

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

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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* 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 corpses; 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<sup>1</sup>. 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<sup>ii</sup>. 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.

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 casualisation 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<sup>iii</sup>. 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<sup>iv</sup>. There are too many levels of mediation, from the fashions in genres to the world view 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 have 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 cut and paste pieces of 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 [www.euscreen.eu](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 has pointed out, this is more than a question of shot length<sup>v</sup>. 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* (Jim Sharman, 1975); the singalongs with *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008); the applause and tears at *Les Misérables* (Tom Hooper, 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<sup>vi</sup>. 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<sup>vii</sup>. 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.

## **Why this history?**

Film and television history is, in part, an activity of intelligent reevaluation. It allows discrimination to take place, prioritising what should be rescued from the back of the digital vault and returned to attention. This reevaluation 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 reevaluation 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 the downgrading of historical accounts, since they tend to show that actions are impelled by forces that, at the time, remain obscure to those who have to act. Other cultures, including Europe and China, tend to reach back into their past to provide justifications for present actions. History often lies at the core of the self-account that attempts to guide and justify actions. These will often be heavily influenced by myths of origin. This again will provide a public justification: a more personal justification also exists in the psychic function of history.

We need history (rather than story) as a means of reconciliation with the ceaseless processes of change that take place both around us and within ourselves. With change comes loss, inevitably. Objects and neighbourhoods are destroyed, friends disappear, important causes lose their urgency. And with any loss comes a backward pull of regret. Yet their images and sounds remain: the recorded sounds and images of those pasts now lost can still be accessed. The opening of the archives makes this even more possible. These sounds and

images have a particular power because they capture the accidental and the incidental as well as what we saw at the time as important. The sense of loss that they provoke can sometimes take us unawares. The role of history here is an important one. At its most pathological, the sense of loss can lead individuals (and maybe groups or even societies) into a reluctance to act that can, at its worst, be debilitating. Well-researched history can provide a counterbalance to this disabling level of loss. History can demonstrate that change is a ceaseless process, not only a destructive one. Change produces the situations whose loss we regret: this is why we trace complex causalities. History also brings forward the elements of any situation that did not figure in the picture, and the elements whose disappearance we celebrate rather than mourn.

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<sup>i</sup> See for instance:

Weissmann, Elke. "Drama counts: uncovering Channel 4's history with quantitative research methods." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7.2 (2009): 189-207.

Johnson, Catherine *Branding Television* Routledge 2012

The Channel 4 and British Film culture project at Portsmouth University

[http://www.port.ac.uk/research/cccr/projects/c4\\_bfc/](http://www.port.ac.uk/research/cccr/projects/c4_bfc/) and <http://www.c4film.co.uk/>

And current PhD projects on subjects ranging from the Eleventh Hour series to the development of the independent production sector.

<sup>ii</sup> See Brown, Maggie *A Licence to be Different: the Story of Channel 4*, BFI 2007 pp.51-2

<sup>iii</sup> See Williams, Raymond *The Long Revolution*, Chatto & Windus 1961; and Matthews, Sean. "Change and theory in Raymond Williams's Structure of Feeling." *Pretexts: literary and cultural studies* 10.2 (2001): 179-194.

<sup>iv</sup> See for instance Geraghty, Lincoln *American Science Fiction Film* Berg 2009 or

<sup>v</sup> Bordwell, David *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* University of California Press 2006

<sup>vi</sup> Kuhn, Annette *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* IB Tauris 2002; Griffiths, Trevor *The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896-1950* Edinburgh University Press 2012 etc

<sup>vii</sup> <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/>