For better or worse, my efforts to assess the state of film history have taken a personal turn. My work as a film historian found traction in the mid- to late 1970s when, as an independent filmmaker and part-time graduate student, I became curious about the beginnings of cinema, particularly of film editing. What was the first cut? How did editing develop? The available literature did not adequately address these issues, and so I began to explore them myself. Of course, my questions seem somewhat naïve in retrospect. I soon realized that editing was around long before cinema, that in nineteenth-century screen entertainment, the exhibitor, rather than the image-maker, generally held editorial control and was responsible for what we now call postproduction. On a basic level, then, film editing was not invented but shifted from exhibitor to production company, resulting in the centralization of this crucial element of creative control and acceptance of the filmmaker as an artistic and cultural force. Intimately related to this insight into production practices was an interrogation of the "pre-Griffith" system of representation, which prior scholars had dismissed as primitive, unformed, and incoherent. Rather than assuaging my curiosity, these new understandings pointed to related topics for engagement, which absorbed much of my energy for the next fifteen years.

Obviously I was not alone. The study of early cinema produced a community of scholars whose work was historical and based on archival research. As has often been noted, the 1978 annual meeting of the Federation of International Film Archives (FIAF), held in Brighton, England, proved to be a crucial moment as historians, archivists, filmmakers, and theorists from Europe and the United States came together to view fiction films made between 1900 and 1906 and to present their initial insights on the pre-Griffith era. The conference signaled a new integration of academic and archive-based history and fostered tendencies that contributed to the formulation of a new historiography. One of the most fundamental changes involved a new approach or attitude toward the subject.

Too often film scholars have maintained a superior attitude toward the works they examine and the creative artists who made them. In this regard, Edwin S. Porter, the key figure in my dissertation, was a touchstone. Film historians had sometimes credited Porter with the breakthrough realization that cinema could be a storytelling form, but just as quickly they had criticized him for being rather inept as a storyteller. Of course, both assessments were off the mark. On the one hand, storytelling was around from the onset of cinema and Porter was just one of many filmmakers to develop the story film in the early 1900s. On the other hand,
like Noël Burch and others, I found that Porter helped to pioneer a coherent system of representation (a way of storytelling) that was fundamentally different from the system that emerged in the nickelodeon era, as cinema became a form of mass entertainment.

Tom Gunning’s concept of the “cinema of attractions,” which leads to valorizing many of the qualities that Lewis Jacobs derided in the pre-1903 cinema, also reflects this change in orientation. Revalorization is something Gunning and I had in common, and this has been crucial to our subsequent work, transcending differences in approach and emphasis. Here Jay Leyda’s role as my mentor was invaluable (he was Tom Gunning’s mentor as well). Moreover, as I learned by working in the film industry, creative work is difficult and far more layered and complex than scholars generally recognize. To wrestle and return to a group of films again and again so that one’s understanding changes and deepens requires a sympathetic, humble openness to the material and a readiness to accept a body of work on its own terms. At the same time, film scholars cannot forsake critical engagement with either the work or their own analyses. Otherwise, film history lacks rigor, perspective, and a sense of limits. To move back and forth between these two attitudes involves what I call “critical sympathy.” Both approaches are crucial to a method that is at once materialist and historical.

Beyond the question of attitude toward one’s subject, engagement with early cinema foregrounds at least five fundamental challenges for historical inquiry. The first takes the form of a basic commandment: interrogate the status of the film text! This commandment is less honored in practice than the announcements of restorations and directors’ cuts would have us believe. Often “restorations” create synthetic texts that have no historical standing—mishmashes of variant prints that obscure as much as they illuminate. (Paolo Cherchi Usai has written eloquently on this point.)

The problem of the text was no doubt responsible for my entry into serious film scholarship. I was mystified that leading film historians such as Gerald Mast could not establish which version of Porter’s Life of an American Fireman (1903) was the correct one: the cross-cut version in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Circulating Collection or the copyrighted version at the Library of Congress, with its narrative overlaps and repetitions. André Gaudreault and Noël Burch tackled this question as well; that the copyright version reflected what was released in 1903 must seem quite obvious now, as it did to Burch at the time. In contrast, I was a New Yorker challenging local institutional authority, and my analysis of the different versions had to be much more sustained and “scientific” if I was going to maintain friendly relations with my MoMA colleagues. In fact, Senior Curator Eileen Bowser was responsive and provided support and archival guidance that was crucial to my ongoing development as a scholar.

Looking at as many variant prints as possible and forcefully examining their status has proved a keystone of the film historical method as I have come to practice it. Writing about The Pawnshop (1916) in an exploration of Charlie Chaplin’s comic aggression toward work and industrial labor, I used the MoMA print (then the one most widely available). Eventually, I discovered that it was missing the
first few shots, when Charlie compares his watch to the calendar: a comparison of two different kinds of time (industrial and preindustrial), which sets up much of the film's subsequent ideological and comic bite. (Was this absence simply chance, or did it help to adumbrate Chaplin's ideological critique and make him safe for critics eager to frame his comedies as a genial form of humor?)

Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925) offered a different kind of textual challenge. The available print seemed so disjunctive that many scholars assumed that the film was radically incomplete and out of order, due to censorship and the reworking of film materials that seemed to characterize Micheaux's modus operandi. Establishing the textual integrity of the surviving print at the George Eastman House (based on considerations such as footage counts, censorship records, and stylistic similarities with Micheaux's earlier, recently rediscovered films) opened the way for a sustained analysis of the film's hallucinatory, nonlinear style, which depended on the recognition of key antecedent texts for its intelligibility. This clarified, in turn, the limited nature of the textual gaps that did exist.

A second component crucial to historical study involves the exploration of the relationship between films and other cultural works, including questions of adaptation. A concern with intertextuality is so basic to present-day interpretive strategies that it needs little comment. Nonetheless, the search for the telling, appropriate intertext is typically elusive and depends on both immersion in the soup of period artifacts and some serendipity. Such encounters can spark new and radical interpretations. Here again, early cinema was a powerful training ground. I still recall the shivering shock of discovery when an entertainment column in a Lewiston, Maine, newspaper cited Porter's *The Miller's Daughter* (1905) as an adaptation of Steele MacKaye's play *Hazel Kirke* (1888). This suddenly obvious connection fundamentally changed my subsequent understanding of the film (and to a lesser extent Porter's entire film work).

More recently, my realization that Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925) was not just an adaptation of the Oscar Wilde play but also a meticulous remake of the 1916 Ideal Film Company version has led to new understandings of the Lubitsch film, the filmmaker's modus operandi, and the Wilde play. These encounters with hidden, unlikely, or unexpected intertexts have led me to pursue a practice I call radical interpretation.

Radical interpretation involves making a sharp break from conventional wisdom about a film's meaning and value. One sign is a certain personal incredulity at the interpretive journey that the intertexts seem to dictate. Another symptom is resistance from journal editors and specialists in the relevant subfields. Winning over such skepticism through gradually deepening explication and analysis is an essential feature of radical interpretation, one that distinguishes it from wild speculation. The foremost practitioner of radical interpretation of American film was the late Michael Rogin. Only an excess of criticism and lack of sympathy limited his brilliant insights.

A third compelling problem that came out of the study of early cinema involves the nature of historical change, causality, and the transformation of film practice. How did we get from A to B, from short one-shot films of fire runs (*A Morning*
Alarm, 1896) and rescues (Fighting the Fire, 1896) to Life of an American Fireman? And from Life of an American Fireman to The Lonely Villa (1909)? Answering such questions required a framework for understanding historical transformation (including the dialectic between changing modes of production and representation), as well as more sustained research and common sense.

The 1890s and early 1900s was a period of rapid, fundamental change in which the domain of film practice was relatively small. Although the available evidence is often fragmentary, we can grasp the nature of historical change in that epoch with a specificity that is not always possible for later periods. Moreover, debates about the nature of historical change have been sharp and wide ranging as revisionist historians have challenged accepted conclusions about the pre-Griffith period. Was a sufficient supply of story films one of the preconditions for the nickelodeon boom—the dominance of story films preceding the rise of specialized motion picture theaters—or a consequence? Historians using quantitative analysis of copyright records (divided into fiction and nonfiction categories) argued that the dominance of story films over actualities (news and travel films) did not occur until 1907 and therefore resulted from the demands of the nickelodeons and a certain conspiracy among film producers, who found that making fiction films was cheaper than making actualities.

Working from a broader evidentiary base that did not simply depend on categorizing copyright entries but calculating the length of each subject as well as the number of prints made of individual titles, I was able to establish that American companies (in particular Edison) were selling at least six times more footage of acted/staged films than of actualities in 1904–6 (a ratio that remained remarkably constant in this period). The fundamental shift to story films had occurred by 1903–4 and was undoubtedly a precondition for the nickelodeon boom, not a consequence of it. Broadening the evidentiary base and interrogating assertions about historical change on a multiplicity of levels (production, exhibition, commerce, cinematic form and subject matter, technology, intertexts) proved crucial in addressing the questions of historical change.

The issue of historical sequencing has continued to inflect my scholarship, although the issues have usually been more localized. In this respect, one recurrent motif has involved films that were released almost a year after their production, during which deep social and cultural shifts occurred. Micheaux's Body and Soul, for example, was shot in 1924, shortly after Paul Robeson appeared in three plays by white playwrights about the “Negro Soul.” Micheaux engaged these plays in a sustained and critical way, but by the time his film was released a year later, memories of those productions had faded (even in New York) and the official onset of the Harlem Renaissance had profoundly altered the context for reception. Interracial collaboration seemed to be working, and Robeson was a cultural hero in African American communities—not the race traitor of Micheaux’s critique.

Time and again, in-depth interrogation of the full sequence of events relevant to a film's production, distribution, and reception has provided opportunities for new interpretive insights. Similar groundings in archival research are undoubtedly basic to the best historical work currently being done in film studies.
My fourth point: the study of early cinema compelled us to ask questions about the kinds of history we write. I find that the label "film historian" is at best reductive. Studying early cinema initiated the process whereby I have found it productive to imagine cinema as an element (typically a crucial element) of other histories. In the case of early cinema, thinking about it within the history of screen practice—of the projected image and its sound accompaniment—rather than within the confines of a narrower history of cinema practice proved very useful. Many (perhaps most) early "film programs" integrated slides and motion pictures. In fact, virtually all films made before 1903-4 lack head titles because exhibitors introduced each picture with a title slide; projecting a slide rather than a film was not only cheaper but in the days before the three-blade shutter (introduced in the summer of 1903) less trying on the eyes. Further, many illustrated lectures alternated between slides and films to create full-length, documentary-like programs. A history of screen practice provided a highly productive framework for understanding historical changes in the mode of production and representation throughout the pre-1907 period—and beyond.

More recently, I have pursued alternative historical models in two areas of cultural practice that cross media boundaries. First, I have become interested in situating cinema within the larger framework of theatrical culture. Cinema is a form of theatrical entertainment—one reason classical film theorists eager to assert the status of film as a unique art form spent so much energy separating productions on stage from those on screen. In an era in which all forms of theatrical culture are under assault by more privatized forms of viewing, a history of theatrical culture that incorporates cinema's fundamental, dynamic presence is worth reconsidering.

Looking at *The May-Irwin Kiss* (1896) within the framework of theatrical culture as it is transformed by cinema rather than purely as film history has more adequately revealed the film's expansive impact and underscored the inadequacy of my own earlier work on this topic. Indeed, the history of theatrical culture proves to be a productive and often necessary way to think about many genres and dimensions of cinema: the comedy of remarriage, the western, African American cinema before World War II, and so forth.

On the other side, I have been imagining a history of documentary—one that includes the still as well as the moving image. Joris Ivens's *Song of the Rivers* (1954) and Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* (1955) need to be examined as two epic landmarks in a unified history of documentary, rather than situated separately in the histories of cinema and of photography. One added reason for this proposed confluence is that both were multifaceted projects with film and photographic components. Increasingly, I am convinced that cutting across media-specific histories rather than reinforcing them can facilitate rather than impede historical understanding. It is not that media-specific histories are necessarily wrong but that their insights and connections often become more predictable. At the same time, I hesitate to ignore or too quickly abandon these admittedly contingent, intermediate historical paradigms for a broader and more amorphous cultural history. These intermediate alternatives between a narrow media-specific history and
a broad cultural history can help us grasp the history of cultural practices in a way that reveals the transformative powers of motion pictures.

The fifth and final component of the historical method involves the exploration of films (and other cultural works) in relation to their social base, which is also to say their ideology. If the trope of pre-Griffith cinema was that of birth and biological growth, then issues of relations to the social were relatively unimportant. (Don’t all infants speak gibberish?) Since early cinema was at least in part a continuation—as well as a transformation—of screen practice, the notion that cinema was “innocent” or ideologically unformed holds little weight. Porter’s system of production (collaboration rather than hierarchy), his system of representation, and the specific content of his films articulated a coherent old middle-class response to a rapidly changing America. I have pursued such questions with a range of silent film practitioners, including Sigmund Lubin, whose films expressed a petit-bourgeois anarchic fury (as well as a certain envy) at the anti-Semitic establishment; Lyman H. Howe, with his cinema of reassurance; Charlie Chaplin, with his assaults on productive labor and industrial capital; Oscar Micheaux, with his commitment to black cultural nationalism; and Germaine Dulac, with her feminist questioning of patriarchal structures.3

Some of this work has put me in dialectic relation with my good and patient friend Tom Gunning (and with the Chicago School of Film Studies, pioneered by Miriam Hansen), for my work has certainly failed to explore film as an expression of modernity as much as it might. Certainly, cinema often exploited and celebrated the possibilities of new technologies and the resulting changes in perceptual and bodily experiences. Yet from very early on, even the cinema of attractions was not just an expression of modernity, of new possibilities and freedom, and of play; it used these elements to express other, different, if not deeper, concerns and beliefs. This is evident, for example, in a sustained comparison of early Edison and Lumière films. The French films prove far more conservative affirmations of family, nation, and state, while the Edison films tend to be more transgressive and destabilizing, upending the cultural and social status quo on many fronts. (Gunning’s recent work on British factory-gate films certainly enriches potential comparison along these lines.) These issues need to be further addressed in an open and collegial fashion.

As Noël Burch has observed in a somewhat different context, cinema thrives on contradiction and ambivalence (and, as the surrealist would note, even incoherence), leaving open the possibilities for different interpretations. Here, as elsewhere, I have found Marxist thought a catalyst for historical understanding. I have also found that film studies provides a community of scholars where creative frictions produce not only dialogue and deeper appreciation for how the cinema has functioned within history but also friendships. This has been true (speaking personally) for the foundational community of early film scholars centered around Brighton and for at least two other more recent communities of film scholars: the new wave of feminist silent film historians and the New Black Cinema Group, for whom Micheaux has been an important touchstone. (The present-day vitality of film studies can be marked by the presence of many such groups, often built around annual or biannual conferences: Visible Evidence,
Orphans Film Symposium, and so forth.) Whatever the scope and nature of these rewarding interactions, let me confess to one truth that they have helped me recognize in the last twenty years: the person whose work I find in most urgent need of serious revision is my own.

Notes

1. Paolo Cherchi Usai, Silent Cinema: An Introduction (1991; London: BFI Publishing, 2000), and The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age (London: BFI, 2001). Although Renoir’s Rules of the Game (1939) is one of my favorite films and I regularly show the standard restoration in Introduction to Film Studies, the print has no status—it does not reflect what reviewers criticized or viewers saw in the theaters. To my knowledge, such a print—while it may survive in archives—is unavailable, even for purposes of comparison.


“History Can Work for You, You Know How to Use It”

Richard Abel

In the mid-1990s, centenary celebrations of cinema’s emergence intensified the reexamination of early cinema, provoked by such events as the Federation of International Film Archives (FIAF) conference in Brighton, England (1978); the annual silent film festival in Pordenone, Italy (started in 1981); and the formation of Domitor (1987), an international organization dedicated to studying early cinema through biannual conferences. Among the many reexaminations, one work that should be singled out is Thomas Elsaesser’s astute summary in the initial issue of Cinéma et cie, which asked those writing film history: “Where next?” I myself have reflected on that question in my writing on the history of French silent cinema and with respect to the trajectory my own research has taken, shifting from the analysis of film texts to studies in cultural history, from early French films to