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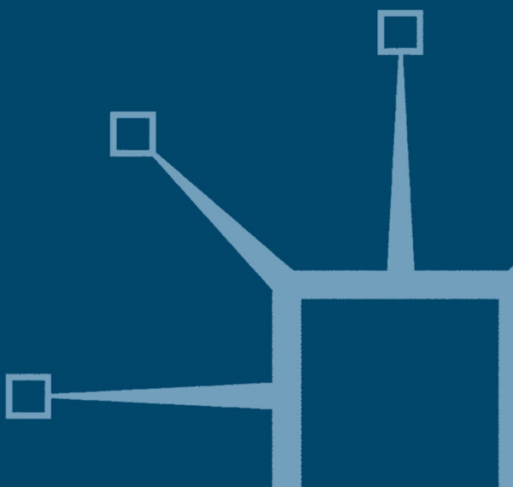
The New Film History

Sources, Methods, Approaches

Edited by
James Chapman, Mark Glancy
and Sue Harper



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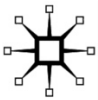

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This book is dedicated to all our students –
past, present and future

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Introduction

James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper

The New Film History is a collection of essays bringing together some of the latest research in American, British and European film history. It is not intended as a comprehensive history of film: there are already enough surveys providing a historical overview of the development of the medium from its origins to the present.[1] Our collection is a close up rather than a long shot: it presents the fruits of current research in a series of self-contained case studies that are nevertheless linked by common themes and methods. The intellectual context of this volume, as indicated in its title, is the 'New Film History': each contributor is engaged in original research that advances our knowledge of the field. The chapters herein contain the fruits of new and often ground-breaking research that represents the intellectual issues currently at stake in the study of film history. The book's subtitle – sources, methods, approaches – indicates that it is based on the principle of empirical investigation and inquiry: this is a work of historical scholarship that emphasizes the critical analysis of primary sources relating to the production and reception of feature films. Film history is both like and unlike other types of history. It is similar in so far as it is concerned with historical structures and processes: the film historian focuses on the cultural, aesthetic, technological and institutional contexts of the medium. The sort of questions that the film historian asks – what? when? where? how? and why? – are the same as our colleagues in other branches of the historical profession. Yet film history is also different in so far as the main primary sources, the films themselves, are unique: the film historian requires skills of formal and visual analysis that are specific to the discipline. The aim of *The New Film History* is to demonstrate, through case studies, how the principles of historical investigation can be applied in practice in order to illuminate the structures and processes that have determined the nature of the

medium of film and its social institutions. It is our hope that *The New Film History* will be of use for students and teachers of film history who will appreciate work that is methodologically sophisticated yet intellectually accessible.

From 'old' to 'new' film history

In order to establish what is 'new' about the New Film History, we first need to outline the characteristics of the 'old' film history. All historians work within particular intellectual and cultural contexts that influence the nature of their work, the specific questions they ask and the methods they apply. The nature and extent of historical knowledge is constantly in flux: it expands and changes continuously as new sources come to light, 'lost' films are rediscovered and new intellectual developments take shape. Perhaps the most significant development in film history in recent years has been its increasing professionalization. Once the preserve of 'amateur' historians such as William K. Everson in America and Leslie Halliwell in Britain (collectors and enthusiasts with a passion for film), film history is now an accepted academic discipline with its own professional organization (IAMHIST: the International Association for Media and History) and several scholarly peer-reviewed journals.[2] The majority of scholarly film histories have been published during the last 25 years: indeed, until the early 1980s there were only a handful of major works that mapped the contours of the discipline.

There are two paradigms within the old or traditional film history: one focused on the history of film as an art form, the other on the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society. The former paradigm is concerned primarily with aesthetics and form. This approach – exemplified by pioneering film histories such as Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926) and Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930) and still evident in recent additions such as David Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* (1990) – shares many affinities with the history of art.[3] It tends to privilege those films accepted as the 'masterpieces' of the medium – for example, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) – which have come to form the film studies canon and which feature regularly in 'best film' polls.

The aesthetic tradition represents a comparatively narrow approach to film history. It is by definition interested in a small core of films which, owing to their 'masterpiece' status, are not representative of the vast majority of film production. They tend to be the work of *auteurs* rather than genre films, or they are situated within the paradigm of

'art cinema' rather than mainstream or commercial cinema. Furthermore, the aesthetic approach tends to focus solely on the text – film history as the history of films – at the expense of the institutional and cultural contexts of production. Yet, as the worst excesses of the *auteur* theory fade, it is now accepted that the content and style of films is determined as much by contextual factors – the mode of production, the economic and cultural strategies of the studios, the intervention of censors – as by the input of the individual film-maker. Or, to put it another way, *Citizen Kane* was as much a product of what André Bazin called 'the genius of the system' as it was of the genius of Orson Welles. Aesthetic film history also tends to be teleological: it takes a particular style (the classical narrative film) as the normative example and assumes that this was the inevitable form into which the medium would evolve, interpreting the history of film as the development towards the perfected classical model. This trend was most evident in the old film history, which saw the emergence of the classical narrative arising from the 'discoveries' of pioneers such as Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith.

The second paradigm, the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society, owes much to the work of the German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer who, in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), suggested that the cinema of Weimar Germany provided a unique insight into the collective mindset of the German nation after the First World War. Films reflect society more accurately than other cultural practices, Kracauer averred, because they were produced collectively rather than individually and were made to satisfy the desires of a mass audience. 'What films reflect', he claimed, 'are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness.'[4] Kracauer's argument that the distorted imagery and disturbing themes of expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and *Dr Mabuse* (1922) reflected the social dislocation of Weimar Germany has been influential on later historians who have similarly interpreted films in relation to the *Zeitgeist*. However, his suggestion that they also revealed the unconscious inclination of the German people towards dictatorship and thus anticipated the emergence of Nazism has since been criticized for 'mixing weak history with flimsy psychology' and for reading 'too much out of the films through hindsight'.[5] Furthermore, Kracauer explicitly rejected box-office data as a quantitative index of popularity and cultural significance.

The reflectionist model, shorn of the social psychology and mysticism that characterized Kracauer, has been enormously influential on the subsequent development of film history, exemplified by important

books during the 1970s such as Raymond Durgnat's *A Mirror for England* (1970), Jeffrey Richards' *Visions of Yesterday* (1973) and Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (1975).[6] Again, however, this approach has been criticized for offering too simplistic an understanding of the relationship between film and its social context. Graeme Turner, for example, asserts: 'Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and "re-presents" its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium.'[7] The more common metaphor now, rather than reflection, is mediation: historians recognize that the relationship between film and society is complex and that films are not straightforward mirrors of social reality. They do, nevertheless, 'reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced them and attracted audiences to them … More often than not, they reflect back what audiences want to see rather than what is really there.'[8]

Turner's reference to 'signifying practices' points to an intellectual division that emerged in the discipline during the 1970s. This has conventionally, if rather simplistically, been categorized as the difference between 'film studies' on the one hand and 'film history' on the other. While the two disciplines shared common ground in their subject matter, they had very different intellectual and methodological assumptions. Film Studies grew principally out of English literature (at university level, film was often taught in English departments) and its agenda was dominated by similar issues (authorship, genre, narrative) and analytical methods (especially linguistic theories of semiotics and structuralism). Film Studies took a theoretical 'turn' in the 1970s when its proponents turned to psychoanalytical models (particularly those derived from Freud and Lacan) for explaining the 'meaning' of films. In contrast, film history, which grew principally out of the disciplines of social and political history, developed along two lines. The first analysed the use and abuse of history in feature films, assessing the accuracy and errors of historical films. The second was concerned with contextual analysis: exploring the conditions under which films were made and how far they succeeded in reflecting the intentions of those who made them. Yet both historical approaches prized empirical evidence and factual accounts over interpretative models.

The institutionalization of the methodological and intellectual differences between the more theoretical interpretative school and the historical school was exemplified by the content of the two leading scholarly film journals. Since the early 1970s the pre-eminent film

studies journal has been *Screen*, which has been at the vanguard of theoretical developments in the discipline (psychoanalysis in the 1970s, gender studies in the 1980s, reception theory in the 1990s), whereas the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* has, since its foundation in 1981, been the leading forum for historians seeking to place films in their social, political, industrial, economic and cultural contexts.

The last two decades have seen the gradual narrowing of the division between these two schools. Film Studies has retreated from the high theory of the 1970s: few scholars today would not accept the importance of historical context to a full understanding of the medium. Film historians, for their part, have taken on board some of the more useful theoretical developments. In the 1980s, for example, the adoption of Gramsci's theory of hegemony influenced the work of British historians analysing 'the ideological role of the British cinema in fostering harmony and social integration' during the 1930s and 1940s.[9] In Britain, the end of the cold war between the rival blocs was marked by the conference 'Cinema, Identity, History: An International Conference on British Cinema', held at the University of East Anglia in 1998, which was characterized by fruitful and constructive exchanges.[10] It was this increasing congruence between the two schools that had already provided the intellectual context for the emergence of the New Film History.

Rather like new wave cinemas, the New Film History emerged at a particular moment that can be identified quite precisely. The first recorded use of the term that we have been able to locate is a review article by Thomas Elsaesser in 1985, in which he noted the tendency of recent scholarly works to move beyond film history as just the history of films and to consider how film style and aesthetics were influenced, even determined, by economic, industrial and technological factors. 'Two types of pressure have produced the New Film History', Elsaesser asserted: 'a polemical dissatisfaction with the surveys and overviews, the tales of pioneers and adventurers that for too long passed as film histories; and sober arguments among professionals now that, thanks to preservation and restoration projects by the world's archives, much more material has become available.'[11] The same year saw the publication of two of the most important works of film history. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, by the American scholars David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, was an ambitious, wide-ranging attempt to write a totalizing history of a mode of film practice in its historical context, setting out to explore the relationship between the style of Hollywood films between the late 1910s and *c.*1960 and the industrial

and technological determinants of the studio system which produced them.[12] It remains a highly influential work, though the relative dearth of studio records elsewhere has meant that there is no comparable equivalent for other national cinemas. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* was different again: it remains to this day the only thoroughgoing historiographical and methodological study of the discipline.[13] Allen and Gomery identify four approaches to film history – aesthetic, technological, economic and social – though most of their case studies arise from the authors' own research in the history of early American cinema. It remains a valuable work, although, as the discipline has moved on, it inevitably has been overtaken by new intellectual developments, not least the increasing interest in representation and reception. To this extent *The New Film History* represents the expanding research agenda of film history since 1985.

Defining the New Film History

What, then, are the characteristics of the New Film History as opposed to the old? It is our contention that there are three features that distinguish recent and current research.

One is a greater level of methodological sophistication. The New Film History has moved beyond reflectionism and is posited on a more complex relationship between films and social context. There is a greater attention to the cultural dynamics of film production and an awareness of the extent to which the style and content of films are determined by the context of production. The buzzwords here are process and agency: films are shaped and determined by a combination of historical processes (including, but not limited to, economic constraints, industrial practices, studio production strategies and relationships with external bodies such as official agencies, funding councils and censors) and individual agency (representing the creative and cultural competences of their art directors, composers, costume designers, directors, editors, producers, stars, writers, etc.). Several of the contributions to this volume examine production contexts of individual films or groups of films: the section on 'Authorship', in particular, extends the field to consider the inputs of creative personnel other than the director, including the writer, the star and the art director. The New Film History has also extended the historical analysis of films from the moment of their production to the moment(s) of their reception. In contrast with theoretical models of spectatorship, which assumed that cinema audiences responded monolithically to films, the practice of reception studies seeks out evidence of

actual audience responses and locates these within the context of the audience's time, place and identity. The contributions to the section on 'Reception' demonstrate that there is much more to this complex process than simply quoting a few reviews: sources include publicity materials, audience surveys and online fan communities – the latter, especially, representing research at the cutting edge of film history today. The sections on 'History' and 'Genre', moreover, also demonstrate the methodological sophistication of current research. Here the authors interpret films not as simple mirrors of social reality, but rather in terms of their representation of, for example, history, national identity, gender and ethnicity. One way of defining the New Film History in relation to the old is that it thinks in terms of representation: what the historical film shows, for example, is not 'real' history, but a constructed version of history that accords with the ideological values of its makers and the cultural tastes of its audiences. To this extent the New Film History places the film text at the nexus of a complex and dynamic set of relationships between producers and consumers.

The second feature is the central importance of primary sources. The New Film History is source-based: it arises from the critical examination of primary sources, both filmic and non-filmic. It would be disingenuous to suggest that it was not until recent times that film history experienced its archival 'turn'. Indeed, it was a feature of several of the 'old' film histories that they were based on archival research, especially the pioneering studies of film as an instrument of propaganda and persuasion such as Tony Aldgate's *Cinema and History* (1979), Richard Taylor's *Film Propaganda* (1979) and David Welch's *Propaganda and the German Cinema* (1983).[14] Histories of the American film industry, in particular, have been informed by the studio archives deposited with US universities.[15] A characteristic of the New Film History, however, has been the extent to which it has expanded the range of primary sources available for the researcher. It is revisionist in nature: the new film historian is comparable to an archaeologist who unearths new sources and materials, especially those which have been previously disregarded or overlooked. An important revisionist landmark in this regard was Jeffrey Richards' *The Age of the Dream Palace* (1984), a social history of films and cinema-going in 1930s Britain that drew extensively upon a wide range of contemporary sources, including social surveys (such as Mass-Observation), censors' reports, middle-brow journals and popular fan magazines.[16] Among the many sources employed in *The New Film History* are memoirs, personal papers, production files, scripts, censors' reports, publicity materials, reviews, fan magazines and Internet discussion groups. What the

contributors all demonstrate is the range and extent of primary sources and the different ways that historians use them.

The third feature is an understanding that films are cultural artefacts with their own formal properties and aesthetics, including visual style and aural qualities. One of the criticisms levelled against the old film history was its tendency to read films solely as narratives (almost as if they were novels). The New Film History recognizes that narrative is only one of the ways in which audiences read films: they also respond to the 'look' and 'sound' of films. In particular, the film historian should be able to decode the visual style of a film by emphasizing the relationship between the different discourses within it (camerawork, costume, art direction and so on). It is clear that film audiences respond in subliminal ways to both visual and aural qualities. The film historian ought to have a modicum of technological knowledge, in order to make judgements about visual style and aural properties that are historically appropriate. Moreover, the film historian can add a material dimension to the analysis by showing how struggles for creative control can be glimpsed in the visual texture of the film itself. There are fashions in film style – common ways of using composition and light, quotations from other visual arts, and naturalistic and non-naturalistic sound effects – and it is important to pay attention to these fashions, and to recognize changes and innovations.

This is not to say, of course, that every piece of work emerging from the New Film History exemplifies all three of these features in equal measure. While all the contributions to this volume are representative of these trends, individual authors emphasize certain approaches. What they all share, however, is a commitment to expanding the boundaries of historical knowledge and a concern to understand films both as texts and in context: this, above all, is what defines the New Film History.

A note on organization

The New Film History comprises 15 chapters and is structured in four parts: History, Authorship, Genre and Reception. It is a tendency of many edited volumes that they end up as rag-tag-and-bobtail collections of discrete essays without any thematic or methodological consistency to link them together. While each chapter of *The New Film History* may be read as a stand-alone piece in its own right, rather like a journal article, the collection is intended as more than just the sum of its parts. It presents the fruits of current research from a group of film historians who share similar intellectual and methodological concerns.[17]

We have not followed the rather tedious practice of so many edited collections by summarizing the content and arguments of each chapter in our editors' introduction: it is our view that our contributors are more than capable of speaking for themselves. Instead, we have provided a short introduction to each of the book's four parts that situates the chapters within the intellectual context of the discipline. In determining the content of the volume, we have been concerned to focus on films and subjects that feature prominently in the teaching curriculum of British and American universities: to this extent *The New Film History* will serve as a set text for courses on film history. All the chapters, therefore, are case studies that focus either on individual films or on groups of films linked by genre or authorship. The case studies of individual films are particularly valuable in demonstrating the minutiae of historical scholarship, while those surveying a group of films serve to illustrate how film, as a medium, is in a state of constant flux as it responds to changing historical determinants and circumstances. We have chosen the examples carefully based on our experiences as university teachers and our knowledge of the response the films evoke from students. Our intention is not to promote these films as canonical texts. The New Film History does not distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' films. Nor is it our intention to consider only 'old' films. This book is designed to demonstrate the usefulness of approaches, methods and sources, and these can be applied to modern films as well as classics. It is our hope that *The New Film History* will inspire more students to become researchers and, in turn, further broaden the horizons of our discipline.

Notes

1. See, for example, Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema from its Origins to the 1970* (London: Allen Lane, 1976); Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (ed.), *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (London: Reaktion, 2003).
2. IAMHIST was founded in 1977 and has held biennial conferences, alternating between America, Britain and continental Europe. The range of dedicated journals includes, but is not limited to, *Film History, Film & History, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* and *Media History*. Other film studies journals that regularly publish historically based articles include *Cinema Journal, Journal of Popular Film and Television, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Screen* and *The Velvet Light Trap*. To this list we may also add journals dedicated to specific national cinemas such as the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*. A collection of articles originally published in *Screen* has been published as Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Screen Histories: A Screen Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

3. Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926); Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Spring Books, 1930); David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (London: W. W. Norton, 1990).
4. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 6.
5. Paul Monaco, *Cinema and Society: France and Germany During the Twenties* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), p. 160.
6. Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970); Jeffrey Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975).
7. Graeme Turner, *Film As Film* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 129.
8. John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. xxi.
9. Tony Aldgate 'Ideological Consensus in British Feature Films, 1935–1947', in K. R. M. Short (ed.), *Feature Films as History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 111.
10. See Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000).
11. Thomas Elsaesser, 'The New Film History', *Sight and Sound*, 55:4 (Autumn 1986), pp. 246–51.
12. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985).
13. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985).
14. Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Scolar Press, 1979); Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).
15. Examples include, but are not limited to, Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976); Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' film 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). The annotated Warner Brothers screenplay series are an invaluable resource for understanding the cultural dynamics and institutional practices of the studio system.
16. Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1929–1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
17. Several of the contributions to *The New Film History* have arisen from research papers presented to the 'Issues in Film History' seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research, London, though they have been substantially revised for publication.

Part I
History

Scholarly interest in the filmic representation of history was long divided into two distinct paradigms. On the one hand there was the 'film and history' movement whose interest was in the use of film as a primary source. While much of the early interest was in the use of film as a primary source, focusing especially on newsreel and documentary, there was also much attention devoted to the issue of accuracy and authenticity in the historical feature film. This interest has bred a cycle of both academic and popular publications that persists to this day and has informed debate in journals such as *Film and History* which continues to fly the flag for the cause of film as a means of bringing history to the wider public. On the other hand the 'film and history' movement was challenged by the emergence of a more theoretically-oriented tradition emerging first from the work of the 'Paris School' in the late 1970s, including Marc Ferro's *Cinema and History* (1977) and Pierre Sorlin's *The Film in History* (1980), and taken up, in the 1990s, by American postmodernist historians such as Robert A. Rosenstone, particularly his 1995 collection, *Revisioning History*. These scholars were concerned less with the question of historical accuracy and focused instead on the structural and ideological features of the historical film. They were interested in the ways in which film constructs its own historical world and in analysing the codes and strategies used to bring the past to life. Taking its intellectual inspiration from Hayden White, the postmodernist school argues that the traditional historian's source-based approach to their subject is intellectually limited and asserts that film is simply another form of historical narrative with its own codes and conventions. This approach has, in its turn, been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the historical contexts of production and reception – quite often the films are discussed as if they exist in a vacuum – and for focusing on films that,

by dint of their avant-garde styles, such as *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977) and *Walker* (1987), are unrepresentative of the genre.

The New Film History combines aspects of both these approaches: it moves beyond a narrow concern with historical authenticity and takes on board questions of representation, whilst at the same time paying full attention to the contexts of production and reception. It does not unduly privilege the avant-garde, but at the same time has been prepared to look beyond conventional notions of what a historical film is. In particular the New Film History has collapsed the distinction between the historical film (usually defined as one based, however loosely, on real historical events or people) and the costume or period film (a fiction film set against a recognizable historical background). The historical/costume film has become a focus for debates around the economic and cultural viability of national cinemas, the use of the past for the dissemination of ideologies and its contested place within 'taste wars' between middle-brow critics on the one hand and the popular preferences of cinema audiences on the other.

The four chapters in this section exemplify these different concerns. Two of the films, *Gone With the Wind* and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, both adapted from historical novels, demonstrate how film-makers deploy symbolic and mythic aspects of the past. These films were both popular successes, even though the creative and cultural economies of the film industry that produced them had changed out of all recognition between 1939 and 2003. Melvyn Stokes and James Chapman explore how particular historical periods – the American Civil War and the Napoleonic Wars – have been interpreted in ways that accord with the cultural and political interests of their producers. Mark Connelly's study of *Gallipoli* – a film reconstruction of a historical event – moves from a discussion of the film's disputed authenticity to consider its place in discourses of Australian nationhood and national identity. And Sue Harper's overview of historical and costume film production in Britain in the 1970s explores the economic and cultural determinants of the film industry to demonstrate how different and to an extent competing narratives of the past came to be in circulation in the film culture of the time. What all these chapters reveal, in their different ways, is that the historical film is a site for exploring the present as well as for the popular imagining of the past.

1

Gone With the Wind (1939) and the Lost Cause: A Critical View

Melvyn Stokes

The American Civil War is best thought of as two conflicts. The first, lasting from 1861 to 1865, was political and military. During this war, 620,000 men died – more than were killed in all other American wars combined, from the War of Independence to the two Iraq wars. The second, beginning almost as soon as the other ended, was cultural and intellectual. It focused on the struggle to define the war itself in terms of collective memory and meaning. The first Civil War ended in the complete victory of the North, an outcome most graphically demonstrated by Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox court-house in April 1865. The second in a number of respects still continues but, for much of the period since 1865, it has just as clearly been 'won' by the South.[1] Much of the reason for that victory has been the birth, growth and dissemination of the 'Lost Cause', a romantic myth revolving around the 'Old South' and the way in which it fought the Civil War. One film, in particular, has been widely regarded as responsible for much of the enduring success of the Lost Cause legend: David O. Selznick's production of *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Yet, as this chapter will argue, although *Gone With the Wind* did indeed embody essential ingredients of the Lost Cause, there are shots and scenes in the film that contradict – either subtly or directly – essential ingredients of the Lost Cause. It will suggest, indeed, that it may be time to reappraise the view of *Gone With the Wind* as a typical 'moonlight and magnolias' treatment of the South.

The legend of the Lost Cause itself grew up over some decades. It emerged in two stages. First there was the 'inner' Lost Cause: the attempt on the part of Confederate politicians such as Jefferson Davis and generals such as Jubal A. Early to justify why they had fought and explain away their defeat. Later came the 'outer' Lost Cause – the work of mainly Southern writers who romanticized the South. It was these

writers, including John Esten Cook, Sara Pryor and – above all – Thomas Nelson Page, who glamorized an image of the 'Old South' that would become dominant between the 1880s and *Gone With the Wind*.[2] The remarkable thing about this second group of writers was that their books and stories appealed not only in the South. They became the favourites of many Northern readers as well. It may be, indeed, that inhabitants of Northern towns and cities – confronting the fast pace of industrialization, urbanization and immigration in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth – were consciously drawn to a society that was simpler, changeless and more rural. In reality, however, there had never really been such a land as the 'Old South'. The so-called 'Cotton Kingdom' had only emerged in the South around 1820. There were few gracious plantations to be found there in the style of Twelve Oaks or Tara (revealingly, Selznick's scouts failed to identify one that was large enough and gracious enough to act as Tara in the area of northern Georgia in which Margaret Mitchell's original novel had been set).[3] The planter class itself was very small: only 2,300 families across the South as a whole owned a considerable number of slaves.[4] And whatever pretensions to gentility and civilization the antebellum South possessed were vitiated by the fact that such white 'civilization' as did exist was founded on the brutality of plantation slavery.

If Lost Cause mythology was both constructed over time and susceptible to a number of influences, so too was the version that appeared on screen. According to Ed Guerrero, Hollywood's plantation myth began with D. W. Griffith's racist epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).[5] But the home of the slave-owning Cameron family in *Birth of a Nation*, although it did have white porticos, had been comparatively modest. The road to the magnificent Tara and Twelve Oaks plantations in *Gone With the Wind* has its origins in Hollywood's attempts to maintain its profits during the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1941, the movie industry produced a cycle of more than 75 nostalgic features dealing with the 'Old South'. Clearly, such films had real box-office appeal (Guerrero comments that 'the southern plantation film addressed an economically insecure audience's diverse needs and problems by placing them in the comfortable, opulent milieu of the antebellum past.')[6] As the cycle developed, from *Dixiana* (1930) through *Mississippi* (1935) and *So Red the Rose* (1935) to *Jezebel* (1938), the Southern mansions shown became progressively larger and grander. This trend reached a peak with 'Halcyon', the great Louisiana plantation portrayed in *Jezebel*. After this, it would have been difficult to depict Tara and Twelve Oaks cinematically on a smaller scale. Consequently, in showing not one but two impressive plantation

mansions in *Gone With the Wind*, Selznick was responding both to Hollywood tradition and audience expectations.

Other factors, both inside and outside Hollywood, also affected the manner in which the Lost Cause was portrayed in *Gone With the Wind*. Four of these were of especial importance. They may help explain why the treatment of the Lost Cause in the movie was more nuanced – and at times more critical – than that to be found in literature. First, Margaret Mitchell declined any involvement whatever in the making of the film. This gave Selznick and his team of writers and directors far greater autonomy in bringing the novel to the screen. For example, as Selznick himself observed, the film-makers 'toned down very considerably Miss Mitchell's portrait of the depredations of the [Yankee] invaders'.[7] Second, the film-makers were very aware of the long historical shadow cast by *The Birth of a Nation*. Knowing of the long and determined campaign by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against Griffith's film, Selznick consulted with NAACP leaders such as Walter White during the production of his film. The tactic worked: although there would, indeed, be black criticism of *GWTW*, it would not involve the NAACP.[8] Third, displaying controversial aspects of the Lost Cause – especially those to do with race – was discouraged by the Production Code Administration. Introduced in 1934, the PCA sought to remove many contentious elements from Hollywood films: amongst other things, it cautioned Selznick against using the word 'nigger'.[9] Fourth, the representation of the Lost Cause was influenced by Selznick himself. While his approach to making what – despite three directors and innumerable screenwriters – was unmistakably 'his' film was dictated mainly by a commercial imperative (and hence the need to avoid alienating any major section of the potential audience), Selznick also seems to have been affected by the racial and political currents of the time. With Hollywood increasingly conscious of Germany's racial policies, Selznick was determined that his film not be perceived as 'an unintentional advertisement for intolerant societies in these fascist-ridden times'. He insisted on the complete elimination of the Ku Klux Klan from the film's story-line. But his desire to ensure that blacks 'come out decidedly on the right side of the ledger' almost certainly had a broader influence on *Gone With the Wind*'s representations of race and Southern society.[10]

The Lost Cause myth

The Lost Cause has been anatomized by Alan T. Nolan as a collection of specific beliefs and assumptions. Advocates of the Lost Cause do not

perceive slavery as the essential cause of the dispute between the sections that ended in Civil War. Instead, they blame the role of the abolitionists as provocateurs. The South, they believe, would ultimately have abolished slavery on its own initiative. In the meantime, the slaves themselves were contented with their lot. With slavery set aside as a sectional bone of contention, the Lost Cause emphasized that the differences between North and South were really cultural and nationalistic: Northerners had their (distant) roots in Anglo-Saxon tribes, Southerners in the Norman barons who conquered them. These Norman 'cavaliers' were noted for their warrior virtues and their chivalry. Secession, while lawful and legitimate according to the Lost Cause, had become a doomed enterprise once the North had determined to use force. For, despite gallant commanders and heroic Confederate soldiers, the South had ultimately been overwhelmed by the superior manpower and industrial strength of the North. With the victory of the North, the gracious, cultivated way of life associated with the great plantations had disappeared for ever. It would be immortalized, however, in *Gone With the Wind* – a film that 'idealized the men and women of the plantation class, suggested the superior valour of Southern manhood, and is strongly peopled with happy slaves and gentle and indulgent masters'.[11]

Even though *Gone With the Wind* would become America's favourite Civil War narrative, by no means everyone approved of it. In 1940, black poet and film critic Melvin B. Tolson attacked it for being more dangerous to the black community than *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith's film told the 'story' of sexually aggressive blacks pursuing white women in the aftermath of the Civil War. This threat had ultimately been defeated only by the Ku Klux Klan, who emerged as heroes of the film. *The Birth of a Nation*, Tolson contended,

> was such a barefaced lie that a moron could see through it. *Gone With the Wind* is such a subtle lie that it will be swallowed as the truth by millions of whites and blacks alike. … Since *Gone With the Wind* didn't have a big black brute raping a virgin in a flowing white gown, most Negroes went into ecstasies. Poor Sambo![12]

Tolson agreed with the view that *Gone With the Wind* summarized the Lost Cause. It recounted the Civil War from the point of view of the white planter class, ignoring poor whites and Yankees, and it falsified the history of slavery by presenting it as 'a blessed institution'. Tolson also criticized the film for the ways in which it promoted 'sympathy for the white South': *Gone With the Wind* depicted many dead or dying Confederates (the only dead Yankee is the looter/rapist Scarlett shoots),

Union shells crash through the stained-glass window of a Southern church (the fact that most Southern white churches supported slavery is not mentioned) and Atlanta burns (with no recognition that Confederates actually started the fires).[13]

What Tolson did not see, however, was that *Gone With the Wind* offered a more selective – and at times critical – interpretation of the Lost Cause. As the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* argued more than 30 years ago, even films that appear to embody hegemonic myths most accurately may still contain contradictions that serve to undermine those very myths.[14] *Gone With the Wind* was essentially a commentary on – and criticism of – the Lost Cause as well as perhaps its most influential expression.

The causes of the Civil War

According to the Lost Cause myth, the Civil War had been brought about by abolitionists – militant characters who had stirred up conflict where none had previously existed. There was some evidence in favour of this proposition: abolitionists had been regarded in many Northern communities as discordant elements.[15] Whites in the South and North were often united not so much by their dislike of slavery as by their dislike of black people.[16] On the other hand, in the years between 1831 and 1860, a moral consensus had emerged outside the South that slavery should not be allowed to spread – that, in essence, it be confined to the Southern states in which, it was hoped, it would eventually disappear. The abolitionists can be seen as having contributed to the creation of this consensus.

Gone With the Wind (unlike *The Birth of a Nation*) did not feature or refer to abolitionists in any specific way (though Gerald O'Hara mentions that the South has received 'enough insults from the meddling Yankees'). Indeed, according to Tolson, the film avoided any significant confrontation with the causes of the war. Despite half the film being set against the background of the war itself,

> the Civil War comes like a spontaneous combustion. … *Gone With the Wind* shows not a single economic or social or political cause that led to the Civil War. How could a civilization be 'gone with the wind' unless there was something to MAKE it go?[17]

In fact, Tolson was wrong. The film identifies at least three causes of the war. The first of these was slavery. At one point, *Gone With the Wind* reproduces the Lost Cause notion that, left to its own devices, the South would itself have abolished slavery. Ashley tells Scarlett of his family's