in The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media, Marcia Landy, ed. New Brunswick, 2000.

Pierre Sorlin

How to Look at an "Historical" Film

I must first ask my readers to be patient. Before studying the films themselves—which are, I admit, the most exciting part of our work—we must first specify the methods to be used and define the subject of our interest, which is, roughly speaking, the study of the cinema considered as a document of social history that, without neglecting the political or economic base, aims primarily at illuminating the way in which individuals and groups of people understand their own time. We will of course return to the ideas I am discussing here, but I would like to warn the reader that I am describing research which is still in progress, a stage in working out a method; I shall give very few final results, I shall ask questions to which there can be no reply and I shall point out problems for which I can find no solution.

The Audiovisual Age

Audiovisual material—by which I mean material that reaches the senses and establishes communication through a combination of moving pictures and sounds, particularly television and the cinema—is a part of our daily life. It is a source of much of our knowledge, information and entertainment. But as historians, we demand very little of it. The cinema is barely ninety years old, although it has drawn considerable crowds since the beginning of the century; there are few places in the world today where television is unknown. And yet, until 1960, audiovisual material was almost completely neglected by historians. At the most, they dealt with it in a few paragraphs on art and culture. For reasons which are worth examining, historians have stressed the artistic aspect of cinema, failing to speculate on its documentary value, its possible influence in moulding opinion, or its interest as an historical source.

In 1960, or thereabouts, the situation began to change: we now have cinema periodicals specially intended for historians, we have established organizations like the Slade,[1] and a number of universities have developed courses on

audiovisual studies. I believe that television is at the root of this change. Historical documentaries are an inexpensive and convenient way of filling screen time. As editing and the addition of a commentary are usually all that is needed, a programme built up of old films involves on average one tenth of the cost of a television play. Successful series like *World at War* have exposed the public to an unfamiliar type of history—visual history, designed to strike by its evidence and through immediate contact, instead of convincing through reason and deduction.

The integration of film into the material used by historians is not the result of deliberate choice: filmed documents have been imposed on historians through the use made of them by nonspecialists or by specialists with no training in history. A comparison with written sources might be useful. All over Europe, scholars have collected and corrected texts relating to antiquity and the Middle Ages. Historians were on their own territory: no one disputed their right to work on the manuscripts, and they realized that if they did not complete the task a large proportion of the documents were in danger of disappearing. The effort to construct a positive history, respectful of its sources, is inseparable from the discovery and publication of the texts on which that history is based.

If we turn to audiovisual material, I think we can distinguish three new features which completely alter the situation. First, historians have no monopoly over the material, nor are they alone in studying and disseminating it. For example, television has made most of the interesting material relating to the Second World War widely available. In this respect, the historian's task is no longer to compile otherwise unknown sources and make them available to all: he must learn instead to use material that is already widely available. If the scholars of the past had not accomplished their enormous task, there would be no positive history, no "scientific" history. But if historians today neglect audiovisual material, it will exist in spite of them as a history through pictures. Furthermore, the public will lose all interest in specialists, and the specialists themselves will be in a curiously divided position, conducting their research shut away in libraries, but turning to television when they want information on the present. Historians must take an interest in the audiovisual world, if they are not to become schizophrenics, rejected by society as the representatives of an outmoded erudition.

This introduces the second point, that access to filmed records is very expensive. If we had to pay to consult Roman inscriptions or medieval documents, and pay again if we quoted them, historical publications would be few in number, and historiography would become the privilege of a few public foundations and wealthy individuals. We cannot discuss the cinema without bringing up the central question of money. As there is heavy demand, due mainly to the requirements of television, the film companies charge high prices. We have to make do with one film, when for the purposes of comparison we would prefer to use ten. In the book from which this essay is taken, we are going to discuss a number of films, but if the reader were to see them all it would prove to be an expensive undertaking. I hope that my accounts will suffice.

We can read a text once and then discuss it; we are all used to this kind of exercise. With a film it is more difficult: we are trained to read, rather than to watch. And here we come to the third point. Hitherto, the historian produced a new text after having read existing documents. In both, the medium of expression was the same—language. Cinema, however, although it too uses language, can manage without it. There are many films in which not a single word is spoken. In any case, when language is used in the cinema, it forms part of a whole: the raw material of cinematic expression is an indissoluble combination of picture, movement, and sound. Anyone who is interested in the audiovisual—historian or otherwise—must translate a system with several components into a system with only one—language. Starting from pictures, he must produce a written text. It is an unsatisfactory method, and I accept that in writing this book, I place myself and my readers in a rather absurd position: it is difficult for us to obtain the necessary material, and we do not quite know how to use it. I am convinced that more and more we will use another film medium, video, to express our feelings about cinema film. So why embark on an unsatisfactory study that will be out of date in twenty or thirty years? For the moment, we have no alternative: we must begin somewhere, and we can argue that getting used to pictures no doubt begins with getting used to reading.

We will not be considering the whole of world cinema, of course, and I would like to explain the choices I have made. I have chosen 1960 as a *cut-off point*, when television had become a commonplace in nearly every country in the world and when light, inexpensive recording equipment became more generally available, at least in the West. If we were concerned only with the United States, we would naturally have to go back to 1950, whereas in other countries 1970 might have been a more appropriate date at which to end the study: 1960 is taken as an average boundary. Before then, television was of only slight importance and audiovisual material was limited to the use made of it in the motion picture industry: film equipment was cumbersome and expensive; only a few companies used it for specific purposes, which we will discuss later. Production was restricted to a few, select circles, and an inventory of the audiovisual film output of the pre-1960 period would be a brief one: most of the existing material on the Second World War, for example, has been located.

Since 1960, the television companies have been filming constantly to provide programme material. The availability of small cameras and video means that companies, political groups, and private individuals have recorded on literally miles of film or tape. To take only one example: three years after the *coup d'état* in Chile there were at least three feature films and several short films on the failure of the "Union Popular" and the events of September. We know not only the official truth—elections, parliamentary debates, speeches, processions—but we also have filmed records of dozens of incidents unknown to the press—the occupation of land, the shopkeepers' strike, confrontations between workers and lorry drivers, and arrests made by the army in September and October. Of Hitler's accession to power, the cinema shows us only the official version—Hitler in the Reichstag, the screaming crowd in the streets, the enthusiasm of the

victors. There exist only a few photographs of the hunting down of opponents, the prisons, and the first concentration camps, whereas we have several hours of film on the internment camps in Chile. The history of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, the *coup d'état* in Chile, or the Portugese Revolution will be known through audiovisual records as much as through written ones, but an inventory of this material will first have to be drawn up, and this will need lengthy research by international teams. We have not yet reached this stage.

In short, we have a stage of limited development in the evolution of audiovisual material, followed by a stage of ultra-rapid expansion. We will restrict ourselves in this book to the first stage, which is the only one for which we can achieve a fairly clear general view. For this period, the exploratory research and archive work is well advanced. The Slade Film History Register can be consulted by subject (mines, strikes, bombing, etc.) or by period. In addition to newsreels, all British films stored in the National Film Archive are listed in a printed catalogue and the catalogue of the other films is available on demand.

How Films Are Made

At this point, it would perhaps be useful to summarize what a motion picture is, from a material point of view. Everybody knows this as well as I do, but we must agree on the technical terms we are to use. A motion picture is first of all a strip of film on which frames are printed; during filming, as during projection, the number of frames filmed or projected is constant for a given period, generally twenty-four frames per second. The filming begins when the motor is switched on, and the sequence of frames taken continuously, without stopping the motor, is called a shot. When a cameraman comes to the end of a reel he has the raw material of a film; several consecutive shots which may have no connection with one another. The film is constructed when some passages are cut out of certain shots, and shots that the director wishes to bring together, for reasons of completion or contrast, are spliced end to end. This is the editing. Several related shots, for instance showing the arrival of a person who gets off a plane, into a car, and drives away, form a sequence.

It is essential to bear these points in mind if we are to understand what kind of document we are working with. It is very rare to find raw material—a shot as it was filmed by the cameraman: most if the films we see have been edited. It is impossible to reconstruct the originals, because what is not used is nearly always thrown away, for lack of room. But you must not imagine that what has disappeared was of great value: in most cases the cameraman responsible for filming an event, such as the opening of an exhibition by the king, took three times more than was necessary to be sure of having clear pictures, in which the king and the people welcoming him were easily recognizable. The problem for the historian is not that shots have been eliminated, but that what he sees is the result of a subjective choice, where the effect of editing is involved; that is, the influence that the different shots making up a sequence have on one another. On top of this,

since 1930 there is the further problem of the sound track. We must remember that before magnetic recording came into general use, sound recording was an extremely delicate operation, requiring complex, cumbersome equipment. Speeches were recorded easily, because the speaker did not move; but in the previous example, an enormous effort would have been needed to follow the king as he walked through the exhibition, speaking to different people. Nobody thought it was worth taking the trouble. In spite of appearances, the cinema before 1960 consists of silent films to which sound has been added. In the sequence of the royal visit, vague crowd noises, voices, applause, and a commentary were added later. When we watch such a film, we are conscious of an atmosphere, and we feel a sense of involvement; but the sound effects, which play a large part in our impression, are artificial and have nothing to do with the scene that was filmed. Let us try to make a comparison: there is a great difference between a telex from a news agency reporting an event and a comment on this event in the *Times* or the *Guardian*. Exactly the same thing is being dealt with, but the article develops, shifts and modifies it. There is an even greater transformation between the filmed shot and the shaping through editing and the addition of sound effects. In most cases we know only the finished version of filmed events.

So I propose to make a first distinction between the filmed document as raw material, and the film which gives an interpretation, a particular point of view. I am stressing this difference because it is generally ignored in studies of the cinema. A classification should be made among films; several studies, in particular the article by Roads on film as historical evidence,[2] have laid down rules for this; and I do not think it is necessary to repeat here what you can easily find elsewhere if you are interested. Suffice to emphasize the difference between information films and feature films.

They can first be contrasted by stressing that the very great majority of feature films are fictional; the few exceptions, like Walt Disney's films on the desert, and documentaries on the sea, and on animals, are not very important. Information films are directly connected with the world of social relations, certain aspects of which they claim to reveal. To borrow a term from semiotics, we will say that they have a referent. For instance, it is decided to film a race that should interest the public. The purpose is the contest; the film of course shows only a few aspects, interpreted by the shooting and the editing, and transformed by sound effects. But the film exists only in relation to its pretext, and if we want to study it we must compare it with the referent. A fictional film is its own event; technicians and actors have been brought together, and for several weeks they have formed a social group, the manifestation of which is a long strip of film. The motion picture is both the cause and the result; it has no referent.

This involves a great difference in the way in which the audience is addressed. An information film seeks the best viewpoint of the event, the clearest picture; it concentrates entirely on the scenes and the people to be shown. A fictional film has less need of clarity and precision, but as it refers to nothing other than itself, it must grip the audience, making them participate actively, guess what is not shown, and feel sympathy or repulsion with what is happening on the

screen. Brecht has explained perfectly the justification and function of this phenomenon of identification; he studied it mainly in the theatre, and we shall have to make a closer examination of the mechanisms by means of which the feature film involves the audience.

On the one hand we have the feature film, often unrelated to current events, and in any case conceived as a self-contained work, an enclosed universe; on the other hand, we have the information film which is only a kind of relay, a reflection that is no doubt distorted but that was originally based on direct observation of an event. It would seem that for the historian the information film is the preferred audiovisual document, the one from which he can get most. From sources of this latter type, the British Inter-University History Film Consortium has made five very interesting films on the years between 1936 and 1940 (*The Munich Crisis: The End of Illusions; From Munich to Dunkirk; The Spanish Civil War; The Winter War in its European Context; Neville Chamberlain*);[3] and the Open University has edited the War and Society series.[4] I am nevertheless going to criticise this kind of document. My proposition is that the information film is of undoubted but extremely narrow value, and that for the period we are dealing with, that is, for the years *before 1960,* the most original source is the fictional film.

Moving, Talking Newspapers: The Newsreels

Newsreels were born with the cinema: in 1896 or 1897, Dickson in the United States and Lumière in France were filming scenes of daily life. Until about 1910, cinema shows had no programme; people went without knowing what they would see, just to watch moving pictures. The performances were short and included about ten items, a mixture of newsreels and fictional scenes. Even at that time, the principal market was already the United States. In Europe, cinemas were open only a few hours a day, whereas in the United States the nickelodeons, which started in 1905, were so popular that within five years there were nearly 10,000 of them, open from morning till night; programmes changed daily, which meant that there was a considerable demand for films to renew the shows.[5] For technical reasons, mainly because they owned the patents, the market was dominated by a few companies—Edison, Biograph, and Pathé. In 1908, they came to an agreement and founded the Motion Picture Patents Company which had a monopoly of production and sales in the United States. Pathé dealt particularly with newsreels; this company already had subsidiaries in most European countries, and to supply this vast circuit the company sent cameramen all over the world to make films that could be shown equally well Russia or in England, and in the east or the west of the United States. The dominance of a company which supplied an extremely diverse clientele set a model for newsreels at the beginning of the century. This pattern did not change until 1960 and remains unchanged in countries like Italy, where newsreels are still shown in cinemas.

There are various reasons for this permanence. Let us briefly mention some technical considerations, although these are not the main factor. Those of you who have used a cine-camera know how difficult panning is—swivelling the camera to follow a moving object—if a tripod is not used. The exploits of Buster Keaton in *The Cameraman,* following the stages of a gigantic fight step by step, would be almost impossible with the lightweight equipment available today; it was out of the question with the old cameras, which were far too heavy. In addition, emulsions were slow, and filming was only possible in a good light. For a film to be successful, it was advisable to choose a good position, set up the equipment beforehand, and wait for sufficient light; so the simplest thing was to film events announced in advance, such as exhibitions, sporting contests, and military parades. If there was a violent demonstration or a fight, the still photographers took a few snaps and the cine-cameramen arrived when it was all over.

But we must take into account other phenomena, with which historical research is directly concerned.

The first important question is the organization of the film industry and its position with regard to the public. The habit of going to the cinema spread remarkably quickly in the West, from the first decade of the century. Twentieth-century historians seem to forget that the film was a perfectly common information vector well before the First World War. In his articles, which I recommend you to read,[6] N. Pronay has shown that no English newspaper ever reached a public comparable with that of the newsreels, which were seen every week by more than half the population of Great Britain during the 1930s.[7] The newspapers have their public, whose characteristics they approximately know, and for whom they adapt their style. Newsreel producers[8] do not know whom they are addressing; the same films are shown in a small agricultural town, a working-class suburb, and the West End, depending on the distribution circuit, so they have to try to please everyone.

We know the instructions given to Gaumont-British cameramen—give priority to traditional events, festivities, and sport; when abroad, do not miss either official ceremonies or events in which the English are involved.

People dealing in news items and entertainment in other media often take care not to offend their public; but the fear of shocking the audience never seems as acute as it is in the cinema. Filmmakers have always avoided what might annoy their audience, using a self-imposed censorship to avoid any kind of "excess." Just before the First World War, the British Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, fearing the loss of a part of its audience, urged the Association of Kinematograph Manufacturers to establish a system of censorship: a British Board of Film Censors was established in January 1913. The filmmakers were not obliged to refer their films to this new private institution, but it became more and more difficult to find cinemas ready to show a film without the certificate delivered by the Board. The cinema had created its own limits.

The big European cinema networks, of which Pathé was the best example, did not survive the First World War. After 1920 they broke up into national companies and the market was taken over by firms in the United States, which were

now the most powerful. For their sales abroad, and for their purchases of foreign films, almost all the producers went through the United States. The circuits had changed, but the old rules endured—to reach every social group within any one country, to satisfy audiences in very different countries, and to concentrate on a few well-defined fields of interest which people had become accustomed to since the earliest newsreels.

We must also take into account a conception of news which places the event in the foreground. As historians, we should wonder how, in each period, the public is informed of current events; for reasons that we do not have time to analyse, we should note a tendency, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to put the emphasis on exceptional facts, which can be dated precisely and described in a few words or a few pictures. An attempt was made in the cinema to develop magazines dealing with a single subject, but they had little success and filmed news which was almost entirely limited to a series of brief, superficial glimpses of a small number of events.

Excellent studies have already been made of newsreels from Britain and the United States,[9] and I will therefore deal more with German films. The Bundesarchiv collection in Coblenz is far from complete for the period of the 1920s, but the period from 1929 to 1932 is covered more satisfactorily. There, we would expect to find material on the German crisis, unemployment, rioting, the rise of the Nazi organizations, but in fact newsreels made during this time are no different from those of previous years, and remarkably similar to newsreels produced in other European countries in their general conception. Sport is prominent, appearing weekly and frequently taking up more than half of the programme. Regional festivities featuring dancing, costume, and music appear to be the next most popular subject, followed by film of official ceremonies. The crisis is mentioned only indirectly, and coverage of politics is confined to what might be called "recognized" circumstances—elections, inaugurations, and visits of foreign dignitaries.

Documents of this sort are of only limited value, although they are not entirely worthless. They invite an interesting comparison with the concerns of the written media in 1932. The newspapers of the period continually refer to the rise of Hitler: if we took them as our only source, we might deduce that the Germans were interested in nothing but politics. Newsreels counterbalance this impression, reminding us that the economic and political crisis overlay ordinary activities without affecting them. The same Germans who, through political meetings and the newspapers, lived in a state of permanent tension, found their country apparently unchanged when viewing newsreels at the cinema.

Filmed news was never intended to cover developments over a long period; it deals only with particular facts, occurring at a definite point.[10] It is at its best when dealing with diplomatic agitation, military preparedness, or the effects of war.[11] Hardly surprisingly, the five British Inter-University History Film Consortium films all deal with the origins or the early years of the Second World War, three of them focusing entirely on the fighting. The material gives us a good idea of what was at stake (such as the strategic importance of Madrid), the conditions in which fighting took place (winter in Finland), the rival forces, and the principal battles.

Newsreels themselves are questionable as pieces of evidence. What can be gleaned from an analysis of them? John Grenville[12] proposes a distinction between primary and secondary evidence, giving as an example the Gaumont-British special feature on the Munich Conference and Chamberlain's return to Great Britain. The film gives us very little information on the diplomatic discussions themselves: here it provides only secondary evidence. But it gives primary, direct evidence in the sequence showing Chamberlain reading a report on the results of the Conference. Primary evidence of this sort, however, is hardly very useful. Newspapers published the report in full, and in this respect the film made no great contribution to the evidence already available elsewhere. I think we must see the film in a rather different light. The film shows Chamberlain being driven home along a road lined with crowds. The people raise their arms and the soundtrack records long shouts of applause. The evidence here is secondary rather than primary. The filmmakers wanted to show that the British people supported Chamberlain's policy, and that they were prepared to unite in support of their leader. The British filmmakers were in fact imitating their German counterparts. Interestingly enough, the same film footage was re-edited in France for French audiences, with the French Prime Minister Daladier taking the place of Chamberlain. In the English version, Chamberlain's return is featured prominently: in the French film, Daladier's return is dealt with much more briefly. Knowing that newsreels are composed entirely of shots chosen to produce a desired effect, and with a completely fabricated soundtrack, we should not conclude that the British were more satisfied with the results of the Munich Conference than the French were. All we can say is that the filmmakers themselves had two completely different sets of objectives. Films tell us all we need to know about the policies and opinions of their makers, and no more, but as we are aware of the importance of newsreels in influencing opinion, we must also understand what those policies and opinions were.

Newsreels show the world as filmmakers would like to see it, as is obvious in their choice of topics and even more apparent in the style of the various sequences. In spite of its brevity, every part of a weekly newsreel can be edited in various ways.[13] Official ceremonies, for example, are described in suitably solemn manner. The Prince of Wales visits allotments given to poor country people: we see the Prince arriving, speaking, smiling, digging, cutting corn. His exploits are not of intrinsic interest and might even be described as faintly ludicrous, but the filmmakers were interested in making the point that the Prince was prepared to try. Today, we can learn little of value about the Prince of Wales from the film, but we can at least gain some information about rural life in the 1930s by examining the faces of the ordinary people ranged behind him in the film.[14] Another reel[15] covers the street fights between Communists and fascists in London: a few brief shots and a shouted commentary make both demonstrations appear shocking and offensive.

We are obliged to treat newsreels as "distorted" or rather as "directed" images of society. Events that were of little importance at the time are endowed with a greater significance through repetition. Penelope Houston underlines this point: "Look at enough news film and one begins to feel that the most constant image of the 1930s is of a mounted police charge into an unarmed street crowd. But I realise, as I write this, how little real idea I have of the facts. How often was this scene actually enacted, in London, or Paris, or Madrid, or Berlin? How far is it an impression gained from well deployed screen use of a few unfailingly dramatic shots?"[16] Newsreels give us a highly selective view: if we want to use newsreels as evidence, we must expose the concealed rules governing that selectivity.

Newsreels illustrate diplomatic and military history, but they might also be useful in another way if we were prepared to consider them as ethnographical documents.[17] If we look, for example, at film of German crowds leaving a stadium, and if we ignore the clothes, the uniforms and the surroundings and consider only the mannerisms, the way of walking, the priority given to women and children, and the composition of the groups, we are presented with a number of interesting details. We can guess that half a century ago, social life modelled behaviour in very different ways, but we lack the means to prove it. In this respect, films are a potentially useful source of evidence, but perhaps we are still too close to the period and should leave research of this sort to the historians of the twenty-first century.

Imagine that a catastrophe destroyed all newspapers everywhere with the sole exception of *Life* magazine; who would dare to use this sole source as a basis for writing history? What happens with newsreels is rather like that. This is not an imperfection peculiar to the cinema, but a situation connected with the production and distribution of newsreels in the first half of the twentieth century. This fact must be acknowledged, and we must limit the use of news films to the restricted field for which they are suitable, and look elsewhere—in fact to feature films—for an instrument for research.

History and Historiography

Up to now we have discussed the relationship between the cinema and historical research as though the purpose of this research was obvious to everyone. I am not sure that we are in complete agreement on this point, and before considering the use of feature films I think it is essential to make it clear, at least as far as I am concerned, how I see the historian's work.

In the first stage, history is an attempt to clarify—to sort out what is probable from what is false, to establish the chronology of events, to show the relationships between them, and to detect periods of strong social or political tension and define their characteristics. We can call this positive history, the methods of which were devised two centuries ago and have lost none of their value. Today, we must go beyond this stage. We know that history is a society's memory of its past, and that the functioning of this memory depends on the situation in which

the society finds itself. Out of the almost infinite mass of incidents and encounters which perpetually occur, a certain number are identified and described, and in this way become fixed as events, particular moments, the memory of which will be passed down and adopted by later generations. Sometimes it is a matter of chance whether a name or date stands out or disappears, but we should not attach too much importance to this. The essential part of what remains was made to be kept; even if we restrict ourselves to material traces, we find what was built to last—the towns, the houses of the powerful, the palaces. Our task is not only to reconstitute the past; we must also understand how, and according to what interest, the bases of our future documentation accumulated. We must realise that our work is largely conditioned by the organization of the period in which we are interested.

Most societies, at any rate Western societies, create their history as they evolve. And in these societies, certain groups, social classes, political parties, and socio-professional communities define their own version of the past. To clarify matters, we will use the word "historiography" to refer to the work of historians (or any other people) based, in principle at least, on all the available documents; and we will call the descriptions proposed by the groups belonging to the same society "historical traditions." I will make this clearer by an example that I would like you to bear in mind, concerning Russian films about the October revolution. In Russia it has always been the rule to refer to history, and particularly to the experience of the revolution; before the opposition was crushed by Stalin, it defined its position against the party leaders in terms of its own version of the events of 1917. The conflicting trends in the Bolshevik Party were marked by revisions of the previously accepted historical traditions. Today, now that the opposition is reappearing, it presents the reassessment of October and the period of Lenin as an essential stage. The Russian example is particularly obvious, but the same phenomenon can be found in many other countries.

The historical tradition defended by each group and class is of course only an instrument for talking about the present; the conflicts that divide a society, and the goals pursued by the opposing forces, are transposed in the semblance of past events. So I think that historiography—the history of history—is the ideal instrument for approaching the study of the problems that are current concerns in a society and for understanding the picture it has of its future.

I now come to what seems to me the second aspect of historical research—an aspect complementary to and inseparable from positive research. With the methods available to us—defining the socioeconomic base, analysing production methods and yields, studying quantitative data—we describe a period or a social sphere from the outside. But our research remains firmly rooted outside its object unless we can go beyond our scientific problematics and try to discover how the society we are dealing with defined itself, how it interpreted its own situation.

Let us return to the example of Soviet Russia. For a decade, the Bolshevik Party was simply not strong enough to administer a country of that size without some additional support, and so the Bolsheviks re-created a precariously

privileged class in the form of a vast bureaucracy. Half a century later, we can now see this process as a whole, and we can begin to understand its significance and the various stages in its evolution; we must now discover how those who were involved in the process understood it, and the extent to which their actions were guided by their perceptions. In research of this kind, the greatest obstacle is the dearth of documentary evidence. The leaders of a political struggle have of course left their own accounts of the period, but how can we discover the point of view of those who did not write in newspapers or speak at congresses, but who nevertheless had an important part to play in a period of open struggle? At this point, we must turn to other material, including feature films.

Not all films are of equal interest, however, and we will first of all discount mass-produced imitations of an earlier success, on the grounds that these simply cashed in on a fashionable and popular theme. Mass production would be of interest if we were studying public reaction, but that is not our concern here.

On the other hand, the success of a new film must be taken into account, although I admit that this criterion is a very ambiguous one: bad films can be transformed by good publicity and vice versa, but we have no other method of assessment. We can measure the size of audiences and the length of runs, and this will give us a rough index of the correspondence between the message of a particular film and certain public expectations of that film.

We will also consider the character of a film. Nearly all films refer, if indirectly, to current events, but references of this sort are frequently obscure. For reasons of economy, we will concentrate on overtly political films. In view of what we have said about the importance of historical traditions, I think it would repay our interest to analyse historical films in which we have a chance of finding a view of the present embedded within a picture of the past. Finally, I have chosen films produced during periods of tension, rather than those that were released in a period of relative calm.

To sum up, I would therefore propose four rules for selection: the originality of a film, its relationship to current events, its favourable reception by the public, and the fact of its being produced and distributed during a time of crisis. On this basis, we could analyse several films from the same period (those films made on the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1927, for example), but as we are attempting a comprehensive view, rather than an exhaustive one, I think it would be best to select a number of different examples, rather than restrict our choice to films made at a certain time. In 1914–1915, for example, when war broke out in Europe, very few historical films were made, and yet *La Marseillaise*, *La Grande Illusion* and *Gone with the Wind* were all made at the time of the Spanish Civil War, when the sins of German and Japanese aggression were first apparent and war seemed imminent. Not all historical films were exceptional: many of them were mass-produced. In studying the film I have selected, I will say why I consider it to be original, why it can be classified as an historical film, what kind of reception it had, and—because we are concerned with "history in film" rather than "film in contemporary history"—with the period covered in the film itself, rather than the period at which it was made.

What is an "Historical" Film?

Before beginning the individual analyses, I think it is essential to raise a few general questions about the nature of the historical film and the methods of research already in use.

When we want to characterize a film briefly, we try to isolate the features it has in common with other films, so that it can be classified as a type. Most of the types that we are familiar with—westerns, thrillers, comedies, science fiction, horror—developed within the world of the cinema, despite their literary origins, and they no longer exist except as cinematic types. The peculiarity of historical films is that they are defined according to a discipline that is completely outside the cinema; in fact there is no special term to describe them, and when we speak of them we refer both to the cinema and to history. This is a point that should be of interest to historians: it would seem that audiences recognize the existence of a system of knowledge that is already clearly defined—historical knowledge, from which filmmakers take their material.

A spectator watching an unfamiliar film can type-cast it within minutes. In the case of the historical film, what are the signs by which it can be recognized as such? There must be details, not necessarily many of them, to set the action in a period which the audience unhesitatingly places in the past—not a vague past but a past considered as historical. The cultural heritage of every country and every community includes dates, events, and characters known to all members of that community. This common basis is what we might call the group's "historical capital," and it is enough to select a few details from this for the audience to know that it is watching an historical film and to place it, at least approximately. When the period is less well known, or does not belong to the common heritage, then the film must clearly stress the historical nature of the events.

A well-known American film, *Intolerance,* illustrates both these processes. The film consists of four stories, three of them taking place in the past and one in the present, which are shown alternately rather than in chronological sequence. Two episodes, the life of Christ and the religious wars of the sixteenth century, are easily recognizable: they can be identified by the costumes, the attitudes, famous scenes, and occasionally portraits. But one of the episodes is set in ancient Babylon, a period virtually unknown to audiences, so the film provides abundant detail to establish the period, informing the audience that a certain object was found during excavations, that a particular custom is described in Greek or Babylonian texts. By compensating for the gaps in the audience's knowledge, it emphasizes the historical nature of what is shown.

What I think is important in both cases is the understanding that is formed, with no difficulty, between the filmmakers and the audience: for both, something real and unquestionable exists, something which definitely happened and which is history. The contingent aspect of the historical tradition, with which historians are deeply concerned, is completely ignored by the producers of historical films. It must be said that this type of film is not an historical work: even if it appears to show the truth, it in no way claims to reproduce the past accurately.

So I think that when professional historians wonder about the mistakes made in an historical film, they are worrying about a meaningless question. They would do better to concentrate on other problems.

We have noted some of the methods by which a film identifies itself as historical and allows the audience to find its bearings. In this way every historical film is an indicator of a country's basic historical culture, its historical capital. Which characters do not even have to be introduced, which have at least to be named, and which need to have some details given about them? What scenes, meetings, and events are recognized unhesitatingly? When, and on what points, do explanations have to be given? Behind the common knowledge, we can detect what is much more important: the underlying logic of history. What facts does the film select? How does it develop them? What connections does it show between them? The historical film is a dissertation about history which does not question its subject—here it differs from the work of the historian—but which establishes relationships between facts and offers a more or less superficial view of them. The understanding of historical mechanisms as developed in the cinema is another field for our research.

Historical films are all fictional. By this I mean that even if they are based on records, they have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show. Scenery and costumes similar to those of the period represented can be based on texts and pictures, but the actors alone are responsible for the gestures, expressions and intonations. Most historical films (though not all—this does not apply to *October*) combine actual events and completely fictitious individual episodes. It is very seldom that a film does not pass from the general to the particular, and arouse interest by concentrating on personal cases; this is one of the most direct forms of the appeal to identification, an appeal which is in fact not specific to the cinema. Fiction and history react constantly on one another, and it is impossible to study the second if the first is ignored. The same type of analysis can be applied to an historical film as to any feature film.

Every Film Has Its Own "History"

When we begin the study of a film, the first question that arises is which document to use. Some of my readers may undertake research in this field, and I would draw their attention to this point. A film is analysed from a copy, but a copy is not like a book; it always has a career and sometimes a history. Its career is the use that has been made of it previously; a copy wears out and gets torn, and to repair it the damaged parts are removed. Before a film is shown, its condition should be checked, and any cuts noted, so that the missing passages can be replaced from another copy. But this is a comparatively minor thing. We must also realize that many production companies print copies for the domestic market (domestic prints) and copies suited to foreign audiences (foreign prints). We must always bear in mind the origin of the print used and the audience it was intended for. The essential thing is the history—in other words, the way in which

the film has been marked by the political variations of its time. Many films that we are going to study have undergone important alterations. For some of them there are no more than the scissors of the censor to account for and things are quite simple: for a long time, *La Grande Illusion* was shown without the passage in which a German woman and a French soldier live together; the original version was not restored until 1958. With *October* and *The Birth of a Nation* things are far more complicated. I think it useful to give some information on the subject. Erudition is only the first and by no means the most interesting stage in the study of films, but it is absolutely necessary because all too often people discuss a film without knowing they have seen completely different films with the same title.

October was filmed and edited in a few months, at the end of 1927. In many of the authoritative studies of the Soviet cinema, the film is said to have suffered cuts in a number of scenes because they dealt with Trotsky. That is not true; Trotsky played a very small role in the original print: the shots showing him were cut out, but their omission only shortened the film by a few minutes. The cut shots were not burnt, as had been done for those cut in *The Birth of a Nation;* instead, the cut scenes were deposited in the Moscow film archive. The film, in its first version, was shown for several months in Russia after its release. However, audiences found it somewhat disappointing; the general impressions were that it was too difficult to follow and too intellectual. As a result the film was stored away and forgotten. A German company, which had acquired a print, finding it too long and subversive, made a concise version and sold it under a title borrowed from John Reed's book *Ten Days that Shook the World.* In 1966, the Russians took the first version out of storage and sold it to Western companies. As the Western newspapers, even the communist ones, had given the film good reviews, the government decided that the film was a useful propaganda vehicle in Soviet Russia and abroad; but *October* was still said to be too difficult for "average people" and another, shorter, re-edited version was assembled: all the subtitles were modified;[18] and the sequences in which oppositions were used (one photograph followed by the same photograph horizontally reversed; when Kerenski is endlessly climbing the steps of the Winter Palace inversions are extremely important in emphasizing his helplessness) were simplified. As we shall see later, the time scale is broken up: in the second part of the film, night and day constantly overlap one another; the 1967 version tries to "restore" the chronology by editing first the day shots and then the night shots.[19]

Here again things are simple: it is not difficult to ask which of the three different versions is going to be shown. Nobody can tell us where a print of *The Birth of a Nation* comes from. It is well known that the original 13,500-foot version, which showed the negroes in a hostile, racist manner, was strongly criticized; the producers cut out 500 feet which have never been recovered.[20] In the following years, the film was projected all over the United States; depending on the audience, the distributors[21] sometimes shortened the copy, sometimes altered the editing, sometimes added, cut out, and modified subtitles.

The producers themselves made changes,[22] and in 1930, Griffith himself issued a new short sound version.[23] It is impossible today to say which is the original print or how many prints are in distribution.

My conclusion on that point will be extremely clear: you must never study a film without referring to the origin of the print you have seen.

Problems of Interpretation: From Kracauer to the Present

Only what is relatively important politically is censored, and here we find another indication for measuring the popularity of films. When we follow the career of the prints, and reconstitute the original, we are again only doing a job of pure erudition, to which the methods of positive historical research are well suited. The uncertainty begins when we try to read and to interpret the film. Historians seem to experience a particular difficulty in this field. Thirty years ago, two books by Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Film* (1947) and *Nature of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1961), opened the way to a sociology of the cinema, but they were not followed up. In spite of their inadequacies we are still compelled to quote from them. Kracauer developed two different points of view, which are not contradictory, but for which he proposed no synthesis. In *Nature of Film,* he tried to show that feature films are realistic, in spite of their fictional character: "Film is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates towards it. . . . The only reality we are concerned with is actually existing physical reality—the transitory world we live in."[24] If we ignore the plot and the characters, we discover aspects of life which the camera has recorded all the more accurately because the cameraman did not even notice them. Take a film like *The Servant.* Today we are interested in the story and we think the setting unimportant, but in a hundred years' time, historians will find in it valuable information about dress, homes, public places, and relationships in London in the middle of the twentieth century. This is what I have called the ethnographical aspect of the cinema; Kracauer was right to draw attention to it, to show that it changes according to the period and the director; and he points out that certain social spheres are often shown while others, such as the country and factories, are forgotten. Looked at in this way, films are only a series of documentary illustrations; the frames remain, but the film disappears as a system of expression with a specific character. As it is difficult to work with film, for material reasons, and as there are very good collections of stills in the archives, it is possible to avoid the cinema altogether, if this is all we expect from it.

Kracauer also drew a parallel between the unhealthy atmosphere in the German cinema in the 1920s and the political situation under the Weimar Republic. There is certainly a connection between the two, but the author does not show where it lies; he underlines a few major trends in the cinema—mysticism, a feeling for nature, and an exaltation of the irrational—that he also finds in Nazi propaganda, but this parallel, which is sometimes forced, proves nothing.

Starting from an interesting intuition, Kracauer was content to give brief impressions, never really analysing the material of the cinema and never wondering what links there were between films and the society which produces them. I will return to these questions later.

Since 1960 there have been studies of individual films, but I know of only one attempt at a methodological synthesis—a work written by six Danish historians, *Film Analyses: History in Film.* As the book raises important questions, I will discuss it at some length.[25]

The authors look at films in relation to the historical and social circumstances in which they were produced. They think that while all films reflect a background reality, this reality is not directly reflected, but rather transformed by a series of processes. The book begins with an outline of the sociohistorical position, and then analyses twenty-three films produced in the United States and Western Europe in the fifty years since the end of the First World War, beginning with Lang's *Doctor Mabuse* (1922) and ending with *The Godfather* (1971).

The authors argue that during this period, the rise and crises of capitalism in the United States have forced the entire world into a ceaseless motion called development, which has destroyed the old social order. As capital tended towards an even greater concentration, independent producers were reduced to the status of wage-earners: "The centralizing tendency of capitalism and *proletarianization* of independent producers led to a new world where self-sufficiency has been abolished, a world strange and threatening for those who based their way of life on self-sufficiency."

Most people who work in the film industry are wage-earners, but their situation is such that they are in many ways placed in the same position as independent producers—whether they sell their products, if they are writers, freelance journalists, or musicians—or whether they are allowed enough freedom in their work that they become less conscious of the economic background determining it. "The intellectuals are to a high degree in the same position as the *proletarianized* independent producers but the mainly immaterial characteristics of intellectual work can lead to a concealment of the economic circumstances in which it takes place, so that there is in this work process the basis for a mixture of real insight and mystification." Films are not a direct reflection of reality, but give a distorted image of society, restricting social conflicts to a limited environment, transferring from the social to the individual plane and arbitrarily shaped by the conventions of the genre.

Let us look at John Ford's *Stagecoach* as an example of the most widespread types of distortion. First, some social conflicts are transposed and take place in the framework of a mini-society, a small, closed universe. Secondly, the subject matter of social conflict is transposed to the personal, individual level; the hero's problems with agriculture and the breakup of the family (remember that the film was produced in 1939: its social background is the economic depression of the 1930s) are seen as being caused by personal conflicts between the hero and certain wicked individuals. When these conflicts are resolved, the hero can return to his farm and restore the family idyll. Thirdly, *Stagecoach* is a western; the

course of events proceeds within the limits of the conventions of a particular genre which requires a fixed organization of the story material.

The general approach in *Film Analyses* is at least an advance on Kracauer. The latter never separates a film from its "author"; he imagines that a film, like a book or a painting, has a single creator whose biography throws light on his creations. The Danes realize that such a notion cannot really be applied to the cinema: a film is always made by a team. To a large extent a writer or a painter is an independent producer: he does not need to find a publisher or a dealer until he has completed his work. But filmmakers have to find financiers before they can begin, and during shooting they are constantly making compromises with the actors and technicians. The director is a leader and an arbiter, but he has nothing of the author; for reasons of convenience his name may be attached to the title of the film, but the details of his life cannot be used as elements for an explanation. If we want to put films back into their context, which is very important, we must consider the circuit as a whole—the financing, the shooting, and the distribution. Kracauer also has a tendency to tell the story of the film, to concentrate on the scenario, and to comment on the psychology of the characters. The Danes, on the other hand, try to get away from fiction, and, beneath the anecdote, to discover the hidden expression of social conflict.

In spite of this progress, I see two serious objections. The first concerns the connection made between the background and the film. The sociohistorical analysis in *Film Analyses* seems to me a little too simple; even if it were taken further, the technique of defining a model and then trying to find proof of it in films is still not a very satisfactory method. With this procedure, we are sure to find at the end only what was postulated at the outset. The twenty-three studies lead to constantly recurring conclusions: the middle class is more and more threatened with losing its freedom, and independent work is giving way before monopolies. [The book from which this essay is drawn] covers half a century of the cinema in the United States and Europe: if, over fifty years, thousands of films have only repeated the same thing, dealing with the cinema is a waste of time.

In logic, when we are trying to classify terms, it serves no purpose if we have a category into which all the items can be placed, because it allows no distinction to be made. The same applies to an explanatory model which does not show the differences between films. Instead of describing society and then seeing how it is transposed to the cinema, we should move in the opposite direction—start with the films, study their specific characters, group together those which have features in common and separate those which are different, even on secondary points. But such an analysis cannot be made simply by seeing the films; it demands a preparation that many commentators prefer to dispense with.

Filmmaking and Film Analysis

How are films made and produced? News items or events or even a novel, or the biography of an important person, might suggest suitable themes: the filmmaker's first job is to write a short account of the subject and to present it for a producer. This simple, untechnical plan is called a *treatment:* Renoir and his scriptwriter wrote several unused treatments for *La Grande Illusion* and one of them is easy to get hold of:[26] it is quite different from the final film. If a producer and a group of actors are interested in the scheme, the director or the scriptwriter rewrites the text in order to give a full list of shots, described in their order, with stage directions and technical terms clearly marked; this is the scenario. There is a good scenario of *October* written by Eisenstein himself[27] but, once again, it is far removed from the three finished versions of the films we can see today. It is difficult to put into practice what was decided beforehand, and important alterations occur in the course of production. Two examples illustrate the point. One of the most spectacular effects of *October* is the opening of the main bridge of Petrograd; the carcass of a dead white horse, which is slowly raised with the bridge, eventually falls into the water; the scene was not even in the original scenario and was introduced later on: one morning, whilst filming another scene, the director, seeing the opened bridge on the skyline, decided to include its slow and irresistible motion in the film and to dramatize it by adding a carcass.[28] *La Grande Illusion* ends with two French prisoners of war escaping from the camp through snow, mud, and cold. The snow, which produces a very impressive effect, was not in the scenario; it had snowed just before the sequence was shot and the quite accidental effect of snow enhanced the mood of the scene.

Another difficulty may arise from the novel that the film was inspired by. It is tempting to make a study of the transposition of the written text to the screen, to list differences and likenesses, to dwell on the novel and on its relationship with the film, in a word, to take into account the sources. It is well known that the subject of *The Birth of a Nation* was suggested by two novels by the Reverend Thomas Dixon;[29] many apparently unnecessary or secondary details can be easily explained by referring to these books; for instance, the scene where Ben Cameron, injured, is visited by Elsie in hospital, follows the book closely, which explains why it is so long; we are then told that the same character is to be executed "on a false charge" but we do not know what this charge is: the book is more precise; the military surgeon tells Ben's friend that the young man was "sentenced by court-martial as a guerilla. It's a lie, but there's some powerful hand back of it."[30] The novel is less ambiguous than the film, but, as we shall see later, this lack of precision about the causes of events was one of the salient features of the film;[31] the film itself was greatly admired in spite of its vagueness.

If we were interested in the process of filmmaking, it would be important to compare the novels and the scenarios with the film. If we only want to study the films in their final form, however, as they were shown to the public, if we are asking what the films show us about their period, such comparisons are less relevant. Publishers print "the text" of some films; one must bear in mind that there is an enormous gap between a shot-analysis and dialogue: dialogue only gives the cues, the spoken part of the film; the book published with the title *Grande Illusion* is not very useful because it does not include information on

centring, motions, stage management, or editing. On the contrary, Theodore Huff did very well when he described the making of *The Birth of a Nation* giving, shot by shot, any necessary information on shooting, staging and editing:[32] although it is rather a good work, I think the writer did not pay enough attention to the changes which were made from one print to another—especially from the silent to the sound version—and I prefer to use a more comprehensive analysis.[33]

A film is not simply a story played out by actors, even if the plot and characters are very important. It is also a series of shots which exert an influence through their content and through their relationship with one another. Again, it is a succession of information through language and, in sound films, a musical accompaniment and sound effects. When we first look at a film, we react to certain particular aspects of the picture. If we try to explain our feelings, we can find that our remarks are misunderstood or that they are not intelligible to others. One reason for this lack of precision is that in discussing our feelings about a film, we fail to provide enough detail to expand and substantiate our comments. Feelings are rarely a particularly useful basis for discussion or argument. If we want to argue about films—and as historians we have to argue about documents—we must begin with a description of what we are arguing about, namely films. Of course, the particular, specifically emotional quality of a film is only in part reducible to words and sentences. A description is no more than a brief discussion document. Semiologists would describe it, barbarically, as a meta-text, by which they mean another text, a byproduct of the first, rewritten in terms which enable historians to understand one another. A meta-text enables us to gauge the importance of data like style, shooting and editing. Many people maintain that a verbal description of this sort merely stifles intuitive creation and comprehension. They may be right but they miss the point completely. Intellectual, theoretical research is an abstraction: if we want to understand a film, we must ignore its presence; if we want to discuss it, we must isolate it and examine it from a distance. Objective consideration of this sort is probably less satisfying than pure, unalloyed "feeling," but at least it can form the basis of further discussion.

A filmed story and its constituent images cause us to react with approval or disapproval. We accept what we have seen or we reject it, and after the performance we all enjoy discussing what we felt. I have often observed that audiences are disturbed by the portrait of negroes in *The Birth of a Nation,* and that they react with very violent criticism. Too many discussions on the cinema consist only of obvious remarks and hasty judgements. It is easy to say that *The Birth of a Nation* is a racist film which condones lynching and violence. This may be true, but it is far too obvious a comment to serve any purpose. If we want to understand the reason for this racism, and its place in American life, we cannot be content with such general remarks. We must get a grip on the film, and to do so we must analyse it more deeply.

Many essays on the cinema try to assess the meaning of a film in terms of the director's purpose. In my opinion, a film *has* no meaning, and we should

not be concerned with the purpose of the filmmaker. As both of these statements are highly contentious, I will try to make them more precise.

On the question of meaning, I would say that a film does not *necessarily* demonstrate anything. If it does make a point, it does so in such an obvious way that it is simply not very interesting. *The Birth of a Nation,* for example, suggested that blacks were a threat to the South and that the Ku Klux Klan were right to attack them. This point is made perfectly clear in the film, and we would waste valuable time in discussing it further. A film shows various things and poses many questions. We cannot hope to find and clarify them all. We must choose a middle way between discussing the obvious and losing ourselves in a maze of largely unanswerable questions.

What about following the director's intentions? Griffith certainly had a purpose in filming the American Civil War, and we can study what he wanted to "explain" and why he used particular details in his film. But Griffith is not the film. If we wanted to write his biography, we would have to decide to what extent his life and his experience are involved in his films. But he did not make the film single-handed: many older and younger people from all over the United States worked with him and had an effect on the film. And the thousands of Americans who saw the film and enthused over it did not care about Griffith's "purpose." *The Birth of a Nation* was a milestone in Griffith's life, but to the extent that we regard the film as a document of social history, we are concerned only with analysing the finished work and studying its effects.

History in "Historical" Films

One film mixes together a lot of information. Some of it is shaped by the cultural habits of a period or society: some of it is new and unfamiliar. Put together, old and new make the film; as far as we are concerned, it is important to know how details, notations, and pictures react upon one another. A film is made in more than one way; there are many connections, each of them structuring the whole of a film or a part of it, sometimes only one sequence. A good method for examining a film in detail is to take one or two themes and see how they are treated throughout the film. For us, history provides a convenient starting point. What is shown of it? Are the "historical" scenes long and detailed or short and imprecise? How are they edited?

Most books and reviews on the subject of history in film compare the events shown in film with a written description of those same events, but such an approach is ineffective. What should we compare? The history of the American Civil War as we now know it and a film of the war made in 1914? It would be an absurd comparison. We are in a position to see many things and relations which were unsuspected at the time: after the black revolt of the 1960s and 1970s we do not look at American blacks as people did before the First World War. We must, instead, compare the film with the version of history given at the time, but in 1914 there were many versions of the war, many accounts, none of them with

a monopoly on the truth. *The Birth of a Nation* is one such account, no more or less so than any other book or film. If we were studying an historical text written at the same time, we would not compare it with the film version to see if it was true. We would instead try to understand the political logic of the account given in the book, asking why it emphasized this question, that event, rather than others. We should keep the same preoccupation in mind when analysing films.

As my argument is rather theoretical, I will give an example. Take Austin Stoneman, a character in *The Birth of a Nation.* We can try to identify him by looking beyond the film to the House of Representatives, where a parliamentary leader called Thaddeus Stevens had considerable influence during the Civil War and in the period of Reconstruction. During the war, Stevens was an aggressive extremist: in 1864 he spoke of the need to "exterminate" the rebels, and at the end of the war he urged the President to reduce the South to a "territorial condition." In this respect, the character of Stoneman closely resembles Stevens—but I would add that such a conclusion is not particularly interesting. Stoneman or Stevens—what is the difference? Let us go further: if we want to deal with the "context," our comparison should not stop there. In many ways, Stoneman and Stevens are very different. Stevens was elected in 1848, whereas Stoneman was "rising to power" in 1860; Stevens never married, whereas Stoneman had two children; Stevens never visited the South, whereas Stoneman travelled there "to see his policies carried out at first hand." More important, Stevens's close friend, Charles Sumner, supported the same programme and was one of the senators whose hostility towards the South wrecked Johnson's and Lincoln's policies. In *The Birth of a Nation,* Sumner urges a less dangerous policy in advocating extension of power to the newly free negroes.

Stevens or not Stevens? We cannot decide. Why is this so? We will have to accept that it is impossible to list all the characteristics of class, group, and character given in the film. We can enumerate some qualities, but we can never be sure that we have exhausted the possibilities or that we have grasped the relevance of a particular quality. Is it important that Stoneman was married, or that he very often remained seated when speaking to other people? We cannot answer that without putting Stoneman—or any other character—into a system of mutual relations. Most phenomena are only inadequately described if they are analysed piece by piece. The appearance of any element depends on its place and its function in the pattern as a whole. The shots do not simply stand "additively" next to each other, but assume quite different shades of meaning through this juxtaposition. Our vision does not involve mechanically recording the elements, but grasping significant structural patterns.

I know that the word "structure" is anathema for many historians. Structural analysis is not a pure formalism, nor a self-sufficient system: the structures do not exist by themselves, at least when we are working on a limited object like a film; they are conceptual models which help us in describing the organization and mutual relations of a particular complex whole. The structural analysis begins by discovering opposing principles (Stoneman as anti-Lincoln, for example) and

goes on to emphasize the process of development of the opposed characters, groups or alliances.[34]

In "reading" a film, we must make a detailed examination, on the screen and more slowly on the viewing table, of all the elements in a film, to assess material and to see how it stands in relation to other material. At this stage we must ask: What is happening? How does it work? What is the film stressing? What fictional mechanisms is the film using, and behind them, what social mechanisms are concealed? It is not a matter of "explaining" the film, nor of finding out what the film "means." Under the unifying veneer of the story, multiple threads run through a film, some of them vanishing immediately, while others are developed at length. Analysis must draw out this multiplicity, showing that several approaches are possible to any one film. . . .

NOTES

1. "In January 1969 the Slade Film History Register started to comb the film collections systematically for material of use in the study of the twentieth century. The main selection criterion was to include every newsreel item ('story') which related to personalities (politicians, statesmen, inventors, artists and 'ordinary people') who made news, events (wars, strikes and elections) and subject themes (aircraft development, welfare services, economics, women and society, fascism, etc.) . . . Selections were based on the issue sheets of the newsreel companies and their accessions registers, together with additional information from any catalogues which existed, shot sheets, and the viewing of some of the material." ("The Slade Film History Register." In Frances Torp, ed., *A Directory of British Film and Television Libraries* (London, 1975). The lack of finance resulted in the closure of the Register at the end of 1975; its files can be consulted at the British Universities Film Council, 72 Dean Street, London.

2. C. H. Roads, "Film as Historical Evidence," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* (1966), 183. See also R. M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Films: A Critical History* (New York: Dutton, 1974), chap. 1; and William Hughes, "The Evaluation of Film as Evidence," in *The Historian and Film,* ed. P. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), chap. 3.

3. Created in 1967, the British Inter-University History Film Consortium comprises the history departments of the Universities of Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Nottingham, Reading, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Queen Mary College, London. See John Grenville, "The Historian as Film-maker," in *The Historian and Film,* chap. 7; Tony Aldgate, "The Production of the 'Spanish Civil War,'" *University Vision* 11 (1974), 16, and 12 (1975), 42; and Tony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War,* (London: Scolar Press, 1979).

4. The third-year history course "War and Society," prepared by the Open University, includes thirty-two lectures. Students receive, alternately, one radio programme every fortnight and one TV programme every fortnight. The 16 TV programmes comprise, for instance, "The Social Consequences of World War II," "The Afro-American and World War II," "Guerrilla Warfare in Algeria." See Arthur Marwick, "Film in University Teaching," in *The Historian and Film,* chap. 8; and Milton Keynes, *Archive Film: Compilation Booklet* (London: The Open University, 1973).

5. "Today it would be hard to find a nickelodeon in the country that is not furnishing a change of program every day. In some instances . . . two changes a day are offered." *Views and Film Index* (28 December 1907). In Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of American Film* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939), 53.

6. Nicholas Pronay, "British Newsreels in the 1930s," *History* (1971), 411; and (1972), 63.

7. "By 1934 the circulation figure for the cinema was already 43% of the [British] population [excluding the young people]. . . . In 1938–39 over half the population, excluding the very

young, saw each week what was communicated by means of the screen." Pronay, "British Newsreels," (1971), 412–13. See also Aldgate, *Cinema and History,* 54 ff.

8. Gaumont-British, Movietone, Pathé, Paramount, Universal.

9. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

10. According to N. Pronay, the newsreels were very popular among the working class for their "personification of political issues and their directly personal style; by way of contrast the cult of impersonality adopted by the BBC and by the documentaries appealed to the middle class." Pronay, "British Newsreels," (1972), 69.

11. "The newsreels of the 1930s belonged much more to the world of journalism than to the film world." Ibid., 63. See Aldgate, *Cinema and History,* 34 ff.

12. John A. S. Grenville, *Film as History: The Nature of Film Evidence* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1971).

13. We cannot agree with N. Pronay when he says, "The 44 stories were constructed to move as fast as possible. . . . The professed reason for this technique was to cut before anyone in the audience became bored. It was, however, also another way of saying 'cut' before anyone could have had a chance of going over the story again in his mind. . . . Much the same applied to the sound tracks: the points were made to sink in through speed, loudness and repetition." Pronay, "British Newsreels," (1972), 63.

14. *British Movietone News* (24 April 1933), included in the Open University programme quoted in note 17 below. See "Great Britain 1750–1950: Sources and Historiography," (London: The Open University, 1974), 16.

15. *British Paramount News,* 664 (8 July, 1937), 4. "Blackshirts and Reds clash."

16. Penelope Houston, "The Nature of the Evidence," *Sight and Sound* 36:2 (1967), 91.

17. By selecting some short sequences devoted to precise aspects of social life and editing them the Open University had opened this field; its programmes on "Images of the working class in films of the Thirties" and "Slum clearance" used feature films, newsreels and documentaries. The OU's television programmes have been drastically reduced by lack of money.

18. Alterations often give information on what is supposed to be understandable for an "average citizen" in 1967. For instance the first subtitle, which was originally "February" has been completed by a caption telling the audience that February was the first step in the Revolution!

19. Unfortunately the most common version, distributed by the BFI, is the last.

20. We can imagine what the cut shots were by reading some reviews written after the first screenings. For instance: "We are told both in pictures and in titles that African Slaves were brought to this country by Northern traders who sold them to the South. Puritan divines blessed the traffic, but when slave trading was no longer profitable to the North, the 'traders of the seventeenth century became the abolitionists of the nineteenth century.'" *The Moving Picture World* (13 March 1915). This sequence was suppressed.

21. At that time a distributor acquired all the rights (including changes) for the whole of a State.

22. The second caption tells us: "All pictures made under the personal direction of D. W. Griffith have the name 'Griffith' in the border line. . . . There is *no exception* to this rule." It is easy to distinguish the captions written by the producers from those which were made by the distributors. Very often two or more different captions, having the name "Griffith" in the border line are edited at the same place in different prints.

23. Billy Bitzer, Griffith's cameraman, writes: "Ten years after the first showing, Mr. Aitken [the producer] who still owned *The Birth of a Nation* consulted me and I deemed it best we insert film twins—two identical picture frames coupled where one had been. Thereby we doubled the original twelve reels to feed into the new, more rapid projector." George William Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer, His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 112.

24. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 28.

25. *Filmanalyser. Historien i Filmen* by Michael Bruun Andersen, Torben Grodal, Søren Kjørup, Peter Larsen, Peter Madsen, Jorgen Poulsen (Copenhagen: Røde Hane, 1974). Quotations taken from the introduction, translated by the authors.

26. See André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 172.

27. Sergei Eisenstein, *Three Films* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

28. Having given Eisenstein's account we may add that another film devoted to the Russian Revolution, *The End of St. Petersburg,* which was shot during exactly the same period, includes some shots of the same opened bridge, which means either that one of the two directors (which one?) was influenced by the other or, more likely, that this bridge was seen as a symbol of the Romanovs' capital. With regard to the white horse, we must remember all the dead horses in Dostoevsky's novels. Bridge and horse are not mentioned in the original scenario of *October* (see note 27 above). It is interesting to see they were "spontaneously" added to the film during the shooting.

29. In 1915 many people thought that the "author" was Dixon, the writer of the novels which Griffith drew his inspiration from. See *Fighting a Vicious Film* (Boston: Boston Branch of NAACP, 1915), a pamphlet against the picture in which the film is attributed to Dixon.

30. Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the South* (New York: Doubleday Page and Co., 1905); and Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (New York: Doubleday, 1902), whose epigram is very symptomatic: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?"

31. Sorlin, *The Film in History,* 93–94.

32. Theodore Huff, *A Shot Analysis of D. W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation"* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, Film Library, 1961), 62.

33. "Special Griffith," *L'Avant-scène du Cinéma* 193/194 (October 1977). All the captions are given in English.

34. In the lecture he delivered to the seventh Conference on History and the Audiovisual Media (München, September 1977), "A structural analysis of the film 'Sisimiut' with reference to an assessment of the applicability of semiotics in historical film research, Karsten Fledelius gave an excellent restatement of the question. The main objection is that the structural analysis is too time-consuming but it enables us to observe some patterns or 'modes' of expression which seem to possess, several of them, some ideological values. Perhaps these were not realized by the filmmaker, at least on the conscious level, but nevertheless they are there and they exert their influence on the message of the film as the potential of meaning is either narrowed or broadened by certain ways of building up the syntax of the film. In this way structural analysis becomes of fundamental value for the 'close reading of the film—the sign analysis'" (p. 40). See also Karsten Fledelius, "Film Analysis; the Structural Approach," in *Politics and the Media,* ed. M. J. Clark (Oxford and New York: Published for the British Universities Film Council by Pergamon Press, 1979), 105–126.