How Can Cinema History Matter More?

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Out of the blue, a little over ten years ago, Melvyn Stokes telephoned me. He was beginning his annual task of organising the Commonwealth Fund conference on American history at University College, London, and on this occasion he wanted the conference to examine some aspect of American film history. Did I want to be involved in the planning, and could I think of a suitable subject that might have some impact on the field? A couple of days later, I called back. “I think it’s about time,” I said, “that we looked at the history of audiences.” Five books, three conferences, a couple of grants and one scholarly organisation later, that relatively unconsidered response has certainly kept me occupied.[2] The scale and scope of the research undertaken in this area (in which my own work is but a modest part) indicate the extent to which many film scholars have come to recognise that in order adequately to address the social and cultural history of cinema, we must find ways to write the histories of its audiences. This redirection of research interest forms part of what some scholars have called the “historical turn” in cinema studies. In part, this change of emphasis reflects a growing recognition that psychoanalytically-derived theoretical models of “the spectator” have, in the end, little more to tell us about cinema’s audiences and their consumption of movies than do quasi-scientific laboratory-based studies of media “effects.” More broadly, this reorientation challenges what one 1970s theorist has called “the weaknesses and insularity” of contemporary film studies by developing accounts of cinema that place audiences, rather than films, at their centre (MacCabe, p. vii). In what follows I want to consider some of the evidential and methodological issues involved in writing historical studies of cinema that are not centrally about films, and to explore the opportunities provided by studies of the social history of reception for cinema studies to converse with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

Three years ago, Cinema Journal/published a forum on the state of film history, edited by Sumiko Higashi (Higashi, pp. 94-143). Despite their common argument that there should be “no boundary between history and theory,” most of the contributions to this “Baedeker Guide to the Historical Turn” left me with the impression that the writing of film history has been strangely by-passed by the central preoccupations of contemporary historiography and its struggles with the fervent uncertainties of postmodern thought (Crafton, p. 140). Beyond the confines of film studies, structuralist and poststructuralist critiques have deconstructed the conventionalized authorial voice of the history text, questioning its implicit rhetorical claim to authoritative knowledge of the past. Engagement with such issues of objectivity and historical truth occupies little space in the Cinema Journal guide, however, perhaps because its contributors regard their own practices as taking place in an intellectual realm that is already sufficiently theoretically sophisticated, and perhaps because they are more concerned to encourage archival research and other aspects of elementary good practice. [3] Higashi, for example, insists on a distinction between what she approvingly calls “history proper,” which assumes human agency and privileges empirical data, and the more dubious work of those “film historians who began academic life as theoreticians” and remain inappropriately deductive in their methodology, relying “cinema, apparatuses, narration, discourses and texts” (Higashi, p. 95). Her articulation of the “history-theory dichotomy” in terms of agency and intentionality would sit perfectly comfortably with an understanding of the nature of history articulated by such an unreconstructed historical “reconstructionist” as Arthur Marwick.[4] Given the influence of poststructuralist thought on the development of film studies, however, cinema historians’ relative lack of engagement with contemporary applications of poststructuralist theory beyond their own discipline seems remarkable, and worthy of some explanation.[5] Part of that explanation, I suggest, lies in the nature and extent of the actual empirical work that film historians have done. Another part lies in the congeries of evasive critical practices that have constituted a significant part of film studies’ practical postmodernism, in simultaneously providing a substitute for the “dirty and tedious archival work” of digging evidence out of sources which is the historian’s trade, and offering a multiplicity of ways to arrive at “the familiar conclusion that the ‘text’ under analysis is full of contradictory tensions, requires active readers and produces a variety of pleasures” (Stone, p. 194; Willemen, p. 227).

As Jeffrey Klencotic has suggested, since the 1970s academic film historians have seen their most urgent task as “rolling up their sleeves” in the face of the archive, in order to correct the historical record “by re-examining the primary historical archive rather than relying on the secondary resources provided by prior histories” (Allen and Gomery, pp. 46, 51; Klencotic, pp. 46, 51). It has taken time to build a sufficient body of consensual historical knowledge around which to stage a debate about historical method. There are still enormous gaps in our knowledge. Cinema history is still subject to the kinds of revelatory discovery – exemplified by Richard Abel’s The Red Rooster Scare – that seldom occur in the historiography of more established historical terrain, simply because the body of available primary source material pertaining to cinema has been far less thoroughly examined (Abel, passim). There remains, to paraphrase Thomas Kuhn, a great deal of ordinary cinema history yet to be written.[6] By now, however, there is an orthodox practice of film history by which an article on authorship in Hollywood can emerge from a trawl of the trade papers and an archive box containing a couple of contracts and a cache of letters. There are eminently respectable places to publish such exercises, which certainly enhance the details of our understanding of how the institutions of representation operated. But the larger picture – the understanding of cinema’s social agency in the twentieth century once promised by 1970s theories of ideology – continues to evade us.

Bearing this larger picture in mind, we might then ask what we take to constitute ordinary cinema history. In an editorial in the current issue of film History, Richard Koszarski...
As a leading example, the critical construction of genre as a defining taxonomic principle of American cinema and the accompanying assertion that film genres have at least semi-autonomous histories have provided one means by which a history of the relations between films has substituted for a history of cinema as a social and cultural institution. As Rick Altman has argued, “the theoretical clarity of film genre criticism is quite obviously challenged at every turn by the historical dimensions of film production and reception,” but genre critics have succeeded in avoiding a serious engagement with historical issues by adopting “the transhistorical model offered by myth,” by which predetermined social and political meanings can be ascribed to genres, compartmentalizing their cultural function as a property to be read from the movie-as-text (Altman, pp. 16, 20). Such methodologies of textual interpretation have also dominated most attempts to construct cultural histories of the movies, including most historians’ use of film as symptomatic evidence. Social and political historians have, in the main, borrowed from film historians and incorporated into their histories the genre-based, mythological, assumptions about the relationship of movies to the culture of which they are a part. Thus accounts of I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang or Scarface appear as diverting boxed features on “social realism in the movies,” alleviating the statistical tedium of histories of the early Depression. Even as they are absorbed into a larger version of social history, the movies remain under the obligation to entertain.

Yet the history of the American cinema is not the history of its products any more than the history of railroads is the history of locomotives. The development of locomotive design forms part of the history of railroads, but so, far more substantially, do government land policies and patterns of agricultural settlement. To write a history of texts and call it a history of cinema involves omitting the social process and cultural function of cinema, and denies the contextual significance of the material conditions under which movies were produced and consumed. The issue that seems to prevent film historians from recognizing and embracing the implications of this observation in their academic practice is precisely the fact that any consideration of the economics of distribution and exhibition is likely to downplay the centrality of the movies themselves to the business history—and therefore the social history—of cinema. To research the advertising for nickelodeons in Boston in 1913, or create an account of the role of air conditioning in reconfiguring the exhibition year in the late 1930s, or investigate the importance of confectionary sales to the financial viability of megaplexes, is to bring uninvited guests into the coeteris paribus of an academic centre around the close examination of individual filmic texts.

In the second edition of Global Hollywood, published in 2004, Toby Miller and his co-authors suggest that screen studies has so far failed “to engage political and social history and social theory on the human subject, the nation, cultural policy, the law and the economy” (Miller et al., p. 31). “What would it take,” they ask, “for screen studies to matter more?” Part of their answer is to avoid the “reproduction of ‘screen studies’ in favour of work that studies the screen, regardless of its intellectual provenance” (Miller et al., p. 45). One aspect of such a project may be to recognize the limited intellectual value in trying to maintain the coherence of a medium-specific academic discipline, and acknowledging, instead, that the study of block booking has little in common with the study of the aesthetics of lighting or with philosophical essays in “thinking through film” — and to recognize also that in order to make connections to other disciplines, the study of cinema must abandon its preoccupations with medium-specificity and with the centrality of the film text. More specifically, cinema’s historians might consider the possibility of writing histories of cinema that are not centrally about films.

As James Hay has argued, film histories written under the assumption of the centrality of the film text have tended to produce “self-contained, self-perpetuating” aesthetic accounts of “film as a distinct ‘language’ or set of formal conventions … without a clear sense of cinema’s relation to other social sites” (Hay, pp. 210-212). Histories of reception, on the other hand, must begin by acknowledging that for most audiences for most of the history of cinema, their primary relationship with “the cinema” has not been with individual movies-as-artefacts or as texts, but with the social experience of cinema-going (Bowles and Huggett, pp. 64-77). An examination of the ways in which the cinema has provided a site and an occasion for particular forms of social behaviour, or of the ways in which individual movies have specified the nature of the site, the occasion, and the behaviour, is an inquiry into the production of meaning, but that meaning is social, not textual.

A consequence of the expectation that the film text must be the central object of film history surfaces in Richard Abel’s argument, in his essay in the Cinema Journal forum, that Robert Allen’s recent work on audiences in the American South “generally succeeds as social or cultural history more than as cinema history; that is, its chief interest lies in describing and analyzing the social conditions and cultural practices within which moving pictures could be as important for their relative absence as for their presence” (Abel, pp. 108-109). Abel remains reluctant to abandon the medium-specificity of film history in order to integrate it into what Charles Musser describes warily as “a broader and more amorphous cultural and social history.” Musser declares that “I have found it productive to imagine cinema as an element (typically a crucial element) of other histories,” but the problem that film historians face is that relatively few writers of “other histories” have shared Musser’s sense of film history’s productivity or importance (Musser, p. 105). Despite the extensive historical analysis of early cinema, a recently-published 976-page history of late Victorian and Edwardian England devotes only one paragraph to cinema, providing a telling instance of the extent to which social and cultural historians have not yet found it necessary to address the historical work on early cinema (Searle, passim). In his 2004 introductory survey, What is Cultural History?, Peter Burke makes no mention of any work on cinema (Burke, passim).

Film history’s apparent inability to gain a purchase on broader historical enquiry is, somewhat perversely, a consequence of its over-reaching ambition. In 1973, Jean Mitry proposed an ideal of film history as


simultaneously, a history of its industry, its technologies, its systems of expression (or, more precisely, its systems of signification), and aesthetic structures, all bound together by the forces of the economic, psychosocial and cultural order. (Mitry, p. 115)

This version of film history as simultaneously medium-specific and totallising remains common to much contemporary film historiography, although its intellectual origins in the Annales School of French history are less often acknowledged. French film historian Michèle Lagny follows Mitry in describing her version of a preferred film history as “a part of a larger ensemble, the socio-cultural history … conceived as an articulation among three types of analysis, dealing with cultural objects, with the framework of their creation, making and circulation, and finally with their consumption.” She sees the desirable condition of film history as being that of “an open field where different forces (economic, social, political, technical, cultural or aesthetic) come into being and confront each other,” but she also regards institutional histories of cinema that seek to insert cinema into “the whole of economic and social structure” as threatening to discard the “specific characteristics” of cinema. As a result, she insists that the “core” of film history “is the film text … Working from the cinema or on the cinema means starting from the film, and going back to it” (Lagny, pp. 27, 41). Moreover, she places explicit limits on the explanatory capacity of such a film history: films “are never a consequence of (economic, social, cultural or political determining factors, crossing each other in a non-systematic way), nor the cause of anything (a political action, a social reaction, or the production of other films). They can be, socially and historically, seen as symptoms” (Lagny, pp. 39, 41).
What these symptoms may explain, and how they may explain it, however, remain matters of uncertainty. If symptoms are, as Lagny suggests, merely "signs related to other signs … produced by other series of discourses," their explanatory power seems highly restricted (Lagny, p. 41). Like the "symptomatic interpretation" that David Bordwell criticised in Making Meaning, these historical signs appear to lack an analytical epidemiology with which we might examine the inferential associations and hypothesised relationships between "narrative motifs, social contexts, and intended audiences," in order to test hypotheses and make informed assertions about which correlations may be causal, and about how they may be causal.[7] Lagny herself cites Pierre Sorlin's examination of the decrease in film theatre attendance in North-western Europe at the end of the 1950s as an example of the difficulties of providing "a systematic account of the relation between [the] production and reception" of cinema:

Sorlin … ends up admitting that the behaviour of the European filmgoers has been modified by a broader social evolution, much more than by problems … related to film production, distribution or exhibition; the articulation between production and consumption of films can’t be resolved within cinema alone. More than finding a link between different layers of film history, the issue at stake becomes the understanding of the relations between a socio-economic (and socio-cultural) evolution taken as a whole, and the desire to see movies.[8]

I wish, therefore, to draw a terminological and methodological distinction between film history and cinema history: between an aesthetic history of textual relations between individuals or individual objects, and the social history of a cultural institution. Film history, the history of textual relations and stylistic influence, borrows its methods and rationale from the practices of art and literary history. It is predominantly a history of production and producers, concerned with issues of intention and agency underpinning the process of cultural production, usually at the level of the individual, and relatively little interested in anything, other than aesthetic influence, that happens after the point of production. Writing the history of the cinema is by contrast a project engaging with economic, industrial, institutional history on the one hand – in accounts of how the commercial institution of cinema operated – and the socio-cultural history of its audiences on the other. These two histories are far more closely bound together than either of them is to a film history of textual relations. The boundaries of my distinction are, no doubt, blurred, but if it is the case, as Charlie Keil has argued, that the form of classical Hollywood cinema can be sufficiently explained by the "proximate forces" of "industrial maturation and attempts at standardizing production practices," requiring little engagement with the history of cinema as a social or cultural institution, then there is very little reason for historians in other fields to be much concerned with the topic (Keil, p. 52). So long as cinema history remains solipsistically committed to medium-specificity, starting and ending with the film text, then the history of entertainment will remain no more than an entertaining diversion decorating the illustrative margins of other histories.

What would it take for cinema history to matter more? We can, perhaps imagine some counter-factual historical circumstances. What if the Payne Fund Studies researchers had been right? What if the basic claims of effects researchers since 1910 about the direct deleterious effects of movie consumption on youth had any substance? What if the anti-American jeremiads of bourgeois cultural nationalists, that Hollywood movies "literally poison the souls of our children, … who are to be turned into the docile slaves of the American multi-millionaires," accurately depicted the impact of American consumer products on other cultures? (Thorez, p. 51). Were any of these propositions, with which so much commentary on the media remains preoccupied, demonstrable, we would find it much easier to raise grant money to study the history of cinema reception[9] We would also find it easier to "participate in the broader social and cultural discourses of other disciplines and subject areas," and to persuade other historians of the significance of our research (Sklar, p. 137).

For cinema history to matter more, it must engage with the social history of which it is a part, less through practices of textual interpretation than by attempting to write cinema history from below; that is, to write histories that are concerned not with the "great men" and women of Hollywood but with their audiences and with the roles that these performances of celebrity played in the ordinary undistinguished imaginations of those audiences. Such histories would form part of an historical turn that is both broader and of longer durée, and which seeks to restore agency to the "undistinguished" classes by recognizing "the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts to the making of history" and historical meaning[10] in The Making of the English Working Class, E. P. Thompson famously sought to "rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper … and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity." The goal of the histories I am advocating will be to rescue the undistinguished membership of cinema's audiences from the condescension of a posterity that has seemed more concerned to contemplate "its own desires, criteria, and representational structures" than it has to construct a meaningful account of the past (Thompson, p. 13; Sobchack, p. 303).

Ironically, a concern with reception and with the social context and consequences of movie-going also involves an historical return to the prevailing concerns of the earliest studies of cinema, as an object of sociological and psychological enquiry, rather than the object of aesthetic, critical and interpretive enquiry that has ensued from the construction of film studies as an academic discipline in the humanities. These earlier studies, from Hugo Münsterberg to the Payne Fund research, concerned themselves with what Frankfurt School theorist Leo Lowenthal called the "underlying social and psychological function" of cinema as a component in the modern urban environment; their methods were those of the "human sciences," and their objects of enquiry were people, rather than artefacts[11] This research trajectory fell from grace on or about October 1932, with the organised American film industry’s response to the Payne Fund Studies, which constituted in many ways its culminating work. The Payne Fund Studies deployed what were then the cutting edge methodologies of American psychological and sociological research to ideological purpose, to seek to maintain a failing Protestant cultural hegemony over the social function of entertainment. In response, the "organised industry" launched an attack on the credentials of the research project at the same time that it cemented its defensive alliance with the Catholic Church.

The industry’s response to the Payne Fund Studies polarised socio-cultural research into American cinema, separating the commercially-oriented work of George Gallup and the Audience Research Institute from the loaded agenda, the behaviourist assumptions and what Graham Murdock has termed the "medico-model" of the media effects tradition, which has given us an "unbroken line of banal science" and "failed to ask awkward questions, to pursue other possible lines of enquiry or to place ‘effects’ in their social contexts." (Murdock, pp. 69, 77, 83; Cressy, pp. 518-519)

The first casualty in this exchange was Chicago School sociologist Paul G. Cressy, author of the thirteenth, unpublished Payne Fund manuscript, “Boys and City Streets”[12] Although Cressy never completed that work, he did summarise his conclusions about the sociology of the motion picture experience in a 1938 article in American Sociological Review – a piece that reads like a research agenda for a path unfortunately not taken. Summarising what he took to be the demonstrable findings of the Payne Fund Studies, Cressy noted that:

When the motion picture is viewed only “externally,” it certainly appears [that] the patrons are wholly passive agents who are merely ‘played upon’ through the arts and skills of cinematography. We have, however, abundant evidence that this is an erroneous conception. Through imaginative participation, identification, random reflection, phantasy before and after cinema attendance, and through the impact of prior interests and values, the cinema experience is redefined in many ways and may affect the patron in forms only incidentally associated with film content. (Cressy, p. 522)

Cressy's proposed agenda was to examine these processes and behaviours from a position that recognised that "the cinema’s ‘effect’ upon an individual, a community or a society never can be gauged accurately if the motion picture experience is studied only segmentally and never in its essential unity." Any programme of research that failed to acknowledge "all essential phases of the motion picture experience," he argued, could "offer little more than conjecture as to the cinema’s net ‘effect’ in actual social settings.
A return to such concerns in the history-writing that I am advocating invites an engagement by cinema historians with a different and far more productive series of dialogues in the social and cultural historiography that has been developed since 1970 than that provided by poststructuralism: debates between the quantitative methods of demographic and economic historians producing a “history without people,” and those seeking to write histories from below, an aim broadly shared by several groups of historians concerned at the elimination of the particular from the grand narratives of social scientific history, who sought, as Carlo Ginzburg put it, “to reconstruct the lives of individual men and women from the popular classes of the past,” with the specific purpose of reconstructing “the relationship (about which we know so little) between individual lives and the contexts in which they unfold (Ginzburg, pp. 89-90). Ideally, the microhistories of Ginzburg and Giovanni Levy extend, complement and qualify the broader generalisations provided by quantitative methods, and their dialogue provides models for the histories of cinema from below that I am advocating.[13] In the remainder of this paper, I want to describe some of the places that such research takes me.

In April 2001, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher celebrated the accelerating expansion of the global market for American-sourced popular culture as a functional substitute for his department’s disengagement from cultural diplomacy, by declaring to the Advertising Age that his department had now “taken the view that to know us is to love us.[14] Although its proselytizers and detractors have alike charged American popular culture with the ideological project of carrying “the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe,” this century’s history has reminded us forcibly that in large parts of the world, the consumption of American popular culture has not brought with it an assimilation of what Woodrow Wilson called “the principles of America,” and what current discourse calls “American values” (Creel, passim). A consideration of the failure of the “brand of the free” might lead us to suggest that the imaginary “American” culture of the movies that has become “everyone’s second culture” has done so far more successfully as an agent of commerce than as an instrument of ideology (Snow, p. 55; Kuisel, p. 237). It might also lead us to ask whether the diplomatic failure of American “soft power” should be seen as lying in its execution or in the underlying theory’s overly simplistic account of unilateral cultural exchange and ideological transmission.[15] As Victoria de Grazia has argued:

it is not at all clear how as elusive a force as consumer culture, being the sum of myriads of marketing strategies, second-order decisions of government, and mundane choices about getting and spending, was converted into great power. Nor is it clear how the United States exercised this great power to promote democracies of consumer exchange, much less to advance global concord. (de Grazia 2005, p. 3)

In the decade after World War I, Hollywood became the most visible signifier of an unparalleled American economic expansionism, as the United States “flooded the world with products, branch plants, and investment capital,” while American radio and cable companies, wire services and airlines built the foundations of the American communications empire in what Owen D. Young, head of the Radio Corporation of America, described as the “economic integration of the world” (Rosenberg, pp. 87-107; Young, p. 140). In 1923, Will Hays, head of the motion picture industry’s trade association, described Hollywood’s role in a more global process of Americanization as being to sell “the purposes, the ideals, the accomplishments, the opportunities, and the life of America” to the world “with American motion pictures.”[16] To proponents such as Young and Hays, America’s expansion was inherent benign, since it was based “not on military force or government design but on the wonders of its private industry, the skill of its experts, the goodness of its philanthropists,” and the ubiquity of its communications technologies (Young, p. 153). In 1929, economist Christine Frederick described this commercial version of Americanization as “Consumptionism … the greatest idea that America has to give to the world; the idea that workmen and masses be looked upon not simply as workers and producers, but as consumers. … Pay them more, sell them more, prosper more is the equation (Frederick, p. 5). “Film America,” as the German trade press called Hollywood, was a powerful agent of this policy, as both a sales apparatus for American goods and as a demonstration of what de Grazia has characterised as ‘the enduring capacity of the American empire without frontiers’ to discover, process, and redistribute techniques, styles, and tastes of global provenance” (de Grazia 1989, p. 60).

To what extent – where, when and how – this commercial project mutated into an ideological one will perhaps be a question open to some productive historical revisionism during the next decade. Certainly our present understanding of how cinema functioned as an agent of consumerism in different places at different times in the last century remains in need of further investigation. Were movies and movie attendance really classless, making standards and experiences “more homogeneous and accessible”? Or did they (as a re-examination of William Johnson’s argument, properly informed by better methodological tools and greater historical perspective might suggest) function like other, comparable consumer goods, which acted as sources of social fragmentation, producing “new sources of differentiation and exclusion”?[17] (de Grazia 2005, p. 107). Because movie attendance was geographically specific – attendance at this cinema in this neighbourhood with these people and these detailed local understandings of social distinction – these differentiations were integral to the activity and meaning of cinemagoing, at times even constructed into the architecture of the cinemas themselves (McKenna, pp. 45-59).

In her history of the spread of Americanised consumer culture in Europe from 1900 to 1970, de Grazia repeatedly demonstrates that different countries – and within each country different classes and groups – acquired the material capacity to participate in consumption at significantly different times. The “narrative of how household goods came to be possessed” was, she argues, “in large measure indifferent to variations in class, local cultures, and history.” At any given historical moment, however, what these goods meant, socially and culturally, varied from nation to nation and region to region depending on how far the particular nation or region had progressed through that reiterated narrative of “technological change, rise in family incomes, and revolution in outlooks” (de Grazia 2005, p. 446). Undoubtedly, the movies, like advertising, reinforced a new economy of desire. But the public directly addressed by advertising – the public possessed of discretionary spending capacity – varied considerably from around 70% of the US population in the late 1920s to 30% of the population of Britain and northwest Europe, to less then 10% of the population of Italy and Spain (de Grazia 2005, pp. 78-95).

As one part of ordinary cinema history, then, we might ask such questions as this: To what extent did cinema, as a social agent in the promulgation of “consumptionism,” require pre-existing economic conditions, including a level of discretionary spending among its potential audience? Where these conditions did not exist, did cinema exhibition remain a marginal activity not simply because people were too poor to attend frequently, but also because the pleasures of cinema – the aspirational pleasures of viewing consumption and viewing-as-consumption that were part of what economist Simon N. Patten had called the surplus or pleasure economy – were insufficiently engaged with or integrated into their daily lives? (Patten, p. 9) Can we correlate patterns of cinema exhibition to the markedly variant patterns of retail sales in the U.S., Europe and Asia for much of the century? And if we can – or, for that matter, if we cannot – what will that tell us about the social function of cinema? Did cinema represent a sort of half-house way between access to “Americanised” consumer culture and the practicalities of economic possibility, both for poorer communities in the U.S. and for much of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond? To what extent, where, and when, did the cinema provide a substitute for consumption – a placebo – rather than an aspiration to consume and a guidebook or practical manual in the development of the practice of consumption?

If the answers to these questions are not yet plain, what is somewhat clearer is that such explanations as we may be able to offer will require different historical methods and tools from those that have so far predominated in film history. These tools are likely to be drawn instead from the methodological dialogues of social and cultural historians. To begin with, however, we will need detailed historical maps of cinema exhibition, amplified by evidence about the nature and frequency of attendance. This data then needs to be combined with broader demographic information derived from census data and other surveys to amplify our understanding of cinema’s audiences. Such detailed quantitative information is vital if we are to progress beyond our current broad-brush knowledge based on trade figures, diplomatic accounts and grand theories of classical cinema as vernacular modernism – all forms of “history without people” – to a more exact sense of who made up cinema’s audiences. With this knowledge will perhaps come the means...
better to understand cinema's cultural function: to enquire, for example, into whether the geography of cinema produced new forms of social differentiation at the same time that the images its audiences consumed projected a dissolution of "the sumptuary lines between classes." These enquiries will also, I hope, return us to Paul Cressey's projected examination of the mechanisms and processes of "the motion picture situation" (de Grazia 2005, p. 100).

Just as vital as this demographic history, however, is the inclusion of experience that will ground quantitative generalisations in the concrete particulars of micro-historical studies of local situations, effects and infrastructure, based perhaps around the records of individual cinemas or small chains. The protagonists of these micro-histories — the Menocchios of the cinema — will be the small businessmen who acted as cultural brokers, navigators and translators constructing a creolised culture out of their community's encounters with the mediated external world shipped to them in tin cans two or three times a week (Ginzburg, passim). One of these micro-histories may become the Montaillou of cinema history, by revealing how its citizen consumers explained themselves and their place in the world through their encounters with the forces of global and globalising culture (Ladourie, passim). Such histories, self-consciously acknowledging their own constructions and mediations, may also form part of comparative local histories, and, finally, may underpin attempts to consider the cultural function and performance of individual movies in more secure social and cultural detail than we can presently achieve.

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Endnotes

[1] This essay is developed from a paper on audiences and the history of consumption given at the 13th biennial conference of the Film and History Association of Australia and New Zealand, in Melbourne in November 2006. It develops some material from an article entitled "On the prospect of writing cinema history from below," published in Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis, 9.2 (December 2006), pp. 74-96.


[9] It would be tactless of me not to acknowledge, at this point, that this paper is an output from an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant for 2005-2007, entitled *Regional Markets and Local Audiences: Case Studies in Australian Cinema Consumption, 1920-1980* held jointly with Kate Bowles, Deb Verhoeven and Mike Walsh; together with Colin Arrowsmith and Jll Julius Matthews, we also hold an ARC Discovery Grant for 2008-2011, for a project entitled *Mapping the Movies: The Changing Nature of Australia’s Cinema Circuits and their Audiences*.


[12] Cressey was a somewhat hapless witness before a subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce investigating crime and crime control in New York in November 1933. As the only academic witness at these hearings, he summarises his still evolving position on the social influence of motion pictures, but his attempt to steer a middle course left the sponsors of his research unsatisfied while exposing him to the withering ire of the industry’s representatives.


Film shows that academics do not own the past. Film creates a historical world with which the written word cannot compete, at least for popularity. Film is a disturbing symbol of an increasingly postliterate world (in which people can read but won't). Let me add an impolite question: How many professional historians, when it comes to fields outside their areas of expertise, learn about the past from film? How many Americanists, for example, know the great Indian leader primarily from Gandhi? Or how many Europeanists the American Civil War from Glory, or Gone with the Wind? Or how many Asio