

The Study of Cinematic History

In 1990, John E. O'Connor, one of the historians who pioneered research on the use of film for the study of history, observed that a chasm existed between historians and film studies specialists. He noted that individuals in each field seemed to work at a distance from each other and paid little attention to scholarship outside their own fields. Some responsibility for this lack of communication could be traced to the historians, said O'Connor. History professionals resisted the theoretical apparatus that film studies specialists employed in their research. Evidently, said O'Connor, historians needed to learn more about the theoretical basis of recent film scholarship.¹

The chasm O'Connor identified in 1990 remains impressively large today. On one side stand scholars who employ standard approaches of the history profession when examining film. On the other side are film professionals who raise different questions, address different issues, and speak and write in a language that is quite distinct. Occasionally a representative of one or the other group suggests the value of constructing a bridge that can bring the two groups together. Bridge building requires cooperation among many participants, however, and colleagues in each group demonstrate little enthusiasm for the effort. Most prefer to shout epithets across the chasm. In these scornful comments, they draw attention to the shoddy work of researchers on the other side who do not share their perspective or methods. Then they return to their own professional activities, speaking and writing for the benefit of colleagues who inhabit their particular side of the chasm.

Who is represented in these two groups? Generally, on one side are individuals who conduct most of their teaching, research, and writing within the field of history. Most do not consider themselves "traditional" historians, and indeed, many of them are at the cutting edge of new developments in their profession's research on race, class, gender, and other subjects broadly associated with social and cultural history. When called on to discuss documentary and dramatic films, however, they are not given to reading the literature on film generated by academics working outside their discipline. On the other side are scholars from diverse backgrounds: professionals from cinema studies

programs, specialists in literature, and individuals from philosophy, psychology, and other fields who are interested in the connections between film and history. There are also some professional historians in this group, individuals who agree with the general outlook of cinema studies specialists.

Cinema scholars complain that most historians take ad hoc approaches when analyzing motion pictures. They say that historians tend not to bring big ideas, theories, or techniques to their investigations. Film specialists complain that historians look at each production individually, consider its interpretation of the past, and then render judgments about the soundness of its treatment based on their own knowledge of the historical scholarship. Film scholars criticize historians for failing to view each film in the context of larger cinematic developments. Many of the historians' criticisms of motion pictures are irrelevant, say the film scholars, because the historians' observations lack this broader perspective.

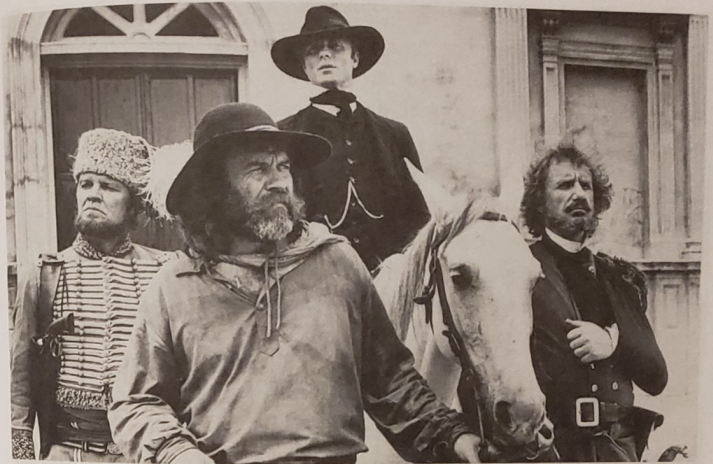
Film scholars often object to the way historians go searching for an accurate, truthful, or representative picture of the past in the cinema. Hollywood movies are not a mirror of the past, argue the film specialists; movies cannot recreate actual conditions of history. Nor are Hollywood movies a window on the past, a clear and accurate image of the way life was in an earlier age.² *Everything* in a dramatic film is fictitious—the physical appearance of the actors, the way they dress and walk, the words they speak, the gestures they make. All these elements are more or less a director's speculation about the way people appeared and acted in the past.³

More important, film scholars argue that a completely truthful presentation of the past is impossible, because there is no single truth to uncover. No historical interpretation is the real or correct one; all explanations of history are constructed. The narrative itself is a construction, formed out of the interests and ideological inclinations of the storyteller. Even history texts are interpretive dramatizations. Linda Hutcheon, for example, welcomes the postmodern intellectual's challenge to history's "truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity."⁴ Even traditional historical interpretations involve a great deal of artistic creativity, says Hutcheon. The distinction between history and fiction is often exaggerated, she argues.⁵ Janet Staiger makes a related point, noting that postmodern writers such as Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Peter Gay "all stress that no scholar comes 'objectively,' 'neutrally,' or 'innocently' before his or her evidence."⁶ Film scholars often point out that dramatic film cannot offer a total judgment on history that represents an objective or true picture of the past. Stressing the relativity of truth claims, they

praise postmodernist, anti-narrative approaches to storytelling, experimental movies that recognize that truth is always contested.⁷ Films may help us think differently about the past, says Robert A. Rosenstone, a historian who endorses much of the new film scholarship.⁸ He appreciates directors who employ imaginative, anti-narrative techniques that refuse to sum up through single-minded conclusions. The filmmakers who win Rosenstone's applause remind audiences that historical understanding involves an open-ended investigation rather than a closed and certain judgment.

Many film scholars reference Hayden White in their discussions about this relativistic perspective. White, who has taught at the University of California–Santa Cruz and at Stanford University, is the author of a number of influential books. He argues that historical interpretation involves the arranging and telling of stories, not the objective presentation of truth. All historical explanations constitute forms of fiction, White points out, and we must be cautious about promoting false distinctions between fact and fiction. There is no single authoritative story about the past. Commentators who attempt to explain the French Revolution or the murder of President John F. Kennedy, for example, may tell very different stories. Whatever coherence we find in their explanation of events is a function of the narrators' determined efforts to shape interpretations. These storytellers do not find evidence lying in the archives that naturally suggest explanations. Instead, they privilege a few facts from the many they encounter and connect them in a narrative that constructs a specific reading of the material's significance. This process is strongly subjective; it hardly constitutes an objective search for the truth. White praises movies that, in a postmodernist style, reveal that the meaning of the past is contested. He appreciates films that suggest we cannot answer questions about the past comprehensively and with certainty.⁹

Film scholars stress that we do not necessarily have to abandon the search for historical truth when we recognize the impossibility of presenting history objectively. Although moviemakers manipulate evidence, misrepresent facts, and configure details in a manner that irritates historians, they can nevertheless communicate thoughtful viewpoints on the past. Filmmakers may get specific representations wrong, but they can address broader or higher truths in their productions.¹⁰ Rosenstone stated this case eloquently when he said, "the Hollywood history film will always include images that are invented and yet may still be considered true; true in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they carry out the overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued."¹¹



In Walker (1987), Ed Harris (on horseback) plays William Walker, an American adventurer who tried to become president of Nicaragua in the 1850s. Some film enthusiasts praised Walker for its break from familiar narrative conventions. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

Some film scholars use these insights to take aim at efforts to judge the validity of cinematic history. They criticize historians for viewing movies traditionally. Cinema specialists complain that historians act as if they can find true history lessons in Hollywood dramas. Their attempts to point out errors, misrepresentations, and fictional flourishes in these films are often misdirected, say these cinema scholars. Robert Burgoyne notes, for example, that historians frequently protest the mixing of fact and fiction, expressing much "anguished commentary" about filmmakers' employment of artistic license. When historians assess movies such as *JFK*, *Malcolm X*, *Jefferson in Paris*, and *Nixon*, they appear to hold the movies "to standards of authenticity and verifiability that nearly equal the standards applied to scholarly texts," notes Burgoyne.¹²

Attention to cinematic interpretations of the past "misses the point" and obscures more important issues.¹³ Similarly, Sumiko Higashi finds historians and the public heavily invested in "traditional concepts about the past." Ob-serving that historians, including myself, drew attention to fabrications and misrepresentations in *Mississippi Burning* (1988), Higashi asked, "Why did academics not simply dismiss *Mississippi Burning* as just another movie?"¹⁴

Higashi and Rosenstone urge students of cinematic history to consider film in a different way. They suggest that historians expend less energy fretting

about the historical interpretations in popular movies and give greater attention to more radically conceived productions that boldly challenge the public's ideas about the past. Both Higashi and Rosenstone cite *Walker* (1987) for its achievement in breaking from familiar conventions. *Walker* deals with the adventures of William Walker, the filibusterer who succeeded briefly in taking control of Nicaragua in the 1850s (he was later executed by Honduran authorities). The movie includes, however, some modern-day references in its imagery, such as a Mercedes-Benz, a Zippo lighter, a computer, a helicopter, and copies of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People* magazines. In these and other scenes, *Walker* references both the Vietnam War and the Sandinista-Contra conflict in Nicaragua and suggests critical questions about the impact of U.S. economic and military interventions in Latin America and the world. Both Higashi and Rosenstone praise Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), too, for its lively experimentation. Rosenstone acknowledges that the motion picture fudges some details about the Kennedy assassination, but he argues that it effectively questions official "truths." He points out that the film confronts audiences with a provocative and important question: Has something gone wrong with America since the 1960s? Whatever the movie's flaws, says Rosenstone, "*JFK* has to be among the most important works of American history ever to appear on the screen."¹⁵

Both authors appreciate *Walker*, *JFK*, and other avant-garde movies that eschew traditional storytelling techniques. They applaud filmmakers' panache in mixing genres, presenting odd juxtapositions, incorporating sarcasm and humor, creating temporal jumps, and generally promoting postmodern perspectives.¹⁶ Movies that explore new modes of communication confront audiences with a "multiplicity of viewpoints," says Rosenstone. These films challenge audiences to think differently, to "revision" the past.¹⁷

Film scholars and historians who sympathize with this point of view raise important issues for the study of cinematic history, but their arguments call for critical analysis. Significant questions regarding the application of their concepts need to be addressed. Just as many historians need to confront the questions raised by cinema specialists, cinema specialists need to deal with important questions addressed by historians.

First, movies that experiment with radically different narrative structures are rarely among the popular productions that attract huge audiences and revenues. Artistic films, with their fragmented narrative styles, usually appeal to niche audiences, not the multiple millions reached by major Hollywood productions (*JFK*, with its fast-changing MTV-style presentation, is a notable exception). The films that excite enthusiasm from film scholars because of their postmodernist, counternarrative strategies are minority entries within the



In *JFK* (1991), New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) excites controversy with his claims of a conspiracy in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Historian Robert A. Rosenstone acknowledges that the movie fudges a number of details regarding the assassination, but he believes that the movie imaginatively challenges official "truths." (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

broad field of cinematic history. Film scholars' analyses of these unconventional films are interestingly suggestive, but they do not speak to a broader need. A more important task remains: providing historians and the public with insights that are useful for dealing with mainstream Hollywood-style cinematic history.

Second, despite film scholars' frequent references to Hayden White's argument that films should demonstrate that truth is not knowable, many of the movies that film scholars applaud do, in fact, suggest a specific, knowable past. These motion pictures—even the postmodern, avant-garde ones—are not as balanced in the presentation of multiple perspectives or open-ended inquiries as film scholars suggest in their commentaries. This is certainly the case with *JFK* and *Walker*. Despite Stone's reported attempt to turn *JFK* into a *Rashomon*-like study that shows clashing viewpoints, the movie has a strongly opinionated perspective on the key events. *JFK* delivers a hard-hitting attack on the Warren Commission's conclusions about the Kennedy assassination and a sharp criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam. *Walker* is strongly critical of U.S.

intervention in Nicaragua in the nineteenth century, and by implication, it lambastes the Reagan administration's policies in Central America in the 1980s.

The appeal of these movies to film scholars may relate to ideology as well as to the directors' artistic skills. If Stone had produced an experimental, boldly designed motion picture defending the Warren Commission and supporting U.S. intervention in Vietnam, would Higashi, Rosenstone, and others have praised the director for his panache? Similarly, if Alex Cox had produced a movie that applauded William Walker's involvement in Nicaragua in the nineteenth century and, by implication, supported Reagan's intervention in Central American affairs, would the authors have celebrated the director's artistry? This question can be addressed more broadly as well. Is the film scholars' demand for more movies that raise questions and challenge familiar truths only a general appeal for more sophisticated engagements with history? Or does it reveal a discontent with the political perspectives they encounter in mainstream movies? Do their suggestions communicate an interest in more agreeable political messages rather than just a demand for multiple perspectives and open-ended structures?

The film scholars' enthusiasm for White's ideas about the relativity of historical truths creates another problem. It leaves open for discussion questions about the limits of such relativism. Scholars who advance White's theories tend to defend many different cinematic experiments involving historical evidence. They support directors' manipulation of historical details in the interest of communicating symbolic or higher truths. When historians protest the way filmmakers deal with the historical record, the familiar response from film scholars is essentially, "Be careful about throwing stones. You, too, live in glass houses." But acknowledgment that written history is also a "constructed" narrative should not be used to dismiss demands for greater truthfulness in cinematic history. Certainly we can excuse some of the filmmakers' manipulations, for as we have seen, creative design is inherent in motion picture composition. But are all manipulations defensible? Are any of them problematic? Is every invention a praiseworthy example of creative filmmaking? In what situations is criticism of historical depictions appropriate? Are questions about historical representation, by their very nature, irrelevant? It is not enough to make a relativist case, citing White's deconstructionist reminder that scholars of the printed word also invent. Are there no limits to White's model? Can it be taken to extremes?

In dealing with this question of extremes, some historians acknowledge the value of the questions that White and others have raised, but they nevertheless hold moviemakers accountable to *some* standards of truth telling. In speaking about *JFK*, for example, historian Alan Brinkley recognized that skepticism

about claims of objectivity is healthy. There may be no completely objective or "absolute truth," Brinkley acknowledged, "but there are such things as untruths." He continued, "There are things that simply are not true, that are lies. . . . We do not always find [truth], but we seek it. And in seeking truth, we also have to seek untruth and attempt to avoid it or discredit it." Brinkley warned that "if we abandon any notion of truth then we are entering very serious ground, indeed." One way to identify historians, he claimed, is to call them "people who are seeking truth."¹⁸ Eric Foner, another prominent historian, also raised questions about artistic license in connection with *JFK*. Foner recognized that all people who examine history have an agenda or a point of view. He noted, however, that the public does not welcome any expression of a personal perspective. If an individual's point of view is "completely divorced from the evidence" and serious historians view the argument as implausible, other historians "would point that out because the evidence is there and there are standards."¹⁹ Brinkley and Foner alerted fellow historians to the danger of extreme subjectivity, to the hazard of claiming that since all truths are contestable, we can privilege none.

The dangers that Brinkley and Foner allude to are illustrated in David Irving's attempt to present a sharply distorted view of the Holocaust. If a filmmaker tried to dramatize Irving's argument, maintaining in a Hollywood production that Auschwitz was essentially a labor camp where Jews died chiefly from typhus rather than from planned extermination, observers would face questions about objectivity, subjectivity, and judgment in stark form. In such a circumstance, many historians (and, it is hoped, film scholars, too) would strongly denounce the interpretation as a lie. Like the British judge who threw out Irving's suit against Deborah Lipstadt—the historian who called Irving "one of the most dangerous spokesmen for Holocaust denial"—these scholars would likely affirm that there are, as Brinkley maintained, "untruths" that ought to be discredited. The postmodernist claim that all narratives about history are subjective and constructed would not excuse such a motion picture's fooling with the evidence. As Tony Judt notes, the Irving verdict reminds us that "some statements are true, some are false. Some writers have integrity and are to be believed, however outlandish their opinions. Others are knowingly disseminating seductive falsehoods. Some people are good. And some are evil."²⁰

There is another question regarding White's argument that needs consideration by film scholars. In many respects, the fundamental thrust of White's thesis is quite familiar to professional historians. Historiography, the study of evolving and conflicting interpretations of the past, is fundamental in the graduate training of history professionals. By reading Edward Hallett Carr's

What Is History? and Gerald N. Grob and George Athan Billias's *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, as well as other books that introduce this perspective, historians in training learn that so-called truths about the past are actually very much in dispute.²¹ Conclusions are always subject to argument and reinterpretation. Students learn to appreciate the way current intellectual trends, recent events, and present-day political outlooks affect the way historians view the past. As Carr points out, historians do not approach their subjects neutrally. They bring a personal political philosophy to the research table, and their outlook often has an impact on their choice of topics, their interest in specific evidence, and their efforts to draw conclusions. Hence, the fashionable relativist argument of film scholars does not come as a revelation to historians; questioning truths and examining the bias of authors who create historical narratives is central to their scholarship. Historians are not naïve about the truth claims of either authors or filmmakers. They are quite familiar with the argument that complete objectivity is an impossible goal and that all interpretations, whether in print or on film, are constructed and contestable. They are therefore quite amused by film scholars' excitement in making this discovery and lecturing historians about its importance.

Another difficulty associated with film scholarship relates to its heavy association with Marxist ideology. Especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, homage to perspectives of the ideological Left appeared abundantly in the film studies literature. The problem with this is a question of degree rather than presence. Open-minded inquiry welcomes all points of view; censorship is repugnant. The references to such theories became so prevalent in the film studies literature of the 1980s and 1990s, however, that they appeared to achieve a status of political correctness. Film scholars attached themselves to a troubled intellectual tradition when they privileged Marxist and neo-Marxist outlooks. By the late twentieth century, Marxist perspectives were nearly bankrupt as guides for understanding the economic and psychological foundations of human behavior. The growing intellectual disaffection with Marxism in America and the world also had a significant impact on interpretations in traditional fields of study such as history, economics, political science, and sociology. Film studies, however, was among the slowest disciplines to respond to these developments.

In the late twentieth century, Marxist ideas became quite fashionable in the professional literature on film. Authors frequently cited the neo-Marxian viewpoints of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci as a means of explaining why the masses failed to recognize that their own interests were exploited under capitalism. Theorists argued that the public had become mystified, confused, and fooled by false beliefs. The theorists claimed that a predominantly conservative, pro-capitalist outlook had been promoted through many outlets.

In religious training, formal education, the law, and popular culture (including novels, theater, and film) the public learned to accept an ideology of the ruling class. In this respect, Hollywood looked like a good target for Marxist analysis, because a few gigantic corporations (studios run by business moguls) dominated production and distribution.²² Film scholars also eagerly employed psychoanalytic concepts from Jacques Lacan and other writers to explain why audiences were psychologically predisposed to accept capitalist hegemony. These scholars became sympathetic to the view that ideological beliefs can develop through unconscious processes.²³ The masses absorbed the ruling class's propaganda, said the film scholars, and were, in a sense, under a form of mind control. Audiences believed they were free agents but were, in fact, greatly influenced by the hegemonic powers. Movies created this impression in subtle but powerful ways, the scholars observed. Hence, capitalism's influence needed to be understood in cultural as well as economic terms.²⁴

There was an obvious problem with this outlook. It made the masses appear to be passive figures who demonstrated little potential to defend their interests. Some film scholars began to resist this pathetic portrait of the public as duped receptors and victims. Eventually, a new wave of research and theorizing emerged that contradicted the earlier characterizations. Notions of "agency" became popular in the revised literature. Film scholars were now less likely to characterize the masses as passive recipients of capitalist propaganda. Instead, they claimed that citizens worked to shape their own destinies. Moviegoers did not simply absorb what Hollywood moguls produced for them, argued the film scholars. Audiences achieved power at the box office and in other commercial outlets by accepting or rejecting various dramas, forcing the Hollywood executives to revise their production plans.²⁵ Furthermore, film scholars focused on the works of a new generation of directors who made unusually provocative movies in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Martin Scorsese, Arthur Penn, Francis Ford Coppola, and Stanley Kubrick. The scholars praised these unconventional filmmakers for designing a new kind of cinema that challenged the earlier celebratory accounts of American society.

These rather abrupt shifts in the arguments of leftist film specialists suggested that ideological needs of the moment had a substantial impact on scholarly interpretations. A good deal of Marxist research during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s maintained that cinema failed to perform an emancipating role in the class struggle, thwarting the development of revolutionary consciousness. By the 1990s, when notions of agency had become trendy, film specialists were busy demonstrating something quite different: that moviegoers resisted the conservative values communicated on the screen. Although audiences had not become revolutionaries, at least they seemed to be more in control of their

affairs than the masses described in earlier writings had been. Such a rapid change in interpretive direction hinted of a research agenda that was highly politicized. Evidently, many film scholars decided what they were going to discover well before they undertook their research. Inspired by the concepts of Lacan, Althusser, and Gramsci, they looked for the power of ideology in popular culture and found it. Later, motivated by the new literature on agency, they searched for evidence of resistance to ideology and found that, too. Whether such agenda-laden investigations truly constituted scholarship is a subject worthy of debate. The process of research in film studies certainly does not resemble university models of scientific inquiry and experimentation, investigations in which researchers establish hypotheses and create rigorous experiments to see if the evidence supports their hunches.

The argument of ideologically inclined scholars that Hollywood movies rarely show collective solutions to social difficulties is also problematic. Many leftist observers criticize American cinema for almost always viewing great economic and social issues at the personal level, portraying specific individuals struggling against society's problems. Large groups, especially classes, rarely appear as the movers and shakers in these stories, they note. The crowd, so much a factor in Sergei Eisenstein's early motion pictures produced in the Soviet Union, is much less a force in American-made dramas. The Hollywood approach is a cop-out, these writers suggest. It refuses to address a need for collective action.²⁶ The scholars also criticize Hollywood's tradition of producing happy endings for its stories. Too frequently, say these scholars, movies hint that all problems can be settled within the capitalist system. In the final minutes, cinema almost always presents solutions to the characters' difficulties. This practice suggests a positive view of American society, one that seems smugly comfortable with the way things are.

This familiar claim that Hollywood's storytelling promotes conservative values is fundamentally wrong. It reflects little appreciation for the power of genre. As discussed earlier, moviemaking in the United States has developed a number of conventions, techniques of dramatic presentation that have worked over the years in creating profitable cinema. Among the most important generic elements are the two aspects that film scholars criticize: emphasis on individual action, and upbeat conclusions. Audiences respond favorably to movies that feature one or two heroic figures and to narratives that, in the end, provide some sort of triumph or symbolic redemption for the main characters. If audiences preferred class struggles rather than individual heroics and depressing endings rather than inspiring ones, studio executives and filmmakers would, no doubt, rush to give them what they wanted. Hollywood, which invests tens of millions of dollars in new productions, responds sensitively to

the public's taste. Charges that the cinema's storytelling techniques reflect capitalist ideology or timidity in recognizing the need for collective action represent irrelevant grumbling.

Furthermore, the leftist scholars' assumption that the powerful people behind Hollywood productions are strong defenders of conservative values lacks merit. The authors of an important study, *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*, reveal the error of this assumption by gathering a great deal of statistical information on artistic and business talent in Hollywood. Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman, and Stanley Rothman tested the film theorists' claims that a conservative elite controls Hollywood and uses movies to promote the values of the nation's ruling classes. Unlike the many film scholars who characterize Hollywood leaders on the basis of speculation, Powers, Rothman, and Rothman conducted detailed research. They surveyed Hollywood artists and business executives on a number of subjects and found that they were significantly more liberal than the American public on social, economic, racial, religious, gender, and military issues. The authors acknowledge that Hollywood turned somewhat cautious in the 1940s and 1950s, during the years of big-studio control, House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, and competition from television. They note, however, that in the 1960s and after, when conservative pressures on the motion picture community began to disintegrate, story themes increasingly suggested more critical views of American society. The new movies communicated greater antagonism toward authority figures, the U.S. government bureaucracy, and the military. Hollywood filmmakers were hardly the conservative elite that film scholars made them out to be, and Hollywood productions, especially those from the 1960s and after, were not simply appeals for complacency or veiled propaganda for a conservative ideology.²⁷

Powers, Rothman, and Rothman build their case on a great deal of evidence, and by implication, they castigate film scholars for dipping too deeply into theory. Their research demonstrates a need for documenting ideas rather than borrowing them liberally from the works of prominent theorists (many of them European) who have philosophized widely on issues related to language, literature, film, and society in general. The authors score an important point in this regard, for scholarship on film is replete with theoretical references that are unsupported by evidence. The professional stakes in citing these concepts are quite high, as evidenced by the numerous efforts of film scholars to reference the esteemed theorists in articles and books. Evidently, these scholars learned in college and graduate school that they would face academic penalties if they left out the exalted names. Scholarship on film, including analysis of cinematic history, frequently cites Michel Foucault, Christian Metz,

Louis Althusser, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Louis Baudry, Raymond Bellour, and Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as the concepts of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.²⁸ Often the quotations are so brief or obscure that the relevance of a theorist's idea to the film scholar's interpretation is not immediately clear. In many cases, the scholars seem to be unsure of the concept's pertinence themselves, but they recognize the professional value of citing fashionable luminaries in their discussions.

A historian who wades through these vague abstractions may feel a sense of wonderment at the pervasiveness of this language. A reader from outside the field is inclined to ask: Is no one willing to challenge the relevance of much of this work? Are not some film scholars troubled by so much unsubstantiated theorizing? Is anyone willing to question the many vague abstractions in the literature? Does someone in the field have the professional courage to challenge these works for their lack of clarity?

There is such a figure: Noel Carroll. Carroll deserves accolades for publishing an unusually bold criticism of this literature. In *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*, Carroll draws attention to the "shoddy thinking" and "slapdash scholarship" in many of the film studies publications. He claims that many film specialists support a form of self-censorship, restraining frank criticism of writings in the field. Those who question the fashionable interpretations are summarily dismissed as neoconservatives. Many film scholars demand the expression of politically correct views, says Carroll, a practice that "protects bad scholarship."²⁹ He maintains that too many concepts central to modern film theory are "systematically ambiguous" and represent "extended exercises in equivocation."³⁰ The field's explanatory metaphors are abstract and vague, and concepts are not rigorously defined. Film scholars need to frame their questions more explicitly and clearly so that manageable answers can be created for them.³¹ "The problem with this language," says Carroll, "is that it says virtually nothing. It has impeded research and reduced film analysis to the repetition of fashionable slogans and unexamined assumptions."³²

Historians who investigate film scholarship must certainly be prepared to deal with the dense, mystifying language that Carroll describes. Jargon is a staple in the literature. Nebulous, uncommitted statements are abundant, and clear, crisp phrases are in short supply. Straightforward language that articulates a firm opinion is frustratingly absent in key sections of the literature where a thesis needs to be communicated. For instance, early in *Film, Politics and Gramsci*, Marcia Landy identifies the heart of her thesis. She announces: "I wish to address the efficacy of Gramsci's insights into the dynamic nature of capitalist formations, into the contradictory positions that constitute subalternity, and

into the importance of arriving at a sense of the multivalent relations between economic, cultural, and political phenomena."³³ What was that again? Near the beginning of *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, Robert Burgoyne attempts to set up the foundations of his thesis. He explains: "Social identity, as conceived in these films, originates neither from 'above,' in alignment with the nation-state, nor from below, with ethnicity or race, but rather from 'across,' through horizontal relations whose antagonistic and transitive character is left represented in terms of 'inside' and 'outside.'"³⁴ Is this the language that will illuminate the book's thesis? In her introduction to *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, Vivian C. Sobchack opens with a discussion of the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*. She writes: "The complexity of diverse individual trajectories and their nodal coalescence in the massive 'historical events' we see foregrounded as the film's background are ironically revealed as nothing less (while something more) than confusion: that is, notions of both rationality and system are undermined by the visible evidence that 'History' is the concatenated and reified effect of incoherent motives and chance convergences."³⁵ This statement hardly establishes a clear basis for the book's principal arguments. Sobchack offered much clearer commentary on film in a book she published with Thomas Sobchack sixteen years earlier, *An Introduction to Film*.³⁶ Evidently, lengthy exposure to film studies literature over subsequent years effected an enormous embellishment of language.

These statements do not represent a few unusual examples of obfuscation in the film literature. Unfortunately, similarly dense writing can be found in much of the film scholarship about movies generally and cinematic history specifically. The scholars' commentaries are replete with multisyllable words, vague references, and cloudy arguments.

There is a simple remedy for this communication problem: authors in cinema studies can read a few issues of *Foreign Affairs* before they commence writing. That distinguished journal, the source of many influential articles on international affairs, provides a useful model for clarity. The editors of *Foreign Affairs* insist that their contributors reach out to audiences in comprehensible and lively language that engages readers from diverse disciplines. They expect authors to deal with complex issues, but they demand that the authors present their theses in language that is interesting and understandable to all readers. A professional in history, political science, or international relations can easily pick up a copy of the journal and profit from the reading experience. For that matter, a nonprofessional can examine *Foreign Affairs* and find considerable intellectual stimulation. The lesson is valuable. Film scholars do not have to write like James Joyce in *Ulysses* to prove their capability of addressing the subject with intelligence and insight.

Film scholars can also learn from the example of Robert A. Rosenstone, a professional historian who expresses considerable interest in the research and ideas of film professionals. Rosenstone writes in clear, comprehensible language; he does not avoid judgment by hiding his opinions in a muddle of multisyllable words. Rosenstone attempts to communicate the theoretical arguments of film scholars in prose that can be appreciated by fellow historians as well as by individuals from other disciplines. Furthermore, he recognizes that a moving image can present ideas in unique and highly stimulating ways. Through his own experiments in innovative modes of presentation, Rosenstone hints that all students of history can profit from postmodern perspectives. In his book *Visions of the Past*, Rosenstone offers the reader radical shifts in thought, brief explorations of tangential issues, observations on his personal relationship to the material, and penetrating questions about issues that sometimes challenge the thesis he is advancing. Through these imaginative techniques, Rosenstone attempts breakthroughs in communication similar to the ones he hopes filmmakers will achieve. He practices what he preaches. Rosenstone shows concern not only for addressing ideas but also for finding effective modes of presenting them.³⁷

Rosenstone effectively prods his fellow historians to think more imaginatively than do those who are obsessed with factual errors or artistic liberties in films. He reminds readers that a film is not a book. Pointing to the generic conventions of cinematic history such as the ones described in this book, Rosenstone emphasizes that film can never provide “some mirror of a vanished past.” Still, the medium can offer important insights in unique ways. “Rather than lamenting the supposed sins of film,” argues Rosenstone, “we need to investigate its strengths.”³⁸ At its best, film can contest and revision our notions of history. Film can deliver insights that are as important as those found in books (but in a different manner). Rosenstone’s perspective lifts our consideration of historical film to a higher level, above narrow questions about whether a filmmaker got the hats right or left out a speech. To better appreciate the medium’s possibilities, says Rosenstone, historians need to give greater attention to the ideas developed in film studies scholarship. Like John E. O’Connor, cited at the beginning of this chapter, Rosenstone urges his history colleagues to become acquainted with the conceptual and theoretical works published by scholars in cinema studies and literature, as well as with the work of the few historians who have been thinking differently about film.

But is there not a correlative to consider as well? If we accept the conclusion that historians need to become better versed in the literature of film studies, must we also insist that film scholars develop greater sensitivity to issues that concern historians? Film studies specialists are very demanding, claiming that

historians ought to read their literature and become familiar with their paradigms. But are they eager to listen to historians, to ponder the issues that interest them? Indeed, are they willing to read the historians’ publications and become aware of the principal trends in their scholarship?

Many individuals writing from the perspective of film studies give relatively little attention to historical scholarship. Generally, their footnotes in articles and books about history and film contain few references to research in history. Surprisingly, when they cite a work in history, often the reference is to a textbook or general survey of history rather than to a scholarly monograph. For the most part, instead of referring to historical scholarship, the authors refer to other motion pictures or to ideas about cinema articulated by various film theorists. These writers pay little attention to scholarship in history because they do not believe that it is pertinent to the issues that interest them. In fact, some of them consider the question that intrigues history professionals—how well does cinema deal with the past?—pretty much irrelevant.

Disagreements about which questions are important sometimes produce friction between historians and film specialists. Cinema scholars often give a cold reception to historians’ interest in assessing filmmakers’ presentations of history. Some film specialists have crusaded so strongly for the idea that cinema is art and entertainment and communication and business that they appear rather uncomfortable with discussions about cinema as history. When film professionals encounter historians criticizing the treatment of history in Hollywood productions, they consider the observations unjustified.

This kind of reaction does not help advance a dialogue. A number of historians sense that cinematic history can have a significant impact on the public’s perceptions about the past, and these historians believe that the popular productions coming out of Hollywood deserve serious discussion. They are also aware of the caveats film scholars mention in their essays and books. Historians recognize that a film is not the same as a book and that students of film must learn about its distinctive means of communication. Still, these historians want to know what kind of history film does provide, and how it can be judged.

There are perils in trying to combine an interest in investigating cinematic interpretations of history with an interest in addressing the issues raised by film scholars. I have experienced these difficulties firsthand. Sometimes even a brief reference to historians’ criticisms of film draws angry fire. For example, Maureen Ogle, also a historian, complained about an article I wrote for the American Historical Association’s newsletter *Perspectives*. My essay referred to the way criticisms by historians and journalists had undermined some Hollywood movies’ chances for an Academy Award. Ogle’s letter to the editor expressed outrage: “Let me get this straight,” she wrote. “According

to Robert Brent Toplin, historians have taken it upon themselves to function as monitors and watchdogs of the film industry." Ogle went on to question whether there are "any limitations to historians' professional arrogance."³⁹

The question is ridiculous, yet historians who suggest that we need to assess the treatment of history in film are likely to encounter charges like it. Some critics seem wedded to the misguided notion that historians are proposing gatekeeping, turf protection, thought policing, or censorship when they express judgments about filmmakers' treatments of the past.

In sum, we face a significant challenge. It relates to the important issue that Robert A. Rosenstone and John E. O'Connor raised, but the implications are more complex. The challenge involves the difficult task of not only exposing historians to ideas from film scholarship but also making scholars in cinema studies aware of the concerns of professional historians. Enthusiasts of the perspectives promoted in film studies need to face the *C* word—*content*—to acknowledge that historians care a great deal about it and to explain (forthrightly and in intelligible language) how they propose to deal with it. Much more than film scholars, historians want to talk about the historical substance of films—the words, pictures, sounds, structures, narratives, and other elements that communicate interpretations of the past.

Historians should play an important role in judging historical presentations that turn up on the screen. When making these judgments, historians need to be broad-minded and informed about the issues addressed in film scholarship, but they should not be timid. Classroom teachers, scholars, and public historians do not need to apologize for taking filmed interpretations seriously and should not be silenced by claims that the stuff on the screen is just art. Politicians, TV talk-show commentators, and newspaper and magazine pundits take cinematic history seriously, frequently discussing and disputing its messages in the popular media. Historians need stronger voices in these debates. They should not remain hidden in their classrooms, libraries, museums, and archives, separated from the important discussions going on outside their institutions.

What, then, can historians or anyone interested in cinematic history gain from explorations into film scholarship? Surely, there is much of value in the professional literature. The scholarship awakens readers to the way film conveys messages differently from the printed word. It encourages readers to think about the medium's unique characteristics, to ponder the language and signs by which motion pictures communicate. Cinema scholarship teaches readers to examine the structure of film and encourages them to advance discussions beyond an ad hoc consideration of individual movies. By exploring the elements of genre and positing theoretical concepts related to cinema, the new

scholarship can lift discussions of the subject to a higher level. Above all, the research challenges history-minded students of film to raise new questions about Hollywood's productions, to go beyond stale and pedantic discussions about whether a war movie depicts troop movements properly or a drama set in the nineteenth century uses the correct type of furniture. Film scholarship encourages audiences to recognize that movies convey both literal and symbolic truths. It can assist them, too, in thinking differently about the subject of history. Film scholarship demonstrates how innovative movies can raise provocative questions, forcing students of history to view the subject in new ways, to "revision" the past.

At the same time, a historian cannot help but express disappointment with some characteristics of the emerging film scholarship. In a number of respects, the literature fails to live up to the achievements enthusiastically advertised by its practitioners. A good deal of film analysis appears in impenetrable, jargon-laden language; discussions are heavy on theory and light on detailed research. The literature also displays considerable intellectual timidity. Authors bow frequently to favored theorists, and few writers are courageous enough to suggest that the supposed gurus do not offer much relevant commentary about the subject or that they might be seriously mistaken in some of their observations. Critical spirit, celebrated in words, turns up much less in deed. Oft-repeated references to Hayden White's questions about objectivity and truth rarely include considerations of the limits of White's relativism. Particularly surprising is the legitimacy given to Marxist and Freudian analysis. Scholars in many disciplines now recognize that Freud's interpretations were often wildly speculative and lacking in experimental confirmation, yet film scholars remain eager to invoke his name and apply his ideas about psychoanalysis to film. Similarly, researchers around the world have come to view Marxist theories as so mistaken in their fundamental assumptions that they are of questionable value, yet many film scholars continue to discuss these concepts as if they still had a good deal of intellectual clout. Disappointing, too, is the inattention to historical scholarship. A number of film scholars who write about cinematic history delve very little into the publications of historians. In fact, many of them display little interest in the most fundamental question historians raise about cinematic history: How well do films deal with the past?

In years to come, these difficulties may be surmounted. The dialogue between professionals in the disciplines of history and cinema studies may improve substantially, and each will generously fertilize the understanding of the other. Unfortunately, that day of familiarity and appreciation is still far off. Much important work remains to be done in both camps to deal with the still-present chasm.