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## **Film and History: A Very Long Engagement. A Survey of the Literature Concerning the Use of Cinematic Texts in Historical Research.**

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### **Astract**

The essay offers a survey of the literature concerning the use of cinematic texts in historical research, from the publication of Kracauer's classic *From Caligari to Hitler* to the most recent contributions. It singles out the principal tendencies shown by the scholars who engaged in this particular field of research such as: the use of raw unedited footage as a record of historical events and personalities; the analysis of institutionally sponsored film in order to gain insight into the motives of sponsoring institutions like governments and political parties, the idea that feature films might be indicators of the moral values, prejudices, ideas, and political and social tensions running through a society at a given time. The essay also offers an account of the major theoretical contribution by authors like Marc Ferro, Pierre Sorlin, and John E. O'Connor. The paper's ultimate purpose is to take stock of the progress made by scholars in this well-established and yet, in many respects, still controversial research thread.

‘We need to study film and see it in relation to the world that produces it. What is our hypothesis? That film, image or not of reality, document or fiction, true story or pure invention, is history.’

M. Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988), p. 29.

Historians basing their research principally on cinematic texts may, at times, feel unease with regard to the epistemological foundations of their research. This is due to a number of reasons. First of all, to study films, or principally films rather than written documents, means to go against a long and illustrious tradition of historiographical studies which has normally privileged written texts over visual evidence as primary sources for historical research. Secondly, within the range of visual sources, historians have for a long time been especially suspicious of cinematic texts. Finally, a universally accepted, coherent and comprehensive methodology for studying film as a source for historical analysis has not yet been formulated. This awareness accounts for the title of the essay: cinema and history have had a very long engagement, but a proper wedding has yet to be celebrated. It is worth noting that the long-term diffidence of historians towards film is not entirely unreasonable. The use of cinematic texts as historical sources presents difficult theoretical problems with respect to their

selection, use and methods of analysis. In the mid-1970s, historian Paul Smith, while advocating the use of films in historical research, provided a succinct summary of the issues troubling professional historians: '[film] can quite easily be faked, or put together in such a way as to distort reality, give a tendentious picture, and practice among the emotion of the spectator. Moreover, it is often a relatively trivial and superficial record, capturing only the external appearance of its subjects and offering few insights into the processes and relationships, causes and motives which are the historian's concern.'<sup>1</sup>

The doubts and perplexities listed by Paul Smith are still on the table and they should not be overlooked. However, a corpus of methods, findings and suggestions concerning the use of cinematic texts in historical research has been developing over the years, especially since the mid-1970s. Together they provide, if not a methodology, a reasonably reliable theoretical base. By sketching the history of the relationship between historians and film, the essay takes stock of the methodological progress historians have made in analysing cinematic texts as a source for historical research. Subsequently, the paper focuses on two genres, historical films and cinematic propaganda, and discusses the related research threads which have developed as the result of the historians' interest in these particular cinematic texts. The essay aims to account for how well-established scholars and professionals have answered a set of questions concerning the nature of cinema and the relation between cinema and society and cinema and audience. These questions are: are historians justified in using cinematic texts in their research? What is the social role of cinema? Can visual image and filmic discourse effectively render the past? And what are the implications of this as far as professional historians are concerned? Does cinematic propaganda work? How? And to what extent? With a closer look, everything comes down to a single, fundamental question: do films influence people, or, rather, do they mirror people's ideas?<sup>2</sup>

The issue of the relationship between cinema and history is as old as cinema itself. As early as 1898, the Polish cameraman and employee of the Lumière Company, Bolesław Matuszewski, argued for the establishment of a 'Cinematographic Museum or Depository' where footage documenting historical events could be stored on behalf of scholars and students of the future.<sup>3</sup> The use of the filmic image as historical documentation was a fairly intuitive idea. If history's most sacred duty was to avoid that 'what has come to be from man in time might become faded', to quote Herodotus of Halicarnassus, what could be better than a tiny band of celluloid which constituted, in the words of Matuszewski, 'not only a proof of history but a fragment of history itself'? It is easy to see how Matuszewski had an all-round positivist attitude towards cinema: film was much more than a mirror of reality to him, it was reality itself.

Matuszewski's call to undertake large scale storage of footage for research purposes fell on deaf ears. Film archives were not established before the 1930s, and, for many years, historians did not give any serious thought to the use of film as a historical source. Even when the Annales School legitimized the use of a wider range of evidence in historical research, scholars generally remained suspicious of film. A certain intellectual snobbery towards the cinema medium, which was for many years regarded as nothing more than a form of entertainment for lower class people, certainly played a part in this respect.

If there is a time that can be considered as a watershed moment for the study of cinema and history, it is the publication of *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, by German historian Siegfried Kracauer, first published in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Clearly influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud, Kracauer came to believe that cinema represented a sort of psychoanalytic revelation of the collective unconscious. His study was aimed at accounting for the mass acceptance enjoyed by Nazism in the Germany of 1930s by

investigating the ‘hidden mental processes’ and ‘mass desires’ of the German people as they emerged from the films produced in the years of the Weimar Republic.

The Chapter devoted to Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is perhaps the best known of Kracauer’s psychoanalysis-inspired investigations.<sup>5</sup> Kracauer sensed that, in order to fully understand the historical relevance of the film, it was necessary to go beyond what appears on the screen, and investigate the film’s production process. It was precisely this investigation which provided Kracauer with the principal evidence informing his psychoanalytic reading. Kracauer learnt that the film’s original script, by two Austrian authors, exposed the perversion of power and the intrinsic violence of government institutions: the protagonist of the film eventually finds out that the despicable Caligari (who has enslaved the somnambulist Cesare and forces him to commit murder) is the director of a public lunatic asylum. In order to make the film more acceptable to the main stream audience, however, German-born director Robert Wiene imposed a fundamental change on the plot by encapsulating it in a new narrative frame: the entire story is just the fantastic account of a mentally ill patient secluded in the lunatic asylum.<sup>6</sup> According to Kracauer, by turning a subversive plot into a reassuring and conformist film, Wiene had demonstrated a more heightened awareness of the ‘German soul’ than the two Austrian screenplay writers. In fact, according to Kracauer, Germans trusted authority above all else. Kracauer concluded that, when faced with the seemingly unavoidable alternative of tyranny and chaos, as had happened in the early-1930s, German people would invariably choose tyranny, as for them order was, in any case, preferable to anarchy. This is why they had eventually chosen Adolf Hitler.

To infer the ‘collective disposition and tendencies’, the ‘inner urges’, or ‘the intrinsic concerns of the collective mind’ from the production of a national film industry appears, nowadays, quite an adventurous approach to film studies.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Kracauer’s book

remains fascinating in that it reminds us that film, fiction or factual, does not exclusively appeal to the viewer's rationality. In order to be appealing and successful films have to satisfy the audience's existing desires and psychological needs.

Kracauer also added to his book a final chapter dealing with Nazi cinematography, in which he claimed that all of the films produced in Germany during the Nazi regime - newsreels, documentaries, or apparently escapist feature films - were to be regarded as propaganda films.<sup>8</sup> There was, at the time, a growing awareness among scholars in this respect. Many historians realised that, when it came to cinematic texts, one could hardly speak of objectivity, given that every film, feature film or documentary conveyed an author's point of view.<sup>9</sup> This certainly did not help overcome historians' scepticism over the use of film in historical research. As a consequence, studies on film and history did not flourish in the following years.<sup>10</sup>

History documentaries and newsreels were the object of a conference held at the University College of London (UCL) in 1968 and called *Film and Historians*.<sup>11</sup> This conference focused on the use of films for didactic purposes. Quite significantly, scholars debated whether 'raw material', that is, unedited footage, was the best source for the teaching of history, being the only type of cinematic text (almost) free from manipulation. This approach shows how historians generally allowed only a narrow use of the cinematic text. Based on a sort of 'criterion of truth', the historian dealing with filmic documents had to primarily perform a philological operation aimed at detecting every kind of manipulation. Only the remaining true information could thus be safely deployed.<sup>12</sup>

The conference at UCL stimulated British scholars to investigate the potential uses of cinema in historical research. In 1976, *Historian and Film*, edited by Paul Smith, took stock of the progress made in this field. In the introduction, the editor advocated 'the full integration of film into the range of resources at the historian's disposal.'<sup>13</sup> Historian and film studies

lecturer William Hughes adopted a structuralist approach. He claimed that cinema is a visual language structured by specific elements which fundamentally shape the cinematic text's meaning. These elements are the result of how both shooting and editing techniques were handled by the filmmaker. Therefore, a proper interpretation of visual content depends upon a knowledge of filmmaking: 'Just as they must often learn a foreign language in order to utilise essential written documents, historians must know how focus, camera placement, framing, lens selection, lighting, film emulsion, editing technique, and other factors combine to determine the form, content and meaning of a given length of film.'<sup>14</sup>

Hughes also listed a number of possible uses of cinematic texts in historical research. For example, unedited footage could be employed as a partial record of events and personalities. Films produced and distributed on regular bases (such as newsreels) might be useful for audience research purposes. Sponsored films could provide insights into the motives of sponsoring institutions like governments and political parties (showing what they did and did not want people to see). Finally, feature films could be taken as an indicator of the moral values, prejudices, ideas and political and social tensions running through a society at a given time.<sup>15</sup>

Of all the potential applications of film to historical study suggested by Hughes, it was especially the last one that seemed to arouse the interest of scholars in the middle of the 1970s. According to Michael Wood, author of *America in the Movies*, 'all movies mirror reality in some way or other', and Hollywood films mirrored myths and concerns of the American people.<sup>16</sup> Daniel J. Leab, in *From Sambo to Superspade*, analysed the racism of American society through American cinema.<sup>17</sup> He asked whether movies influence an audience or whether they mirror its ideas, and seemed to consider both alternatives true. The cinema industry was, at least to some extent, pandering to society's prejudices, while Hollywood played a major part in shaping the American Dream.<sup>18</sup> His conclusions with

respect to the relationship between cinema and society were quite original: 'Movies are entertainment, but they are also symbols, and behind every shadow on the big screen is a struggle to impose definitions upon what is and what should be. The Power of any single movie to influence a viewer permanently is limited, although repetition obviously has its effect. Constant repetition that emphasizes certain stereotypes [...] is overpowering.'<sup>19</sup>

Both works by Wood and Leab are examples of what could be called the subjective approach to film, an approach which was directly derived from Kracauer. In the 1970s, a few film theorists, sensing that this approach lacked objectivity, attempted to create new interpretative tools, principally borrowing models from linguistics. This was the golden age of film semiotics, founded by French film theorist Christian Metz.<sup>20</sup> Although film semioticians may have developed a more objective method, their work was inaccessible and utterly unsuitable as far as dissemination outside the academic environment was concerned. For a few years it appeared that the advent of semiology applied to cinema would lead to a definitive rupture of the nascent relationship between cinema and historians. The latter were in fact understandably frightened by the esoteric terminology employed by film semioticians.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, a major methodological breakthrough which would restore historians' confidence in their justification to study cinematic texts was about to come from France. This was the work of Marc Ferro, who, in 1977, published a collection of essays called *Cinema et Histoire*.<sup>22</sup> Ferro's book officially granted cinematic texts citizenship among the evidence admitted in the courtroom of historical research.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the French historian gave a decisive contribution to the overcoming of the residual distrust of historians towards the reliability of films. Ferro shows that cinematic texts are useful tools for the historian precisely because they are unreliable – they do not picture reality but an interpretation of reality, and they very often have hidden or not-so-hidden propaganda, intentional or unintentional - as films tell us a great deal more about the people who produced them than the events they



portray. In this respect, Ferro argues that films provide historians with ‘a counter-analysis of society’; that is, the possibility of unearthing hidden aspects of society.<sup>24</sup> According to Ferro, the historian must therefore look for everything that can be spotted beyond the intentions of the authors of the cinematic text. In this sense, a film, rather than showing, reveals. Marc Ferro also made several suggestions concerning the methodology to be used in the analysis of film, including, famously, the recommendation to study both ‘the visible and the non-visible’ or, in other words, ‘the relations between a film and what is extra-filmic’<sup>25</sup>, namely to focus on the production background and to seek as much information as possible about the material circumstances in which the cinematic text has been produced and distributed, including screenplays, production documents, film reviews from newspapers.<sup>26</sup>

Following Ferro’s *Cinema et Histoire*, publications on cinema and history blossomed. Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, for example, delivered two books investigating British society via the analysis of feature films.<sup>27</sup> These two British scholars adopted the idea of the two-way connection between cinema and society previously proposed by Leab. They claimed: ‘Broadly speaking, the cinema operates in two ways, - to reflect and highlight popular attitudes, ideas and preoccupations, and to generate and inculcate views and opinions deemed desirable by film-makers’.<sup>28</sup>

Richards would take an important step further with respect to the idea of cinema as mirror of society in a book investigating the relationship between British national cinema and British identity published years later.<sup>29</sup> He claims that feature films do not simply mirror society, they reflect an empowered and very often prescient image of it and, in doing so, they legitimize a new state of things which are about to come. Rather intriguing are, in this respect, his conclusions in regard to the function played by British ‘free cinema’: by championing the repudiation of Victorian self-restriction, free cinema films of the 1960s

prepared the ground for the advent, a decade later, of Thatcherism – in its essence, a political philosophy promoting the elevation of individual desires above the good of society.<sup>30</sup>

By the time Richards published his book, films had become one of the favourite sources for scholars in the flourishing field of cultural studies. The use of cinematic texts in cultural studies seems to imply the idea that films, as human artefacts, disclose something about society as they reveal the complicated relation between reality and social representation of it. This assumption is arguably rooted in the Marxist theory of literature which postulates that cultural production cannot be treated in isolation but must be interpreted ‘within a larger framework of social reality’.<sup>31</sup> It could be argued that, as a result, modern scholars of cultural studies often regard the epistemological legitimacy of the use cinematic texts as a given, and they are not especially attentive to methodological questions. There are, however, many exceptions to this rule.<sup>32</sup> As far as historians are concerned, a last attempt to draft a coherent and comprehensive methodology for the use of cinematic texts in historical research came from the US in the early 1990s, when John E. O’Connor edited *Image as Artifact. The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*.<sup>33</sup>

O’Connor suggested that there should be two stages to the historical analysis of what he defined as a ‘moving image document’. In the first stage, the historian should gather as much information as possible with respect to content, production and reception of the moving image document, as he would do with any other document. In the second stage, the historian would undertake an enquiry according to four frameworks: the moving image as a representation of history; the moving image as evidence for a social and cultural history of the period in which it has been produced; the moving image as evidence for historical facts, and the moving image as part of the history of film industry and arts. Quite apart from this scheme, which is perhaps too rigid to be profitably adopted, O’Connor’s work contains several useful conclusions and suggestions. One of these concerns the idea that content

analysis requires repeated viewing of the cinematic text under examination. Another is that every cinematic text represents a valuable source of historical information as far as customs and habits of the past are concerned, including the way people used to dress or style their hair, the houses they lived in, and the way they spoke.<sup>34</sup> It could be said that in such an ethnographical approach, as proposed by O'Connor, the cinematic text retrieves the historical function originally envisioned by Matuszewski.

Another film-related research thread which rose to prominence within the historical discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s, concerned the relationship between history and cinematic rendering of historical events. This was principally due to a special issue on cinema and history assembled in December 1988 by the *The American Historical Review*, which included articles by John E. O'Connor, Robert A. Rosenstone, Hayden White and others.<sup>35</sup> The contributors to this special issue were so confident in the possibilities that historical films offered to scholars that Hayden White went as far as envisaging the rise of a new discipline which he dubbed historiophoty, that is 'the representation of history and our thought about it in visual image and filmic discourse.'<sup>36</sup> Robert Rosenstone, in the essay *History in Images / History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film*, posed the question whether history could be effectively turned into visual history through the production of documentaries or feature films, without losing the rigour and scientific qualities of written history.<sup>37</sup> The idea was not entirely new. As early as the 1910s, D.W. Griffith, author of the controversial historical drama *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), had imagined that history sections in the libraries of the future would exclusively store accurate and truthful cinematic re-enactments of historical episodes, with unreliable and biased history books being long forgotten.<sup>38</sup> In more recent times, French historian and cinema critic Pierre Sorlin devoted an important book to history as presented in film, *The History in Film. Restaging the Past*.<sup>39</sup> Sorlin argues that films based upon historical events contribute to shape what he

called a country's 'historical capital', that is the historical heritage of a country. In this sense, historical films were to be regarded as rightfully part of a body of literature concerning an historical period or event. Therefore, historical films are definitely matter for historians, and, more precisely, they have to be addressed with a historiographical approach.<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that Sorlin's call to deal with historical films as history books granted their authors membership in the history community.

Robert Rosenstone would develop Sorlin's investigation in various papers and books. He argues that historical films, as opposed to historical dramas, have their own historical reliability, in that they depict an historical truth rather than the historical truth. In other words, historical films, even when they are not entirely accurate as far as historical facts are concerned, are, nonetheless, powerful tools for conveying the feeling of the past, and in providing viewers with a psychological or emotional sense of historical events. He also warmly invites historians to accept historical films as they represent a different approach to the discipline, a branch of history using a specific methodology. As has been the case with oral history, the new cinematic history would not replace or supplement written history, it would simply constitute 'another way of understanding our relationship to the past, another way of pursuing that conversation about where we came from, where we are going, and who we are.'<sup>41</sup> The most interesting case study delivered by Rosenstone with respect to the relationship between history and cinematic history is probably the analysis of Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928) as an historical account of the Russian revolution.<sup>42</sup> Rosenstone stresses the historical importance of the film by suggesting that, although *October* could hardly be regarded, by historians' standards, as a reliable historical documentation of the October revolution, many people have learned more about the Bolshevik Revolution from this masterwork of Soviet cinematography than from any other single source. Even professional historians have felt compelled to deal with the film, if only to dismiss it as

inaccurate. Furthermore, Rosenstone claims that the film's inaccuracies serve the purpose of shaping a sort of holistic narrative of the October Revolution, he claims '*October* tells us neither *what happened* nor *what might have happened*. Instead it presents a cunning mixture of the two – a mixture that (not completely different from written history) creates a symbolic or metaphoric expression of what we call the Bolshevik Revolution [*italics in original*]'.<sup>43</sup>

Along with historical films, another class of cinematic texts have aroused the interest of historians, and this is cinematic propaganda. Studies concerning cinema and propaganda began to appear at the beginning of the 1970s, probably because the emergence of political and militant filmmaking in various countries in the late 1960s had awakened historians' interests in this particular use of the cinematographic medium. Authors have focused, particularly, on the cinematic propaganda text itself and, having learned the lesson of Marc Ferro, have interrogated propaganda films looking for values and political lines inferable from the voice-over commentary - for instance in the case of newsreels - or have carried out extensive research aimed at detecting censorship and repression by the authorities supervising the production of the propagandist film. A book which perfectly exemplifies this approach is Anthony Aldgate's *Cinema and History*, published in 1979.<sup>44</sup>

Since the pioneering work on politics and film by Swedish authors Leif Furhammar and Folke Isaksson (1968), however, historians have also wondered whether the historical relevance of propaganda films should be judged by finding a reliable way to assess their influence on the contemporary audience.<sup>45</sup> Of course, such an endeavour has proved to be quite challenging. However, it was not meaningless. Not only has the question of the audience's reception been subsequently addressed by sociologists and media scholars, who have eventually established a research expertise known as audience studies,<sup>46</sup> but it also has had some important reverberations as far as the methodology of studying films from an historical perspective is concerned. Most notable is, in this respect, Pierre Sorlin's call to

appreciate and valorize the specificity of the filmic fact (*fait filmique*), namely the invitation made to historians to not merely utilize cinematic material as written text, but investigate the effect of what Sorlin calls *effet cinéma* (cinema impact) on the viewers<sup>47</sup>. It is worth stressing, however, that a historian analysing archival cinematic texts cannot have the same visual experience as early spectators when viewing the same cinematic text at the time in which it was produced. In fact, as modern viewers, we have a different perception of film due to the evolution of cinematographic techniques, narrative styles and taste which has taken place since then. This inevitably affects the analysis, for example making a cinematic text appear obsolete and clichéd, whereas contemporary viewers had no such impression.<sup>48</sup>

There is, however, much more to be said about the relationship between cinematic texts and viewers. Every film - and possibly propaganda films do it to a greater extent - conveys its message through a series of artistic, cinematographic, cultural and political codes that its target audience is capable of understanding thanks to a cultural and political background common to both the authors of the film and the spectators. Therefore, the historian must be equipped with cultural references and symbols shared by a given group of people constituting the presumed audience of the cinematic text(s) under analysis. This has become, over time, a widespread awareness among scholars of film studies and historians.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the greatest problem with propaganda films is, as pointed out by Aldgate and Richards, to distinguish deliberate propaganda from the “unwitting testimony”, the hidden assumption and attitudes, rather than the conscious, and often biased, message’.<sup>50</sup>

As this essay shows there has long been a symbiotic but problematic relationship between historians and film. I shall now draw conclusions concerning the points addressed in the essay, beginning with the justification for the use of cinematic texts in historical research. Doubts about film’s accuracy and reliability which have been frustrating historians for decades manifest themselves in every type of document normally utilised by historians, at

least to some extent. Such doubts are not, therefore, a good reason to exclude cinematic texts from the range of documents admissible in historical research. Furthermore, the corpus of texts devoted to the use of film for research purposes has reached a respectable consistency, and tradition matters in history. Of all the approaches experimented by historians, the most convincing is perhaps Marc Ferro's, who states that the cinematic text should be primarily utilised in order to gather information and insights about the life and times of those who produced it. This consideration leads to a fundamental question: what is the connection between cinema and society? Nothing conclusive can be said in this respect, however, that cinema mirrors society in some form is such an intuitive and powerful idea that one cannot help but to believe it. After all, cinema does not exist *per se*, in a separate sphere. Cinema, rather, is like a piece of blotting paper absorbing ideas, cultural influences and controversies belonging to the world in which it was produced. To use Dudley Andrew's words: 'Culture can be said to surround each film like an atmosphere comprised of numerous layers and spheres, as numerous as we want.'<sup>51</sup> Sometime, one of these spheres could consist of the reflections of a society, or a sector of it, on past events. In this case we can speak of historical films. These provide the audience with a powerful and vivid experience of history by putting 'flesh and blood on the past', as argued by Robert Rosenstone. Historical films are perhaps a branch of historiography, as Pierre Sorlin suggests.<sup>52</sup> As far as cinematic propaganda is concerned, Nicholas Reeves claims that the assumption that cinema is a powerful medium for propaganda, able to radically affect viewers and produce profound transformations in the attitude and ideology of the population, has proved ill-founded in the light of recent research.<sup>53</sup> Propaganda films are, however, valuable documents for the insights they provide in the motives of the sponsoring institutions and for what they reveal as far as the ideological and cultural traits of an epoch and/or a social group are concerned.

Today, finding and watching films has never been so simple and easy. Films can be downloaded legally from a variety of specialized websites at accessible prices. Thousands of old movies, documentaries and original newsreels are available on YouTube and other video sharing platforms as well as on online video archives. Many signs point to a future where virtually every cinematic text ever produced will be accessible with the click of a mouse. Increased accessibility will encourage more and more historians to regard cinematic evidence as both primary and secondary sources. Although a universally accepted, coherent and comprehensive methodology for studying film as a source of historical analysis will probably never be drafted, an eclectic and inter-disciplinary approach merging history, cultural studies, film studies, gender studies, anthropology, and so forth, will enable the historian to deal with every type of cinematic text. After all, the effective and truthful use of archival evidence ultimately depends upon the ability and the professionalism of researchers. It is, nonetheless, important, from time to time, to go back to think about the epistemological foundation of the use of film in historical research. This is precisely what I have tried to achieve in this essay.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Issues related to the specular / non-specular relationship between text and reality are also dealt with by literary theorists, see for example P. Macherey's classic, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Maspero, 1966). My essay, however, is exclusively concerned with film.



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<sup>3</sup> The article *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire: création d'un dépôt de cinématographie historique*, published in *Le Figaro* on 25 March 1898, has been subsequently translated by Julia Bloch Frey, see B. Matuszewski, 'A New Source of History: the Creation of a Depository for Historical Cinematography', *Cultures* 2, no.1 (1974), pp. 219 – 22. It can be found at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/clasjul/mat.html>. On Matuszewski, see A. Aldgate, *Cinema and History. British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Scolar Press, 1979), pp. 2 – 3.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974, c1947).

<sup>5</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp. 61 -76.

<sup>6</sup> Kracauer based his interpretation on an unpublished typescript by Hans Janowitz, co-writer of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. An analysis of Janowitz' account of the making of 'Caligari', and a critique of Kracauer's reading of the film can be found in D. Robinson, *Das Gabinet des Dr. Caligari* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), pp. 1 – 24.

<sup>7</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp. 6, 7 and 86 respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 275. The chapter on Nazi cinematography was a reprint of the pamphlet titled *Propaganda and the Nazi war film*, issued, in 1942, by the Museum of Modern Art Film Library of New York. Nazi cinematography has been, ever since, investigated thoroughly. See, for example, D. S. Hull, *Film in the Third Reich: a Study of the German Cinema, 1933 -1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), R. Taylor, *Film Propaganda, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: Tauris, 1998), and D. Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema (1933 – 1945)* (London and New York: Tauris, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Kracauer elaborated on this in a later work, see S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The redemption of physical reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, c1960), pp. 160 –

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3. On objectivity in documentary filmmaking, Eric Barnouw claims that: ‘The documentarist, like any communicator in any medium, makes endless choices. He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not. [...] Even behind the first step, selection of a topic, there is a motive.’ E. Barnouw, *Documentary, a History of the Non-fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 287 – 8.

<sup>10</sup> Kracauer’s book, however, inspired a line of research based on what could be defined as ‘the psychological paradigm’. See, for example, M. Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (New York: Free Press, 1950). A critique of the psychological paradigm is in R. Sklar, ‘*Moving image media in culture and society: paradigms for historical interpretation*’, in J. E. O’Connor (ed.) *Image as Artifact, The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger, 1990), pp. 121- 3.

<sup>11</sup> British University Council, *Film and the historian* (BUFC, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> On this point, see Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, pp. 5 – 11; P. Ortoleva ‘*Testimone infallibile, macchina dei sogni. Il film e il pubblico televisivo come fonte storica*’, in G. M. Gori, (ed.) *La Storia al cinema. Ricostruzione del passato / interpretazione del presente* (Città di Castello: Bulzoni, 1994), pp. 299 – 332.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, (ed.) *The Historian and Film*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> W. Hughes, ‘*The Evaluation of Film as Evidence*’ in Smith, (ed.) *The Historian and Film*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, ‘*The Evaluation of Film as Evidence*’, pp. 49 – 79.

<sup>16</sup> M. Wood, *America in the Movies* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 16. Although brilliant in some of its analysis, the book by Michael Wood seems quite contradictory as far as methodology is concerned. While claiming that feature films mirror society, he also says that films, at least Hollywood movies, belong to an independent, self-created, self-

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perpetuating universe, an artistic tradition upon which both their narrative structure and significance ultimately depend, see Wood, *America in the Movies*, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> D. J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade. The Black Experience in Motion Picture* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975). Interesting investigations on feature films as a reflection of collective mentality can be also found in P.C. Rollins (ed.), *Hollywood as Historian.*

*American Film in a cultural context* (Lexington Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). On the same line of research, but more concerned with the political background of the films, and not exclusively devoted to America, are the essays contained in K.R.M. Short (ed.), *Feature Films as History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, pp. 117 and 2 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, p. 263.

<sup>20</sup> See C. Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1974), and C. Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> On this point see A. Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British. Cinema and Society 1930 – 1970* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> M. Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> A discussion on the theoretical contribution by Marc Ferro to the studies concerning film and history can be found in W. Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 7 – 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ferro, *Cinema and History*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Both quotations are in Ferro, *Cinema and History*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> On the relevance of film magazine and film reviews for historical research Pierre Sorlin shows a rather dismissive attitude in his book *Italian National Cinema*: ‘I have read a large number of weeklies, specialized and not, in preparing this book. They have told me a lot about the names of famous people, the way of commenting upon films, the vocabulary in

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vogue, but, obviously, little about spectators' deeper feelings.' See P. Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema, 1896 – 1996* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 167.

<sup>27</sup> Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British* and A. Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards *Britain can take it: the British cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> J. Richards, *Films and British National Identity. From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Forgacs *Marxist Literary Theory*, in A. Jefferson and David Robey, *Modern Literary Theory. A comparative Introduction* (London: Batsford, 1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> I shall mention just one example, David Forgacs's compelling analysis of Roberto Rossellini's masterwork *Rome, Open city*, published by the British Film Institute in 2000. The author is fully aware of many of the methodological questions discussed in this article, including the necessity to go 'beyond the visual' by interrogating production documents and investigating material circumstances within which the film was conceived, produced and distributed.

<sup>33</sup> J. E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact. The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> On this point, see also P. Sorlin, *The Film in History. Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 24 – 25.

<sup>35</sup> *The American Historical Review*, 93, No 5, (Dec. 1988). The publication, in 1988, of the English version of Ferro's *Cinema et Histoire* may have inspired the journal's editors this special issue. It is fair to say, however, that many American scholars always had a keen interest in the issue of cinema and history, as proven by the foundation, as early as 1971, of

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*Film & History*, the first journal specifically devoted to use of cinema for historical research and for the teaching of history.

<sup>36</sup> W. Hayden ‘*Historiography and Historiophoty*’, *The American Historical Review*, pp. 1139 – 1199.

<sup>37</sup> See R. A. Rosenstone, ‘*History in Images/History in Words: Reflection on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film*’, *The American Historical Review*, pp. 1173 – 1185.

<sup>38</sup> D. F. Stevens, *Based on a True Story. Latin American History at the Movies* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1998), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> P. Sorlin, *The Film in History*.

<sup>40</sup> P. Sorlin, *The Film in History*, pp. 16 – 22.

<sup>41</sup> R. A. Rosenstone ‘*How to look at an “Historical” Film*’, in M. Landy, (ed.) *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (London, Athlone, 2001), p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> R. A. Rosenstone, ‘*October as history*’, *Rethinking History: the Journal of Theory and Practice*, 5 (Summer 2001), pp. 255 -274. Also in R. A. Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), pp. 50 – 69.

<sup>43</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 68. Other authors share Rosenstone’s appreciation of historical films for research and didactic purposes. See, for example, Donald F. Stevens, who advocates the integration of written and cinematic history: ‘It is not a case of either / or, but of both and more at once. Neither book writing nor filmmaking provides a perfect window on the past. Both are “based on a true story”, and their efforts to make the past presentable, for all their apparent differences, are rather similar.’ Stevens, *Based on a True Story*, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Aldgate, *Cinema and History*.

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<sup>45</sup> L. Furhammar and Folke Isaksson, *Politics and Film* (New York: Praeger, 1971), translated by Kersti French, pp. 243.

<sup>46</sup> In the early '80s Stuart Hall pioneered this area proposing his Encoding/Decoding model, see S. Hall, 'Encoding / Decoding', in S. Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128–138. Hall's work revealed that the effects of mediated communication were not as direct as expected, but different groups decoded the same message in different ways. For Hall the central point was that the text could be understood in different ways, ranging from a dominant reading of it, in line with the intended meaning, or an opposing one, which added new meaning to the message. This meant that audience had some degree of agency. If applied to our analysis, it also means that the expected outcomes of a propaganda text, for example the effect of propaganda cinema, could not be assumed. However, alongside this recognition of a complexity on the side of the audience, Hall also maintained the idea of the media as a tool to set the political agenda. By reinforcing a dominant understanding of the text, for example highlighting certain issues instead of others, the media exercise its political action on society as a whole. Subsequent research in audience studies went back to highlight the relevant power that media had in shaping attitudes according to a dominant ideology (the Glasgow Media Group). Nevertheless, the idea of a variety of effects, or different degrees of effects of the mediated text, within the same society at the same historical time has remained a main aspect of this research area until today.

<sup>47</sup> See, in particular, the conclusions of P. Sorlin, *Sociologie du cinéma. Ouverture pour l'histoire de demain* (Paris: Aubier, 1977), pp. 290 – 97.

<sup>48</sup> Ideological and cultural factors can also play a part in the audience's perception of the artistic and political value of a film. An example can help to clarify this point. From the perspective of a modern viewer, it is rather surprising that a film like the Soviet biopic

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*Kljatva* (*The Vow*, 1946) – a piece of pure Stalinist cinematic propaganda - could have been considered as an effective propaganda tool by the Soviet authorities, as its content is so explicitly propaganda-driven that its showing would appear, to a modern viewer, counterproductive. However, this was not the case in 1946 Russia, as explained by the director of *Kljatva* himself, Mikhail Chiaureli, during a press conference following the presentation of the film at the Venice Film Festival. Answering a provocative question by an Italian journalist about the presence of propaganda in Soviet feature films, Chiaureli claimed that while every film was to be considered as propaganda, as every film, regardless of its nationality, endorsed an ideological vision of reality, the viewer whose ideology entirely matched the one of the film would not perceive it as such. See Umberto Barbaro's *Il regista sovietico Ciaureli parla ai critici del Festival*, *l'Unità*, 4/9/1946, p. 2. On *The Vow*, see J. Leyda, *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), pp. 392 – 4; for complete cast and crew, see Leyda, *Kino*, pp. 452 - 3.

<sup>49</sup> On this point see, for example, B. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 35 – 41.

<sup>50</sup> Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, pp. 1 - 2. The expression 'unwitting testimony' is by Arthur Marwick.

<sup>51</sup> D. Andrew, 'Film and History', in J. Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.) *Film Studies. Critical Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 183.

<sup>52</sup> Sorlin *The Film in History*, p. 118.

<sup>53</sup> N. Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda. Myth of Reality?* (London: Cassell, 1999).