

THE NEW FILM HISTORY

Sources, Methods, Approaches

EDITED BY
JAMES CHAPMAN,
MARK GLANCY AND
SUE HARPER



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and

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The New Film History

*This book is dedicated to all our students –
past, present and future*

Notes on Contributors

Tim Bergfelder is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Southampton. His publications include *International Adventures: Popular German Cinema in the 1960s* (2004) and the edited collections *The German Cinema Book* (2002) and *The Titanic in Myth and Memory* (2004).

James Chapman is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Leicester. His books include *Licence To Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films* (1999), *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (2003) and *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (2005).

Mark Connelly is Reader in Modern British History at the University of Kent. He is the author of *The Charge of the Light Brigade: A British Film Guide* (2003), *Reaching for the Stars: A New History of Bomber Command in World War Two* (2001) and *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (2004).

Laurie Ede is Principal Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Portsmouth. He has written extensively on film design and is currently completing a book for I. B. Tauris entitled *British Film Design: A History*.

Mark Glancy is Senior Lecturer in History at Queen Mary, University of London, where he teaches courses in American and British film history. His publications include *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film, 1939–45* (1999) and *The 39 Steps: A British Film Guide* (2003). He is currently completing a book entitled *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain, from the 1920s to the Present*.

Sue Harper is Professor of Film History at the University of Portsmouth. She is the author of *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (1994), *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* (2000) and, with Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (2003). She is the leader of an AHRC research project on 1970s British cinema.

Peter Krämer is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia. He has published essays on American film and media history, and on the relationship between Hollywood and Europe, in *Screen*,

The Velvet Light Trap, *Theatre History Studies*, the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, *History Today*, *Film Studies*, *Scope* and numerous edited collections. He is the co-editor of *Screen Acting* (1999) and *The Silent Cinema Reader* (2004). He also co-wrote a book for children entitled *American Film: An A-Z Guide* (2003).

Jonathan Munby is Senior Lecturer in American Studies, Institute for Cultural Research, Lancaster University. He is author of *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster Film from 'Little Caesar' to 'Touch of Evil'* (1999) and has published widely on ethnicity, race and exile in American cinema. He is currently completing a new book on African-American criminal self-representation in American popular culture.

Jeffrey Richards is Professor of Cultural History at Lancaster University. He is the author of many books on cinema and popular culture, including *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939* (1984), *Films and British National Identity* (1997) and *A Night To Remember: The Definitive Titanic Film* (2003).

Martin Shingler is Senior Lecturer in Radio and Film Studies at the University of Sunderland. He has published papers in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences* (ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, 2001), *Screen Acting* (ed. Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer, 1999), *The Journal of American Studies* (1996) and *Screen* (1995). His most recent publication is a textbook co-authored with John Mercer, *Melodrama: Genre, Style & Sensibility* (2004).

Justin Smith is Principal Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Portsmouth. He has written articles on British cinema in journals such as the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and *Fashion Theory*, and is currently completing a book based on his PhD entitled *Cult Films and Film Cults in British Cinema, 1968–86*.

Andrew Spicer is Reader in Cultural History in the School of Art, Media and Design, University of the West of England. He has published widely on British cinema, including *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (2001) and *Sydney Box* (2006). He is also the author of *Film Noir* (2002), and he is currently completing a collection of essays on European Film Noir.

Ingrid Stigsdotter is a Film Studies PhD candidate at the University of Southampton, where she also teaches on the Film Studies degree programme. Her doctoral research examines the reception of contemporary European cinema in Britain, with particular focus on recent French and

Swedish films, and the impact of cultural and linguistic difference on film interpretation.

Melvyn Stokes is Senior Lecturer in History at University College London. He has edited *The State of US History* (2002) and, with Richard Maltby, he has co-edited a series of books on Hollywood's audiences: *American Movie Audiences* (1999), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences* (1999), *Hollywood Spectatorship* (2001) and *Hollywood Abroad* (2004). He has recently finished a book on D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*.

Sarah Street is Professor of Screen Studies at the University of Bristol. Her publications include *British National Cinema* (1997), *British Cinema in Documents* (2000) and *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA* (2002).

Richard Taylor is Research Professor in Politics at the University of Wales, Swansea. The most recent of his numerous books and articles on Russian and Soviet cinema are *The Battleship Potemkin* (2000) and *October* (2002).

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Introduction

James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper

The New Film History is a collection of essays bringing together some of the latest research in American, British and European film history. It is not intended as a comprehensive history of film: there are already enough surveys providing a historical overview of the development of the medium from its origins to the present.¹ Our collection is a close up rather than a long shot: it presents the fruits of current research in a series of self-contained case studies that are nevertheless linked by common themes and methods. The intellectual context of this volume, as indicated in its title, is the 'New Film History': each contributor is engaged in original research that advances our knowledge of the field. The chapters herein contain the fruits of new and often ground-breaking research that represents the intellectual issues currently at stake in the study of film history. The book's subtitle – sources, methods, approaches – indicates that it is based on the principle of empirical investigation and inquiry: this is a work of historical scholarship that emphasizes the critical analysis of primary sources relating to the production and reception of feature films. Film history is both like and unlike other types of history. It is similar in so far as it is concerned with historical structures and processes: the film historian focuses on the cultural, aesthetic, technological and institutional contexts of the medium. The sort of questions that the film historian asks – what? when? where? how? and why? – are the same as our colleagues in other branches of the historical profession. Yet film history is also different in so far as the main primary sources, the films themselves, are unique: the film historian requires skills of formal and visual analysis that are specific to the discipline. The aim of *The New Film History* is to demonstrate, through case studies, how the principles of historical investigation can be applied in practice in order to illuminate the structures and processes that have determined the nature of the

medium of film and its social institutions. It is our hope that *The New Film History* will be of use for students and teachers of film history who will appreciate work that is methodologically sophisticated yet intellectually accessible.

From 'old' to 'new' film history

In order to establish what is 'new' about the New Film History, we first need to outline the characteristics of the 'old' film history. All historians work within particular intellectual and cultural contexts that influence the nature of their work, the specific questions they ask and the methods they apply. The nature and extent of historical knowledge is constantly in flux: it expands and changes continuously as new sources come to light, 'lost' films are rediscovered and new intellectual developments take shape. Perhaps the most significant development in film history in recent years has been its increasing professionalization. Once the preserve of 'amateur' historians such as William K. Everson in America and Leslie Halliwell in Britain (collectors and enthusiasts with a passion for film), film history is now an accepted academic discipline with its own professional organization (IAMHIST: the International Association for Media and History) and several scholarly peer-reviewed journals.² The majority of scholarly film histories have been published during the last 25 years: indeed, until the early 1980s there were only a handful of major works that mapped the contours of the discipline.

There are two paradigms within the old or traditional film history: one focused on the history of film as an art form, the other on the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society. The former paradigm is concerned primarily with aesthetics and form. This approach – exemplified by pioneering film histories such as Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926) and Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930) and still evident in recent additions such as David Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* (1990) – shares many affinities with the history of art.³ It tends to privilege those films accepted as the 'masterpieces' of the medium – for example, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) – which have come to form the film studies canon and which feature regularly in 'best film' polls.

The aesthetic tradition represents a comparatively narrow approach to film history. It is by definition interested in a small core of films which, owing to their 'masterpiece' status, are not representative of the vast majority of film production. They tend to be the work of *auteurs* rather than genre films, or they are situated within the paradigm of

'art cinema' rather than mainstream or commercial cinema. Furthermore, the aesthetic approach tends to focus solely on the text – film history as the history of films – at the expense of the institutional and cultural contexts of production. Yet, as the worst excesses of the *auteur* theory fade, it is now accepted that the content and style of films is determined as much by contextual factors – the mode of production, the economic and cultural strategies of the studios, the intervention of censors – as by the input of the individual film-maker. Or, to put it another way, *Citizen Kane* was as much a product of what André Bazin called 'the genius of the system' as it was of the genius of Orson Welles. Aesthetic film history also tends to be teleological: it takes a particular style (the classical narrative film) as the normative example and assumes that this was the inevitable form into which the medium would evolve, interpreting the history of film as the development towards the perfected classical model. This trend was most evident in the old film history, which saw the emergence of the classical narrative arising from the 'discoveries' of pioneers such as Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith.

The second paradigm, the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society, owes much to the work of the German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer who, in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), suggested that the cinema of Weimar Germany provided a unique insight into the collective mindset of the German nation after the First World War. Films reflect society more accurately than other cultural practices, Kracauer averred, because they were produced collectively rather than individually and were made to satisfy the desires of a mass audience. 'What films reflect', he claimed, 'are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness.'⁴ Kracauer's argument that the distorted imagery and disturbing themes of expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and *Dr Mabuse* (1922) reflected the social dislocation of Weimar Germany has been influential on later historians who have similarly interpreted films in relation to the *Zeitgeist*. However, his suggestion that they also revealed the unconscious inclination of the German people towards dictatorship and thus anticipated the emergence of Nazism has since been criticized for 'mixing weak history with flimsy psychology' and for reading 'too much out of the films through hindsight'.⁵ Furthermore, Kracauer explicitly rejected box-office data as a quantitative index of popularity and cultural significance.

The reflectionist model, shorn of the social psychology and mysticism that characterized Kracauer, has been enormously influential on the subsequent development of film history, exemplified by important

books during the 1970s such as Raymond Durnat's *A Mirror for England* (1970), Jeffrey Richards' *Visions of Yesterday* (1973) and Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (1975).⁶ Again, however, this approach has been criticized for offering too simplistic an understanding of the relationship between film and its social context. Graeme Turner, for example, asserts: 'Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and "re-presents" its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium.'⁷ The more common metaphor now, rather than reflection, is mediation: historians recognize that the relationship between film and society is complex and that films are not straightforward mirrors of social reality. They do, nevertheless, 'reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced them and attracted audiences to them ... More often than not, they reflect back what audiences want to see rather than what is really there.'⁸

Turner's reference to 'signifying practices' points to an intellectual division that emerged in the discipline during the 1970s. This has conventionally, if rather simplistically, been categorized as the difference between 'film studies' on the one hand and 'film history' on the other. While the two disciplines shared common ground in their subject matter, they had very different intellectual and methodological assumptions. Film Studies grew principally out of English literature (at university level, film was often taught in English departments) and its agenda was dominated by similar issues (authorship, genre, narrative) and analytical methods (especially linguistic theories of semiotics and structuralism). Film Studies took a theoretical 'turn' in the 1970s when its proponents turned to psychoanalytical models (particularly those derived from Freud and Lacan) for explaining the 'meaning' of films. In contrast, film history, which grew principally out of the disciplines of social and political history, developed along two lines. The first analysed the use and abuse of history in feature films, assessing the accuracy and errors of historical films. The second was concerned with contextual analysis: exploring the conditions under which films were made and how far they succeeded in reflecting the intentions of those who made them. Yet both historical approaches prized empirical evidence and factual accounts over interpretative models.

The institutionalization of the methodological and intellectual differences between the more theoretical interpretative school and the historical school was exemplified by the content of the two leading scholarly film journals. Since the early 1970s the pre-eminent film

studies journal has been *Screen*, which has been at the vanguard of theoretical developments in the discipline (psychoanalysis in the 1970s, gender studies in the 1980s, reception theory in the 1990s), whereas the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* has, since its foundation in 1981, been the leading forum for historians seeking to place films in their social, political, industrial, economic and cultural contexts.

The last two decades have seen the gradual narrowing of the division between these two schools. Film Studies has retreated from the high theory of the 1970s: few scholars today would not accept the importance of historical context to a full understanding of the medium. Film historians, for their part, have taken on board some of the more useful theoretical developments. In the 1980s, for example, the adoption of Gramsci's theory of hegemony influenced the work of British historians analysing 'the ideological role of the British cinema in fostering harmony and social integration' during the 1930s and 1940s.⁹ In Britain, the end of the cold war between the rival blocs was marked by the conference 'Cinema, Identity, History: An International Conference on British Cinema', held at the University of East Anglia in 1998, which was characterized by fruitful and constructive exchanges.¹⁰ It was this increasing congruence between the two schools that had already provided the intellectual context for the emergence of the New Film History.

Rather like new wave cinemas, the New Film History emerged at a particular moment that can be identified quite precisely. The first recorded use of the term that we have been able to locate is a review article by Thomas Elsaesser in 1985, in which he noted the tendency of recent scholarly works to move beyond film history as just the history of films and to consider how film style and aesthetics were influenced, even determined, by economic, industrial and technological factors. 'Two types of pressure have produced the New Film History', Elsaesser asserted: 'a polemical dissatisfaction with the surveys and overviews, the tales of pioneers and adventurers that for too long passed as film histories; and sober arguments among professionals now that, thanks to preservation and restoration projects by the world's archives, much more material has become available.'¹¹ The same year saw the publication of two of the most important works of film history. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, by the American scholars David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, was an ambitious, wide-ranging attempt to write a totalizing history of a mode of film practice in its historical context, setting out to explore the relationship between the style of Hollywood films between the late 1910s and c.1960 and the industrial

and technological determinants of the studio system which produced them.¹² It remains a highly influential work, though the relative dearth of studio records elsewhere has meant that there is no comparable equivalent for other national cinemas. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* was different again: it remains to this day the only thoroughgoing historiographical and methodological study of the discipline.¹³ Allen and Gomery identify four approaches to film history – aesthetic, technological, economic and social – though most of their case studies arise from the authors' own research in the history of early American cinema. It remains a valuable work, although, as the discipline has moved on, it inevitably has been overtaken by new intellectual developments, not least the increasing interest in representation and reception. To this extent *The New Film History* represents the expanding research agenda of film history since 1985.

Defining the New Film History

What, then, are the characteristics of the New Film History as opposed to the old? It is our contention that there are three features that distinguish recent and current research.

One is a greater level of methodological sophistication. The New Film History has moved beyond reflectionism and is posited on a more complex relationship between films and social context. There is a greater attention to the cultural dynamics of film production and an awareness of the extent to which the style and content of films are determined by the context of production. The buzzwords here are process and agency: films are shaped and determined by a combination of historical processes (including, but not limited to, economic constraints, industrial practices, studio production strategies and relationships with external bodies such as official agencies, funding councils and censors) and individual agency (representing the creative and cultural competences of their art directors, composers, costume designers, directors, editors, producers, stars, writers, etc.). Several of the contributions to this volume examine production contexts of individual films or groups of films: the section on 'Authorship', in particular, extends the field to consider the inputs of creative personnel other than the director, including the writer, the star and the art director. The New Film History has also extended the historical analysis of films from the moment of their production to the moment(s) of their reception. In contrast with theoretical models of spectatorship, which assumed that cinema audiences responded monolithically to films, the practice of reception studies seeks out evidence of

actual audience responses and locates these within the context of the audience's time, place and identity. The contributions to the section on 'Reception' demonstrate that there is much more to this complex process than simply quoting a few reviews: sources include publicity materials, audience surveys and online fan communities – the latter, especially, representing research at the cutting edge of film history today. The sections on 'History' and 'Genre', moreover, also demonstrate the methodological sophistication of current research. Here the authors interpret films not as simple mirrors of social reality, but rather in terms of their representation of, for example, history, national identity, gender and ethnicity. One way of defining the New Film History in relation to the old is that it thinks in terms of representation: what the historical film shows, for example, is not 'real' history, but a constructed version of history that accords with the ideological values of its makers and the cultural tastes of its audiences. To this extent the New Film History places the film text at the nexus of a complex and dynamic set of relationships between producers and consumers.

The second feature is the central importance of primary sources. The New Film History is source-based: it arises from the critical examination of primary sources, both filmic and non-filmic. It would be disingenuous to suggest that it was not until recent times that film history experienced its archival 'turn'. Indeed, it was a feature of several of the 'old' film histories that they were based on archival research, especially the pioneering studies of film as an instrument of propaganda and persuasion such as Tony Aldgate's *Cinema and History* (1979), Richard Taylor's *Film Propaganda* (1979) and David Welch's *Propaganda and the German Cinema* (1983).¹⁴ Histories of the American film industry, in particular, have been informed by the studio archives deposited with US universities.¹⁵ A characteristic of the New Film History, however, has been the extent to which it has expanded the range of primary sources available for the researcher. It is revisionist in nature: the new film historian is comparable to an archaeologist who unearths new sources and materials, especially those which have been previously disregarded or overlooked. An important revisionist landmark in this regard was Jeffrey Richards' *The Age of the Dream Palace* (1984), a social history of films and cinema-going in 1930s Britain that drew extensively upon a wide range of contemporary sources, including social surveys (such as Mass-Observation), censors' reports, middle-brow journals and popular fan magazines.¹⁶ Among the many sources employed in *The New Film History* are memoirs, personal papers, production files, scripts, censors' reports, publicity materials, reviews, fan magazines and Internet discussion groups. What the