite colour of the targeted viewer. "Simple and automatic" will be the motto of the new world of video-based marketing. In this world, "scalability" stands for a process of rationalization which increases the independence, agility, and overall capability of video-marketers by substituting automated digital tools for services previously provided by specialists and interlopers.

21 <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/video/bumper-video-ads/>.

As indicated earlier, both in computer science and business management, scalability is a measure of efficiency, and more specifically of the growth of a system, network, or process relative to input. In computer science, scalability refers to the growth of a system which consists of combinations of hardware and software. Growth of the system is achieved through the addition of resources like CPU, RAM, hard disks, or bandwidth. Vertical scalability, or scale-up, refers to an increase in performance through the addition of computing resources to a given computer or node in a network. Horizontal scalability, or scale-out, refers to an increase in performance through the addition of computers or nodes to a system. Typically, the added units have the same performance and capability as existing units or nodes. Scalability comes in four different, interrelated types. Load scalability refers to the ability of a system to perform steadily under varying data loads. Spatial scalability refers to the ability of a system to take on new elements without an “intolerable” increase in storage requirements, i.e. without the requirement of a significant expansion of storage infrastructure. Spatio-temporal scalability means that a system continues to hold its level of performance even as new elements are added, while structural scalability means that the system can add new elements in a clearly defined area even as it maintains its original structure. The measure of scalability for a system is the speed-up, i.e. the increase in speed and volume in data throughput. Superlinear scalability means that added resources increases speed-up, i.e. performance increases relative to input. Linear scalability refers to a speed-up in which performance increases per resource unit added to the system. Supralinear scalability refers to a system in which added resources lead to a decrease in speed-up. The scalability of a system can thus be defined as vertical or horizontal and through the four interrelated aspects of scalability, and measured in terms of speed-up.²² Regardless of the specifications of a given system, network or process, however, scalability is a measure of increased efficiency and performance in terms of data throughput and speed relative to the addition of new resources. To the extent that his argument touches upon computing, Reinartz expects that film as a scalable and dynamic medium will achieve superlinear vertical and horizontal scalability, i.e. increase performance through operations of scaling formats up and down, based on a prior operation of scaling out, i.e. of delegating functions to an independent unit in the existing network,

22 See M. Michael and J. E. Moreira, D. Shiloach, and R. W. Wisniewski, “Scale-up x Scale-out: A Case Study Using Nutch/Lucene,” in 2007 *IEEE International Parallel and Distributed Processing Symposium* (Long Beach: IEEE, 2007), 1–8.

the marketing specialist operating a node independently of the operators of the pre-existing nodes.

In economics and business management questions of scale are not exactly new. Economies of scale, i.e. the proportionate saving of costs achieved by an increased level of production, have been a major concern of business management throughout industrial modernity.²³ However, the concept of “scalability” has gained currency in this field, primarily in the context of the digital economy and online retailing and marketing.²⁴ In an admittedly pointed fashion we could argue that scalability in business management refers to two things: It describes the one thing that is really new about the new, i.e. digital economy, and it exemplifies the ultimate capitalist fantasy of boundless growth with no or almost no input, and thus without cost—economies of scale on steroids, so to speak. With a view to the broader digital economy, it is important to note that the new economy is a lot more old-fashioned than its proponents would have you believe. Most Silicon Valley business models can be broken down according to the formula “nineteenth- or twentieth-century template x + networked computing + the customers are invited to do most of the work,” with large, hierarchically structured, and publicly traded corporations resembling the industrial giants of the second half of the nineteenth century dominating the tech industry.²⁵ Thus, for instance, Amazon is a mail-order company modelled on the nineteenth century retail-by-mail pioneers Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck, but with a very large catalogue and a website with a recommendation algorithm which uses collaborative filtering of consumer preference data to guide the decisions of subsequent buyers.²⁶ Having first grafted a mail-order system onto the video-rental market, Netflix then adapted the mid-twentieth-century direct-mail book club subscription model to video streaming.²⁷ What is new is the degree to which these companies, thanks to networked computing, can achieve growth without significantly increasing basic operating costs in comparison with their traditional, bricks-and-mortar retail business competitors, such as supermarkets, publishers, cinemas, or

23 See George J. Stigler, “The Economies of Scale,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 1 (1958): 54–71.

24 See, for instance, Marko Juntunen et al., “Business Model Scalability in the Cloud Business Context,” *Journal of Business Models* 6, no. 1 (2018): 19–39

25 See Jason Potts and Vinzenz Hediger, “Die vierte Regierungstechnologie. Über Blockchain,” *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 18: Medienökonomien, 10, no. 1 (2018): 73–86.

26 See Greg Linden, Brent Smith, and Jeremy York, “Amazon.com Recommendations: Item-to-Item Collaborative Filtering,” *IEEE Internet Computing* 7, no. 1 (2003): 76–80.

27 On the history and economics of mail-order book clubs, see Caroline Norrick-Rühl, *Book Clubs and Book Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

the now almost entirely defunct video stores. When Reinartz talks about the scalability of the medium of film, he similarly envisions combinations of existing software to create economies of scale through the basic operations of scaling up formats and scaling out operations at the level of computing, and by targeting consumers with customized messages.

But for Reinartz, achieving full scalability marks a turning point in the history of film, a qualitative change which alters the very structure of the medium—a revolution. There is a tension between this view and a concept like Bruno Latour's notion of the "immutable mobile," which refers to the scalable media devices like maps drawn to scale, which enabled European expansion and colonial domination long before digital media were even a concept.²⁸ There is also a tension with notions of scalability in the study of small gauge film formats, which recognize scalability as a feature of the medium well before the advent of digital compression and machine learning.²⁹ To resolve this tension and to determine whether scalability is a new state of the film medium or a historical feature of media techniques is, indeed, a task for historians. But if we consider the analogy, or rather affinity, between historical facts in the sense of Becker and data and algorithmic techniques in the sense of Rieder, a good working hypothesis will be that a media history of scalability will err on the side of format theory and bracket the pre-digital with the digital, not least by pointing out that film has always already been digital, or rather both analogue and digital in the sense of Goodman.

But this in turn raises a question about historiography itself. It would seem to suggest that we did not have to wait for computational approaches for film historiography to make events, facts, and traces scalable, i.e. readable as elements of coherent systems, networks, and processes which historians doing historiography can scale up and out across time and space. The question, then, is: Are film histories—even non-computational ones—scalable?

Are Film Histories Scalable?

Looking back on Reinartz' 2019 vision for the full scalability of film in 2020 from 2022, two questions immediately come to mind: How new is all of this,

28 See Erhard Schüttelz, "Die medientechnische Überlegenheit des Westens. Zur Geschichte und Geographie der *immutable mobiles* Bruno Latours," in *Mediengeographie: Theorie-Analyse-Diskussion*, ed. Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), 67–110.

29 See Alexandra Schneider, "Viewer's Digest: Small-Gauge and Reduction Prints as Liminal Compression Formats," in *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Culture*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 129–46.

really? And has the medium of film, which is supposedly now dynamic and scalable, ever been as static and stable as Reinartz implies? We want to answer the second, apparently subsidiary question first. As early as 1956, in an article on the impact of television on cinema, French film and media scholar Henri Dieuzeide wrote:

In truth all filmic forms have always been provisional: The history of cinema consists of their successive upheavals: from the destruction of the silent film drama through sound, to the destruction of the black-and-white universe by color, to the destruction of the frame by cinemascope.³⁰

In other words, the insight that film has never been static and stable is as old as film studies itself—if we take the Filmology movement in France, to which Dieuzeide belonged, to be the first attempt to establish the study of film as an interdisciplinary field at the university level. As early as 1967 and under the influence of the film screenings at the Expo 67, a world's fair held in Montreal, Canada, German film historian Enno Patalas wrote: “After this, film as we know it merely appears as one of many varieties which only in their totality define the phenomenon of film.”³¹ In the wake of the New Film History of the 1970s and 1980s the turn to new approaches like media archaeology refined film historiography's grasp of the discontinuities and the instability of the medium of film. First broached in film theory by Roger Odin in his semio-pragmatics in the 1980s and 1990s,³² the study of amateur films, home movies, industrial films, science films, and educational films over the last two decades has shown that fluid and ephemeral settings of projection and viewing have always been part of film practice and thus of film history, even as the dispositive of cinema itself has undergone significant transformations over the century and a quarter of the medium's history.

As for the second question, “How new is all of this, really?,” we believe that—as a matter of methodological caution—novelty claims, whether in marketing or media theory, should always be treated with scepticism, particularly when they concern the blessings of digital technology. But

30 Henri Dieuzeide, “Some Problems Raised by the Use of Films on Television,” trans. Vinzenz Hediger, in *Filmology and the Invention of Film Studies: Selected Writings from the Revue internationale de filmologie, 1946–1961*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Guido Kirsten (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming). Originally published as Henri Dieuzeide, “Quelques problèmes posés par l'utilisation des films à la télévision,” *Revue internationale de filmologie* 7, no. 26 (1956): 111–28.

31 “Danach erscheint der Film, wie wir ihn kennen, nur als eine von vielen Varianten, deren Summe erst die Erscheinung Film definiert.” We thank Malte Hagenner for the reference.

32 See Odin, *Spaces of Communication*.

in Reinartz' case the scepticism is further warranted by the fact that his definition of the medium of film aligns with the guiding assumptions of approaches to the study of film which concern the pre-digital period. As a thought experiment, we can hark back to our earlier suggestion that we should always look for the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century templates of contemporary tech business models and propose a similar exercise for Reinartz' vision of film as a fully scalable and dynamic medium. For instance, we can take Reinartz' vision and substitute marketing with radical politics and digital marketing videos with activist video and small-gauge film. We thus find that the idea of a fully scalable medium of film is remarkably, and in fact structurally, similar to the promise for political action through film derived from and associated with the new technology of video in the early 1970s, a promise which has been renewed and enhanced at the confluence of digital video with social networks in social and political movements.³³

But then, this substitution reveals something not just about Reinartz' visions. It also points to what we may describe as a tacit assumption, and maybe even a blind spot, of academic film historiography. This thought experiment, which serves to reveal a structural analogy of the promise of different self-sufficient modes of film production and distribution for the uses of social action and persuasion, can itself be described as an exercise in scalability. Once we get over the cheeky provocation of substituting revolutionary politics for marketing, the operation may feel oddly familiar to someone trained in established modes of film historiography and the teaching of film history.

The film historiography which helped establish film studies as an academic field, and which we will refer to as the "auteur/nation film history," is one of styles, schools, and modes of production. It is not an approach which stresses the successive upheavals which pattern film history according to Henri Dieuzeide, but one which is broadly derived from the history of art and literary criticisms. In this history the central actors are artists, who are connected through spatial and temporal contiguity, intellectual and cultural frameworks, and relations of influence. More specifically, this mode of historiography first emerges as a narrative of privileged national cinematographies and auteur-directors in the 1930.³⁴ It continues to have

33 See Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Sweta Kisher, "The Promise of Portability: CENDIT and the Infrastructure, Politics, and Practice of Video as Little Media in India 1972–1990," *BioScope* 8, no. 1 (2017): 124–45.

34 See Vinzenz Hediger and Alexandra Schneider, "Wie Zorro den Nationalismus erfand. Film, Kino und das Konzept der Nation," in *Medien und nationale Kulturen*, ed. Vincent Kaufmann (Bern: Haupt, 2004), 203–30.

a persistent afterlife in the teaching of film history, even in film studies programmes, but also in a now canonical work of poetic film historiography like Godard's *Historie(s) du cinéma*, which focus almost exclusively on Russian, German, Italian, French, and American cinema, and its canonical auteurs.³⁵ Specifically, such an approach implies that history can be broken down into chunks along a temporal and a spatial axis. The temporal chunks can be ordered in years or decades, or they can be ordered to align with social and political history. The spatial chunks can be organized according to scenes (underground film), cities (New York, Los Angeles, Paris), countries and national states (US, France, Russia, India) or continents (Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa). In that sense, auteur/nation film historiography can be described as a scalable system, a system which can be scaled up, down, and sideways. With its temporal and spatial axes and its basic conceptual operations—style, school, etc.—this system has considerable generative power in terms of research and teaching agendas. It is, in other words, a system which has linear scalability: adding elements increases its performance without changing its structure or mode of operation.

The problem with this mode of historiography has always been that some moving images compute, and others don't. Not only do facts and data not speak for themselves; for the algorithms which make the data speak not all facts are data. Apart from such idiosyncrasies as Godard's claim in the *Historie(s)* that because they never developed film into a truly popular art form Spain and England really have no cinema, industrial films are a case in point. For a long time industrial films would only compute if they were the work of established auteurs, like Alain Resnais' *Le Chant du Styrène* (considered a mature work) or Godard's *Opération Béton* (an unremarkable early effort which only found consideration because it marks the earliest point of Godard's work as a director). For industrial films to become a serious object of study it was necessary to dismantle, or at least suspend and bracket, the auteur/nation historiography and replace it with one in which the question of the pragmatic purpose and operative performance of the moving image takes precedence over the question of artistic creation and value (a system, it should be noted, is equally scalable and can be scaled out across the globe and up across the temporal axis). Nigerian video films, which Alessandro Jedlowski has aptly termed "small screen cinema," are another case in point.³⁶

35 See Michael Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), ch. 5.

36 See Alessandro Jedlowski, "Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood," *Television & New Media* 13, no. 5 (2012): 431–46.

The transition to computational film historiography along with an increasingly digital native film culture adds a new layer to this conundrum. Apart from the inherent perspectivism of algorithmic techniques analysed by Bernhard Rieder, racial bias in algorithms and machine learning applications in the digital economy and the US health system, for instance, is an ongoing problem.³⁷ With a more specific focus on film, the new technical standards of production, distribution, and projection in cinemas, which were developed and established under the leadership of the American film industry, are designed in such a way as to largely exclude the more informal digital native industries and the “small screen cinema” of sub-Saharan Africa from the lucrative global markets for digital cinema.³⁸ Here, it becomes all the more apparent that we need a critical historiography, which we proposed earlier under the heading of a mecanological metahistory, and which in addition to a critical dissection of actual operations includes a critique of narratives of inherent growth and progress associated with scalable systems, networks, and processes.

In addition to understanding film and media historiography’s own systemic biases and the effects and side effects of what we have described as the scalability of these approaches, it important to explore and develop a historiographical attention to the facts which do not become data and ultimately do not compute. One way of doing so is to think about, and develop, histories of non-scalability and non-scalable histories of film in both research and pedagogy.

What Is Not Scalable about Film?

In her work on diversity and the ecology of the Matsutake mushroom, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues that “scalability banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things.”³⁹ But if film as a medium is inherently scalable, if the founding paradigm of film

37 See Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), and Nicol Tuner Lee, “Detecting Racial Bias in Algorithms and Machine Learning,” *Journal of Information, Communications and Ethics in Society* 16, no. 3 (2018): 252–60; Ziad Obermeyer, Brian Powers, Christine Vogeli, and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Dissecting Racial Bias in an Algorithm Used to Manage the Health of Populations,” *Science* 366, no. 6464 (October 2019): 447–53.

38 See Benoît Turquety, *Format, Medium, Configuration: The Displacements of Film* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019), <https://meson.press/books/medium-format-configuration/>.

39 Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 38.

historiography, the auteur/nation approach is scalable, and if even new types of local cinema-going historiographies turn facts into data, or rather use algorithms to produce facts from available data, then how can we think of film historiography for that which is not scalable, the singular, resistant, incomputable, the facts that do not count?

As we pointed out before, many film history syllabi are designed to be scalable: it is possible to scale up and out their scope without affecting their basic conditions and guiding assumptions. A different model would be to engage with competing historiographies, with frameworks which go beyond the established conceptual operations. The pioneering work of scholars like Mariann Lewinsky, Martin Loiperdinger, Gregory Waller, and others⁴⁰ on local film histories, including that of Annette Kuhn and others on cinema-going and memory,⁴¹ which paved the way for the new sub-field of “New Cinema History,”⁴² could be said to have first raised the issue of non-computable facts in film historiography a quarter of a century ago. More recent advances in such non-scalable film historiographies include Janice Nadua Trice’s study of alternative film cultures in Manila,⁴³ Kim K. Fahlstedt’s *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco’s Chinese Neighborhood*, which draws on “New Cinema History” to argue against the homogenizing effects of the “historical shorthand” of the concept of modernity in film studies to stress “the heterogeneity of historical audiences,”⁴⁴ and Debashree Mukherjee’s *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, in which the author suggests engaging with the concept of “ciné-ecology” as a “terrain of film production” in order to better study the “history of film practice” in the colonial city of Bombay even as she points out, in an echo of Miriam Hansen’s argument of cinema as “vernacular modernity,” that cinema, although a “transnational” force, came “to mean very different things [...] in Istanbul or Sydney.”⁴⁵ In a similar vein the recent work on the material culture of film

40 See Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), and the contributions by Mariann Lewinsky and Martin Loiperdinger in Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, and Martin Loiperdinger, eds., *KINtop Jahrbuch 9: Lokale Kinogeschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2000).

41 <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/cmda/index.php/history/>.

42 See Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

43 See Janice Nadua Trice, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila’s Alternative Film Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

44 Kim K. Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco’s Chinese Neighborhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 7.

45 Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

studios by Brian R. Jacobson and others offers a non-scalable alternative, so to speak, to the linear materiality of neo-formalist historical poetics,⁴⁶ while Haidee Wasson's work on portable film devices opens up another field of research which is impossible to scale up, for reasons beginning with the ephemerality of the practices in question and the scarcity of sources.⁴⁷ In this debate, a concept like Mukherjee's "ciné-ecology" has the potential to reframe the categorical operations of the established film historiography by creating new connections between the local, the regional, and the transnational levels of film practice. What connects these studies, in addition to their attention to cinema as localized practice, is a focus on the institutional frameworks and infrastructures of cinematic practice. They share this focus with Ravi Sundaram's groundbreaking study *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanity* from 2012. Sundaram's book is a meticulous study of how the fantasies of transparency and scalability of urban space which sustained the Nehruvian modern Delhi break down and are progressively replaced with a new form of urbanity in which media, from print to film and digital media, serve as infrastructures and interact with urban migration to create new types of urban space. Sundaram's work provides a model for the challenge which this contribution addresses in particular, namely the need for new modes of film historiography in research and teaching which account for non-scalable processes in a post-digital film culture.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, Meredith A. Bak reminds us that, in the words of Tom Gunning, to "explore historical change as 'a jagged rhythm of competing practices'" we need to turn to new archives and approaches. For Bak, optical toys are "ways of thinking about vision that surfaced in advertising, play culture, the school, the psychology laboratory."⁴⁹ Her work is a productive contribution to the field of material media culture analysis and history, as are Caetlin Benson-Allott's work on the material cultures of film and television and Mark Steinberg's work on media retail.⁵⁰

46 See Brian R. Jacobson, ed., *In the Studio: Visual Creation and Its Material Environments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

47 See Haidee Wasson, *Everyday Movies: Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

48 See Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

49 Meredith A. Bak, *Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 4 and 33.

50 See Caetlin Benson-Allott, *The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Marc Steinberg, "Delivering Media: The Convenience Store as Media Mix Hub," in *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail*, ed. Derek Johnson and Daniel Herbert (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 239–55.

What this brief survey shows is that the groundwork has been laid and the tools are in place. If 2020 may or may not have been the year when the medium of film has become fully scalable at last, 2022 may be the year in which film historiography, both in research and teaching, finally embraces the non-scalability of facts that don't count.

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18 Representing the Unknown

A Critical Approach to Digital Data Visualizations in the Context of Feminist Film Historiography

Sarah-Mai Dang

Abstract

Considering the growing production and application of data in the era of digitalization, the objective of feminist historians to tell a story differently rather than telling a different story has acquired a new urgency. Today, there are a number of online projects that feature women's achievements in film history. There is no doubt that databases such as the Women Film Pioneers Project offer a great deal of information on women workers in early cinema as well as additional references. Yet, this chapter makes the case that in order to foster new perspectives and advance our understanding of women's influence in film culture, we need to further explore new forms of presenting historiographical research by taking advantage of digital tools and methods. Data visualizations can offer a productive approach for telling women's achievements in early film industries while taking into account ambiguities, contingencies, and blind spots inherent to history.

Keywords: digital film history, research data, data visualization, feminist theory, early cinema

Chaplin, Griffith, and Smith

Charlie Chaplin is certainly one of the most famous actors of the silent era. Many people have seen one or more of his movies or at least have a clear image of him. Chaplin has become an iconic figure. In contrast, D. W. Griffith is not very well known beyond cinephiles and film professionals. At media departments, however, many students learn about the US director

in one of the first classes on film history. Very early on, I was taught that Griffith's movie *Intolerance* (1916) is considered a pioneering classic because of its extraordinary film sets and elaborate montage. Interestingly though, what I did not come to know was who was responsible for the acclaimed editing. It was only recently that I have learned from the collaborative online Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP)¹ that Rose Smith and her husband, James Smith, edited a number of Griffith's films, including *Intolerance*. Remarkably, however (and not surprisingly, notwithstanding the celebrated montage), James Smith's wife, Rose Smith, seemed to be forgotten in later sources—and thus in the course of history.²

Smith was not the only woman effaced in film history. Since women's editing was "considered to be merely technical rather than creative," as film scholar Kristin Hatch explains, their work was not credited in the films. Film credits, as presented in the prints themselves, are one of the sources historians would first go to in order to seek information. Thus, searching for evidence to tell the story of Rose Smith turns out to be quite an endeavour. In general, women's significance for Hollywood's visual style has been little documented.³

The reasons for this marginalization are manifold. To dismiss "women's work" as menial labour is probably the main reason, following the current research in feminist film history.⁴ Furthermore, notwithstanding its significance for today's film theory, the focus on the audiovisual representation of women on screen in the 1970s and 1980s may have made the many women behind the scenes disappear from our sight, as feminist film scholars such as Jane Gaines or Heide Schlüppmann, as well as other colleagues, have argued, and as I have discussed elsewhere.⁵ A third reason for the absence of women in film history, closely related to the first one (the disregard of labour), is that

1 The Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP) is available online at <https://wfpp.cdrr.columbia.edu/>.

2 See Kristen Hatch, "Cutting Women: Margaret Booth and Hollywood's Pioneering Female Film Editors," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2013).

3 See Kristen Hatch, "Rose Smith," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2013a).

4 See, for example, Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, eds., *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

5 See Sarah-Mai Dang, "Digital Tools & Big Data: Zu gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen für die Film- und Medienwissenschaft am Beispiel der feministischen Filmgeschichtsschreibung," *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, no. 2–3 (2018): 142–56.

in the silent era, women's roles varied and were acknowledged differently. For instance, women commonly known as "cutters" were also referred to as "editors" or "scenario editors" if their work involved dramaturgical aspects even though there might have been only little manual cutting to it.⁶ Job titles may change over time and differ from country to country. Therefore, it is difficult to get a comprehensive overview of the many women involved in film montage.

However, while this chapter focuses on women in film history, we need to be aware that both women and men have been excluded from film history due to historic manufacturing conditions as well as specific conceptions of film and film history. For example, by focusing on the director of a film in the context of the *auteur theory* the many facets of film production, including the numerous people who collaborated in various areas, have been neglected for a considerable time. The development of film history is yet another example of how theoretical concepts, research interests, and objects are closely interlinked and thus, as feminist theorist Donna Haraway has pointed out, that knowledge is always situated in a specific context.⁷

How we categorize and conceptualize tasks and professions such as "director," "authorship," or "editor" affects the (non-)representation of women in film history, as pointed out by a wide range of film scholars.⁸ Whether we identify a woman as "cutter," "editor," or "assistant director" matters because categories imply particular assumptions with regard to significance and status. Categorizations effect how we evaluate a woman's role in history. This is particularly important in the context of digital databases. Ascribing specific metadata to discrete elements is no neutral procedure but a deeply political act of interpretation, as digital humanities scholar Miriam Posner writes.⁹ In other words, feminist film historians Shelly Cobb and Natalie Wreyford note, it is an authoritative process of power and authority that risks normalizing and essentializing meaning.¹⁰

6 See Hatch, "Rose Smith."

7 See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

8 See, for example, Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, eds., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Vicki Callahan, ed., *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).

9 See Miriam Posner, "What's Next: The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Mathew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/a22aca14-0e80-4cc6-a622-6fee9428a357>.

10 See Natalie Wreyford and Shelley Cobb, "Data and Responsibility," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 3 (2017): 115.

The example of Rose Smith is only one of many which demonstrate why it has been difficult to reconstruct women's work in early film industries and tell their stories to today's audiences. While the lack of evidence is certainly one major challenge, in this chapter, I would like to shift the focus from archival research to the presentation of findings, that is, to the presentation of research itself. How we provide access to sources and research today determines the way we will envision the past in the future. While it is crucial that historians carry on digging up treasures from the archives in order to tell more stories, we also need to further reflect upon *how* to tell more stories. How can we show research results in an engaging yet critical and self-reflective manner? How can we talk about past events we can only imagine?¹¹ How can we represent the unknown?¹²

In light of the increasing digitalization which is impacting both our research objects and methods, these questions have become an even greater challenge. In the use of new technologies inclusion and exclusion mechanisms can be easily reproduced and exponentially amplified—or, and this is important to keep in mind, counteracted. As I have summarized in a previous article, there is the risk that due to the focus on “big data” metahistory is favoured over micro-history. Furthermore, while the implementation of standard metadata can foster interoperability and collaboration, at the same time it might reinforce blind spots and obscure specific details. Last but not least, mass digitization of objects allows for easy access and global circulation of artefacts, on the one hand. On the other, analogue sources will possibly be left out by students and scholars as well as users in general. At the same time, digital platforms can inform us of the many existing archives and their valuable collections and thereby encourage further research on site.¹³

Against this backdrop and considering the growing production and application of data in the era of digitalization, the objective of feminist historians to tell a story differently rather than telling a different story has acquired a new urgency. Today, there are numerous online projects that feature women's achievements in film history. In my view, however, platforms such as the Women Film Pioneers Project are still far from reaching their full potential.¹⁴ Without doubt the WFPP database offers a great deal

11 See Monica Dall'Asta and Jane M. Gaines, “Prologue. Constellations. Past Meets Present in Feminist Film History,” in *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 13–25.

12 See Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*.

13 See Dang, “Digital Tools & Big Data.”

14 See Sarah-Mai Dang, “Unknowable Facts and Digital Databases: Reflections on the Women Film Pioneers Project and Women in Film History,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, no. 4

of information on women workers in early cinema as well as additional references. Yet in order to foster new perspectives and advance our understanding of women's influence on audiovisual culture, I suggest further exploring new forms of presentation by taking greater advantage of digital tools and methods. Based on my studies on media aesthetics, research data and databases, and on what I shall present in this chapter, I assume that data visualizations in particular open a productive methodological path for telling women's significance in early cinema while taking into account ambiguities, contingencies, and blind spots inherent in film history.

Various data can be visualized in many different ways, for different purposes, and in different contexts. For instance, visualizations provide access to research and cultural sources; they help us navigate archives and analyse data. They might demonstrate an idea and make us reflect on a particular subject. They can also invite us to ask further questions and explore new territories. Moreover, as I will show in this chapter, they enable us to rethink traditional approaches in the humanities and further develop film and media studies concepts and methods.

Before I lay out my arguments for further exploring data visualizations in the context of digital film historiography, I want to sketch out some general challenges by drawing attention to the representation of the Corona crisis (as of July 2020). The many familiar examples in this context can help us to better understand what is at stake when visualizing data and other types of research results.

Data Visualizations and COVID-19

The Corona crisis has drawn particular attention to statistics and data visualizations in and beyond academia. In order to demonstrate the dimensions of the pandemic, news media have presented numerous graphics on its effects: for example, maps which display the development of the virus in specific regions, timelines which show a possible infection rate if no measures would be taken, and bar charts which compare the number of people infected, cured, and deceased in various countries.¹⁵ Other graphics elaborated on the goal of flattening the curve or the rapid expansion of

(December 2020).

¹⁵ See Dominic Lammar, "COVID-19—So veranschaulichen Datenjournalist:innen das Coronavirus," *netzpolitik.org*, March 11, 2020, <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/so-veranschaulichen-datenjournalistinnen-das-coronavirus/>.



Fig. 18.1. Screenshot of the COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. "COVID-19 Dashboard," cropped by the author.

the outbreak.¹⁶ By now, we are all familiar with the mathematical term of exponential growth, the greater increase with passing time.

In most instances, the visualizations are based on data from Johns Hopkins University (JHU), which aggregates data from various institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, as well as local reports and the international physicians online community DXY.cn. Most readers probably recognize the COVID-19 Dashboard run by the university's Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE).

As of July 2020, for example, the dashboard shows that the US was the most affected by the virus, then came Europe, India, and parts of South America. Red circular areas indicated the regional gravity of the pandemic, confirmed by the stats of "global death" in the right column, ranking the US first (150,713), followed by Brazil (90,134), and the UK (46,046). The map clearly signals the fatal consequences of COVID-19, though it also displays the number of people who have recovered. From the dashboard we learn that the virus is to be taken seriously. This can be interpreted as the main message.

16 See Siouxsie Wiles, "The Three Phases of COVID-19—and How We Can Make It Manageable," *The Spinoff*, March 9, 2020, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/09-03-2020/the-three-phases-of-covid-19-and-how-we-can-make-it-manageable/>; Harry Stevens, "These Simulations Show How to Flatten the Coronavirus Growth Curve," *Washington Post*, March 14, 2020.

However, as we know from the media coverage, the pandemic and its data-based representation is more complicated. First, data on the developments of COVID-19 was captured in many different ways. Thus, the various data sets are only comparable to a limited extent. Second, in order to grasp the severeness of the virus we have to take into account the velocity of the spread, meaning the reproduction value (R), and not just the death accounts. Taking a closer look at the dashboard it becomes obvious that it gives us a very specific view on the virus' effects.

At first, by default, as pointed out by UX designers Dan Benoni and Louis-Xavier Lavalley in their animated case study of the COVID-19 Dashboard, we see an overview of cumulative cases.¹⁷ In this mode, almost the entire US seems to be infected. But in reality only a part—still a comparatively large number—of the population, has caught the virus.¹⁸ The fact is, as Benoni and Lavalley illustrate, the statistics and the visualization do not match. Readers might find this quite surprising since Johns Hopkins University ranks as one of the top US universities and thus the CSSE seems to be trustworthy—and it most likely is. Yet, as graphic designer and information scholar Edward Tufte has shown with his concept of the “lie factor,” inadequacies are remarkably common in all kinds of institutions and areas.

In what has become a standard reference in the field of data visualization, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, Edward R. Tufte coined the “lie factor” in order to examine the proportional relation between data and its representation.¹⁹ The “lie factor” can vary. In the case of the COVID-19 Dashboard it is relatively high. Benoni and Lavalley rightly argue, by completely “infecting” an area visually, the map implies “it can't get worse, when in fact, it could.”²⁰ In their view, a symbol map is unsuitable for representing the proportion of infected people. They suggest, “[w]hen data has a negative connotation, you should avoid showing cumulative cases” at all because it can “amplify/alter perceptions.” If the dashboard's creators had chosen green or blue over red, besides a different type of representation, the numbers would have a very different effect on us.²¹

17 See Dan Benoni and Louis-Xavier Lavalley, “Coronavirus UX: How Dashboard Designs Can Impact Your Perception,” *Growth.Design* (2020).

18 The screenshot reflects the status quo of July 30, 2020. Since then, the number has increased significantly.

19 See Edward R. Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2001), 57–59.

20 Benoni and Lavalley, “Coronavirus UX.”

21 Ibid.

In addition to aesthetic questions of *how* data is presented—and consequently perceived and interpreted—it is, of course, also important to consider *what* is being represented. For example, the map tells us nothing about personal characteristics, age, gender, or health conditions.²² We cannot trace how the virus has spread, though a map seems to be particularly suitable for this information. Of course, a visualization can only focus on a limited range of factors without resulting in an information overload. However, we ought to try to understand what these foci are. Visualizations do not simply represent what we assume is already there but also generate knowledge by relating to the world in a specific way. Data visualizations offer only a partial view; a view, however, that might appear natural in the act of re/presentation.

As stressed by scholars across disciplines, we have to closely look at the data a graph or diagram is based on. What data has been included and what data has been—deliberately or inevitably—excluded? Under which premises was the data generated? If we look at the dashboard, we see some substantial areas which are not red. According to news media coverage it is very much unlikely that this is because there are zero infections in these areas. As mentioned above, the tests are not equally performed across countries. For some regions, there hardly exists any data. Thus, media theorist Christoph Ernst concludes, also referring to Benoni and Lavalles analysis, that the freely accessible infographic does not just visualize the statistics of the global crisis but also the political agendas of nation states and how they seek to manage the curve.²³

Following this line of reasoning, we can state that data is always data politics, and so is data visualization. Despite the association with accuracy and evidence, data is neither self-explanatory nor neutral. All data “is *capta*, made, constructed, and produced, never given,” media scholar Johanna Drucker asserts.²⁴ However, digital humanities scholar Charlotte Fillmore-Handlon explains, this does not mean that data is not objective. Referring to media historian Lisa Gitelman and literary scholar Virginia Jackson’s introduction of “*Raw Data*” *Is an Oxymoron*,²⁵ she writes, we need

22 See *ibid.*

23 See Christoph Ernst, “Die Kurve Abflachen!—Über Informationsvisualisierung und die Corona-Pandemie,” Universität Bonn, April 2, 2020, <https://www.uni-bonn.de/neues/die-kurve-abflachen-2020-ueber-informationsvisualisierung-und-die-corona-pandemie>.

24 Johanna Drucker, “Graphical Approaches to the Digital Humanities,” in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Raymond George Siemens, and John Unsworth (Chichester: Wiley/Blackwell, 2016), 249.

25 See Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson, “Introduction,” in “*Raw Data*” *Is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

to “understand objectivity as ‘situated and historically specific; it comes from somewhere and is the result of ongoing changes to the conditions of inquiry, conditions that are at once material, social, and ethical.’”²⁶

In this light, the terms “messy data” and “data cleaning” require careful scrutinization, as digital humanities researchers Katie Rawson and Trevor Muñoz argue in their plea “Against Cleaning.”²⁷ They explain:

The term “cleaning” implies that a dataset begins as “messy.” “Messy” suggests an underlying order: it supposes things already have a rightful place, but they are not in it—like socks on the bedroom floor rather than in the bureau or the hamper.²⁸

Instead, the production and use of data is intertwined with human decisions and agency, statistician Nick Barrowman notes, arguing that data has no “mind of its own.”²⁹ Therefore, like data visualizations, data itself is always already an interpretation.³⁰ On this account, we need to analyse (1) the source, (2) the production process, and (3) the aesthetics of data visualizations as well as their perception in order to better understand the COVID-19 Dashboard and data visualizations in general.

Data Visualizations and Media Studies

“Every discipline and disciplinary institution has its own norms and standards for the imagination of data, just as every field has its accepted methodologies and its evolved structures of practices,” Gitelman and Jackson note. In their view, data is to be taken as a “matter of disciplines—rather than of computers.”³¹ I agree with their proposed perspective and like to add that, likewise, we need to consider how data visualizations—both as object of study and tool for investigation, or even method—are conceived in different disciplines.

26 Charlotte Fillmore-Handlon, “5 Things Data Cannot Do,” Project Arclight, July 8, 2016, <http://projectarclight.org/arguments/5-things-data-cannot-do/>.

27 Katie Rawson and Trevor Muñoz, “Against Cleaning,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Mathew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

28 Ibid.

29 Nick Barrowman, “Why Data Is Never Raw,” *The New Atlantis* 58 (2018): 130.

30 See Fillmore-Handlon, “5 Things.”

31 Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction,” 3.

Already before the Corona crisis, data visualizations have been broadly applied in various sectors and disciplines, mainly in fields known for their quantitative approaches, such as economics, demographics, or statistics. However, due to the growing production of research data in the (digital) humanities, data visualizations have been also—slowly but steadily—gaining in significance in the field of film and media studies.

In this chapter, I use the term “data visualization” in the broadest sense in order to retain an open mind for all sorts of digital representations of information and knowledge. A more general definition also accounts for the heterogeneity and complexity of data and data visualization in film and media studies.³² Nevertheless, for heuristic purposes it can be helpful to distinguish between visualizations of (meta)data *about* artefacts (information visualization) and visualizations *of* artefacts themselves (media visualization), as suggested by media theorist Lev Manovich.³³ In the context of his much discussed Cultural Analytics approach, for more than ten years Manovich has been analysing large amounts of images by applying various visualization techniques. For this purpose, Manovich’s Software Studies Initiative (<http://lab.culturalanalytics.info/>) uses various tools that derive from different rather unfamiliar disciplines, media scholar Eef Masson points out.³⁴ This is why we need to reflect how digital humanities are shaped by specific applications and thus specific intentions, assumptions, and epistemological definitions. For example, ImagePlot is based on the software ImageJ that was initially created for medical scans and later used for biological microscopy. To understand how digital tools work and how to interpret the results of data-based visualization is quite a challenge even for experts.³⁵

Considering the many implications of humanistic digital research, we need to look at how new tools affect our approaches and also our objects of study. For instance, transforming artefacts such as films or paintings into data raises many fundamental methodological and epistemological questions. For example, how does this “recoding” alter our research object?

32 See Sarah-Mai Dang, “Forschungsdatenmanagement in der Filmwissenschaft: Daten, Praktiken und Erkenntnisprozesse,” *montage AV* 29, no. 1 (2020): 120–40.

33 See Lev Manovich, “Museum without Walls, Art History without Names,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, ed. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2013).

34 See Eef Masson, “Humanistic Data Research. An Encounter between Epistemic Traditions,” in *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data*, ed. Mirko Tobias Schäfer and Karin van Es (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 29.

35 See *ibid.*



Fig. 18.2. Screenshot of an example by media scholar Kevin L. Ferguson that Christian Olesen presents in his overview on image data visualization, cropped by the author.

What is the relationship between original artefact and data? How does this approach change film and media studies?

While the “translation” of images into data and then into visualizations provides new ways of comparison and analysis, as film historian Christian Olesen demonstrates, it is crucial to realize that visualizations present something different from the original object.³⁶ We see references that might resemble the original object. But in contrast to what Manovich implies, I contend that we are not able to see the “objects themselves.”³⁷ The “objects themselves,” I would argue, is a misleading term, like “raw data,” since it implies that each artefact can be defined by an ontological core aspect when in fact it is a matter of perception how we conceive an object. For instance, a “montage visualization,” which accumulates all takes of one film in a mosaic-like overview, or a “summary visualization,” which superimposes single images, changes our perception of the visualized film and consequently our understanding of what film theorists usually define as a time-based medium.

As I have sketched out elsewhere, following Olesen, media visualizations in Manovich’s sense allow us to see new aspects of artefacts, such as colour schemes in genre film or image compositions in films, and thereby broaden our understanding of media research in terms of theories and methods.³⁸ However, regardless of the disciplinary potentials, I think that the translation

36 See Christian Gosvig Olesen, “SEMIA and Moving Image Data Visualization: An Overview and Brief Introduction,” *The Sensory Moving Image Archive*, May 20, 2018, <https://sensorymovingimagearchive.humanities.uva.nl/index.php/2018/05/20/semia-and-moving-image-dataviz-in-film-and-media-studies-an-overview-and-brief-introduction/>.

37 See Manovich, “Museum without Walls.”

38 See Dang, “Forschungsdatenmanagement,” 124–27.

process which, according to Manovich, characterizes media visualizations is true for all kinds of visualization. For instance, visualization experts Katrin Glinka and Marian Dörk consider the translation of non-spatial data structures into geometrical forms and other visual arrangements (in order to show, for example, relations between philosophical concepts) a particular challenge for information visualizations in art history.³⁹

If we, in line of what I have addressed above with respect to the COVID-19 dashboard, understand both data and data visualization themselves as artefacts, and thus as “media data,” the distinction between information visualization and media visualization becomes even more debatable. Since all data requires “material expression,” a simple spreadsheet is already some form of visualization.⁴⁰ It is this “material expression” I will discuss in the following with regard to film historiography.

Data Visualizations and Film Historiography

Despite the current discourses on “big data” in the digital era, we must not forget that data has been essential in the humanities long before the “computational turn.” Data has played a significant role in the context of historiographical studies, for example, in stilometric film analysis developed in the 1970s when film studies was becoming a discipline—in addition to all kinds of visual knowledge productions that can be traced way back in cultural history.⁴¹ Nonetheless, we can observe that the number of data-intensive projects in film and media studies has increased significantly in the past few years. Many different examples can be found in the context of film historiographical research.⁴²

One of the first data-driven projects that has become widely known is the online platform on film editing and shot length, Cinemetrics (<http://www.cinemetrics.lv/>). It was created in 2005 by film scholar Yuri Tsivian and

39 See Katrin Glinka and Marian Dörk, “Zwischen Repräsentation und Rezeption—Visualisierung als Facette von Analyse und Argumentation in der Kunstgeschichte,” in *Computing Art Reader: Einführung in die digitale Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Piotr Kuroczyński, Peter Bell, and Lisa Dieckmann (Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, 2018), 238.

40 See Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction,” 6, 12.

41 See Christian Gosvig Olesen, “Towards a ‘Humanistic Cinemetrics’?,” in *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data*, ed. Mirko Tobias Schäfer and Karin van Es (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017); Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

42 This graph is also highlighted by Olesen to give an example of a statistical data visualization (2018).



Fig. 18.3. Screenshot of the Cinemetrics website that shows a case study on Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), slightly cropped by the author. This graph is also highlighted by Olesen to give an example of a statistical data visualization (2018).

computer scientist Gunars Cijvans in order to provide statistical evidence for the transformation of film style. As Olesen explains in his comprehensive analysis of Cinemetrics, the crowd-sourced data uploads do not follow any research data management standards. Instead, the roughly 15,000 titles “constitute a heterogeneous data mass which facilitates comparison between primarily limited corpora with uniform, technical standards rather than providing evidence for a universal, evolutionary film history as in the 1970s.”⁴³

The central element of Cinemetrics consists of a standard format for statistical data visualization, a graph that can be annotated by users, Olesen observes. By providing various cutting parameters the website does not only allow for multilayered comparisons but reflects the variety of scholarly concepts of stilometrics such as the Average Shot Length (ASL) and the Median Shot Length.⁴⁴ While Cinemetrics seems to be indebted to positivist traditions that focus on accuracy and verifiability of patterns by means of statistical data, it allows for a detailed analysis of film editing. Thus, as Olesen argues, different than one might have initially assumed, in spite of the statistical focus, cinemetrics approaches qualify as exploratory, critically, and inductive, thus humanistic. Although they might appear as utterly scientific, they possess the potential of bridging the hermeneutic and quantitative epistemic traditions.⁴⁵

43 Olesen, “Humanistic Cinemetrics,” 44.

44 See *ibid.*, 45–46.

45 See *ibid.*, 40–41.

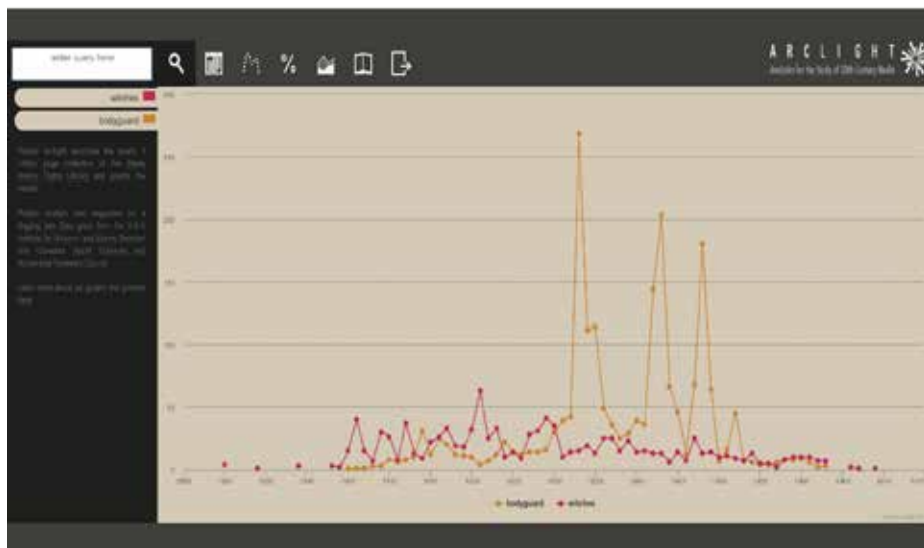


Fig. 18.4. Screenshot of the Project Arclight website that shows how many times the terms “witches” and “bodyguard” are used in film magazines over several decades, cropped by the author.

Besides Cinemetrics, a considerable number of additional film historiographical projects have been developed in recent years. When it comes to the question of how digital tools shape humanistic research it is also worthwhile to take a closer look at Project Arclight (<https://projectarclight.org/>). This media history platform was initiated by media scholars Charles Acland and Eric Hoyt in 2014. Together with their teams they have created a software project that allows users to search for trending keywords in about two million pages of film magazines and journals in the Media History Digital Library (MHDL) and the newspaper archive of the Library of Congress. The MHDL was founded by media historian David Pierce. It mainly contains sources up to 1964 since these are no longer protected by copyright but instead assigned to the public domain. The search results are visualized in diagrams and maps with direct access to the digitized artefacts aggregated by the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>). Project Arclight demonstrates that data-based research can enable both a quantitative metadata analysis and a qualitative close reading approach. Due to the direct linking users can zoom in and zoom out while retaining the entities' integrity and historical context. Micro- and macro-histories are brought into a dialogue.

As for data bases and visualizations that explicitly focus on gender representation, besides the WFPP, the BFI Filmography (<https://filmography.bfi.org.uk/>) has gained international recognition (see fig. 18.5). The project



Fig. 18.5. Screenshot of the BFI Filmography website that shows how different graphs are applied to different aspects in film history, slightly cropped by the author.

seeks to give a comprehensive overview of the UK film industry from the beginning of film history. The website displays categories like the “most prolific actress” and “most prolific female director,” as well as the gender balance in British feature films, among other aspects, for example, film subjects and international co-productions, in various graphs and diagrams. In order to address political issues such as diversity and inclusion, the project has added an extra layer that focuses on gender by drawing on additional data bases such as the Office for National Statistics and manual biographical research.⁴⁶ In doing so, the data curators are well aware that binary categories and external gender attributions leave out nuances. However, although this method is not perfect, as it is explained on the website, the focus on gender fosters further discussions about equality in film industries.

While the BFI Filmography does not tell individual stories, it serves as an impressive example of how quantitative data can make the absence of women in film history visible. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the absence of women is not a personal experience but a structural problem, as Wreyford and Cobb explain.⁴⁷ They both were engaged in the research project “Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK,” led by Cobb and Ruth Linda Williams. Based on BFI data sets, their goal was to identify women’s various roles in British film productions from 2000 to 2015 using both quantitative and qualitative methods in a

46 See *ibid.*

47 See Wreyford and Cobb, “Data and Responsibility.”

feminist manner—that means, in their view, passionately, collaboratively, and critically.⁴⁸ Also taking into account the dilemma of labelling others, in their article “Data and Responsibility,” they argue that statistics and data have played a key role in feminist research and politics, for instance, in understanding inequalities and consciousness raising.⁴⁹ Following these impetuses, they have created a research project that seeks to encourage a redistribution of financial means in a more equitable way by presenting various statistic findings to the public via the news media, for example, the low representation of women of colour in the UK film industry.⁵⁰ Moreover, according to the BFI statistics, a general absence of women can be observed in contemporary British film-making.⁵¹ However, like other databases, the BFI database does not provide a complete overview of all the women who have been working in British film. The figures should be treated with caution, as Wreyford and Cobb emphasize. Ideally, they should be complemented with further investigations in order to provide a broader and more nuanced overview and to include women in the official history.⁵²

These data visualization projects are just a few among many in the field of film and media historiography that have been created in the past two decades. This brief insight shows the variety of approaches. They all apply different data to different tools for various purposes and in various contexts. And they all look differently. How to classify visualization projects epistemologically concerns many digital humanities scholars at present. I also think that this issue needs to be further explored. So far, the analyses have mainly focused on the intended functions and pragmatic use of visualizations rather than their effects and possibilities.

It has been demonstrated that, generally speaking, each type of visualization serves specific functions. For instance, bar charts are appropriate for comparing values, pie charts show the percentages of values and network diagrams point out connections.⁵³ And, as shown in the case of the COVID-19 dashboard, symbol maps seem to be unsuitable for representing proportions. But, as Drucker reasonably argues, we need to further investigate the “intellectual implications of the use of graphical arguments built on tools borrowed from other disciplines.”⁵⁴ There is much

48 See *ibid.*, 114.

49 See *ibid.*, 115–17, 108–9.

50 See *ibid.*, 116.

51 See *ibid.*, 124.

52 See *ibid.*

53 See Drucker, “Graphical Approaches,” 239–41.

54 *Ibid.*, 238.

more work to be done in order to better understand the epistemological conditions and effects of visualizations: (1) in the humanities and (2) from a humanities perspective.⁵⁵

As indicated above, different from what one would expect, diagrams, maps, and other forms of visualization can hardly serve as clear evidence that does not require any explanation or interpretation. Due to representational conventions and epistemological premises, visualizations appear ordered, comprehensive, and structured, when in fact they often obscure ambiguities, conflicts, and contradictions.⁵⁶ Therefore, if we consider visualizations themselves artefacts we have to closely examine each single case to grasp how an argument is made, what kind of knowledge is produced, and what underlying political structures are at play.⁵⁷ As mentioned above, we ought to take into account that visualizations do not only represent information but at the same time also produce meaning. Or, in the words of Drucker: “The means by which a graphic produces meaning is an integral part of the meaning it produces.”⁵⁸ The challenge for media scholars is to not only distinguish various graphs but also grasp *how* the various visualizations are *creating* meaning. They do not just reveal or show something but they also “act.”⁵⁹ This argument needs be kept in mind, when we, as claimed by Glinka and Dörk, further educate ourselves in digital visualization literacy as a new facet of critical inquiry.⁶⁰

Rethinking Data Visualizations

While it is necessary to thoroughly analyse how data visualizations re/produce—or perform and enact—specific values, ideologies, and politics, I would like to shift the focus to their critical potential for film historiography. Following current discourses in data feminism and other critical approaches in digital humanities, I, too, contend that data visualizations do not always obscure conflicts and contradictions but can, in contrast, help us reflect upon the situatedness of knowledge

55 See *Ibid.*

56 See Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction,” 9.

57 See Drucker, “Graphical Approaches,” 239.

58 *Ibid.*

59 See Kyle Parry, “Reading for Enactment: A Performative Approach to Digital Scholarship and Data Visualization,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

60 See Glinka and Dörk, “Repräsentation und Rezeption.”

and epistemological uncertainties such as vague or ambivalent data or assumptions and probabilities. As a number of scholars have argued, in order to fully explore the potentials of digital knowledge production and representation we have to rethink our underlying premises of what data visualizations ought to accomplish. We need to look beyond the “lie factor” and recognize that they do not necessarily have to aim for the clearest and most comprehensive accurate picture. Graphics and other visual arrangements can be also unsettling and perhaps, in doing so, make us reconsider what is perceived as common knowledge and legitimate scholarly work. The following example shall outline how such a visualization can look like.

In *The Shape of History: Reimagining Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's Historical Visualization Work*, feminist data scholar Lauren Klein and her team introduce us to the grid as an alternative approach to history (see fig. 18.6). In the introduction Klein wonders:

What would it mean if a visualization was designed to be difficult and abstract? If it was intended to send us back to the original source of the data in order to make sense of the image we encountered? What if the goal of visualization was to allow each person, individually, to interpret the image for herself?⁶¹

The grid was designed by the nineteenth-century educator, writer, and publisher Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who believed in the active engagement of people. Instead of organizing historical data through a chronological timeline, which would be the standard choice for displaying past events, Palmer Peabody created a colourful grid with an interactive interface for users to implement data of their own and thereby create their personal report to history. The goal of this pedagogical approach was, as Klein explains, to reflect on the remediation process of data visualizations. It makes us think about the status of data and the importance of design that shapes history.⁶² It encourages us to engage with historiography in an affective, playful, and self-reflective manner.

This is just one of many digital humanities projects that critically investigates knowledge production and that I think is inspiring for further

61 Lauren F. Klein, Caroline Foster, Erica Pramer, Adam Hayward, and Shivani Negi, “Introduction,” *The Shape of History: Reimagining Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's Historical Visualization Work* (2016), <http://shapeofhistory.net/>.

62 See *ibid.*

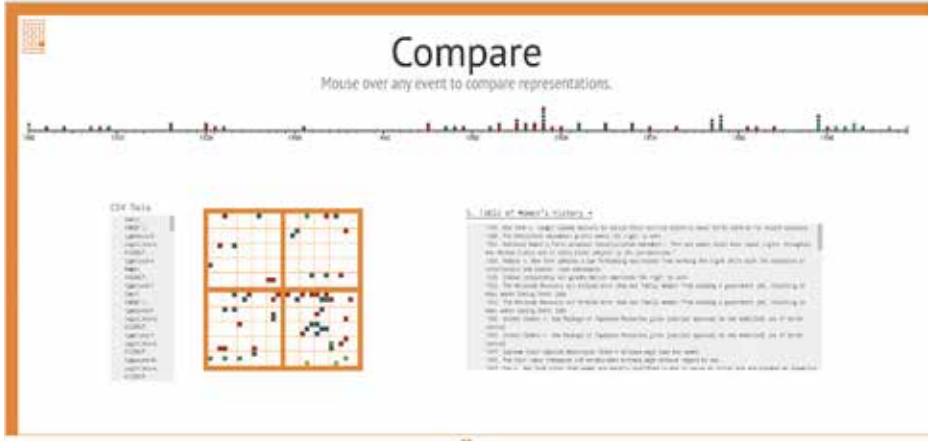


Fig. 18.6. Screenshot of the Shape of History Project by Lauren Klein, a multi-perspective, interactive data visualization project, slightly cropped by the author.

exploring the potentials of data visualizations. Working in a larger research context with data feminism, Klein and data scholar Catherine D’Ignazio make the case that data visualization projects can productively draw on feminist theory.⁶³ They state:

When exploring the intersection of data visualization and the digital humanities, one must consider not only how the domain of digital humanities—and of the humanities more generally—can provide opportunities for the design and application of visualization tools and techniques, but also how theories from the humanities can themselves inform visualization design.⁶⁴

Based on four fields of critical inquiry—feminist science and technology studies, feminist human-computer interaction (HCI), feminist digital humanities, and cartography and geographic information system (GIS)—D’Ignazio and Klein outline six principles for feminist data visualization. I have slightly rephrased their claim to underline certain aspects I assume to be particularly relevant. They ask us to: (1) rethink binaries and categorizations, (2) in lieu of an universal objectivity embrace pluralism and allow for “multiple truths,” (3) scrutinize power structures in the entire design process, also with regard to the production team and the users, (4) consider

63 See Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, “Feminist Data Visualization,” paper presented at the IEEE VIS Conference, October 22–28, 2016, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

64 Ibid., 1.

diverse contexts of knowledge production, including data provenance and processing, (5) recognize aesthetic experience of data visualizations, and (6) credit the entire team's labour.⁶⁵

As intended by D'Ignazio and Klein, these principles offer a fruitful starting point for further scrutinizing the complex framework of data visualizations. However, while I agree with their claim that a theoretically well informed approach to data visualization is much needed in order to understand and intervene in current methodological developments, I want to emphasize that, as noted by various media scholars and mentioned earlier, vice versa, one must also consider how data visualization can enhance humanities approaches. As implicitly reflected by D'Ignazio and Klein in their paper cited above and further elaborated in their book *Data Feminism*,⁶⁶ I wish to stress that data visualization can also help us engage with feminist matters if we apply them as a "humanistic method."⁶⁷ Thus, referring to what has been said earlier, in order to better understand digital forms of knowledge production, we need to further investigate data visualizations (1) *in* the humanities and (2) *from* a humanities perspective,⁶⁸ and, for the purpose of clarification I would like to add, echoing Drucker, (3) *as* a humanities approach.

A humanistic method, or a humanities approach, takes into account the constructed, subjective, and situated nature of scholarly knowledge. It shows that "phenomena and their observers are co-dependent" and that consequently data as well as data visualizations are always already a (performative) interpretation that is determined by particular historical, social, and political configurations.⁶⁹ Contrary to "realist approaches" which strive for transparency and equivalence as if the world to be presented was pre-existent,⁷⁰ humanistic data projects should re/present contingencies, partial views, and plural perspectives. In doing so, we need to distinguish between "the task of representing ambiguity and uncertainty" and "that of using ambiguity and uncertainty as the basis on which a representation is constructed."⁷¹

65 See *ibid.*

66 See Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

67 See Drucker, *Graphesis*, 130–35.

68 See Drucker, "Graphical Approaches," 238.

69 See Drucker, *Graphesis*, 130–35.

70 See *ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, 126–27.

Where Do We Go Now?

While digital film historiography is an emerging field where more and more scholars advance research by developing and applying new tools and methods, the many opportunities digital technologies provide are yet to be much more explored. In terms of critical inquiry, digital humanities have still a long way to go, or rather, should much more intervene in current developments and discourses.⁷² In this respect, I hope to have shown why data visualizations play a particular important role that we need to further analyse both theoretically and application-oriented. Bearing in mind the foregoing, I conclude that the “means by which a graphic produces meaning”⁷³ can best be understood in-depth by experimenting with data visualization itself—in addition to theoretical case studies—that means *as a humanities approach*. For instance, we should explore how to develop projects that “show us categories like race *as they have been experienced*, not as they have been captured and advanced by businesses and governments?”⁷⁴ As Posner suggests, “a useful data model for race would have to be time- and place-dependent so that a person moved from Brazil to the United States, she might move from white to black.”⁷⁵

In lieu of presenting information as if a priori reality exists that can be easily measured and grasped, as one might initially associate with data visualizations, we can take advantage of data visualizations to challenge absolute values, universalization, and essentialization by foregrounding the particularity of knowledge. As Drucker reminds us, in the digital humanities we must not suddenly treat space and time as given as if philosophical discourses have never existed.⁷⁶ Therefore, we also have to scrutinize concepts of space and time as they are re/presented by powerful applications like Google Maps as well as by alternatives like OpenStreetMap.⁷⁷ How to model and show historical data that is vague and uncertain like “for six months before the war; ‘around 1832,’ or ‘during harvest season in her youth’” is still a desiderata, geographic researcher Karl Grossner and data visualization practitioner Elijah Meeks write.⁷⁸

72 See Posner, “What’s Next.”

73 Drucker, “Graphical Approaches,” 239.

74 See Posner, “What’s Next.”

75 Ibid.

76 See Drucker, *Graphesis*, 242.

77 See Posner, “What’s Next.”

78 See *ibid.*; Karl Grossner and Elijah Meeks, “Topotime: Representing Historical Temporality,” *Proceedings of DH2014 Conference, July 7–12, 2014* (Lausanne: Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, 2014).

Another challenge lies in overcoming the “search-slot paradigm,” a single query box that requires prior knowledge of a field, as Glinka, Dörk, and geovisualization scholar Sebastian Meier state.⁷⁹ Exploring how to visualize the “un-seen” in cultural heritage collections they suggest to create a more flexible and open access to (data) collections by allowing users to search by a variety of interrelated metadata visualizations.⁸⁰ The BFI Filmography provides a good example for this approach. By facilitating different modes of access to the database, for example, via a map that shows the distribution of regions, a histogram that focuses on dates and time ranges, and a tag cloud that illustrates the significance of a topic, experts and non-experts alike can benefit from the BFI platform. Thus, what might look like conventional statistics at first sight has much more to offer. As I have explored and elaborated elsewhere, also simple data visualizations can enhance and transform research on women in early cinema. Furthermore, they can help us reflect on our own film historiographical approaches and epistemological premises.⁸¹

In addition to various access possibilities, interfaces could allow annotations and comments, or even the co-creation of data infrastructures in order to make users actively engage and perhaps help collect missing data.⁸² Needless to say, this requires an inviting interface design so that the users will actually exploit such interactive opportunities. If we consider power structures in the entire design process, it is crucial to assure, as Glinka, Dörk, and Meier emphasize, that also in collaborative environments diverse perspectives are included.⁸³ Diversity comprises recipients, producers, and approaches—in research and cultural heritage institutions alike. To change the point of view and look at collections beyond traditional logics such as metadata, similar to Manovich’s Cultural Analytics approach, they, too, suggest to use computer vision for relating objects, among others, by colour, structure, or shape.⁸⁴ Data visualizations allow us to defamiliarize our research objects in order to recognize unexpected aspects and challenge

79 See Katrin Glinka, Sebastian Meier, and Marian Dörk, “Visualising the ‘Un-seen’: Towards Critical Approaches and Strategies of Inclusion in Digital Cultural Heritage Interfaces,” in *Kultur und Informatik. Cross Media*, ed. Carsten Busch and Jürgen Sieck, vol. 13 (Glückstadt: Werner Hülsbusch, 2015), 109–10.

80 See *ibid.*

81 See Sarah-Mai Dang, “The Women Film Pioneers Explorer: What Data Visualizations Can Tell Us About Women in Film History,” in: *Feminist Media Histories* 9, no. 2 (2023), 76–86.

82 See *ibid.*, 111.

83 See *ibid.*, 112.

84 See *ibid.*, 113.

traditional concepts.⁸⁵ If we, for example, conceive film not only as a moving image but as a colour-intensive impression we might be able to ask new questions and develop new approaches.

The overarching argument here relies on carefully reconsidering the goal and thus the conceptualization and creation of data visualizations in order to present film historical research in a critical and self-reflecting manner. In this sense, it is essential to understand what visualizations do but also what they *could* do.⁸⁶ In terms of highlighting contingency, subjectivity, and serendipity, I see special promise in data visualization approaches to feminist film historiography.

By identifying artefacts as data and data as artefacts, data visualizations can extend film and media studies corpora as well as our repertoire of theories and methods. As pointed out by numerous scholars, data-intensive approaches do not replace established methods. Despite a change in perspective, when considering data visualization as a film historiographical approach for displaying research, essential humanities concerns—the critical investigation of knowledge production, the hermeneutic analysis of artefacts, or the contingency of history—still matter.⁸⁷ In the course of “datafying” film historiography, fundamental historiographical methods such as finding, collecting, cataloguing, and interpreting remain relevant, but they change and new ones emerge. If we consider data visualizations in their versatility I argue that they offer a productive point of departure for actively intervene in current transitions in digital film historiography. I think that feminist film historiography can greatly benefit from digital data visualization and, vice versa, data visualization from feminist film historiography respectively, feminist theory. Considering the growing production and application of data in the era of digitalization as well as the debates on digital history, research data, and open access, it becomes obvious that new representation strategies are much needed to keep the memory of the countless women in early film industries alive and prevent them from getting lost again in the course of history. In my view, data visualizations can provide a critical response to the current challenges of digital film historiography and help us tell different stories differently.

85 See Olesen, “Humanistic Cinematics,” 50–52.

86 See Marian Dörk, Patrick Feng, Christopher Collins, and Sheelagh Carpendale, “Critical InfoVis: Exploring the Politics of Visualization,” in *CHI EA '13 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2189–98 (Paris: ACM Press, 2013).

87 See Olesen, “Humanistic Cinematics,” 50–52.

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Index

Persons

- Abbas, Ali 254, 255
Abbott, John 21, 177
Acland, Charles R. 36, 263-281, 480
Adams Sitney, P. 191, 194, 203, 228
Adenauer, Konrad 365
Al-Abdul, Ali 258
Al-Aziz, Abd 244
Al-Khalifah, Ali bin Abdullah 249
Al-Khalifah, Ali bin Mohamed 249
Al-Muhaisen, Abdullah 254, 256
Al-Sanousi, Mohammed 254
Al-Shams, Majed 254
Al-Siddiq, Khalid 254f, 258
Al-Tamimi, Khalid 254
Al-Thawadi, Bassam 254f, 258
Alberini, Filoteo 142, 146
Alexander, Georg 352-354
Allen, Robert C. 29f, 372
Alpà, Gitta 357
Alter, Nora M. 215
Althusser, Louis 274-276
Altman, Charles F. 373
Altman, Rick 137
Álvarez López, Cristina 396, 399
Andersen, Thom 350
Anderson, Benedict 334
Anderson, Perry 272
Anderson, Wes 403, 434
Andrade, Joachim Pedro de 407
Anschütz-Kaempfe, Hermann S. 180
Antonioni, Michelangelo 365
Archenhold, Friedrich Simon 320, 323
Aristarco, Guido 219f
Arnheim, Rudolf 94, 120, 148, 219
Arnold, Jack 352f
Arnold, Martin 397
Arp, Hans 229
Arvidson, Linda 26
Astruc, Alexandre 394
Avildsen, John 404
- Babić, Gaby 130
Bacon, Francis 106
Bacon, Lloyd 407
Baer, Nicholas 32, 49, 85-118
Bak, Meredith A. 462
Balázs, Béla 103, 175
Bank, Monty 180
Barbaro, Umberto 142
Bardèche, Maurice 21, 23, 28, 190, 214, 225, 373
Barger, Tom 246
Barnet, Boris 175
- Barrowman, Nick 475
Barry, Iris 14, 19-21, 177, 179, 182, 190, 209f, 214, 224-227
Barthes, Roland 397
Bateson, Gregory 450
Bazin, André 55, 95, 195, 337, 373f, 447
Becker, Carl L. 448-451, 456
Becker, Edith 378
Becker, Peter 435
Belgrave, Charles Dalrymple 240, 247f
Bell, Henry Hesketh 248
Bellour, Raymond 366, 403
Benedek, László 357
Benegal, Shyam 301
Benjamin, Walter 35, 56, 154, 196, 209, 212, 223, 229, 360, 362f, 397
Bennett, Colin N. 18f
Benoni, Dan 473f
Benson-Allott, Caetlin 462
Berg, Thomas van den 400
Berger, Doris 215, 357
Bergson, Henri 31, 48
Berlin, Isaiah 384f
Bernhardt, Kurt/Curtis 357
Bernstein, Charles 204
Beshara, Khairy 256
Bettetini, Gianfranco 393
Betts, Ernest 26
Bhownagry, Jean 289
Bilainkin, George 248
Bird, Katie 404
Bitomsky, Hartmut 37, 353f, 358f, 361-363, 366f
Blank, Manfred 365
Blumer, Herbert 26f
Blümlinger, Christa 390
Böhme, Gernot 428
Bolter, Jay 420f
Bordwell, David 17, 20f, 25, 373f, 385f
Bourdieu, Pierre 433
Bower, Dallas 25
Bowser, Eileen 190
Braddock, Jeremy 197, 199, 200f
Brahm, John 357
Brakhage, James Stanley 194, 201, 355
Brasillach, Robert 21, 23, 28, 190, 214, 225, 373
Breitz, Candice 350
Bresson, Robert 203, 365
Broughton, James 194
Brown, Roger 269, 351
Brownlow, Kevin 351
Buchanan, Kyle 433, 435
Bucher, Taina 438

- Bühler, Wolf Eckart 366
 Buñuel, Luis 183
 Burch, Noël 350, 363, 373, 375
 Burgoyne, Robert 377
 Burke, Peter 272
 Büttner, Elisabeth 350

 Calder, Alexander 229
 Caplan, Jane 273
 Carey, James 276
 Carroll, Noël 211
 Carter, Huntly 26
 Casetti, Francesco 337, 392f
 Cassirer, Ernst 101
 Cavell, Stanley 31, 54
 Cetina, Karin 340
 Chaplin, Charlie 25, 180, 203, 246, 360, 467, 479
 Chaucer, Geoffrey 200
 Chiarini, Luigi 152
 Child, Abigail 350
 Chladenius, Johann Martin 107
 Ciano, Galeazzo 138, 141
 Cijvans, Gunars 479
 Clair, René 180
 Cobb, Shelly 469, 481f
 Coissac, Georges Michel 28
 Colangelo, David 405
 Collingwood, R. G. 221
 Comin, Jacopo 142, 362
 Comte, Auguste 86
 Conant, James 106
 Confucius 199, 204
 Cornell, Joseph 390
 Cowan, Michael 19, 36, 315-346
 Cox-Stanton, Tracy 407
 Croce, Benedetto 221f
 Cronyn, George W. 200
 Crow, Jim 246, 253
 Cullen Bryant, William 198
 Cusa, Nicholas of 109

 D'Errico, Corrado 145
 D'Ignazio, Catherine 485f
 Dana, Charles A. 198
 Dang, Sarah-Mai 39f, 467-493
 Darwin, Charles 53
 Davin, Anna 273
 Certeau, Michel de 189, 203
 Deffarge, Marie-Claude 256
 Degas, Edgar 102
 Deleuze, Gilles 31, 122
 Delpeut, Peter 350
 Demenÿ, Georges 18
 DeMille, Cecil B. 365
 Deren, Maya 195
 Derenthal, Ludger 215
 Derrida, Jacques 63, 78f
 Descartes, René 53, 320
 Descola, Phillipe 447

 Deutsch, Gustav 350
 Dewald, Christian 350
 Dickens, Charles 272
 Dickinson, Emily 164
 Dickson, Antonia 18
 Dickson, William Kennedy Laurie 18, 68,
 189, 195
 Diebold, Bernhard 93
 Dieterle, William 357
 Dietrich, Marlene 371, 380f
 Dieuzeide, Henri 457, 458
 Dilly, Heinrich 426
 Dilthey, Wilhelm 90, 110-112
 Distelmeyer, Jan 431, 439
 Doesburg, Nelly van 230
 Doesburg, Theo van 229f
 Dommann, Monika 69
 Dörk, Marian 478, 483, 488
 Doros, Dennis 434
 Dotcom, Kim 65f
 Dovzhenko, Alexander 175
 Dreyer, Carl Theodor 203
 Drucker, Johanna 40, 474, 482f, 486f
 Duchamp, Marcel 229f
 Dulac, Germaine 147
 Dütsch, Werner 352, 354, 357, 359-361, 364f,
 367
 Duvivier, Julien 390
 Dyer, Richard 269

 Eames, Charles 451
 Eames, Ray 451
 Eddy, Col 246
 Edison, Thomas 26, 61, 67f, 190
 Edschmid, Kasimir 92
 Eggeling, Hellmuth Viking Fredrik 210, 216,
 224, 226, 229
 Einstein, Albert 32, 48, 85-89, 91, 112f, 356
 Einstein, Carl 102
 Eis, Egon 357
 Eisenstein, Sergei 31, 34, 88, 126, 163-175, 177,
 180-182, 184, 201, 203, 218, 223, 337
 Eisner, Lotte 120, 357
 Eizykman, Claudine 191
 Elsaesser, Thomas 31f, 47-58, 62, 89, 374f, 385f
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo 198
 Engels, Friedrich 361
 Epstein, Jean 56, 88, 103
 Ernst, Christoph 474
 Ernst, Max 229
 Ernst, Wolfgang 321
 Export, Valie 195

 Faden, Eric 394
 Fahlstedt, Kim K. 461
 Fairbanks, Douglas 180
 Farocki, Harun 37, 49, 56, 353f, 366f, 391
 Fassbinder, Rainer Werner 350
 Fehr, Rudi 357

- Feld, Hans 357
 Feld, Käte 357
 Feo, Luciano De 142, 179
 Ferno, John 218
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb 55
 Fickers, Andreas 439
 Fihman, Guy 191
 Fillmore-Handlon, Charlotte 474
 Fischinger, Oskar 224
 Flaherty, Robert 192, 218, 220f
 Flusser, Vilem 49
 Ford, John 192, 268, 352f, 360
 Forman, Henry James 26f
 Foster, Hal 48
 Foucault, Michel 62f, 85, 363, 386, 432
 Francé, Raoul 325
 Freddi, Luigi 139
 Freud, Sigmund 53, 363, 447
 Friese-Greene, William 26
 Frith, Gill 277
 Froeschel, Georg 357
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg 110
 Gaines, Jane 32, 49, 59-84, 266, 468
 Garga, B. D. 297
 Gates, Kelly 321
 Gaudreault, André 126
 Genovese, Eugene 274
 Gerron, Kurt 358
 Gianikian, Yervant 390
 Gibbs, John 407f
 Gibson, Ross 397
 Gill, David 351
 Ginzburg, Carlo 272, 378
 Giovannetti, Eugenio 142
 Girardet, Cristoph 390
 Gitelman, Lisa 474f
 Glassman, Arnold 378
 Glinka, Katrin 478, 483, 488
 Godard, Jean-Luc 142, 192, 350, 390f, 459
 Goebbels, Joseph 359
 Goergen, Jeanpaul 211
 Goff, Jacques Le 136
 Golchin, Ahmad 250
 Golding, Alan 197f
 Golovnia, Anatolii 171
 Gomery, Douglas 29f, 372
 Goodman, Nelson 451, 456
 Gordon, Douglas 350
 Gorky, Maxim 300
 Gottlein, Arthur 357
 Graeff, Werner 216
 Gramann, Karola 130
 Gramsci, Antonio 154, 254, 270, 275f, 287
 Grant, Catherine 394f, 397, 399-401, 403-405
 Grasso, Aldo 393
 Grau, Robert 372
 Gravio, Will Di 398
 Gregor, Ulrich 203
- Grierson, John 218, 284
 Grieson, Lee 252
 Griffith, D. W. 26, 180, 192, 203, 223, 355, 467f
 Grimoin-Sanson, Raoul 390
 Grizzaffi, Chiara 38, 389-415
 Grossner, Karl 487
 Groys, Boris 301
 Grünbaum, Herbert 357
 Grusin, Richard 420f
 Guggenheim, Solomon 193, 224
 Guillén, Claudio 106
 Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich 49
 Gunning, Tom 74f, 126, 142, 180, 462
 Güttinger, Fritz 123
 Guy-Blaché, Alice 192
- Haas, Dolly 357
 Hagener, Malte 13-43
 Hall, Catherine 272
 Hall, Stuart 263, 268-278
 Hanoun, Marcel 191
 Hansen, Miriam 123, 461
 Haraway, Donna 469
 Hardy, Oliver 360, 397
 Harpole, Charles 180
 Harvey, Herk 405
 Haskell, Francis 147
 Hatch, Kristin 468
 Hausmann, Raoul 230
 Hawks, Howard 192
 Hebdige, Dick 277
 Hediger, Vinzenz 28, 39, 445-466
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 49, 93, 107, 374f
 Heidegger, Martin 63, 72, 78f
 Hein, Birgit 355
 Heisenberg, Werner 113
 Heller, Amy 434f
 Heller, Franziska 39, 419-443
 Hellinger, Mark 26
 Helmond, Anne 438
 Hemsing, Albert 219
 Henreid, Paul 357
 Hindess, Barry 274
 Hirst, Paul 274
 Hitchcock, Alfred 192, 407
 Hoffmann, E. T. A. 100, 105
 Hofmann, Felix 366
 Holden, David 252
 Homer 202
 Hongisto, Ilona 383
 Hopwood, Henry V. 18, 189
 Horton, Zachary 451
 Howkins, Alun 272
 Hoyt, Eric 480
 Huelsenbeck, Richard 230
 Huff, Theodore 214
 Hugenberg, Alfred 339
 Huillet, Danièle 357, 365f

- Huizinga, Johan 50
 Hultén, Pontus 192
 Humboldt, Alexander von 325
 Hurwitz, Leo 218
 Husserl, Edmund 106
 Huxley, Aldous 248
 Ignatieff, Michael 272
 Iurenev, Rostislav 180
 Ivens, Joris 164, 218, 224

 Jackson, Virginia 474f
 Jacobs, Lewis 28
 Jacobson, Brian R. 462
 Jacoby, Irving 217
 Jaffé, Carl Heinz 357
 Jameson, Fred 49
 Janco, Marcel 230
 Janowitz, Hans 93, 97
 Jay, Martin 106, 109
 Jedlowski, Alessandro 459
 Jenkins, Charles Francis 189
 Jenkins, Henry 431
 Jenkins, Keith 64
 Jennings, Humphrey 355, 360, 362f
 Johannes, Roland 352
 Johnson, Richard 273-275
 Johnston, Claire 124

 Kaes, Anton 97, 123
 Kaiser, Georg 92
 Kandinsky, Wassily 93
 Kant, Immanuel 91, 100f
 Kaper, Bronislaw 357
 Kaplan, Cora 277
 Keathley, Christian 395f, 399, 401, 405
 Keating, Patrick 404
 Keaton, Buster 180
 Keliher, Alice M. 218
 Kelman, Ken 194
 Kempley, Vance 172
 Khan, Mehboob 255
 Kircher, Athanasius 180
 Kiss, Miklós 400
 Kittler, Friedrich 32, 53, 60f, 73, 79, 105, 321
 Klein, Lauren 484-486
 Klinger, Barbara 266
 Kluge, Alexander 351
 Koch, Gertrud 222
 Kohner, Frederick 357
 Konlechner, Peter 195
 Kooijman, Jaap 403
 Kornblum, Hanns Walter 88
 Koselleck, Reinhart 32, 39, 59, 63f, 71-79, 137, 419, 429f, 437
 Kosterlitz, Hermann (Koster, Henry) 357
 Kracauer, Siegfried 35, 91, 93-95, 97f, 103, 105, 120, 183, 209, 212, 219, 221-223, 365
 Kramp, Fritz 249
 Kubelka, Peter 34, 191-196, 198, 201-203

 Kubrick, Stanley 404
 Kuhn, Annette 461
 Kulthum, Umm 249
 Kurtz, Rudolf 94, 216
 Kuyper, Eric de 126

 Lagny, Michèle 29
 Laing, David 272
 Laing, Stuart 267f
 Lang, Fritz 31, 143, 180, 339, 355, 357, 393
 Langlois, Henri 179, 190, 194, 349
 Lania, Leo 336
 Larkin, Brian 249
 Larsen, Peter 272
 Latour, Bruno 229, 456
 Lauder, Harry 26
 Laurel, Stan 360
 Lavalle, Louis-Xavier 473f
 Leavis, F. R. 267, 269
 Lebedev, Nikolai 167, 169-171, 173-175, 181
 Lee, Kevin B. 393f, 399, 401
 Léger, Fernand 183, 216, 224, 229
 Legg, Stuart 218
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 106
 Lenart, Renata 357
 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich 177
 Leninism 171f
 Lepage, Henri 390
 Lerner, Daniel 251
 Lerner, Irving 218
 Lessig, Lawrence 66, 69f
 Lethen, Helmut 96
 Lewinsky, Mariann 461
 Leyda, Jay 34, 163-188
 Libera, Adalberto 139, 257
 Liesegang, Franz Paul 18
 Linder, Max 180
 Litvak, Anatole 357f
 Lizzani, Carlo 135, 138, 153-156
 Lloyd, Harold 180
 Loch, Percy Gordon 247
 Locke, Alain 200
 Loiperdinger, Martin 461
 Lorre, Peter 366
 Lowell, Amy 200f
 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna 445, 460
 Lubin, Siegmund 65-68
 Lubitsch, Ernst 192, 352, 355, 365
 Lugon, Olivier 193
 Lukács, Georg 91
 Lumière, Auguste 18, 26, 94, 191, 195, 361
 Lumière, Louis 18, 26, 94, 141, 146, 191, 195, 361
 Lupino, Ida 192
 Lustig, Jan 357
 Lyford, Richard 244, 251
 Lynch, David 406

 MacCabe, Colin 277
 Mahel, Adolf 327, 332

- Malraux, André 196
 Manet, Édouard 102
 Manovich, Lev 49, 438, 476-478, 488
 Manvell, Roger 210, 228
 Marclay, Christian 350
 Marey, Étienne-Jules 180, 190, 195
 Marischka, Frank 357
 Marker, Chris 38, 371f, 381-383, 386f
 Marshall, Herbert 173
 Martel, Lucrecia 405
 Märthesheimer, Peter 350
 Martin, Adrian 63, 106f, 109, 367, 378, 396f, 399, 461
 Marton, Andrew 357
 Marx, Karl 49, 53, 122
 Marxism 76, 154, 166, 168, 171f, 182, 185, 219, 272, 274-276, 361, 363
 Marzynski, Georg 87
 Masjid, Babri 302
 Masson, Eef 476
 Mattenklott, Gerhard 432f
 Mayer, Carl 93
 Maynes, Judith 123
 McCarthy, Todd 378
 McGoff, Jessica 406
 McLuhan, Marshall 50
 McRobbie, Angela 277
 Mead, George Herbert 106, 113
 Medick, Hans 273
 Medvedkin, Alexander 175, 371, 381-383
 Meeks, Elijah 487
 Meier, Sebastian 488
 Meins, Holger 353
 Mejón, Ana 407
 Mekas, Jonas 194, 213, 355
 Melford, George 390
 Méliès, Georges 68, 94, 203, 360
 Melville, Herman 164
 Mengershausen, Joachim von 350
 Menken, Marie 195
 Merker, Helmut 352
 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 106
 Merritt, Russell 123
 Metz, Christian 447
 Meyerhold, Vsevolod 175
 Michelson, Annette 88, 191, 193
 Misek, Richard 397
 Mitchell, Hannah 272
 Mitry, Jean 190, 203
 Mittell, Jason 399-401
 Mizoguchi, Kenji 192, 355
 Mohan, Jag 296f
 Monet, Claude 102
 Monroe, Harriett 202
 Moore, Marianne 202
 Moussinac, Léon 28
 Muhammad, Hashim 254
 Mühlenbrock, Heiner 366
 Mukherjee, Debashree 461f
 Müller, Martina 367
 Müller, Matthias 350
 Mulvey, Laura 269, 277, 403
 Muñoz, Trevor 475
 Münsterberg, Hugo 31, 102f, 447
 Münzenberg, Willi 328
 Murnau, Friedrich Wilhelm 339
 Musorgsky, Modeste Petrovich 164
 Musser, Charles 123, 180, 363
 Mussolini, Benito 138, 141
 Nabih, Mohamed 254
 Naficy, Hamid 350
 Nasser, Gamal Abdel 251
 Nehru, Jawaharlal 284f, 293, 295, 298, 302, 462
 Newton, Isaac 113
 Nichols, Bill 378f
 Nicoll, Allardyce 25
 Nielsen, Asta 125, 130
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 53, 85, 89-91, 98, 105-107, 109, 112, 449
 Nilsen, Vladimir 171
 Niney, François 39, 422f
 Nizhny, Vladimir 165
 Noguez, Dominique 191
 Noordergraaf, Julia 446
 Novalis 105
 O'Leary, Alan 399
 Odin, Roger 447, 457
 Olesen, Christian 477, 479
 Oort, Thunis van 446
 Ophüls, Max 352, 357
 Orrom, Michel 267
 Ortega y Gasset, José 87, 106
 Oruc, Firat 35, 237-262
 Osborne, Peter 147, 154
 Oswald, Richard 96, 357
 Ousmane, Sembène 192
 Ovid 202
 Ozu, Yasujirō 192, 352f
 Paglen, Trevor 49
 Palacio, Manuel 407
 Palmer Peabody, Elizabeth 484
 Panofsky, Erwin 94f, 101f
 Pantenburg, Volker 37, 349-369, 403
 Pascal, Blaise 106
 Pasinetti, Francesco 135, 138, 145, 147-152, 155
 Pasolini, Pier Paolo 192
 Patalas, Enno 203, 355, 457
 Pati, Pramod 289
 Philippe, Claude-Jean 351
 Piaget, Jean 50
 Picabia, Francis 216
 Picasso, Pablo 191
 Pierce, David 480
 Pietrangeli, Antonio 409
 Pirro, Nicola De 141

- Pisters, Patricia 402
 Pitassio, Francesco 33, 135-162
 Poe, Edgar Allan 100
 Polan, Dana 268
 Pomián, Krzysztof 137
 Porges, Friedrich 329
 Posner, Miriam 469, 487
 Potamkin, Harry 167, 182, 184
 Pound, Ezra 199-201, 204
 Preminger, Otto 357
 Price, Ira 26
 Prinzler, Hans Helmut 367

 Rajagopal, Arvind 36, 283-313
 Ramsaye, Terry 28, 373
 Rancière, Jacques 272
 Ranke, Leopold von 85, 90f, 107, 112, 216, 223, 449
 Rapp, Davide 409f
 Rausch, Karin 359
 Rawson, Katie 475
 Ray, Charles 26
 Ray, Man 224, 229f
 Rebay, Hilla von 224f
 Reichart, Wilfried 352, 354f
 Reinartz, Lars 452-454, 456-458
 Reiniger, Lotte 149
 Renoir, Jean 192, 224
 Renoir, Pierre-Auguste 102
 Resnais, Alain 459
 Reznikoff, Charles 204
 Ribemont-Dessaignes, Georges 230
 Ricci Lucchi, Angela 390
 Richardson, Dorothy 129
 Richter, Hans 34f, 190, 209-234, 395
 Rickert, Heinrich 90
 Rieder, Bernhard 28, 450, 456, 460
 Riefenstahl, Leni 195
 Riegl, Alois 101
 Rittelmeyer, Christian 356
 Robnik, Drehli 223
 Robson, Emanuel W. 26
 Rocha, Glauber 192
 Rochefoucauld, François de La 106
 Roebuck, Sears 455
 Rohrbach, Günter 350
 Rose, Jacqueline 277
 Rosenheimer, Arthur (Knight, Arthur) 209, 212
 Rosenstone, Robert 377
 Roshal, Grigorii 175
 Rossellini, Roberto 409
 Roth, Wilhelm 352
 Rotha, Paul 20-22, 25, 28, 183, 190, 210
 Rowlands, Gena 407
 Ruttmann, Walter 216, 224, 226
 Ryabchikova, Natalie 181

 Saa'ti, Mahmoud Lal 239
 Sadoul, George 203, 349f

 Salazkina, Masha 34, 163-188
 Saleh, Tayeb 255
 Sam, M. A. 248
 Samuel, Raphael 271f, 274, 277
 Samuels, Stuart 378
 Sander, Helke 353f
 Sastry, S. N. S. 289
 Saud, Ibn 244
 Scheffauer, Herman 88
 Schell, Maximilian 38, 371f, 380f, 383, 386
 Schicklgruber, Aloys 357
 Schiller, Friedrich 105
 Schimek, Hanna 350
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich 110
 Schlemmer, Gottfried 228
 Schlüpmann, Heide 33, 119-132, 468
 Schmitt, Carl 63
 Schmitz, Kevin 66
 Schnapp, Jeffrey C. 140
 Schneider, Alexandra 28, 39, 445-466
 Schopenhauer, Arthur 92f
 Schumann, Peter B. 356
 Schwarz, Bill 271, 274
 Schwitters, Kurt 230
 Sen, Mrinal 185
 Sennett, Mack 180
 Shaheen, Khalifa 251, 254, 256
 Shams, Majeed 254f
 Sheen, Martin 378
 Shela-Sheffy, Rakefet 156
 Shelley, Mary 100
 Shipulinskii, Feofan 179
 Shumiatskii, Boris 181
 Siddiq, Khalid 254f, 258
 Sierck, Hans Detlef (Sirk, Douglas) 357
 Simmel, Georg 100f
 Simondon, Gilbert 450
 Siodmak, Robert 357
 Sloan, Kay 127
 Sloterdijk, Peter 96
 Smith, Jack 195
 Smith, James 468
 Smith, Rose 467f, 470
 Smyth, Rosaleen 250
 Sobchack, Vivian 428
 Sokel, Walter 87, 88, 98
 Sorlin, Pierre 430, 450
 Spann, Marcella 199
 Spengler, Oswald 96
 Spielberg, Steven 51, 75, 403
 Spira, Camilla 357
 Srouf, Heiny 257
 Staiger, Janet 264-266
 Stauffacher, Frank 227
 Stedman Jones, Gareth 277
 Stein, Otto Theodor 331
 Steinberg, Mark 462
 Steiner, George 381
 Steiner, Ralph 168

- Stenzel, Rosemarie 195
 Sternberg, Josef von 353
 Sterne, Jonathan 321
 Stevenson, Robert Louis 100
 Stoney, George 218
 Strand, Paul 164
 Straschek, Günter Peter 353, 356-359, 366
 Straub, Jean-Marie 357, 365f
 Strindberg, August 87
 Stroheim, Erich von 203, 223
 Sukhdev, S. 289
 Sunayd, Abd al-Aziz Abu 246
 Sundaram, Ravi 462
- Taimur, Said Bin 256
 Tannenbaum, Eugen 103
 Tarantino, Quentin 403
 Taylor, Barbara 272
 Taylor, Richard 163
 Teichmüller, Gustav 106
 Thanouli, Eleftheria 38, 371-384
 Thatcher, Margaret 274
 Theek, Ingeborg 357
 Thiel, Reinold E. 352, 354
 Thiele, Wilhelm 357
 Thompson, E. P. 273-277
 Toeplitz, Jerzy 203
 Tolstoy, Leon 384
 Topolski, Jerzy 156
 Trice, Janice Nadua 461
 Tripp, Peter 252
 Troeller, Gordian 256
 Troeltsch, Ernst 91
 Trutat, Eugène 189
 Tscherkassky, Peter 350, 391
 Tsivian, Yuri 478
 Tufté, Edward 473
 Turner, Graeme 266
 Turquety, Benoît 19, 34, 189-207
 Tyler, Parker 202
 Tzara, Tristan 230
- Uchatius, Franz von 180
 Ugwu, Reggie 433, 435
 Ulmer, Edgar G. 357
 Usai, Paolo Cherchi 350
- Vaihinger, Hans 91f
 Valdés-Rodríguez, José Manuel 184
 Valente, Antonio 139
 Valenti, Jack 69
 Vaughan, Olwen 179
 Verdeure, David 397
 Vertov, Dziga 88, 353
- Viany, Alex 185
 Vinci, Leonardo Da 141
 Vitalis, Robert 244
 Vogel, Vladimir 230
- Walkerdine, Valerie 277
 Waller, Gregory 461
 Warburg, Aby 196
 Ward, Lynd 273
 Ward, Montgomery 455
 Wasson, Haidee 462
 Weber, Max 90
 Wedel, Michael 137
 Weedon, Chris 277
 Weinberg, Herman G. 213f
 Welles, Orson 409
 Wenders, Wim 351
 Whannel, Paddy 268f
 White, Hayden 64, 96, 152, 372, 375-377, 449
 Whitman, Walt 200
 Whittier, John Greenleaf 198
 Wiene, Robert 32, 85, 89, 95-98, 103, 108, 110f, 113
 Wilder, Billy 357
 Williams, Raymond 266-268, 276f
 Williams, Ruth Linda 481
 Williams, William Carlos 202
 Williamson, Judith 397
 Windelband, Wilhelm 90
 Winkelmann, Adolf 356
 Witt, Michael 390
 Wittlich, Angelika 354
 Wolf, Christa 397
 Wolff, Lothar 357
 Wölfflin, Heinrich 426
 Wollen, Peter 269, 277
 Woods, Philip 294
 Worringer, Wilhelm 92f
 Wreyford, Natalie 469, 481f
 Wright, Basil 203, 355
 Wyborny, Klaus 350
- Yateem, Ali 240
 Yateem, Hussein 247, 249
 Yeo, Stephen 273
 Young, Terence 391
- Zamponi, Falasca 139
 Zamyatin, Yevgeny 87
 Zhdanov, Andrei 300
 Zielinski, Siegfried 52
 Zimmermann, Yvonne 13-43, 209-234
 Zitzewitz, Karin 301
 Zukofsky, Louis 201f

Institutions

- Al-Sharqiah 249
 Amazon 53f, 455
 American Historical Association 448
 Anthology Film Archives 34, 193f, 197f, 201
 Apple 53f
 ARD 352

 Bahrain Petroleum Company 240
 BBC 26, 351
 Bengal Board of Censors of the Government of India 249
 Black Lives Matter 436
 British Film Institute 178, 269, 360
 British Overseas Airways Corporation 241
 British Royal Air Force Cinema 241
 British Royal Navy 241
 Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv 124
 Burmah Shell 287

 Center for Soviet and Eastern European Studies in the Performing Arts at the University of Southern Illinois 173
 Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) 472
 Central Archive of the Russian Federation 177
 Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia 139
 Channel 4 351
 Cinecittà 192
 Cineguf 140f, 145, 147-149, 152, 154
 Cinelândia 407
 Cinema Ritrovato, Il 341, 423
 Cinémathèque française 152, 190f, 349
 Cinémathèque Gaumont 360
 Cinematics 478-480
 Cineteca Italiana 155
 Cineteca Nazionale 155
 Columbia University 218
 Communist Academy 170
 Criterion 39, 419, 433-435

 Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin 353
 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ton und Bild 360
 Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin 360
 Deutsche Kinotechnische Gesellschaft 318f, 330, 333, 342
 Deutsche Liga für unabhängigen Film 318
 Deutsche Mikrobiologische Gesellschaft 325
 Disney 68
 Dow Chemical 354
 DXY.cn 472
 Dziga Vertov-Akademie 353
 Eoscop Laboratories Basel 210
 European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) 472

 Facebook 54
 Fernseh- und Kinotechnische Gesellschaft 342
 Film Advisory Board 294
 Film and Photo Leagues of the Workers International Relief 164, 168, 182
 Film Foundation, The 424
 Film Institute Moscow 168
 Filmliga 341
 Filmstelle ETH 318
 Filmtheater de Uitkijk 316, 331
 Frankfurt Film Museum 123
 French National Museum of Modern Art 190
 Frontier Films 164

 General Directorate for Cinema 141
 Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) 165, 168-170, 172-179, 181, 183
 German Literature Archive 123
 German Research Foundation 30
 Gesellschaft Neuer Film 318
 Giornate del Cinema Muto, Le 122
 Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main 129
 Google 53f, 453, 487
 Gosfil'mofond 179
 Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines in Paris 18

 Higher Institute of Cinema in Cairo 256
 History Workshop at Ruskin College at Oxford University (Radical History Workshop) 36, 263, 271
 Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München (HFF) 353
 Hollywood 26, 69, 123, 143, 156, 192, 228, 250, 256, 258, 350f, 355, 359, 365, 378, 380, 393, 404, 407, 468

 IG-Farben 130
 Indian Films Division 36, 285
 India Office Records, The 237, 239, 247
 Information Films of India 294
 Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) 190
 Institute for Theatre, Film, and Media Studies at Goethe University 130
 Institute of Film Techniques at City College of New York 214
 International Educational Cinematograph Institute 140, 142
 International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) 122, 275, 349
 International Film Chamber 141
 Internet Archive 406, 480
 Istituto Luce 145

- J. K. Jain Studios 289
 Johns Hopkins University 472
- Kasseler Filmkollektiv 356
 Kastalia Society for Scientific and Educational
 Cinema 327-336
 Kinematographische Studien-Gesells-
 chaft 320, 323
 Kinogemeinde: Vereinigung der Kinofreunde
 (Kinogemeinde) 318f, 329-339
 Kinothek Asta Nielsen e. V. 130
 Komsomol (youth league of the Communist
 Party) 173
 Kosmos Kino 331
 Kosmos Klub der Freunde der Natur 325
 Kosmos Klub für künstlerische und wissen-
 schaftliche Kinematographie 325, 331
 Kuwait Cinema Company (Cinescape-Kuwait
 National Cinema Company, KNCC) 249
 Kuwait Oil Company 245, 250
- League of Nations 140
 London Film Society 20
 Louvre 434f
- Main Administration of Archival Affairs
 (Central Archive, Tsentrarkhiv) 178
 Megapload Ltd. 65f, 68f
 Metropolitan Museum of Art 192
 Middlebury College 401
 Milestone Film & Video 434
 Motion Picture Producers of America 69
 MTV Germany 366
 Mubi 398
 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) 20f, 164, 182,
 190, 193f, 209, 224
 Museum of Non-Objective Painting 224
- National Centre for Art and Culture Georges-
 Pompidou (CNAC) 190
 National Health Commission of the People's
 Republic of China 472
 Netflix 398, 455
 New School for Social Research 182
 New York University 164
 Nykino 164
- Office for National Statistics 481
 Österreichisches Filmmuseum 195
- Paris Films Coop 191
 Pathé 192, 360
 Phars Film 250
 Photochemical Department of the Technical
 University in Charlottenburg 333
 Poligono Società Editrice 148
 Pro7 366
 Project Arlight 350, 480
 Pune Film and Television Institute 255
- Qatar Cinema and Film Distribution
 Company 253
- Red Army Faction 353
 Remake. Frankfurter Frauen Film Tage (Remake:
 Frankfurt Women's Film Days) festival 130
 Rete 2 393
 Rome Film Academy 148f, 152, 155
 Royal Air Force 241
 RTL 366
- San Francisco Museum of Art 227
 Sat1 366
 Sector for Scientific Research (NIS) 175
 Software Studies Initiative 476
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum 224
 Soyuzkino 174, 181
 Spitzenorganisation des deutschen Films 352
 Springer Press 353
 Standard Oil of California 240
 Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek 124
 Studiengesellschaft für das Film- und
 Kinowesen 341
 Studio des Ursulines 316, 331
 Studio Misr 249
 Stuttgart Kinogemeinde 341
- Tesla 54
 University of Padua 148
 University of Regensburg 431
 Universum Kino Vienna 331f
 Urania Scientific Theatre Vienna 331
 US Centers for Disease Control and
 Prevention 472
 US Department of Justice 65
 US Embassy in Saudi Arabia 246
 US Government Office of War
 Information 195
- Venice International Film Festival 409
 Verein Deutscher Ingenieure 335
 VGIK (Gerasimov Institute of Cinematogra-
 phy) 165f, 168-170, 172-179, 181, 183f
 Viacom 68
 Vishva Hindu Parishad 289
 Volksverband für Filmkunst (Volksfilmver-
 band) 318, 328f, 331, 333, 335-337, 339
 Vox 366
- Warner Bros. 164, 183
 Westdeutscher Rundfunk 349
 Women and the Silent Screen 128, 130
 Women Film Pioneers Project 468, 470
 Workers' Educational Association 267
 Workers International Relief 164, 168
 World Health Organization 472
- ZDF 352
- 20th Century Fox 68, 244

Films

- A.I. 51
 Abr Sabeel (Wayfarer) 258
 Abu Dhabi: The Beginning 252
 Addiction 255
 Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy 397
 Angels of the Earth 256
 Apartment, The 397
 Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik 391
 Arrivée, L' 391
 Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat, L' (The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station) 391
 Asifah, Al (The Storm) 254

 Bas ya bahr (Cruel Sea) 254
 Before the Nickelodeon 363
 Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis 226
 Bezhin Lug (Bezhin Meadow) 165
 Bhaye Prakat Kripala (God Manifests Himself) 292
 Black Screen, The 397
 Black Wave, The 256
 Blind, The 255
 Brecht die Macht der Manipulateure (Break the Power of the Manipulators) 353
 Bronx Morning, A 168

 Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, Das (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari) 89
 Campo di Maggio (100 Days of Napoleon) 145
 Carnival of Souls 405
 Case of Mr. Critic, The 288
 Casta Diva 145
 Chant du Styrene, Le (The Song of Styrene) 459
 Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War 378
 Cinema ha quarant'anni, Il (Cinema Is Forty Years Old) 145
 Cinema, the Wind and Photography 367
 Clock, The 350
 Close-up on Kuwait 252
 Correction, Please 363

 Dadascope Part I 229
 Dadascope Part II 229
 Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost 397
 Desert Venture 241-243
 Deutschlandbilder (Pictures of Germany) 365f
 Development in the City of Riyadh 254
 Don Quixote 409
 Double Face of Peter Lorre, The 366
 Dreams That Money Can Buy 229

 East of Borneo 390
 Ein Lokomotivtransport der Sächsischen Maschinenfabrik in Chemnitz durch die Straßen am 28.6.1898 nachmittags 2 Uhr 360
 Ekamtata Yagna (Unity Ritual/Sacrifice) 292
 Elementare Filmgeschichte (Elementary Film History) 350
 Encyclopédie audiovisuelle du cinéma 351
 Ernst Lubitsch. Eine Lektion in Kino (A Lesson in Cinema) 355

 Farewell Arabia 195
 Film Emigration from Nazi Germany 356, 358
 Flaming Creatures 195
 Footlight Parade 407
 Forty Years of Experiment: From Dada to Surrealism 229
 Francesco giullare di Dio (The Flowers of St. Francis) 409

 Generations 255
 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes 403
 Gesture in A Woman under the Influence 407
 Ghostbusters 66
 Go! Go! Go! 195
 Golden Age of Cinematography, The 359-361, 363
 Grundlagen der Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie, Die (The Fundamentals of the Einsteinian Relativity Theory) 88

 Hajiz, Al (The Barrier) 258
 Haunting of the Headless Woman, The 405
 Headless Woman, The 405
 Her 51
 Herstellung eines Molotow-Cocktails (How to Build a Molotov Cocktail) 353
 Hill Stations of South India 288
 Histoire du cinéma par le cinéma, L' 390
 Histoire du Cinéma (Bardèche/Brasillach) 21
 Histoire(s) du Cinéma (Godard) 390f, 459
 histoire du cinéma, Une (Kubelka) 190-195, 197, 203
 Home Stories 390
 Homeless Ghost: The Moving Camera and Its Analogies, A 404

 I Knew Her Well 409
 Ightiyal Medina (Assassination of a City) 256
 Inextinguishable Fire 354
 Intolerance 223, 468
 Islam Is the Bridge to the Future 256
 Island of the Arabs, The 244f

- Kino, Flächen, Bunker 367
 Kristall 390
 Kulturrevue 364
- Last Bolshevik, The 371f, 380-383, 385
 Lighthouse, The 254
 Limelight 246
- Machine à refaire la vie, La 390
 Macunaíma 407
 Marlene 38, 371f, 379-383, 385
 Mask, The 256
 Mayerling 391
 Mechanized Flights 397
 Memories 255
 Metric System 288
 Minotaur, The 230
 Miyah (Water) 251
 Montegelato 409f
 Mother India 255
 Mulholland Drive 406
 My Darling Clementine 268
 My Mulholland 406
- Naya Paisa 288
 New Brazilian Cinema 356
 Nibelungen, Die (The Nibelungs) 143
 Not a Grand Dame 403
- Oh, Treacherous Tim 255
 Oil across Arabia 241
 Opération Béton (Operation Concrete) 459
- Pause and Think 288
 People on the Horizon 256
 Petroleum and Kuwait 241
 Phoenix Tapes 390
 Pictures of an Island 256
 Playback 367
 Powers of Ten 451
 Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jaye (Commitments
 Endure Even if Life Is Lost) 292
 Première sortie d'une cycliste 360
 Public Controversy and Film Censorship: The
 Release of All Quiet on The Western Front
 (1930) in Berlin 407
- Rapsodia Satanica 425
 Red Hollywood 350
 Reichsautobahn 366
 Revenge 255
 Revolte der Sklaven, Die (The Revolt of
 Slaves) 256
- Rhythm 21 211, 230
 Rocky 404
 Rose Hobart 390
- Saat al-tahrir daqqat (The Hour of Liberation
 Has Struck/L'Heure de la libération a
 sonné) 257
 Sad Sail, The 254
 Samt, Al (The Silence) 254
 Sans Soleil 397
 Say, Have You Seen the Carioca? 407f
 SFR 405
 Shahin (Shaheen) 258
 Shining, The 404
 Shooting Down Pictures 393
 Sortie des usines Lumière, La (Workers Leaving
 the Factory) 361, 391
 Sperduti nel buio (Lost in the Dark) 143
 Stranger, The 255
 Studio Cinema 393
 Success 403
 Symphonie Diagonale 210, 229
- Taj Mahal 288
 Thebub, Al (The Fly) 251
 Thérèse Raquin (Thou Shalt Not) 145
 Theresienstadt (The Führer Gives a City to the
 Jews) 358
 These Are the Trucial States 252
 Thirty Years of Experiment 229
 Three Men, The 255
 Titan: Story of Michelangelo, The 244
 To the Shores of Iwo Jima 195
 Trip to the Moon 68
 Triumph des Willens 195
 Two Brothers, The 255
- Uncanny Fusion: Journey to Mixed-up
 Files 405
 Under the Skin 51
 Urs al-Zayn (The Wedding of Zein) 255
- Visions of Light: The Art of
 Cinematography 378
 VW-Komplex, Der 366
- Wedad 249
 What Do Those Old Films Mean? 363
 While the City Sleeps 393
 Workers Leaving the Factory (Farocki) 367
- Zweigroschen-Zauber, Der (Twopenny
 Magic) 211

How Film Histories Were Made is dedicated to film history's own history: It provides insights into the fabrication of film histories and the discourses on their materials and methods in the past in order to better understand and reconsider film history today. The interventions unpack unspoken assumptions and hidden agendas that determine film historiography until today, also with the aim to act as a critical reflection on the potential future orientation of the field.

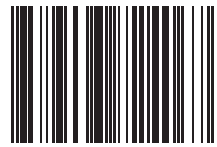
This book proposes a transnational, entangled and culturally diverse approach towards an archaeology of film history, while paying specific attention to persons, objects, infrastructures, regions, institutional fields and events hitherto overlooked. It explores past and ongoing processes of doing, undoing and redoing film history. Thereby, in a self-reflective gesture, it also draws attention to our own work as film historians.

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