

Making Sense of Film Tom Gunning

(from the Making Sense of Evidence series on *History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web*, located at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>)

Making Sense of Film offers a place for students and teachers to begin working with early twentieth-century film as historical evidence. Written by Tom Gunning, this guide offers an overview of early film and how historians use it, tips on what questions to ask when watching early films, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding and using early film online. Tom Gunning is a Professor in the Art Department and the Cinema and Media Committee at the University of Chicago. Author of *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (University of Illinois Press), and the recently published *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Modernity and Vision* (BFI), he has written numerous essays on early and international silent cinema, and on the development of later American cinema, in terms of Hollywood genres and directors as well as the avant-garde film. He has lectured around the world and his works have been published in a dozen different languages.

Introduction

The history of cinema now spans more than a century. One could say that the twentieth century was the first century to be recorded in motion pictures. But how useful are motion pictures as historical evidence and what sort of evidence do they provide? From the inventors' first projections at the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was hailed as a mode of preservation, a hedge against death itself, preserving for posterity not only the images but the actions of people now long dead. We could say that cinema not only records the visual appearance of past time, but the passage of time itself.

When we look at films from the period we now call early cinema (from the invention of cinema around 1895 to the World War I), one might say we are by definition looking at "historical films." As records of the beginning of what would become the major form of mass entertainment and possibly the most important art form of the twentieth century, films from this period are precious to film historians. They are also valuable to historians as records of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These films capture both historical events and bits of every day life, preserving forms of entertainment, social attitudes, clothing styles, and modes of transportation. But what constitutes their uniqueness? How can they be used?

A few practitioners and scholars recognized film's potential as a record of the past early on, even if they held a somewhat utopian conception of film's capabilities. In 1898, Polish cameraman Boleslas Matuszewski declared motion pictures "a new source for history" that provided "authenticity, exactitude, and precision." His call for a film archive, however, fell on deaf ears. Almost twenty years later, D. W. Griffith, perhaps the most famous American film director of the silent era, argued that motion pictures would revolutionize the way history was taught, even superseding written records:

Imagine a public library of the near future. There will be long rows of boxes or pillars, properly classified and indexed, of course. At each box a

push button and before each box a seat. Suppose you wish to “read up” on a certain episode in Napoleon’s life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through a host of books, and ending bewildered, without a clear idea of exactly what did happen, and confused at every point by conflicting opinions about what did happen, you will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button and actually see what happened.

There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression.

Although Griffith somewhat uncannily envisioned the rows of video carrels now found in many libraries and archives, his view of history has been largely discredited. The notion of an objective representation of events, a recording of the way things actually happened, is no longer a goal of history. In addition, Griffith should have known that no picture of past events could be indisputable. His epic portrayal of the Civil War and Reconstruction, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), was heavily criticized as biased in its selective portrayal of events and virulently racist in its depiction of African Americans. But Griffith was also claiming that film could be objective in the sense of providing evidence. Is this a possibility?

How can film serve as historical evidence? First, the seemingly simple but perhaps most vexed question: Does film have unique qualities, such as its perceived objectivity, that affect its role as historical evidence? Second is the issue of films themselves as historical material, objects with a history of their own. How are they transformed over time and through technical transfer? Finally, we will consider film as social and cultural history, by delving into its production, modes of exhibition, and audiences.

Do Films Reflect Reality?

In 1969, a west coast version of Woodstock developed into a massive free concert at Altamont raceway in Northern California. The Hell’s Angels were hired security and constant scuffles ensued. One situation escalated and an Angel stabbed a male audience member, claiming later that the man had a gun and was about to shoot Mick Jagger. His claim was greeted with skepticism, but a documentary film crew inadvertently filmed the event and—to the surprise of many—the film upheld the Angel’s claim. The man was seen aiming a revolver at the stage just before the Angel jumped him. The film evidence held up in court and the Angel was cleared of murder charges.

Do most people recognize film and photography as an objective form of evidence? The idea that photographs and movies “do not lie” has a long history, with many legal cases (and many more fictional cases) resting on photographic evidence. Some argue that films and photographs can indeed lie—they can be doctored, staged, or faked in many ways. However, this very practice confirms the dominant belief that photographs are evidence. Why would someone try to alter a photograph except to capitalize on its credibility? In a legal context, however, photographs and motion

pictures count as legal evidence only when accompanied by detailed testimony as to the nature and context of the photograph.

Photographic evidence, therefore, must be both scrutinized and interpreted by experts. Clearly the same is true for films as historical evidence. The interpreter must know or at least speculate how films were produced in order to ask what they can tell us, and must understand not only what films show but how they show it. Given the levels of interpretation, can we claim motion pictures as a unique form of evidence?

Most theorists agree that photography has a unique relation to what it represents because the photographic image has a direct causal relation to the subject it represents. The light reflected from the objects or people photographed causes the image to be captured on light sensitive film. A photographic image not only resembles its subject, but indicates its existence, which is why journalists try to obtain (or to fake) photographs of things whose existence is in doubt, whether flying saucers, American prisoners still held in Vietnam, or Bigfoot.

But the photographic process is not simple. An object must first pass through the sophisticated apparatus of the camera before it is imprinted on the film. This journey includes a lens, an aperture, and a shutter that, in combination with the film, all have certain qualities that influence the nature of the image. Second, the camera has been placed by a human agent. A photographer carefully arranges the framing and other aspects of the images (focus, f-stop, speed of film, and time of exposure). In the case of mechanical set-ups, like surveillance or satellite cameras, a human-devised program operates the camera automatically.

Of course, all historical evidence should be subject to skepticism. Historical documents, eyewitness accounts, and archeological objects all claim a direct connection to events or situations that historians evaluate and interpret. Film, however, offers a unique ability to reflect and resemble historical figures and events. A motion picture of Teddy Roosevelt does not simply claim to be related to the president and big game hunter, but to show what he looked like and how he moved. This is perhaps film's greatest attraction and seduction: by capturing images in time, it seems not simply to represent things but to make them present. Because of this ability to, in the words of one theorist, "mummify time," some early audiences saw cinema as a defense against death.

Verifying Films

What issues come up when evaluating film as historical evidence? How can we know that an early film is authentic? What does the film show and how might its images have been manipulated? Finally, what are film's strengths and weaknesses as a historical record?

A recent experience will help explore these questions. A producer preparing a film on Teddy Roosevelt sent me a bit of film (transferred to video). He doubted the film's authenticity, and asked me to judge the nature of the images it contained. An authentic image of Roosevelt, particularly one not well known, would be rare and valuable evidence. Given the physical deterioration of early film, I was likely to be viewing a later print, made either from the original negatives or by duping (photographing a film to make a copy rather than making a positive print from the original negatives) a positive print. These processes not only remove the physical material of the original film but can also change the framing of the image and contrast

of tones. Duping reduces an image's clarity, and sometimes duped prints go through several generations—a photograph of a photograph of a photograph—and lose clarity at every point.

These changes are compounded when viewing a film electronically, whether on video or computer. The original frame area may be altered to fit the screen, cutting off essential information. The proportions of the film frame most frequently found on video monitors and computer screens is based on the film frame that existed until the 1950s, when theatre owners widened movie screens to compete with television. Because of the overspill built into most monitors, film images lose information from their left and right edges when shown on a monitor, and color can vary greatly when color film is transferred to an electronic format. Film images hold more information, and more detail, than current electronic modes of presentation (except for high definition TV) can display.

In other words, the film image as it was originally produced may have undergone an enormous number of transformations before we actually look at it. While these transformations can make studying film difficult (for example, if the footage of Teddy Roosevelt had been duped so many times that I could hardly see his facial features), knowledge of them allows historians to make use of films as historical documents. Therefore film documents must be treated with the same skepticism and scrutiny that you bring to any evidence. In the case of the Teddy Roosevelt film, the footage was in black and white and had the same original proportions as the monitor, so some distortion was minimized. Although some clarity of detail was missing (probably due to both duping and the transfer to video), the images were still recognizable.

Understanding a film as historical evidence requires informed judgement based on knowledge from outside of the film. The Teddy Roosevelt footage showed a mustached, bespectacled man in a hunting suit and pith helmet waving from a hill. This was followed by a shot of African natives looking off-screen, as if frightened, then a close-up of Roosevelt as the “great white hunter.” It is well documented that in 1909 Roosevelt went big game hunting in Africa and took a cameraman with him to record his exploits. Could these images be authentic documentary evidence of that hunting trip? Two clues led me to confirm the suspicion that the film was staged. First, the figure, while clearly made up to resemble Roosevelt (the glasses, the mustache), did not really match other photographs of Roosevelt from this period. This was an actor portraying the former president. Second, and perhaps most important, the cut to the African natives indicated images that had been arranged to give the impression of simultaneity—to indicate that the natives were looking at, and reacting to, Roosevelt). But the hunter and the African natives were almost certainly not filmed at the same time (the lighting and backgrounds of the two shots did not match). This points to one of the aspects of filmmaking most significant in the use of film as historical evidence: film cutting or editing.

An uninterrupted shot preserves a single duration of time, what we call a single “take.” But that footage can be altered through cutting, usually trimming the beginning and ending to perfect timing and emphasis, before it is seen in a finished film. Even more important, in almost all modern films this trimmed footage, now known as a “shot,” is combined with other shots. This juxtaposition of shots is known as editing. As the practice of editing developed, filmmakers used it to provide different viewpoints on an action or to switch the viewpoint from one place to another. Filmmakers quickly

discovered the magic of editing: that one shot could influence another—even change its meaning when they were juxtaposed—and could create a sequence of action or portray a locale.

One famous story illustrates how editing, combined with narration, can create the false appearance of historical evidence. France's Lumière company was one of the first filmmaking companies to project motion pictures successfully. Their skilled operators toured the world with their invention, known as the Cinématographe, both showing films from South America to Morocco and making films to show to audiences curious to see exotic lands. François Doublier, a Lumière operator, took the Cinématographe to Moscow in 1898 during the height of the Dreyfus scandal. Russian audiences, including many Jews, were extremely interested in this unfolding injustice and asked Doublier for films about it. Doublier did not have any, but, recognizing the potential popularity of a Dreyfus program, assembled a number of films he had on hand—a group of French soldiers with an officer, an imposing building in Paris, and a ship at sea—and created one. Doublier narrated the films as an unfolding drama. The first film, he declared, showed Dreyfus, the brave officer, with his men. The public building, he claimed, was the courthouse within which the trial of Dreyfus was taking place. Finally, the nautical film showed, according to Doublier, Dreyfus being transported to his prison exile on Devil's Island. Apparently most of his audience accepted the films, since they satisfied their desire to see images of these events. But at one showing, a canny audience member pointed out that images of Dreyfus in command would have predated the 1895 invention of Lumière's Cinématographe.

Even if films have not been totally fabricated, it is difficult to create a truly dramatic sequence of historical events when filming in the midst of them. Films shown on television documentary programs to represent battle may cut freely from bombs falling from a plane to their impact on the ground. Each image may be an authentic image of the battle, but in no way are the bombs we see exploding those we saw released from the plane. Film editing has performed its magic, creating a new fictional whole out of real parts. Films with multiple perspectives dramatically juxtaposed (such as the African natives recoiling before Roosevelt) most likely belong either in the realm of fiction (arranged after the fact) or, occasionally, result from an event that was carefully arranged in order to be filmed by multiple interrelated cameras. Nazi officials specially arranged a 1934 Nazi Party rally in Munich for filming by Leni Riefenstahl to create the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. To distinguish fictional films of events from documentary records, look for signs of arrangement such as editing of footage after the fact or the careful staging of shots. In fact, filmmakers and television producers (such as Oliver Stone in *JFK* or the creators of the television show *Homicide*) often give their fictional footage a shaky hand-held, awkwardly-composed look to increase its "authenticity."

The difference between the fictional and the staged raises another problem with films as historical evidence. Unless recording a pre-arranged event, film cameras are unlikely to capture key historical moments. Newsreel cameras might record Churchill, Stalin, and Franklin Roosevelt appearing publicly at Yalta, but they were not permitted into the carefully guarded meeting that decided the shape of the post World War II world. A newsreel cameraman caught the explosion of the Hindenberg zeppelin because its landing was a newsworthy event and he was there; he was unaware that he would film starkly dramatic footage rather than simply an important event. The same is true of the home movie taken by the Zapruder family of John F. Kennedy's

assassination. Film and television cameramen have risked their lives filming dangerous situations such as battles, riots, and bombings, but the actual historical value of such spectacular records may be limited. Important as it is, the Zapruder film does not contain the information needed to answer all of the questions about the assassination. What information it does have has been garnered by careful expert examination of the film, combined with other documents, and is still open to controversy. Key historical moments are often best understood through a constellation of sources, and film images often play a subordinate role in these arrangements, illustrating an event like the Great Depression through a stereotypical image of apple vendors rather than actually deepening our knowledge of the causes or human cost of the era's economic upheaval.

Film as Social and Cultural History

Increasingly historians have moved away from a history that chronicles battles, treaties, and presidential elections to one that tries to provide an image of the way daily life unfolded for the mass of people: how they worked, what they did for fun, how families were formed or fell apart, or how the fabric of daily life was formed or transformed. Film has an important role to play in these histories. While traditional historical documents tend to privilege great events and political leaders, historians now use other records to discern the lives of “ordinary” people: census records, accounts of harvests and markets, diaries and memoirs, and local newspapers. Film is perhaps more like these records of daily life than it is like the documents that record great events. Motion pictures may provide the best evidence of what it was like to walk down the streets of Paris in the 1890s, what a Japanese tea ceremony was like in the 1940s, what the World Series in 1950 looked like, or how people in factories did their work or spent a Sunday afternoon in the park. All of these subjects could be staged and distorted, of course, and film can be transformed in many ways. But as a record of time and motion, films preserve gestures, gaits, rhythms, attitudes, and human interactions in a variety of situations. In almost any film archive, and in numerous places on the Internet, one can glimpse images of simple actions, from the way a Buddhist monk in Ceylon folded his robe in 1912 to the way people boarded trolley cars in New York City in the 1930s. While film shares much of this information with other forms of documentation, especially still photography, motion pictures allow viewers to see and compare the everyday physical actions of people across the globe and throughout the twentieth century.

This is not to deny that film provides indelible images of some of the twentieth century's great events. Our horrified consciousness of the Holocaust relies partly on the filmed images from the liberation of the camps, and our knowledge of the devastation of the Atomic bomb comes partly from motion pictures of Hiroshima or of A-bomb test explosions. Conversely, twentieth-century disasters or traumas that went unrecorded by motion pictures—such as the genocide of the Armenians or mass starvation in Asia—are less present in public consciousness because of the lack of vivid images. But when we focus on social and cultural history, especially the important role of leisure in the lives of ordinary people, film not only provides evidence and records but takes on a key role.

In addition to the primarily non-fiction or documentary films discussed above, we must consider Hollywood's primary output, feature films. Can fictional film be used as historical evidence? As evidence of what? Fictional films serve as historical evidence

in the same way that other representational art forms do—by making events vivid, portraying social attitudes, and even revealing the unconscious assumptions of past societies. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* cannot be viewed as an objective or accurate view of the era of Reconstruction, but it does—painfully, and even unintentionally—indicate the sorts of hysterical anxieties and aggressive fantasies that underlay American racism, especially in the early twentieth century. Attitudes about gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as heroism, work, play, and “the good life” are all portrayed in fictional films as they are in an era's novels, plays, and paintings. But as a form of mass visual entertainment, films reflect social attitudes in a specific and vivid manner.

From 1915 to about 1955, movies were arguably America's most popular form of narrative entertainment. Before 1915, motion pictures had trouble attracting audiences of the upper and upper-middle classes to this new form of cheap entertainment. After 1955, movies began to give way to television as the dominant form of popular fictional entertainment. Movies, therefore, aimed at a wider target audience than that of most novels and plays. Does this mean that movies reflect social attitudes more accurately than any other medium, since they reached the greatest number of people? Possibly. But a mass audience does not mean that movies in America represented all points of view. It often indicates the opposite, with film studios avoiding certain controversial points of view in order not to offend a wide-ranging audience. Since films were released nationally and globally to make a profit, producers tried not to offend groups they recognized as influential and usually avoided political controversies or minority opinions.

Further, from 1916 until the 1950s, movies were not protected by the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. A court ruling in 1916 (concerning the state of Ohio's ban of *The Birth of A Nation*) held that film could legally be subject to censorship because of its vivid psychological effects and audiences (including women, children, and the “lower classes”) who the court deemed more impressionable than the readers of printed matter. A number of states and localities created film censorship boards. Although Hollywood studios occasionally released controversial films, they usually avoided such themes as racial prejudice, child labor, and venereal disease. Likewise, in contrast to the current trend of niche marketing, Hollywood ignored small specialized markets. A small, and financially marginal, series of independent producers did make films targeted at minority markets (such as the African-American films produced by Oscar Micheaux or the Yiddish films directed by Edgar G. Ulmer). These independent films provide fascinating evidence about the issues and assumptions current in smaller communities, often in sharp contrast to Hollywood films.

Interpreting Hollywood movies as a reflection of prevailing social attitudes or generalizing from specific films requires great caution. Fictional films are complex industrial and social products and how they are made, distributed, exhibited, and received by audiences and critics must be investigated to fully evaluate their roles as historical evidence. For example, it is dangerous to interpret a few films from a specific period as simple reflections of American society. The attitudes portrayed in a specific film may represent a series of compromises carefully designed to be non-offensive. In addition, individual films can indicate very different attitudes toward labor unions, big business, race relations, or women's rights.

One Hollywood strategy for creating and pleasing a mass audience included designing films so that audiences could interpret movies in different ways. This is clearest in the carefully regulated portrayal of sexual behavior during the period of Hollywood's dominance (1917-1960). An adult or sexually aware audience member may decide that Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart have sex when *Casablanca* cuts from their passionate kiss to a brief image of the control tower beacon at the nearby airport. But a child or a socially conservative viewer may assume nothing happened. Most important, the studio could deny to a censor that any sexual activity took place. The Production Code Administration (an industry-created “watchdog” committee charged with locating scenes that might be considered objectionable and proposing ways to modify them) often suggested such ambiguous scenes to film producers to avoid problems with state or local censorship boards.

Ambiguous scenes provide rich material for studying social history, but they require complex interpretation and investigation. Such investigation requires moving beyond the evidence on the screen (whether movie theater, video, or computer monitor) to ask how reviewers, censors, and fans understood films. Likewise historians need to investigate the actual process of filmmaking and the variety of viewpoints involved in production. Hollywood studio archives are filled with discussions of what material should be cut from scripts, what might be offensive to different audiences, how to soften images of sexuality or violence, or how to blur political references. Every Hollywood film involved compromises between divergent viewpoints, often aimed at creating room for multiple interpretations.

Thus, a broad range of materials are needed to write a full history of the cinema as part of cultural life. Film production and film-going are social practices and important aspects of twentieth-century life. To understand them we need to investigate technology, economics (including business and industrial organization), advertising, and distribution—all of which influenced where films were shown and who came to see them. A wide range of documents provide evidence in this quest, including letters, trade journals, movie reviews, contracts, financial information, scripts, and studio memos. In addition, many non-traditional sources are key to writing the social history of the movies. For example, the design of movie theaters or the switch to video rental stores; censorship and pressure group protests; fan magazines and movie-based souvenirs; fashion designs introduced by films; educational matinees for school children; and reactions by specific communities as gathered through oral histories. The actual role films play in people's daily lives, in their sense of themselves and their world, especially for the early part of the century, however are extremely difficult to document. Those vanished audiences will always remain somewhat elusive.

Is the film “Authentic?”

Early films often served, according to film historian Charles Musser, as “living newspapers.” Filmmakers, film exhibitors, and early film audiences highly prized filmed records of celebrities or current events. Film companies sent cameramen around the world, providing a priceless record of the people and events that shaped the first two decades of film. However, at this same time standards of visual authenticity were still being formed. Newspapers at the turn of the century were only beginning to be able to print photographs, and the practice of illustrating events through drawings and sketches was still current. Likewise, early film companies frequently produced films of

current events using actors and re-staging. Did audiences of the time see these as fakes or simply as useful vivid re-enactments?

Most likely their judgment depended on how the films were exhibited. Many re-enactments were announced to their audiences as such, but some exhibitors undoubtedly claimed that films showed “the real thing.” So we must ask whether an early film image is a representation of an event or a re-enactment. For instance, Edwin S. Porter produced a film entitled *The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* for the Edison company in 1901. Leon Czolgosz, a mentally disturbed anarchist, had assassinated President McKinley at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. Czolgosz was executed with the fairly new invention of the electric chair in the prison of Auburn, New York. Porter’s film begins with a panorama of the actual prison seen from outside, followed by a scene staged in the Edison studio of the execution, which carefully reproduced the actual electric chair and descriptions of the electrocution process. While the film is certainly an important historical document, revealing popular fascination with both the fact and the manner of Czolgosz’s execution, it cannot be taken as a record of the actual execution.

Researchers can determine which films are inauthentic by using documents that surround the films. The Edison bulletin for the Czolgosz film makes clear what is authentic (the view of the prison) and what is inauthentic (the reenactment of the execution). In addition, close examination of films themselves often reveals the theatrical nature of sets (painted backdrops and flats), the compression of events, and clear overall lighting that indicates a film studio rather than an actual location. Other elements, such as behavior and “staginess,” are more subjective judgments but also can alert a viewer that a purportedly documentary scene was arranged for the camera.

How was this film shot and edited?

Films go through many transformations as they are copied or transferred to video, but the most important visual aspects of a film are those that can give clues to its production. What can we see about how the film was made by looking at the film itself? How was it shot and how was it arranged for the camera? Was the camera on location or in a studio? Where was the camera placed and why was it placed there? What sort of lenses were used? Did the camera operator use artificial or available light? Was the scene specially arranged for the camera and how was it framed? What angle of view was it taken from? Was the camera on a tripod or hand-held? If there was camera movement, how was it done? After examining individual shots, you must also consider how the film was edited. What scenes may have been cut out by the editor? How do shots begin and end? With the shots that follow each other, how much time actually took place between them? Do the shots form a sequence or are they only loosely connected? If they form a sequence, did the original event really occur in this order?

While many of these questions (such as what footage was cut in the editing process) cannot be answered with certainty by simply examining the film, careful examination can reveal some important features. Only rarely are sets so convincing that a viewer cannot tell if the film was shot on a set or not. The image reveals camera angle, distance, composition, and even lenses. Occasionally such aspects can be very revealing of a film’s authenticity. A too carefully arranged composition—such as camera operators capturing a battle from an ideal viewpoint that would have placed them in mortal danger from enemy fire—can reveal it as a re-enactment.

Editing can make historical interpretation of film tricky for three reasons. First, it can utterly re-work or determine the meaning of a film sequence. Second, it can be done after the filming. Third, films can be re-edited in ways not immediately obvious to a viewer. Many early filmmakers and theorists understood editing as perhaps the most powerful tool filmmakers had for making meaning. While a single shot usually supplies some sort of record of what the camera filmed (even if artificially arranged), editing always presents a reconstruction and can greatly change the meaning of what was shot, creating relationships of space and time that may not have existed originally.

As I mentioned earlier, one must be especially aware of editing when watching a compilation film. Editors can create a sequence of a battle, a riot, or a political convention by cutting between combatants or political orators and their audiences, but they are combining shots taken at very different times and sometimes different places. Thus, in *Hearts of the World*, a fictional feature film made during W.W.I., D.W. Griffith used documentary images of the war to heighten the film's drama. But as film historian Russell Merritt has shown, the images that seem to show one battle actually combine footage from several events and even mix footage shot by both British and German cameramen.

Who made the film and why?

Although films seem to capture real life effortlessly, they are in fact industrial products: the result of complex technological processes and carefully discussed purposes. These factors vary greatly between a multimillion dollar feature and a casually shot home movie. But in the era of early cinema, when amateur filmmaking was rare, films were usually the product of institutions and corporations. To consider a film as historical evidence, it is therefore very important to always ask who made the film and for what purpose.

The "who" responsible for production certainly involved individuals such as the director and camera operator, but, possibly more important, it also might have included large entities such as film companies, government agencies, religious or political organizations, labor unions, and scientific organizations. Some industries sponsored publicity films; for example, the Santa Fe railway sponsored train films, made by both Edison and the Biograph company, to encourage tourism. Companies such as Westinghouse and National Cash Register sponsored "industrials," films showing how companies produced their products. (See examples of the Westinghouse films at the Library of Congress American Memory Web site.) Evidence about who made a film may be readily available in the film itself. Early film production companies frequently included trademarks in their films, sometimes even fixed on an object in the shot or emblazoned on the intertitles. Opening credits also generally announced the production companies. Although the films themselves may not indicate sponsorship by industries, early film catalogues often do.

Determining the purpose or purposes behind a film can be trickier, but it is equally vital in interpreting the film's historical role. The primary purpose behind most commercial films, of course, was to make a profit, and any film that wanted to attract and keep an audience had to be appealing and entertaining. Therefore, when the Peek Freen company hired filmmaker Charles Urban to make a film about how the company made biscuits, Urban had to fulfill the company's goals while also making an entertaining film. Certain propaganda films announced their messages very clearly.

During World War I, various governments made the first films with overt national propaganda messages. Government and health agencies, however, had already realized that film offered powerful forms of persuasion and education, and sponsored or subsidized such films as Edison's *The Fly Pest* (1909) warning about diseases carried by houseflies. Similarly the Red Cross sponsored a large number of films (including fictional films) about the dangers of tuberculosis and ways to prevent its spread.

But it may be that films convey and instruct best when they least seem to be doing so. Many attitudes conveyed by films, or any cultural product, about gender, race, class, sexuality, or religious and moral values are conceived less as conscious messages than conveyed as common assumptions. While a number of early films make overt statements on such issues as women's right to vote, race relations, pacifism, or birth control, and these statements were undoubtedly part of the purpose in making these films, many other films express attitudes toward woman's proper role, racial equality, or the nature of war or the family without proclaiming a position. Reflecting these attitudes was not the central goal of films, but the attitudes themselves may have had a great effect in shaping a realm of common assumption.

In addition, films can effectively change their purposes. Film images can always be redefined, either by re-positioning, adding a different commentary, or simply because the background beliefs of the audience have changed. Scenes of racist humor, cruelty to animals, or gender attitudes tacitly assumed to be shared by audiences when films were released can appear so radically strange to a contemporary viewer that a comic scene becomes tragic and vice versa.

Who watched the film?

In many ways, a film historian's greatest fantasy would be to somehow glimpse the audiences who originally viewed the historical films we study. Films are made to be watched, and without a sense of the original audience our grasp on films as historical documents remains incomplete. Even when films have survived, their audiences have mostly vanished beyond our reach. One way to bring these elusive watchers in the dark back into focus is by going beyond the films and looking for other documents. Film catalogues, which advertised films to exhibitors, convey what the producers thought audiences would enjoy. Likewise, film trade magazines began appearing around 1907 to advise exhibitors (supposedly with less bias than the producers) on what films would be profitable, and local theater managers often printed reports that reveal audiences' tastes and assumptions in these trade journals. Around 1912, newspapers began to review films, again with an eye on what their readers might enjoy. All of these sources provide some ideas of early audiences and the sort of films they liked.

More individual responses, especially by people unconnected to the film industry, are harder to find. Traditional sources—such as letters, diaries, newsletters for religious or labor organizations, and memoirs—yield some insights. A few oral history surveys, such as one by North East Historic Film, asked older community members to describe their early film viewing experiences. Similar surveys were made in the 1930s by social workers and social scientists. There is not as much material of this sort as we would wish.

With cautious viewing, however, films themselves can tell something about their audiences. Recurrent patterns in films from one era tell what genres were popular; what behavior was seen as heroic or villainous; and what sorts of scenes were considered

visually beautiful, hilarious, or endearing. Although one must keep in mind how attitudes have changed, films do seem to preserve not only images and events but also experiences and attitudes implicit in the films themselves. It is hard when laughing over a bit of slapstick 95 years old not to feel a connection with the experience of the original audiences who first enjoyed it. Yet in the moments when our responses do not match those the film seems designed to trigger—when the film presents something as amusing that we find distasteful or disturbing—we also learn something about audiences of the time through our difference from them.

In addition, early audiences were far from uniform. Immigrant audiences in New York City reacted very differently to scenes of urban life than did rural audiences in Iowa. African-American audiences undoubtedly had a different reaction to racial humor than did the white audiences for whom these films were primarily made. Class, gender, and ethnicity differentiated audiences during this period as they do today, and the actual conditions of screening reflected this as well.

Furthermore, film audiences changed radically during the cinema's first two decades. During the first decade of film exhibition (1896-1906), films appeared in a variety of venues rather than in special theaters. Most people saw them as one attraction among the variety of acts that made up a vaudeville program—between a comic monologue and a trained dog act, for example—and vaudeville attracted a primarily middle-class and lower-middle-class audience. Fairs, church socials, and traveling film exhibitors also provided opportunities to see films, often with prices more in the budget of people without much money for entertainment.

Around 1905-1907, nickel theaters (or nickelodeons) generated a new audience and a new role for film. Nickel theaters, which primarily showed motion pictures, attracted working-class viewers. Most workers could afford a nickel ticket, and the theater's casual atmosphere and relatively short programs (30-45 minutes) suited workers with little leisure time. Nickelodeons exploded onto the scene in major cities in these years; there were probably more nickelodeons than movie theaters today. Critics and supporters alike referred to the nickelodeon as the “poor man’s theater” or “the poor man’s club.” The latter term was especially appropriate since these small theaters provided the occasion not only for film viewing but for socializing. Early audiences displayed a community spirit fostered in part by attractions such as the “Illustrated Song,” in which audiences joined performers by following the lyrics projected on the screen.

Many nickel theaters also featured “lecturers” or “explainers.” They supplied a running verbal commentary on the films, often of an educational nature, but also of a dramatic or even humorous sort. These lecturers might even re-interpret the film for particular audiences, such as the Yiddish language explainers on the Lower East Side of New York City who drew moral and political lessons from the films or explained strange American customs. All of these practices demonstrate how exhibitors influenced the way audiences viewed films.

This new form of mass entertainment alarmed reformers who were suspicious of the pleasures that working-class patrons had discovered without any guidance from self-appointed middle-class guardians of culture. Around 1912, reformers made a concerted effort to “uplift” the nickelodeon. Theater owners made (or were forced to make) their theaters safer and more sanitary, local censorship boards insured that films did not offend middle-class tastes, and theater seats and decorations became more pretentious. New theaters seated several hundred or even a thousand patrons and

offered architectural details such as grand staircases, ornate lobbies, plush seats, and elaborate orchestra accompaniments. These “Movie Palaces” targeted a different audience than the nickelodeons, as middle-class patrons began to attend the movies in droves and disciplined armies of uniformed ushers enforced audience behavior and decorum. The theaters’ large size often kept prices low, however, at least during the day, so many working-class patrons may still have attended. Smaller, less elaborate neighborhood theaters in this era kept the flavor of the nickelodeon, if generally cleaner and safer.

By the eve of World War I, movie audiences had undergone several transformations: from the predominately middle-class audiences for the first vaudeville house projections to the influx of largely working-class audiences during the beginning of the nickelodeon period to, finally, the gradual winning over of a middle-class audience that was well in place by 1914 but did not necessarily displace the working-class audience. During the heyday of Hollywood (1917 to 1960), movies were described as the entertainment of all classes. This was probably true, and the American cinema did aim to please a broad audience, but some differences remained: between rural audiences and urban ones, between luxurious picture palaces and neighborhood theaters.

Film Online

America at Work/America at Leisure, 1894-1915

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlhome.html>

This exhibit features 150 motion pictures dealing with work, school, and leisure activities in the United States from 1894 to 1915. The films include footage of the United States Postal Service in 1903, cattle breeding, fire fighters, ice manufacturing, logging, physical education classes in schools, amusement parks, sporting events, and local festivals and parades. Each film is accompanied by a 25-50 word summary of its contents, notes on copyright, media, duration of the film.

The American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment, 1870-1920, Variety Stage Motion Pictures

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vshtml.html>

This collection documents the development of vaudeville and other popular entertainments from the 1870s to the 1920s, including 61 movies. The motion pictures, copyrighted in the Paper Print Collection, include animal acts, burlesque, dance, comic sketches, dramatic excerpts, dramatic sketches, physical culture, and tableaux. These provide a “rare animated record” of vaudeville, although they were not filmed during live performances and were adapted to silent film.

Coca-Cola Television Advertisements

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmphtml/colahome.html>

This site contains highlights of Coca-Cola television advertisements, including 50 commercials, broadcast outtakes, and “experimental footage.” There are five examples

of stop-motion advertisements from the mid-1950s, 18 experiments with color and lighting for television ads from 1964, and well-known commercials, such as the 1971 “Hilltop” commercial featuring the song “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.”

Inside an American Factory: Films of the Westinghouse Works, 1904

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/papr/west/westhome.html>

“Actuality” films (motion pictures produced on flip cards) were also known as mutoscopes. Created by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in 1904, these 21 films were intended to showcase the company’s operations and feature the Westinghouse Air Brake Company, the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, and the Westinghouse Machine Company. They were shown daily in the Westinghouse Auditorium at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis.

Internet Moving Image Archive

Prelinger Archives

<http://www.archive.org/movies/>

These films were selected from the Prelinger Archives, a privately held collection of twentieth-century American ephemeral films. The site contains more than 800 high-quality digital video files documenting various aspects of twentieth-century North American culture, society, leisure, history, industry, technology, and landscape. It includes films produced between 1927 and 1987 by and for U.S. corporations, nonprofit organizations, trade associations, community and interest groups, and educational institutions. Some of the films depict ordinary people in normal daily activities, such as working, dishwashing, driving, and learning proper behavior. Viewing these movies requires a DSL or faster connection and, even with a fast connection, many of the movies take several minutes to load. In addition, specific software [available for free through the site] necessary to view the films is available only for PCs.

Inventing Entertainment: The Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edhome.html>

Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931)—prolific inventor, manufacturer, and businessman—patented 1,093 inventions, including the phonograph, the kinetograph (a motion picture camera), and the kinoscope (a motion picture viewer). This site features 341 motion pictures and related materials documenting Thomas Edison’s corporate impact on the history of American entertainment. A special page focuses on Edison’s contribution to motion picture technology.

Origins of American Animation, 1900-1921

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/oahtml/oahome.html>

This site traces the development of early American animation through 21 animated films made between 1900 and 1921. The films include several media—clay, puppet, cut-out animation, and pen drawings—and indicate the “connection between newspaper comic strips and early animated films.”

Theodore Roosevelt: His Life and Times on Film

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/trfhtml/trfhome.html>

Although not the first president to be filmed for motion pictures, Theodore Roosevelt was the first to have his life chronicled through extensive use of the then new medium. This site offers 104 films depicting events in Roosevelt's life, from the Spanish-American War in 1898 to his death in 1919. The films include scenes of Roosevelt with world figures, politicians, monarchs, friends, and family members and are accompanied by brief captions.

Uncle Tom at the Movies

Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture

Electronic Text Center and the Institute for Advanced Technologies in the Humanities at the University of Virginia and the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/onstage/films/fihp.html>

An in-depth site on the cultural importance and social ramifications of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*. The section entitled *Uncle Tom's Cabin on Film* includes five of the more than ten film versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, made between 1903 and 1927, as well as its cultural legacy in film into the 1950s. The films are broken into small pieces for more manageable downloads and viewing times. In addition, a "Screening Room" allows side-by-side viewing of clips from various years.

Selected Bibliography

General Works on American Film

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). This is a definitive study of the way Hollywood films were made, the technology they used, and the style in which they told stories. This volume covers early cinema as well, although the focus is on the "Classical" era in Hollywood cinema.

Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema* (London: Blackwell, 1995).

Although this deals mainly with the studio system of the later period, Maltby provides a original understanding of the way the business and economics of film determined the way films appeared to their audiences. Very clear, readable, and concise.

Sklar, Robert. *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975).

Still the best single volume overview with a few in-depth treatments of films in relation to larger issues in American culture.

Works on American Leisure Time in the Era of Early Cinema

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

A wonderfully readable account of urban leisure time with a strong focus on the changing role commercial leisure played in working women's lives as it moved from a

male-dominated realm to one that included women and their families. Movies played a big role in this transformation as the author shows.

Rosenzweig, Roy. *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

This classic account gives a sense of the audiences that came to the nickelodeon and the other ways they used their leisure time, both before and during the cinema, with an excellent chapter on the transformation of the film theater during the era covered.

The Invention of the Movies

Mannoni, Laurent. *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

A monumental work of research focusing mainly on France and Europe that reveals the ancestry of the film image in a variety of visual devices, especially the “Magic Lantern.” Filled with facts and details from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century.

Rossell, Deac. *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

A somewhat more compact and focused account of the actual invention of the cinema at the turn of the last century, with excellent accounts of a variety of pioneers and early technologies, including the “invention” of film, the actual celluloid.

Histories of Early American Cinema

Abel, Richard. *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Abel has primarily been a historian of early French cinema (as in his monumental *Cine Goes to Town*). Here he focuses on the effect French films had on early American film history, revealing how French films from the Pathé company primarily fueled the nickelodeon revolution. Abel then shows how American producers tried to regain control of their own market by producing a self-consciously “American” cinema.

Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915, Vol. II: History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1991).

In the second volume of this series, Bowser manages to both give the facts and tell the story of cinema’s emergence during the nickelodeon era in a manner that is engaging and scholarly.

Brownlow, Kevin. *The Parade’s Gone By* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

An account by a film enthusiast of film from the silent era, based largely on interviews the author conducted with filmmakers and stars of the era. This concentrates mainly on the late teens and twenties, and tends towards the anecdotal, but still provides a strong flavor of the unique process of silent filmmaking

Brownlow, Kevin. *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

Brownlow’s third installment of his works on American silent film concentrates on the social problem films of the era, films that dealt with controversial issues ranging from white slavery to abortion to illicit drugs and political corruption.

Brownlow, Kevin. *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

Brownlow follows up *The Parade's Gone By* with an analysis of the role silent film had in recording an era of exploration and expansion, including the capturing of modern warfare.

Burch, Noël. *Life to those Shadows* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

A series of unique essays by a major film theorist who sees early cinema as a laboratory for the analysis of the psychological and ideological power that cinema exerts. Burch was one of the first to argue for the unique quality of early cinema, in contrast with Classical cinema, and he presents an ideological analysis of the relation between the two.

Charney, Leo and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

An anthology of essays by historians and film historians trying to locate cinema in relation to the new phenomenon of "modern life," such as mass marketing, urban life, and in relation to other modern spectacles, such as the wax museum. An important attempt to define the cultural context of cinema's emergence.

Decordova, Richard. *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

A carefully developed discussion of the way movie stars emerged at the beginning and middle of the teens, showing the role publicity and fans played in creating a new phenomenon.

Elsaesser, Thomas and Adam Barker, eds. *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

The anthology of essays that defined Early Cinema as a new area in film studies. The focus is international and largely theoretical, dealing both with modes of narration and new forms of spectatorship, although with less emphasis on the historical context.

Fuller, Kathryn H. *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

Examines the development of film display and audiences from the silent era to the 1930s, from rural and small-town itinerant shows to urban palaces. Also explores the rise of movie fan magazines and culture, including negotiations over the gender and nature of fan culture.

Gunning, Tom. *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). D.W. Griffith possesses a legendary reputation as the "father of film language." Here his first years of filmmaking are scrutinized in terms of the development of film style and narration, as well as their relation to new economics of film production and distribution.

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

A major theoretical attempt to rethink the spectator of silent film in America. Using German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," Hansen argues that the movies provided new contexts in which working-class audiences could digest their experiences of modern life. The book deals first with the nickelodeon era, provides a detailed reading of Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance*, and finally discusses the later film stars with an analysis of the Rudolph Valentino and his appeal, especially for female spectators.

May, Lary. *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Although some film historians fault this book's slightly cavalier attitude toward the films it discusses, May does provide a historical argument about the role film played in establishing a new culture of leisure in America.

Musser, Charles. *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907, Vol. I: History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990).

The first volume of the Scribner series, this is a tour de force of historical research, crammed with facts and illustrations. Original research at its best, it provides the most reliable account of the beginnings of cinema in the U.S.

Musser, Charles. *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Musser again breaks new ground in research, supplying the first complete account of America's first famous filmmaker, Edwin S. Porter, who made *The Great Train Robbery*. Besides analyzing the style of Porter's films, Musser shows how Porter interacted with the first major American film production company, the Edison Company.

Musser, Charles and Carol Nelson. *High Class Moving Pictures: Lyman Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

In the third volume of his trilogy of pioneer works on early American cinema, Musser focuses on the exhibition of film, turning the spotlight on Lyman Howe who toured the U.S. in the early decades of the twentieth century showing films in a unique manner, asserting careful control over music, sound effects, projection lecturing, and programming.

Rabinovitz, Lauren. *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

Rabinovitz deals with women as an audience for not only the first movie shows, but also for other popular amusements at the turn of the century. Her focus on Chicago allows her to delve into the Columbian Exposition of 1893, as well as amusement parks and department stores as early public realms of pleasure for the "new woman" and the way these forms anticipated the cinema.

Stamp, Shelly. *Movie Struck Girls: Woman and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Stamp provides a fresh look at the way women embraced the movies in the era just after the nickelodeon. She deals both with specific films that portrayed feminist issues (such

as White Slavery films or films on women's suffrage) and the way women "went to the movies" how they dressed to go out, behaved when they were there, and afterwards discussed what they saw.

Uricchio, William and Roberta E. Pearson. *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Taking films that adapted such high culture texts as the works of Shakespeare and Dante, or films that portrayed great men in history such as Napoleon, the authors try to reconstruct the cultural backgrounds of the nickelodeon audiences and the cultural "uplift" programs to which such early Vitagraph films appealed.

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Taking Lexington, Kentucky, as his case study, Waller details the way this small southern city "took in" the movies, considering their relation to vaudeville and other forms of entertainment, the role cinema played in a racially segregated city, and the transformation of both theaters and audiences over three and a half decades. One of the most detailed studies of film-going yet produced.

Memoirs

Balshofer, Fred J. and Arthur C. Miller. *One Reel a Week* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

Memoirs by a film producer and a cameraman of the early era. This was written decades after the fact and may romanticize an incident or two, but it captures the often chaotic process of making films before there was a Hollywood.

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Written in the 1930s this memoir still provides rich details of the process of making films in the early era. Besides dealing with his collaboration with Griffith, this book describes Bitzer's early work with the Biograph Company before Griffith arrived, including his filming of the Spanish American War.