Cinema, Television and History

Cinema, Television and History: New Approaches

Edited by

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Edited by Laura Mee and Johnny Walker

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INTRODUCTION

CINEMA, TELEVISION AND HISTORY

LAURA MEE AND JOHNNY WALKER

Cinema, Television and History: New Approaches was inspired by a conference, “Re-thinking Cinema and Television History: Texts and Contexts”, which was co-organised by the editors and held at De Montfort University in April 2012. The book offers a snapshot of work within the academic study of film and television today, and considers where or how notions of “history” are situated within these related disciplines. It is fortunate to have contributions from a number of leading scholars, although most of the authors featured here are, at the time of writing, postgraduate students or early career researchers. As such, whilst the book is primarily concerned with the concept of “history”, all contributions look to the future study of film and television. This introductory chapter offers a brief overview of the concerns which prompted the organisation of the initial conference, before discussing some of the key themes that emerge across this volume.

Fractures

The aim of “Re-thinking Cinema and Television History” was to address two fractures that we, as postgraduates researching film and television, had recognised across the academy. The first was the (still somewhat prevalent) divide between the study of film and the study of television (and their respective institutions). The second was the divide between historically informed, empirical approaches, and theoretical, text-based approaches to such studies.

Television has often been positioned as cinema’s “other”. Whilst, in the 1970s, the emergence of “film studies” seemed derisory to other, well-established humanities disciplines, the emergence of a “television studies” was largely greeted with a similar snobbery from film scholars. Partly, this was due to standards of film theory being deemed incompatible with potential studies of television: to talk of cinema was to luxuriate in the discussion of a single text or body of work. It was to pontificate over auteurs, artistry and the forming of canons. To talk of television was to talk of an ephemeral medium, of quantity not quality. Television was also "gendered" and marginalised, defined by its audience and associated with domesticity (Ellis 1992; Brunsdon 1997; Mulvey 2007), while the study of film, so often preoccupied with singular texts rather than audience experience, became increasingly centralised as the major "screen" discipline.

Over the last three decades, however, television studies has grown into a "legitimate field of study in which 'the terms of debate' have been formulated, if not fully reflected on" (Wheatley 2007: 1). Meanwhile, the focus of film studies has expanded to recognise the importance of audiences and industry, and continues to consider both text and context. To this end, both film and television (and their associated "histories") are considered as "equals" in this collection, though we recognise what makes each medium distinct, and continue to respect the different approaches which guide scholarly research in these areas (Ellis 1992: 23).

For all their differences, it is an unquestionable reality that both film and television are ever evolving, constantly embracing new forms and technologies, and always offering audiences new ways to watch—from the advent of home video in the late 1970s to more recent developments in the digital age. These changes only serve to complicate once easily defined notions of "film" and "television", reducing the importance of the role of both cinematic exhibition and broadcast scheduling in how we categorise films and television programmes. Most films are now consumed—via television—on DVD or through VoD platforms, while a good percentage of television shows are first viewed after initial broadcast, often online via laptops, tablets and smartphones. Moreover, the emergence of "cinematic" and "quality" television shows in light of series such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002—2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008—2013), *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010—present), and *Les Revenants* (Canal+, 2012—present) continue to challenge what is meant by both "cinema" and "television" in the twenty-first century. In this volume, instead of being simply overwhelmed at the rapidity of these developments, we take the opportunity not only to consider cinema and television in some of their more traditional senses, but also make moves toward new contextual understandings.

Before we do this, however, we need to address a second fracture. The fracture is an old one, and has plagued the study of film and television for many years: namely, the binary opposition between "history" and empirical approaches on the one hand, and "theory" and more text-based approaches on the other. James Chapman (2003) sees this dichotomy, in relation to the study of film at least, as being linked to the growth of two separate but connected disciplines: film *studies*—and its allegiances with English literature's "textual concerns" (18)—and film *history*—with its "contextual concerns" (ibid.). He argues:

> The crucial difference between film studies and film history is that whereas film studies opens up a wider range of possible interpretations (there are different ways of reading films that can elicit all sorts of meanings that may or may not have been intended by the makers and understood by contemporary audiences), film history is an empirical discipline that deals not in speculation but in research. The film historian sets out to assemble, assess and interpret the facts concerning the production and reception of films (Chapman 2003: 19).

In other words, film studies is typically concerned with the film as text, whilst film history examines the historical context in which the film emerged, and the context in which it continues to exist. A similar suggestion can, of course, be made for studies of television. Whilst we, as the editors of the present volume, recognise that the study of film and television is informed by a variety of positions, we have been reluctant to impose our own preferred methodological lines of enquiry on our contributors. To this end, rather than see film/television "studies" and film/television "history" as binary opposites, we recognise that film and television history shares "interpretative" elements with the textual analyses used in film and television studies. Indeed, they must share these elements if they are to "belong to the order of discourse" within which "history" is shaped (White 1992, 37).

To talk of history is to talk of the past. But it is also, for scholars of film, or television, or both, to talk of the present. It is to talk of the interminable task of discovering histories, writing historical narratives and the practices of historiography, and, indeed, assessing how varied notions of "history" function within the contemporary film and television industries, and how this influences their textual outputs.

Cinema, Television and History: New Approaches is intentionally fluid in its approach and encouraging of a wide range of methods to a variety of topics. The brief given to our authors, simply, was "cinema and television history", and we welcomed both the empirical and the theoretical, as well as those studies which merged these approaches. As a result, this book is as much about how films and television shows interpret history as it is about the endeavours of the practising historian. It is a book about how historical events are adapted across film and television as the basis for a story, by creative personnel within the creative industries, as well as how the historian determines historical events through exploration of the archive. Divided into five parts—“New meanings, new methods”, “Re-contextualising cinema and television history”, “Rethinking histories of cinema and television”, “Rethinking history through cinema and television” and “The impact of new technologies”—the book is knowingly broad and diverse in terms of the case studies featured within it, and the means through which these examples are examined, explored, and utilised in their respective chapters.

New approaches

Prompting theoretical considerations which pervade many of the chapters within this volume, Part I begins with a question from John Ellis: “what forms of history do we need?” How scholars define, tell, and even retell the histories of film and television becomes ever more complex as works continue to appear or are rediscovered, and as cinematic and televisual forms evolve and are redefined within the wider context of moving image media in the digital age. In his chapter, Ellis reflects upon particular forms of history and how these can be applied to film and television now—considering the moving image as historical evidence, as documentary, as text and as data, and suggesting both personal and public justifications for historical analysis. Ultimately, Ellis argues, we “need” history to help us come to terms with change, and to see changes as never-ending processes: historiography plays an essential part in celebrating and revisiting what has gone before, rather than simply forgetting or mourning its loss.

Part II develops from these wider theoretical reflections with a series of case studies which recontextualise specific cinema and television histories within their socio-political or cultural contexts. Drawing on new archival research, Alex Rock provides an account of the influence of government agencies on cultural production, through an investigation of the relationship between the Metropolitan Police and the British film industry in the 1920s and 1930s. While previous studies have considered the part that police public relations policies have played in shaping the film industry and its output, this chapter focuses more specifically on the formation of the Met Press Bureau in 1919 and the role of Public Information Officer. The bureau was established as an opportunity for collaboration, communication and greater transparency between the police and the film industry – but, as Rock shows, it ultimately acted as an agency of control, manipulating both production and publicity of British cinema right up until the Second World War.

Based on her research on female television audiences, for which she interviewed a number of British women across generations about their memories of television, Hazel Collie explores the part played by music programmes in shaping adolescent female identity. Moving away from studies of women's television which focus almost exclusively on genres traditionally considered "feminine", such as drama and soap opera, Collie's chapter instead shows how women who navigated their teenage years throughout various eras of popular music television identified with both programmes and presenters, suggesting an importance beyond the joy of simply seeing their favourite performers on the small screen. Female stars, especially presenters such as Cathy McGowan and Paula Yates, were often seen as inspirational role models and played a significant part in how adolescent females formed identities through their tastes and style, and even helped to shape their relationships with family and friends. Music television is shown to be key in how teenage girls situated themselves within the youth culture of their times.

Sylwia Szostak's chapter provides an overview of Polish fictional television, charting its development from dependence on imported programmes to domestic production in the post-Soviet era. The problematic notion of a "national" television is explored here, and Szostak argues that the advent of a specifically Polish form of television fiction did not negate the importance of foreign shows – on the contrary, domestic production has been aided by transnational media and its influences, and adapting or imitating other formats, particularly those of American programmes, has proved especially successful. This type of cultural borrowing illustrates how, rather than threatening the validity or commercial potential of domestic output, foreign models can in fact be usefully exploited in the creation of new local productions.

Steve Presence brings Part II to a close with a chapter on oppositional documentary on British television in the 1990s, focusing on the radical Channel 4 programme *Critical Eye* (1990-94), exemplary of a form which has received limited historical recognition. Presence suggests that programmes like *Critical Eye* mark a comparable difference to more recent trends towards perceived impartiality in British documentary. The chapter considers the connections between the aesthetic and political avant-garde, the former prevalent on Channel 4 in the 1980s before the shift to the latter in the 1990s. The first *Critical Eye* programme, *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1990), which documented the Poll Tax riot of March 1990, is analysed in detail here to show the fundamental purpose of oppositional documentary as providing an alternative account of events to those offered by the police, media or government. Recalling historical accounts through forgotten or critically ignored oppositional forms is, Presence argues, ultimately essential if we are to fully understand the political potential of film and television.

Part III is concerned with "rethinking" histories of film and television—that is, considering historical cinematic or televisual moments in a new or previously under-discussed way. Dieter Declercq reflects on the potential for historiographical studies of film and television, as part of the humanities, to challenge neoliberal hegemony in contemporary society and culture. The documentary *Le Temps de Cerveau Disponible* (Jean-Robert Viallet, 2010), which charts the development and eventual success of reality television in France, is analysed here to illustrate how the genre can be seen as representative of western neoliberal ideology. Declercq shows how this is evident in both its production context, as the television industry evolved through fierce marketplace competition and government intervention, and in the competitive nature of the format itself, humiliating citizens in manipulative contests to determine the survival of the fittest, for little more than financial gain. Ultimately, he argues, the socio-economic critique found within a documentary like *Le Temps de Cerveau Disponible* is one which should be considered a moral responsibility of the humanities, and of scholarly work on film and television specifically.

Nathan Townsend draws from a rich history of scholarly work on the concepts of both "national" and "transnational" cinemas to discuss a more specific range of films—what he terms the "Transatlantic British Cinema" of the 1930s and 1940s. Townsend explores the relationships between key British studios and Hollywood, observing a scale of interaction between the two industries that challenged traditional notions of competitive market dynamics. Simultaneously, the practice of these studios produced hybridised texts which, while often explicitly "British" in content, adopted many of Hollywood's cultural and aesthetic values.

Beginning with a discussion of chromophobia, or the "problem" of colour and attitudes toward it, Helen Wheatley's chapter explores the history of colour television in Britain and examines the approaches of policy and programme makers during its inception and early adoption, as well as considering how colour television was initially marketed. A particularly "British" style of colour television, Wheatley argues, can be observed in early colour programmes and is especially apparent in television drama. *Vanity Fair* (1967-68), among others, is used here as an example of how colour was often considered as having one of two purposes: either to offer potential layers of expressive meaning beyond the surface image, or in contrast as an appealing, but ultimately superficial, aesthetic addition. While meanings of colour can only be considered subjective, this chapter concludes that the makers of early colour programmes did indeed strive to use colour in what they considered meaningful ways, and as such there is further scope for work on the impact of colour television.

In Part IV, film and television texts are revisited to explore notions of nostalgia, cultural memory, and the representation of historical moments. Caitlin Shaw's chapter compares the way in which two very different films portray British post-punk icons of the 1980s, and analyses how they each contribute to a particular mythology of one of the era's most celebrated bands. Michael Winterbottom's irreverent *24 Hour Party People* (2002) charts the exploits of Factory Records founder Tony Wilson, responsible for signing Joy Division, while *Control* (Anton Corbijn, 2007) more seriously reflects the brief career and death of frontman Ian Curtis. By comparatively analysing narrative and aesthetic, Shaw illustrates how the two biopics respectively challenge the band's sombre discourse and the myth of Curtis as martyr, before embracing a late-2000s moment of post-punk nostalgia to recover and reinstate these ideas. Shaw uses critics' and audience reactions here to suggest that, ultimately, issues of authenticity and reverence are perhaps less important to audiences (and filmmakers) than nostalgic and idealised representations of subversive celebrity and musical eras.

Jilly Boyce Kay considers the historical debates and controversies surrounding the BBC's *Question Time*. This chapter moves away from historiographical accounts, which largely focus on the topical debate programme's male presenters, and thus reduce arguments to those of a masculinist nature even while considering the under-representation of women. Instead, Kay concentrates on the position of key female personnel (notably editors and producers) to consider the programme as a site of unequal power, competition and gender politics, and discusses *Question Time* as representative of similar struggle and inequality across the wider public political sphere. Personal memoirs and other archival print materials are used to illustrate the chasm between male and female power, influence and opinion throughout the history of the show's production. Considering the programme across the decades in which it has been broadcast highlights how gendered power relations consistently change over time, yet always remain unequal.

Thomas Joseph Watson uses a series of three documentary films, the *Paradise Lost* trilogy, to consider the possibility of a construction of history itself through the cinematic form. The films follow the cases of three West Memphis teenagers accused of murdering three young boys, charting events over eighteen years: from initial investigations and their subsequent incarceration, to the eventual release of the accused. Watson describes how the films were fundamental in both critiquing the American judicial system and contributing to the eventual conclusion of the case itself, often using unprecedented or previously unaccepted methods of documentary filmmaking. In significantly shaping events surrounding the case and its ultimate results, *Paradise Lost* can be seen to challenge both the expectations and conventions of documentary, and the trilogy asks us at once to not only reconsider historical “fact”, but its representation as well.

Part V is concerned with the impact of new technologies on cinema and television histories – both on- and off-screen. Bringing the collection into the digital age, Abby Waysdorf considers how both technological developments in the video industry and the creation of online communities have helped to form television canons. Extensive television series such as *The X-Files* or *Star Trek: The Next Generation* were once available for repeated viewing by the average fan primarily via syndicated televisual reruns, before owning an entire series became possible (if somewhat costly) with DVD, and the later advent of VoD made watching at will entirely affordable and accessible. Simultaneously, the growth of the online population, and the internet as a location for the “savvy” television viewer, has provided a forum for the discussion and endorsement of long cancelled cult TV shows. Waysdorf uses the specific example of the popular culture website *The AV Club*’s “TV Club Classic” section to show how professional reviewers and increasingly critically-minded fans come together in analysis and debate of available series, canonising “worthy” shows and cementing and sustaining their credibility and appeal.

Vanessa Jackson’s chapter considers the role of digital and especially social media in creating and managing community archives through a case study of the *Pebble Mill Project*. Jackson, as a former employee of the once prolific but now defunct BBC studio in Birmingham, founded a website and associated Facebook group to document accounts of production and working cultures at the studio. Her project exemplifies the potential for archives set up outside of the institutional domain, namely the preservation of historical accounts which may otherwise be lost, allowing for a wider selection of people’s memories and accounts, and the preservation of artefacts (photographs in particular) perhaps otherwise considered unworthy inclusions for more official archives. Questions regarding accuracy and the reliability of sources are discussed, and the collaborative nature of the project is also considered with regards to both its benefits and potential drawbacks. Ultimately, the project illustrates how informal digital archives built over social media can assist media historians in accessing previously “hidden” histories.

Concluding this section, and the book, by shifting the attention back to film, Adam Gallimore considers how technological developments in contemporary cinema can affect the fictional representation of historical events. Focussing on digital editing and filming practices, this chapter draws examples from a number of recent films, with a particular emphasis on *The New World* (Terrence Malick, 2005) and *Public Enemies* (Michael Mann, 2009), to illustrate a more subjective approach to historical representation. Adopting digital practices and employing modern stylistic devices can evoke a more "realistic" tone and complicate subjectivity – in turn offering new forms of narrative construction and ways to address the audience. New technologies, Gallimore argues, allow filmmakers to recount history as a particular narrative of past events, outside of the conventions of classical filmmaking.

As illustrated in this introduction, the chapters which follow encompass a wide range of topics and a variety of approaches to their discussion. *Cinema, Television and History: New Approaches* is, in itself, a historical document: one that reflects a specific moment in the study of cinema and television and their institutions, and one that challenges historical fixity, however approached.

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PART I:

NEW MEANINGS, NEW METHODS

CHAPTER ONE

TV AND CINEMA: WHAT FORMS OF HISTORY DO WE NEED?

JOHN ELLIS

Moving image and sound, the media of cinema and television, have a brief past when compared to most other human activities. But the question of their histories, what they might be and how to tell them, is now a pressing one. The old models are no longer working well: it is becoming harder to mount a "history of film" even though the first attempt at a comprehensive audiovisual *Story of Film* (2012) has only recently appeared. The task becomes ever more daunting, not simply because more works continue to be produced and more of what was produced in the past is rediscovered. It is not a problem of growing corpuses; it is a problem of systemic change. There is now much more to moving image and sound than cinema and television. New media appear, and so the old are remediated. New histories therefore have to explain and account for features that the old histories took for granted, including fundamental features like the length of a feature film or the nature of a TV schedule. In this context, we need to ask what forms of history are now appropriate for cinema and television, and what forms will be appropriate for new audiovisual media.

History is a branch of storytelling, one of the central features of our culture. Historical narratives are distinct as narratives only because they depend on evidence; otherwise their cultural place is similar to that of fictional narratives. Story-telling spectacularises what it tells, as much in verbal accounts as audiovisual ones. To tell a story is to package up into an acceptable form that which is difficult in life; to put up there on the screen the things that we prefer not to face down here. Storytelling abstracts and externalises, making other the people, the behaviours, the times and places that we live in. Storytelling, whether fictional or historical, is a practice of ordering and attribution of meaning. Stories bring structure to events which often appear chaotic to those experiencing them. A narrative provides a sense of ending: a point from which all the actions within the narrative finally "make sense". The ending of a narrative attributes meaning retrospectively, reordering the elements into a satisfying whole. The ending of a narrative also has a moral function: it allows—or even insists—on judgements of human behaviour, on good and evil, on adequacy or inadequacy, on mistakes and their subsequent correction. Bad deeds may often remain unpunished in life, but storytelling allows the retribution that the ordinary way of the world is too compromised to allow.

Narratives also permit a distinctive point of view to their users. A viewer or reader often has a superior view to that of any one of the characters, and sometimes even that of all the characters. This superior viewpoint is not necessarily one of omniscience: any detective or suspense narrative involves the withholding of information from the user. Sometimes a character can be "ahead" of the viewer or reader. Narratives depend on differential knowledge during their progress towards their ending, and the user is as caught in this play as any of the characters. However, the ending exists only for the reader or viewer: it makes sense for the observer. The user of a narrative is the point where the narrative makes sense. The characters, with the rest of their "lives" to lead, do not necessarily perceive the ending as an ending at all. For the user, however, there are no more pages; the film runs off the spool; the file is used up. The ending of a narrative is the point of final meaning-making. The function of narratives lies in this moment. Narratives attribute meaning and order to events whose meaning often eludes the fictional participants. In doing so, they explain the world and provide insight into hidden logics of human activity. This is why storytelling is such an important, popular and enduring social activity.

Historical narratives depend on evidence and do not have recourse to invention, as fiction often does. However, historical narratives are no different in their retrospective attribution of meaning and moral order to events. Historical narratives create meaning, order, causality and structure. They are also no different in their creation of a superior viewpoint for their users. Historical narratives are, however, even more explicit than fiction in their explorations of causality. Just as the classic denouement of the country house murder mystery is the gathering of the characters for the detective's final explanation, so too do historians gather all their users for the final explication: the balance of forces, the attribution of responsibilities, the reflection on the role of the actions of individuals, the examination of underlying causes.

Histories explain past events by gathering and organising evidence of that past. So perhaps it is useful to begin an examination of the possible histories of film and television by asking what moving images and sounds themselves provide in the way of evidence. Film and television artefacts are often surrounded by documentation (although the archival researcher is usually aware of the destruction of much more that would have been useful). But this documentation is no different from the written sources that have long been the staple of historical studies: published writings, business records, accounts, blueprints, letters, oral history interviews etc. However, moving images are new and difficult for the study of history, so I shall concentrate my attention on film itself as historical evidence.

Evidence

From the point of view of historiography, many films may purport to be fictional, but all films are documentaries. To say that "all films are documentaries" is by no means an original observation. Indeed a simple Google search reveals that this idea has been attributed at various times to: Bill Nichols, Jean-Luc Godard, Goddard, Werner Herzog, Chris Marker, Jean-Marie Straub… all of whom, with the possible exception of Goddard, could well have said it. Before examining the idea that all films are documentaries, therefore, it is necessary to observe that the imprecision about the source of this idea reveals the *sine qua non* of any history. History has to be based on research and on the most thorough examination of all available evidence, rather than plausibility or the nearest available reference. Therein lies the essential difference between history and story; and the reason for the time-consuming labour of historians.

Accuracy, or adequacy to the evidence, is not simply a matter of accumulating everything that seems relevant, or knowing where to look for more. It is also about finding a way back into the perspective of the time. In order to elucidate or explain the underlying forces that finally made sense of a period, it is also necessary to develop a feel for the experiential chaos of the moment. This can also be a route to discovering the forgotten (rather than hidden) causes. The recent flush of historical research around British TV in the 1980s (and particularly the "radical" Channel 4) provides a good example.[1] The early reception of Channel 4's output as either "Channel Swore" or "Channel Bore" is well-known. At the time, this sense of unease and inadequacy was attributed to the programmes and their makers. The viewing of examples from the archive will often confirm this (though an aspect of the current research consists of revaluing texts dismissed too glibly at the time). However, the channel itself also had a role in creating an impression of amateurism and inadequacy, and this tends to be forgotten. A dispute between the actor's union Equity and Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) over the payment of residual fees had produced a boycott by Equity members of spot advertising on Channel 4 (Brown 2007, 51-2). Advertising was sold by the ITV companies on Channel 4's behalf, so the management of Channel 4 were powerless to resolve the dispute. Yet this dispute had a marked effect on the look and feel of the early days of broadcasting. With no mainstream advertising available, Channel 4 breaks were filled with a mixture of "back in a moment" cards and spot commercials produced without actors, often featuring "have a go" company executives themselves. These already dubious works were repeated beyond reason, so the overall look of early Channel 4 was of amateurism, despite the quality of significant amounts of its programming.

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[1] See for instance, Weissmann 2009, Johnson 2012 and The Channel 4 and British Film Culture project at the University of Portsmouth (http://www.port.ac.uk/research/cccr/projects/c4_bfc/).

A close understanding of the "look" of the early Channel 4 reveals a neglected historical fact of TV in that era: the role of organised labour. The role of talent organisations and trade unions was important at other levels as well. It governed the access that could be given to would-be programme makers with no existing professional experience. At the time the technicians' union Association of Cinema and Television Technicians (ACTT, now known as BECTU) operated a closed shop in key technical areas including that of director. The power of ACTT lay in its ability to "black out" a channel by calling out on strike the technicians who controlled the broadcast signal. They had already done this successfully in 1979 when ITV was blacked out for eleven weeks. So Channel 4's management was justifiably afraid that such a tactic could be used again in the event that a programme made with non-union labour was to be broadcast. So non-union labour was used judiciously and in consultation with the relevant ACTT officials. This produced, among other phenomena, the "Workshop Agreement" which lay behind much of the radical work that appeared on Channel 4 in slots like *The Eleventh Hour* (1982-88).

Trade union activity of this kind is no longer a major feature of politics in the UK. The conditions of trade union activity have been fundamentally changed by legislation in the 1980s and 1990s, and trade union membership has drastically declined in the face of casualistion of work. The way that it permeated the early 1980s, and the major imprint it had on the early Channel 4, are now easily missed by historians who are more attentive to other matters. However justifiable my claim might seem to be, however, the evidence for it still requires reassessment. My assertion of this aspect of Channel 4's history is based on memory (including of some of those adverts: "Go bag a Bickerton" being one). Memory is merely one kind of evidential raw material for a historian, to be balanced against all other forms of evidence. The evidence here should include an examination of the texture of the broadcast stream of Channel 4 in 1982. Recordings of the broadcast stream (as opposed to individual programmes) are rare, of course, but in this case they would provide evidence of the overall visual poverty of a Channel 4 with ad-breaks deprived of the normal range of spot advertising. This case demonstrates, therefore, that the historian's work depends on the balancing of different evidences (from the feel of the broadcast flow to the broad political context) to enable the search for causes neglected or overlooked by modern observers.

All films are documentaries

To repeat, then, from the point of view of historiography, many films may purport to be fictional, but all films are documentaries. The truth of this observation becomes clear in the examination of fiction feature films. Such films document in three ways: in their performances; in the construction of their fictions; and in the evidence they provide in unnoticed ways. All fiction films are documentaries of people acting: this was Godard's insight. Films are full of people pretending to be other people, and spaces pretending to be other spaces. The pretences have to be plausible in order to work, and plausibility depends on the prevailing beliefs of the time: its ideologies as some would put it. So fiction films will provide an insight into the regimes of personhood that were prevalent in our period. They will show what was considered public, private and off-limits completely, the aspects of human life that were considered necessary in order to present a person on the screen. Movies articulate the "structures of feeling" of a time, as Raymond Williams put it so well (Williams 1961; see also Matthews 2001). So they will show to the future what constituted plausible behaviour for our period. Already we are finding styles of acting from the 1930s to be "implausible" or "theatrical", especially in British films where accent and enunciation carry class connotations. Most researchers tend to ignore these aspects of older films and concentrate on the fictions themselves, so a survey of accent and performance styles is yet to be constructed. It would have to be informed by the scattered written sources that record contemporary reactions to the voices and performances in specific films.

Films are also documentaries of their period in the sense that their narratives are rooted in their times. This does not, however, mean that social trends can be read off from groups of movies as is sometimes the case with social studies of movie genres (see, for instance, Geraghty 2009). There are too many levels of mediation, from the fashions in genres to the worldview of the particular social strata that created and marketed the movies. The relationship to social trends is at best a metaphorical one: points of comparison may exist between the narration of a movie and social developments. But comparison does not imply connection, any more than to say “I smell a rat” indicates the presence of rodents or the exercise of the sense of smell. Movies are rooted in their times because of their worldview rather than their ostensible content. They demonstrate the general preoccupations of the times, the limits of what was thinkable, the horizons of common sense and accepted belief: all of which framed the actions of individuals and groups at the time. In short, movies are rooted in their times because of what went unnoticed in them at the time, rather than any message that they claim to carry or are alleged to carry.

Other material also goes unnoticed when a movie or a TV show is newly minted. Later viewers may notice the happenstance of the shooting, the ephemeral things in the background, which were taken for granted at the time. The pounds, shillings and pence; the London Routemaster buses; the clothes that people are wearing, the food they are pretending to eat: all these gain in significance as movies age. This is the grain of the times, the unnoticed and the everyday, which have a powerful evocative effect in retrospect. At its most powerful, this can invert the reading of a movie. The background becomes the foreground, the clothes become more important than the wearer of them. In addition, there are the materials that are caught by the involuntary action of camera and microphone which were not eliminated in the edit. These chance actions in the margins of the frame can become more fascinating than the action at the centre. This way lies both nostalgia (the regretful recall of a lost past) and deconstruction (the reinterpretation of texts away from the confines of their original context). At this point, then, we leave behind the idea that all films are documentaries, to find another notion equally productive of historical approaches: the idea that all films are texts.

All films are texts

Film and TV texts continue to be enjoyed and examined long after their first release. They remain productive of meaning, and increasingly that productivity becomes an activity of reinterpretation. Texts can be reused away from their original contexts of interpretation, either in the knowledge of that context or even with little grasp of their origins. Much reinterpretation takes the form “they didn’t notice but NOW I can see”, a deliberate reading against the grain which often reveals some of the unnoticed aspects that defined the readability of the film on its first release. Interpretations that genuinely reuse a text without much knowledge of its origin are possible but less frequent: more often than not the text simply becomes banal or incomprehensible. This is usually the case for the complex and complete film or TV text: the longeurs of construction usually discourage reuses that are historically unaware.

However, this is much less the case for fragments of texts. Shots, sequences sounds and lines of dialogue can be used for all kinds of purposes beyond their original textual context. Digital availabilities have intensified this process as it is much easier to retrieve archival material and to reincorporate the desired fragments into a new text. Shots from feature films of the 1930s and 1940s are often used in archive-based programmes to provide evidence of the look or feel of a period, or to illustrate aspects of the commentary in a generalised way. I am sometimes taken aback by recognising the actors, at least, and sometimes the actual film: the blurred line between fact and fiction seems to have been crossed. There is nothing to differentiate these particular shots as being derived from fiction rather than documentary. However, given the habitual use of reconstruction in documentaries of the period, this may not be a fundamental problem. But it demonstrates the problems that could emerge as fragments of previous texts are more commonly reused. This is one of the results of a general digital empowerment in the field of the audiovisual.

Digitisation and online availabilities may seem immensely empowering because they allow us to see what has hitherto been impossible to access. But these processes are no respecters of history. Digitisation implies a radical dehistoricisation. It reforms all texts as data, stripping away all the signs of analogue specificity which carry clues to the original textual nature of the footage. It becomes extremely difficult to establish the original technical platform and institutional context of a piece of footage once it has become digital data. If you are lucky, this information is diverted into metadata, which may or may not accompany the data on its onward journey. It is becoming difficult to trace whether a production was made on film or tape, for broadcast or for public screening, for a general or restricted audience. When an extract is taken from this new digital form for new digital uses, then the relationship to origin becomes more difficult or even impossible to trace.

Digital access also reshapes what used to be called audiences. In digital information systems there are no audiences: everyone is a user. Analogue processes brought absolute physical limitations: transfer from one platform to another was laborious even when it could be done. Any manipulation for new purposes required special skills and equipment. Digital systems have drastically reduced (though emphatically have not eliminated) such restrictions. The result is that audiences have become users. The social organisation of individuals to constitute a particular form of viewership has fallen away. Systems of organised viewing are being replaced by individual users accessing material in circumstances that they define for themselves. So it is possible for a user to access footage over a range of devices in a multitude of physical situations: they use the footage how they want. They do not have to queue up to watch it in a cinema or to wait for the broadcast slot (two typical ways of organising individuals into a viewing audience). Users can also carry out any number of operations whose designation with terms such as "rip" and "burn" imply some kind of physical change rather than simple consumption. This process is often subject to restrictions, many of which are motivated by the desire to maintain the integrity of the text or to limit the circulation that the digital enables. For the purposes of this argument, however, the one indisputable result of the transformation of audiences into users is that it is far more difficult for audiovisual creatives to ensure textual integrity for the artefacts that they produce.

It seems as though the integrity of the text is under threat. However, it is worth remembering that this has always been the case with cinema and TV. No broadcaster could ever ensure that people at home would be watching a programme from beginning to end, and broadcast texts show the marks of this realisation in their segmentations, repetitions and breaks. All of these established features of broadcast texts are attempts to ensure that they remain comprehensible when consumed without much regard to textual integrity. Classic cinema practices included the radical cutting down of films for reruns as second features; the institution of continuous-run cinemas meant that audiences could wander in and out when they felt like it. Practices such as the director's cut indicate that the limits of textuality have long been malleable within traditional cinema. The uses to which archive footage has been put in TV documentaries often does not respect textual origins, as we have seen. These are, however, all professional practices, undertaken within an organised industry by an elite of professionals. Digital processes now mean that it is easier for anyone to cut and paste pieces footage from one text to another; this is no longer the province of a professional elite. The problem, then, is that anyone can mess around with a text with no regard to its integrity. Previously, this activity was subject to professional standards and limits, but is so no longer. Those who simply regret this process are regretting the decline in importance of an elite: it also establishes fresh uses.

All films are data

Digitisation means that films and TV become data rather than texts. Their potential uses are no longer determined more or less absolutely by their origins. How does this impact on the processes of researching and telling their histories? When footage becomes data, it can be used well beyond the confines of the entertainment industries. The scanning, classification and searching of old movies and TV means that the footage can be used as data for medical research: they offer a wealth of visual and audio data on the ageing process which have not yet been explored; they offer geophysical data; information on the organisation of urban spaces etc. Moving image data has rich potential for such forms of reuse, but only if its origins are understood.

The radical implication of regarding all films as data is to say that all films are equal. The digital says that all data is just data: it provides no inherent way of discriminating between qualities of data. So history is needed to reassert the intrinsic nature of the data being used. History reasserts the metadata which gives sense to data by asserting its origins and its limitations. Any use of digital data in research requires that the parameters of the data are clearly understood: the conditions of production of the data have to be made clear. Otherwise, inappropriate questions will be asked of the data, and unsupportable conclusions may be drawn. A site such as http://www.euscreen.eu presents much European material from the period when news was shot on film. It therefore includes many sequences that are now silent: the place for the lead-in commentary by the news presenter. This often provided contextual evidence that is now lost; it also gives an erroneous impression of television at the time. We should equally be aware of how styles of editing have changed, especially in cinema. The speed of cutting increased, rendering old footage pedestrian to modern eyes. As David Bordwell (2006) has pointed out, this is more than a question of shot length. Techniques of the spatialisation have been developed, allowing more fluid reinterpretations of space, eliminating the need for an overall viewpoint in favour of a constant supply of details from which the overall space of the action is simply inferred. This in turn allows for a greater compression or expansion of time. So we can begin to speculate that moving images are beginning to develop a different way of making sense of space and time which may have profound effects on their data value to other forms of research.

A new kind of history is needed, one that, fortunately, is already being created. This does not interpret the texts so much as explain the circumstances in which material was produced and for which it was produced. So this is a history of the technologies and cultures of both production and consumption. We are losing touch with the practices of the entertainment cinema of the 1930s and the 1940s with its use of live attractions as well as cinematic spectacle (live performances, talent shows, bingo and other competitions) and its emphasis on creature comforts (the seats where you could be served with afternoon tea; the double seats for the romantic), all of which were important in constructing an audience ready to see a film, that is to concentrate on the screen and the narrative rather than their physical and emotional problems. If this was an escapist cinema, then that escape came as the result of a substantial level of cultural work beyond that of making movies. The movies themselves had an explicitness and address that aimed to weld disparate viewers together into an audience, but more was needed in exhibition practices. All of this cultural work has disappeared from modern cinematic practice. What once was everyday has become remarkable and surprising: the cult of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975); the singalongs with *Mamma Mia!* (2008); the applause and tears at *Les Misérables* (2012).

The history of the circumstance of consumption is more a feature of film studies in the USA than the UK, despite the pioneering work of Annette Kuhn and others (see, for example, Kuhn 2002 and Griffiths 2012). Robert C. Allen's work on the cinemas of North Carolina goes into fine grain detail about the evolution of cinemas in Wilmington, showing that the highest paid cinema employee at the Joyland Theatre in 1910 was Dessie Jones a 13 year old pianist, as well as the ugly effects of segregation on the viewing opportunities of black audiences well into the 1950s.[2] For television, my new research project called ADAPT (The Adoption of new Technological Arrays in the Production of Broadcast Television) will attempt to produce an account of the technological and organisational bases for television production from 1960, emphasising the predominant styles of material that they produced. These are histories which have been called forth by their times: in previous decades, the history of technologies or exhibition practices were seen as rather marginal activities, the province of the amateur and the collector. The move to the centre of such marginalised interests then raises the further question of the historian's motivation for their work.

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[2] For details of this research, see "Mapping movie going in North Carolina" (http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/).

Why this history?

Film and television history is, in part, an activity of intelligent revaluation. It allows discrimination to take place, prioritising what should be rescued from the back of the digital vault and returned to attention. This revaluation will be based on principles which should be made explicit. It may take the form of arguing that a particular body of work is important because it fits into an established canon and should take its place there. Or again, it should cause a reinspection of the values underlying a particular canon. Another justification for revaluation is that the body of work, however defined, is newly relevant to us: it is relevant to our lives as citizens, enriching to experience this emotional catharsis, to meet these characters, to understand this kind of a story. Whatever argument is made, it has to be explicit: historians do not work simply for themselves, their appeal is to the attention of others.

There is a second motive, which governs the historian's choice of a particular area of study. In early stages of film and TV history, perhaps, the luxury of choice was severely restricted by difficulties in accessing material to study, and the limited number of existing accounts from which to develop a theme. This is no longer the case, so the historian has to be aware of their motives for undertaking the study of a particular period or body of work. It is remarkable how many researchers are interested in the time of their birth or immediately before. There seems to be a vogue for doctoral studies of the 1970s and 1980s for instance, and I am aware that I am attracted particularly to the cinema of the period immediately before my birth. Anyone acquainted with Freud's essay on the Family Romance (1909) will recognise this as a fascination with myths and explanations of origin: where did I come from, why was I born, and are my origins in some way problematic or not as they have been explained to me? Historical work needs both a public and a personal justification if it is to be successful.

Why history?

The final set of motivations relates to the object "history" itself. History has a greater presence in some cultures than others. The USA, for instance, could be seen as a culture on the run from its history. The suppression of the foundational genocide of Native Americans is still evident, and many aspects of American culture are still influenced by the heritage of waves of immigrants eager to remake and forget. Indeed, the popular notion of individual freedom and self-determination could be seen as dependent on