

On history and the cinema

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

Cinema in history

The history of the cinema is the history of the 20th century. Cinema is embedded deep into what one might call the external histories of the century – those of economics and politics for example – but even more deeply into the history of modern subjectivity.

This is a thought to be borne in mind as the cinema approaches its imminent centenary. Having come into existence around 1895, the cinema is in fact slightly older than the 20th century, but for the first five or ten years it did not have a distinct social presence. From the early years of the century, however, the cinema is witness to, and participant in, all major world developments, from wars and revolutions to ideological and demographic shifts and to the subtly changing patterns of everyday life. The Belle Epoque, the Jazz Age, Austerity, the Swinging Sixties . . . are all part of cinema, and of history, in the same way as the Russian or Cuban revolutions, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, the Berlin Wall or Tienanmen Square.

Since 1945, however, the multiple purposes which the cinema served during the first half of the century have increasingly come to be performed by television: not only performed but also transformed, since television diminishes the role of spectacle, which is fundamental to cinema, in favour of a domesticated immediacy, bringing events to the spectator, rather than the spectator to the event. The role of the cinema has become that of providing a showcase for feature films, leaving to television and video the wider range of reportage, instruction, propaganda, introspection, entertainment, etc., which the cinema formerly shared with radio and newspapers.¹

¹ Since 1839 is as good a date as any for the invention of photography, we have a roughly fifty-year sequence for the invention or first practical deployment of photography (1839), cinema (early 1890s), television (late 1930s) and the next major stage of development, which is going to be the linking of TV, video and audio to home computers, initiated in the late 1980s and likely to become a reality around . . . 1995.

Television has two powers which the cinema lacks. Firstly, it has a power of incorporation. Television can absorb and relay on to its small screen and loudspeaker the products of other media and discursive practices: it can therefore function as an all-purpose vehicle for carrying movies, music, jokes, chat, journalism and information of all kinds. Secondly, it has the power of instantaneity. Events in Berlin or Bucharest can be seen elsewhere in Europe or in Asia or the Americas, at the very moment at which they are taking place. Although only a fraction of television output is ever broadcast live, this fraction is immensely significant. It really is instant history in the sense that what will become record is, momentarily, globally present as the event unfolds. Because of its ability to be present, moreover, it does more than record: it testifies and performs. Whether it is the draw for the FA Cup or the dragging of Ceausescu's son into the recently captured TV studio, the showing of an event on television is also its performance, the attestation that the event has taken place and that certain consequences follow.

It has been observed that Vietnam was the first television war. It was so in the sense that it was the first war whose events could be made visible, elsewhere, at the moment at which they took place – or, if not at the very moment, then very close to that moment. It was a war which the public in the United States could observe immediately, and close to – commented on and narrativized to a degree, as is inevitable, but more immediate than any preceding foreign war. The fact that the war was watched, not just by generals at HQ with maps, but by the general public on TV screens, affected both the way the war was fought and its outcome. It was also a war about which, perhaps mercifully, there have been few movies.

By contrast the preceding wars of the 20th century were radio and cinema wars. In fact the first cinema war, the Spanish-American War of 1898, was prior to the century. This was also a newspaper war, a fact subsequently immortalized by the cinema in *Citizen Kane*. In Welles' film, the journalist Wheeler, sent to cover events in Cuba, protests at being asked to provide copy about a war that is not taking place. 'Could send you prose poems,' Wheeler cables, but, 'there is no war in Cuba.' Kane cables back: 'Dear Wheeler, You provide the prose poems, I'll provide the war.' This story is not an invention, but is based on actual communications sent by the newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst (on whom, as is well known, the figure of Kane is based), to his correspondent Richard Harding Davies and to the painter Frederic Remington, also employed to provide pictures of the war.² What is perhaps less well known, because not so inscribed in legend, is the extent to which early 'newsreels' of this war also contained large components of invention – with model ships being exploded in tanks to simulate the battle of Santiago Bay – and staging for the camera – as with the so-

2 For a fuller account, see M. Chanan, *The Cuban Image* (London: British Film Institute and Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), pp. 22–24; and E. Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: André Deutsch, 1988).

called charge up San Juan Hill.³ It would be wrong to regard this material as, in a serious sense, forged, since the deception planned did not really amount to a falsification of the historical record, and in any case the ethic of authenticity of the filmed record was not yet in place: the early film-makers were doing no more nor less than a newspaper editor might have done, merging eyewitness reports with information received from despatches and other sources. But it is interesting that within three years of being ‘invented’ the cinema was already inserting itself into the problematic of the historical record and re-marking the boundaries of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, in history.

In general, wars and revolutions offer the most visible test case of the cinema as historical agent. The most powerful single image of the Russian Revolution is probably that of the storming of the Winter Palace in October 1917. But the image that has become history is not a documentary one; it is the one provided by Eisenstein in *October*, a fictional reconstruction made for the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in 1927.⁴ Pulled out of their dramatic and symbolic context, Eisenstein’s pictures, such as that of Antonov Ovseyenko jumping on the table, provide for viewers of television documentaries today, as they did for cinema spectators in 1927, the basic metonymic images of revolution as historical event.

Most of the imagery of the October Revolution is retrospective, created by Soviet film-makers in the 1920s and beyond. Other events, however, have had their record written for them at the time of happening. There is in these cases both a deliberate process at work – an attempt to ensure that certain representations become record – and a less controlled process by which particular images or narrations become fixed in memory as canonical, and retain this canonical status by being, literally, re-presented. In the case of the Second World War, there are certain canonical images of the Blitz, which tend to come either from photographs published in *Picture Post* or from documentary films such as *London Can Take It* (1940). Not only were these images effective in their own time, but they are now regularly recycled on television to renew historical memory.⁵

On the other hand, the war in the Pacific from 1942 onwards, and that in Europe from the invasion of Sicily to the German surrender, were prevailingly represented through fictions: some made at, or close to, the time; some made subsequently. These fictions provided not so much images (in the sense in which *October*, or the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front* [1930], provide images for memories) as models of narrativity. Between 1942 and 1945, Hollywood turned out over thirty feature films dealing with battles then being fought. With a few exceptions (such as Wellman’s *The Story of GI Joe* [1945], Ford’s *They Were Expendable* [1945] or Walsh’s *Objective Burma!* [1945]) these combat films were for the most part forgettable, and have duly been forgotten; but at the time they acted

4 See Yuri Tsivian, ‘Eisenstein and Russian symbolist culture: an unknown script of *October*’, paper presented at the Oxford Conference on Eisenstein, 1988; publication forthcoming in Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (eds), *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

5 ‘*London Can Take It* is a film which everyone has seen, yet which few have seen recently in the form given to it by its makers. Fragments of it appear, longer or shorter, rejigged in detail or assimilated whole, whenever a television programme makes reference to the air raids of World War II.’ Dai Vaughan, *Portrait of an Invisible Man: The Working Life of Stewart McAllister*, Film Editor (London: British Film Institute, 1983), p. 1.

6 By combat films here I mean those war-films which concentrate on the representation of military action. See Kathryn R. Kane, *American Combat Films of World War Two*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Iowa, 1974.

as demonstrations that war was manageable – horrible perhaps, but containable as an experience within the trajectory of a narrative.⁶ What happened in the death camps, of course, and widely on the Eastern front, was not containable in conventional narratives, but the war in the West and in the Pacific was represented from a point of view innocent of horrors that exceeded the possibilities of representation.

To focus on the representation of war and revolution, however, or indeed on the representation of historical events of any kind, runs the risk of confining discussion within the framework of a basically realistic notion of the cinema. The issue tends to become whether a particular representation was or was not 'true' (true, that is, to a reality defined in some other discourse and which cinema then relates) or whether 'truth' (and the spectator who assumes s/he is in presence of the truth) is being manipulated. These issues are not unimportant, because the cinema is a realistic medium – and is widely believed to be such – to the extent that it can both show what is, and can represent things that are presumed to have been. One of its operations is to confer a certain status of reality on what it shows. If it shows an actor playing Antonov Ovseyenko jumping on a table, then it is most strongly implied that the real Antonov Ovseyenko did himself jump on that table, waving a revolver and threatening the members of the Provisional Government. So strong is the presumption of the cinema's realist and truth-telling vocation that even overtly fictional films are regularly criticized for historical untruth. Winston Churchill, for example, took deep offence at *Objective Burma!* because of the way it represented the recapture of Burma as an American achievement (led by Errol Flynn) rather than British. Churchill might have been epistemologically confused, but his confusion was typical: there is in fact no clear border at which cinematic representations pass unequivocally from the attested real to the avowedly fictional.

What is occluded by such examples is the way that cinema operates, independently of particular contents, in another register, which is that of the imaginary – not a timeless and unhistorical imaginary, but a specific twentieth-century imaginary which the cinema itself has formed. The reality effect of cinema is not just given by the fact of similitude or verisimilitude – the picture which resembles a thing or mimes an event, and is, therefore, a picture 'of' that thing or event. What is also needed is belief, the willingness of the psyche to accept the word and image of the cinema into its operation with or without regard for its referential truth. The cinema established itself very rapidly as a picturing and narrating mechanism capable of imposing on its spectators belief in the reality of what they are being shown or told – belief in the reality of leaves fluttering in the breeze in a Lumière film, or belief in the reality of Koko emerging from the black line in an 'Out of

the Inkwell'. Literature of the 1900s and 1910s abounds with references to the cinema as a machine for the creation of happy or unhappy illusion and with stories that hinge around the cinema's ability to make one believe the impossible.⁷ Suspension of disbelief was never a problem for the cinema.

A very interesting early example of the cinema's insertion into culture and of the operation of its imaginary truth effect is provided by a story of Rudyard Kipling's, 'Mrs. Bathurst', published in 1904.⁸ In this story, a sailor called Vickery, on shore leave in Cape Town, sees at a cinematograph show the image of a woman he had known in New Zealand some time previously. The film is of a train arriving at Paddington station and among the alighting passengers is, or appears to be, this Mrs Bathurst, a young widow who kept a hotel for sailors on the seafront near Auckland. Besides Vickery, his companions are also convinced that the fleeting image is indeed she, but for Vickery this becomes an obsession. He returns to the show every night and gets blind drunk each time after watching it. The day the cinematograph leaves town, he arranges to have a job assigned to him which will take him up-country. He is last heard of at Bloemfontein and his corpse is eventually found by a railway line a thousand miles away in what is now Zimbabwe.

The story is fascinating in many respects, not least for its narrative technique (Vickery's adventures and eventual destiny are pieced together by the other participants in the tale) and its picture of colonial life. As far as the role played by the cinematograph is concerned, it is interesting in the first place that it is the film that drives Vickery mad – or tips him over into madness, since the suggestion is that he was already a bit strange. But what is more interesting still is the way the story hinges on the referentiality of the obsessing image. The pictures, says one of the characters, were 'the real thing – alive and movin'.' 'I've seen 'em,' says another; 'Of course they are taken from the very thing itself.' Then, Mrs Bathurst appears on the screen, she is described as 'looking out straight at us', with 'a blindish look' that the sailors agree was characteristic of her in real life.⁹

While it is clearly that 'blindish' look that establishes a subjectivity for Mrs Bathurst (or her image), the key issue concerns her reality as an object (specifically, in this case, an object of desire). The reality-effect here embraces not only the notion of a presence, which could be fictional, but of a real reference: the presence is of someone known to be real elsewhere. The film which the sailors see, and which is enough to drive one of them round the bend, operates on the boundary between fact and fiction. The fiction invests real life because it is not only a fiction. Unlike mere stories, it has the ability to be seen to refer. But unlike a mere photograph, whose declarative function is to say that something once *was*, out there, the film in its movement inspires the illusion that something

7 This material is richly documented in a new book by the Italian historian Gian Piero Brunetta, *Buio in sala* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1989), to which I am indebted for the example which follows.

8 R. Kipling, 'Mrs. Bathurst', in *Traffics and Discoveries* (London: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 337–365, reprinted in Philip Oakes (ed.), *The Film Addict's Archive* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1977) and currently also available in Penguin Classics. See also Brunetta *Buio in Sala*, pp. 101–4.

9 'Mrs Bathurst' (1904), pp. 355–6.

still is: the psychic present prevails over the referential past.

In a sense the cinema has always operated on that boundary, though differently in its 'classical' than in its 'primitive' form. What Kipling intuitively in his story is something specific to the days when cinema was new, but the fundamental ambiguity of cinema has remained – and has passed to television not merely as an immanent property of the medium but as something to be exploited in all ways possible. In their activities along the boundary of fact and fiction, reality and pleasure, actual and imagined, cinema first, and then television, have established themselves as the principal repository of the social imaginary of the 20th century.

To say this is to say more than that cinema and television are and have been important in people's lives – that going to the cinema is treasured as a night out, or that the TV in the living room is an ever present accompaniment to social intercourse, true though these things may be. Nor is the historical role of cinema and television to be ascribed to the mere fact that they are, in the current phrase, bearers of 'moving images', since it is a fallacy to assume that just because something is a picture (which is all that image means in this context) it has any privileged relation to the world of the imaginary. People could spend all day watching 'images' on a cinema or TV screen and this fact would not be of the slightest interest to anyone except the purveyors of popcorn or TV dinners if what they watched did not have certain specific properties of which the most important is the ability to operate over different registers of reality.

There is, however, a difference in this respect between cinema and television, which is this: cinema operates with what is properly speaking an ambivalence, exploited in various ways but basically ineradicable; television, on the other hand, operates with a more or less deliberate confusion, expressed not at the level of its single components, but at that of their 'mix' or 'flow'. Television hops about: now it's live, now it's a recording; now there's a presenter, now an eyewitness; now the studio audience is laughing, now there is laughter but it sounds canned. The viewer compounds the confusion: the News is full of disasters; worse still Mrs Thatcher is visiting the scene, reach for the zapper; oh no, it's that dreary sitcom, try again; settle for the movie with Jack Nicholson . . .

In this context, debates about 'realism' (applied to the cinema) and 'mix' or 'flow' of programme (applied to television) are misguided because overly prescriptive. It is right to point to the essential ambivalence of the film image, to the fact that it is always both real and not-real in different ways, and to the degree of confusion between the various forms of simulation fused together in television, but there is no way in which this ambivalence and this confusion can be wished out of existence. While it is possible to prescribe a balance – in favour of more factuality, or more truthfulness, or whatever – ambivalence and confusion are here to

stay. What is more, they have been around for a long time. How we see the world as it is (mainly off the TV screen) and how we are able to recall it as it was (partly, though of course not exclusively, off the same screen) is already determined by the representations that have been made and by properties built into the way they function.

Cinema in the unfolding present

A major change has taken place in the cinema in the past ten years, which is that cinema no longer happens in the cinemas. Audience figures for cinemagoing have been in secular decline throughout most of the developed world since the 1950s. In Britain annual admissions are now hovering around the 80 million mark – about 5 per cent of what they were in the peak year of 1946. In the United States attendances have held up better, but in many countries where attendances remained high into the sixties, the fall, when it came, has been as drastic as in Britain. But film viewing has not stopped. It has just moved location. Films are now mostly viewed on the television screen, either broadcast or on video. The cinematic experience is still treasured, as is shown by the willingness of people in London to fork out £6 to watch a new release in a city centre cinema with a big screen and Dolby sound. But this is a minority pastime compared with the amount of home viewing that takes place of recent films on video and of both recent and old films on TV. No matter that the viewing experience is an impoverished one – small screen, poor sound, no sense of space or sharing with an audience. The convenience of not having to go out, the cheapness of video and of television, are irresistible.

As films in the cinemas get rarer, films on TV get more and more frequent. The number of films on British TV is still relatively low compared to the United States or to European countries like Italy, but it is set to rise as more channels become available. But Britain also has very high levels of video ownership, and time-shifting is a regular practice. Conscientious use of the video recorder means that libraries can be built up of films that have been on TV, and these libraries can be further enhanced by buying videos, often for less than £10, of films thought worth watching again and again.

This plethora, this superabundance of film on the small screen is in itself a massive semiotic transformation of everyday life. It seems, at first sight, the fulfilment of the surrealist's dream – as expressed, for example, by André Breton in *Nadia* – of immersion in an anonymous flow of collective images. What the surrealists were looking for was a way in which the unformed magma of popular culture could be used to break up the stale rationality of bourgeois art. They never posed the question from the interior of popular

culture of what sort of order and rationality already exists there. Popular culture is not just a site of entropy and disorder. On the contrary, it is of necessity highly ordered even if the mechanisms for maintaining its order seem relatively arbitrary by comparison with those of high culture. The Hit Parade, for example, and subsequently 'the charts', have for fifty years been a mechanism for rating records and regulating listening on a large scale. The release pattern of films has traditionally performed a similar regulatory function. Films in the cinema are customarily first-run, second-run, or (for a minority) repertory; they appear in the cinemas in a known order and hierarchy, mediated through the press and processes of collective decision. Video also has its order and hierarchy, which is that of the bookshop or library rather than the entertainments page or listing. And early television was ordered too: when there were limitations on the number of films shown on the box, each one was an event, which had its particular place in everyday cultural life.

The change that has taken place with (post-)modern television – what Umberto Eco has called 'neo-television' – is in the first instance a question of sheer number. There are more channels, they broadcast for more hours of day and night, and films take up a higher proportion of the schedules. With so many films being screened, it is impossible for each one to be contextualized for the viewer. In Britain, BBC 2 and Channel Four do make strenuous efforts to put films in context and even supply documentation to accompany some seasons, but there is no way this could be done across the board. Even if it was, it is not clear what use people would want to make of it: too much contextualization is as much a source of semiotic overload as too many films.¹⁰

The lack of contextualization of films in the age of neo-television is, as Eco has pointed out,¹¹ potentially deeply diseducative. It means that, although there are more films available, less is known about each one and about the relations of one another. But Eco's observations have fallen for the most part on deaf ears. As far as I can see, the response of most film intellectuals to the phenomenon is either very passive or very (not to say hyper-) active. Some revel in the sheer pleasure of being able to access so many movies, randomly, at the touch of a button. Some give up, decide they'd rather see movies in a cinema or not at all, and switch over to something harmless, like golf. Others, however, devote their lives to a systematic study of the schedules, noting when to go out and when to be in, what to watch during transmission and what to time-shift on to video.

None of these responses seems to me to provide in any way a generalizable model or to promote either an understanding of the phenomenon or a practical approach to the problems it poses for both film culture and culture at large.

What is particularly lacking, and hard to supply, amid the

¹⁰ It would in fact be possible, with cable and satellite, which have unused accessible information capacity on the signal, for a bit of text to be attached to films or other programmes being broadcast which viewers could access in order to get information about the film they had just tuned into. But as far as I know there are no service-providers with plans to do this.

¹¹ U. Eco, 'A guide to the Neo-Television of the 1980s', *Framework*, 25, (1984), pp. 18–27.

abundance, is any sense of history. Sixty years of film history – plus an occasional dip into the silent period – parades in front of our eyes without any indication of where it has been dredged up from, or that it is history at all. It is possible to date films approximately by cars and clothes and other indexical signifiers of period. Colour can help too (unless we get across-the-board colorization) to suggest that a film is likely to be post- rather than pre-1950 or so. But historical and costume films in particular are not easily dated. Dates of films are rarely transmitted or included in listings (with the commendable exceptions of the preview pages of *Radio Times* and *TV Times* and of course *City Limits* and *Time Out*). Everything is therefore displayed as if in a continuous present, with only the occasional connotator of pastness – such as black and white or the absence of dialogue – to indicate any discontinuity. Films are vaguely recognizable as ‘old’, but how old, and how their oldness relates to where we are now, is hard to determine. History is only ever now.

Television in this respect is like some imagined mathematical space, in which representations, whatever their origin, are displayed on a single boundless surface from which the dimensions of depth and historical time have been banished. In this two-dimensional space, whose only temporality is that of the schedules, differences are obliterated: differences of kind, in the sense that movies, music, reportage all appear there as ‘something on TV’; and differences of historical time, which are endlessly referred to but continually elude representation. Somehow it is necessary to restore the dimensions which have been lost.

Cinema history

In a note entitled ‘Some preliminary reference points’, placed at the beginning of his *Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and of the History of Culture*, Gramsci makes the assertion that ‘everyone is a philosopher’ in the sense of carrying around with them a ‘spontaneous philosophy’ composed of all the ideas, notions and usages with which one comes into contact. For Gramsci, critical thought begins not with an introspective void but with the examination of this spontaneous philosophy of which we are all the bearers. This philosophy, he says, is contained:

- 1) in language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content;
- 2) in common sense and good sense;
- 3) in popular religion and also therefore in the whole system of beliefs, superstitions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which surface collectively under the name of ‘folklore’.¹²

¹² Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (III), edited by Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975) p. 1375. English translation in *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 323, and in *A Gramsci Reader*, edited by David Forgacs (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), p. 325. In both these volumes the translation (which is mine) follows an earlier Italian edition which describes beliefs, superstitions, etc. as ‘bundled together’ (*si affacciano*): I have taken the opportunity to correct it here to ‘[they] surface’ (*si affacciano*), following Gerratana’s 1975 edition.

Having declared that 'in the slightest intellectual activity, in "language", there is contained a specific conception of the world,' but that such conceptions are by no means always unitary or internally consistent, Gramsci continues:

When one's conception of the world is not critical and coherent, but disjointed and episodic, one belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass human groups. The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the whole world over. To criticise one's own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. It therefore also means criticism of all previous philosophy, in so far as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Such an inventory must therefore be made at the outset.¹³

It is clear that what Gramsci means here, and elsewhere, by 'folklore' is what we would now call popular culture. It is also safe to claim that what he said about popular culture then (he was writing in the 1930s, but drew his examples from earlier in the century and back into the 19th) can be applied without too much difficulty to the rather more complex phenomena of popular culture at the end of the 20th century. One may have difficulties, in a 'post-modern' age, with the implicit Hegelianism of some of the formulations: who would be confident, now, that there is a progress of thought and of history to ever more advanced levels of development? But to take as one's 'preliminary point of reference' the idea of individuals as formed by their culture in complex and often incoherent ways, and to make it one's job to make sense of this incoherence, seems to me an intellectual programme of the highest importance – even more important (and difficult) now than at the time Gramsci put it forward.

The centre of this programme, it seems to me, must be a return of history – of historicity – into our understanding of culture and how it is acquired. The so-called 'three-minute culture' is of course no such thing. Everyday life is steeped in history. The problem is that this history is so imperfectly known, that there is, in Gramsci's phrase, no 'inventory' of the past which insistently comes back to haunt us. A case in point would be post-modern architecture, whose 'novelty' consists almost entirely in the eclectic use of historical motifs – motifs, that is, which signify through their evocativeness without

13 Gramsci, *Quaderni*, p. 1376; *Selections*, p. 324; *Gramsci Reader*, pp. 325–326. In early editions of the *Selections*, the last sentence quoted was unfortunately missed out, a deplorable mistake which led to dubious 'deconstructionist' readings of the text. The mistake was pointed out by Edward Said in 1978 in his book *Orientalism* and corrected in subsequent editions.

necessarily evoking anything precise. To ask what they evoke, and why, and why this evocativeness is – however bizarrely – often pleasing, we need to work our way back through the tangled thicket of signification, not to a once and for all original meaning, but to a history of meaning, out of which current practices have been generated. The return to history is a return to the repressed.

So it is with film and television. ‘Life’s parade at your fingertips’ (as the salesman calls it in the Ross Hunter/Douglas Sirk film, *All That Heaven Allows* [1956]) throws up a million-and-one images referring to or evoking multiple layers of pastness, but the sense they make is increasingly arbitrary. Many of these images have been seen before, and are known to the viewer. Others are not known in their singularity, but are decoded by reference to those that are known. Moreover, the reference point for the decoding of one image is more and more often another image or piece of information gleaned from television, rather than knowledge acquired from outside. The inventorizing of television (and of film on television) is therefore of the first importance.

The kind of history I am talking about is history seen from the present. It is not therefore history with the pretension of displaying the past, in Ranke’s much quoted phrase, ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*’ – the way it really was. There is no way of determining what history ‘really’ was, and even if there were it would not account for the erratic modes in which history pops up in the present. This does not mean that attempting to trace as reliably as possible the parameters of past events is a waste of time. On the contrary, the construction of objective histories – whether histories of facts relating to film production and circulation, of systems of filmic representation, of the sort of events represented in film and other media, or of the circulation of representations via film and television – is as important as ever, if not more so. These histories provide reference points, co-ordinates, without which any attempt at tracing the way things are remembered is doomed to remain incoherent. For this reason, the relatively speaking more correct versions of film history provided in recent books like Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s *Classical Hollywood Cinema* are unequivocally welcome for what they are, and should not be criticized for not being what they are not.¹⁴ More than ever we need good histories of cinema, just as we need histories of architecture, or warfare, or sex.

The problem with writing the history of cinema, though, is that histories as generally conceived – histories of the industry, or of technique, or of audiences, even histories of signifying systems – take one only so far. What is needed – and is so hard to supply – is a history of subjectivities. The current vogue for studies of ‘reception’ represents, it seems to me, a vague recognition of the existence of the problem. But it falls some way short of being a solution. There are technical senses in which films and TV

¹⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); the criticism I have in mind would include the articles by Barry King in *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), pp. 74–88; and *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1987), pp. 56–82.

15 This perspective is very important to any form of 'historical poetics' which aspires to establish knowledge of the internal parameters of works of art with the same certainty as facts external to the work. See G. Nowell-Smith, 'Facts about films and facts of films', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol. 1, no. 3 (1976); and David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 263–74.

programmes are 'received' by audiences, beginning with the reception of the signal by the TV set (or receiver, as it is technically called), passing through the sets of conditions affecting cognition, and ending up with hypotheses about the processes of cognition themselves. This work is potentially very valuable when applied to history. A history of reception (in a global sense) offers a useful corrective to positionless, 'objectivizing' histories in so far as it signals the gap between understanding the facts from a present standpoint and the way those facts appeared to audiences at the time the films were first seen.¹⁵ But in order to illuminate the presence of film within culture, reception studies need to be supplemented by theories of fantasy on the one hand and of the relation between images and their referents on the other. For although culture can indeed be seen in terms of shared knowledges and agreed practices of cognition, it is also determined by more arcane processes in which a central role is played by fantasy and the devious modes of its binding to the real.

Such theories do of course exist, and *Screen* can claim much credit for pioneering them. But the psychoanalytically informed work of the 70s, with its focus on 'the subject', has proven inflexible and hard to adapt to the task of tracing changing patterns of subjectivity. And yet it is in these changing patterns of subjectivity, and their complex relationship to other patterns of historical change, that the story of the cinema's effectivity lies. To disengage out of the surface of the present a historical dimension and a dimension representing the multiple layering of subjectivity is a daunting task. But it is one which needs to be attempted if we are to make any claim to knowing the century in which we live.