Film history\ terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies

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In the early 1980s, Tony Bennett called for a revolution in literary study, in which one would no longer just study the text, but 'everything which has been written *about* it, everything which has been collected on it, becomes attached to it – like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation'.[1] In these oceanic terms, the text's meaning would not be a function of its own internal system, but a function of what John Frow would later refer to as the text's 'multiple historicities': 'the contradictory modes of its social inscription' synchronically, as well as its 'serial reinscriptions' diachronically.[2] Not all scholars, however, have shared this enthusiasm for radically historicizing literary enterprise by taking extended voyages through textual pasts. Antony Easthope, for example, has questioned the very feasibility of achieving such a grand materialist vision of literary production. He argues that 'texts cannot be adequately analysed in relation to a definition of a particular social and historical context' because they 'exceed that context not only diachronically, always temporally going beyond a given reading, but also synchronically, always available to *another* reading at the same time, even in the supposedly "original" moment when they were first produced'.[3] There is, then, something so elusively excessive about the historical that we can never sufficiently grasp its relation to textuality.

Implicated within this scholarly disagreement is an area of research in media studies particularly devoted to the historical excavation of

1 Tony Bennett, quoting Pierre Macherey, in 'Text and social process: the case of James Bond', *Screen Education*, no. 41 (1982), p. 3.

2 John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 187–8.

3 Antony Easthope, *Literary Into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 113.

meaning. As Bennett and others redefined the object of literary analysis from the text to the intertext – the network of discourses, social institutions, and historical conditions surrounding a work – they helped inspire the development of historical reception studies in film. Those engaged in reception studies typically examine a network of relationships between a film or filmic element (such as a star), adjacent intertextual fields such as censorship, exhibition practices, star publicity and reviews, and the dominant or alternative ideologies of society at a particular time. Such contextual analysis hopes to reveal the intimate impact of discursive and social situations on cinematic meaning, while elaborating the particularities of cinema's existence under different historical regimes from the silent era to the present.

I would like to contemplate an issue raised by Bennett's and Easthope's polarized views of the text/history couplet, specifically as it applies to this kind of film research. The issue has to do with the potential for reception studies to recover adequately a film's past, to reconstruct fully a film's relation to social and historical processes. Can researchers uncover 'everything' which has been written about a film? Can they exhaust the factors involved in the relation between film and history, providing a comprehensive view of the rich contexts that once brought a film to life and gave it meaning for a variety of spectators? Can they, as one scholar exhorts them to do, ask how mass media events 'correspond to the massive data of their origin', so that these events can be 'seized' in their 'totality'?[4] If not, is the entire enterprise of historical research into film meaning jeopardized, because it can only ever offer partial and therefore historically inadequate views of textual pasts? Totality is of course the utopian goal of those critics seeking 'multiple historicities', and a target of those who advocate doubt. In this sense, the issue of comprehensiveness lingers at the borders of historical reception studies as both a promise and a threat.

In addition, many philosophers of history would have grave suspicions about any historian claiming comprehensiveness, seeing it as a failure to exercise what Paul Ricoeur refers to as 'epistemological prudence' in historical explanation.[5] This prudence is made necessary, at the very least, by the scholar's recognition of the interpretive element present in all historical writing and of the always fragmentary and incomplete nature of the historical record itself. Even so, as I will argue, exhaustiveness, while impossible to achieve, is necessary as an ideal goal for historical research. Its impossibility should not lead, as in the case of Easthope, to its dismissal: that would be the rough equivalent of saying because we cannot know all of outer space we should stop our investigations. Rather more in the spirit of Fernand Braudel's concept of *histoire totale*, we can acknowledge both the unattainability of such a history and the benefits of its pursuit.[6]

In a total history, the analyst studies complex interactive

4 Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: the Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 216.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *The Contribution of French Historiography to the Theory of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 19.

6 Braudel writes that his work covering the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries 'does not claim to have depicted all material life throughout the whole complex world. . . . What it offers is an attempt to see all these scenes as a whole . . . . If not to see everything, at least to locate everything, and on the requisite grand scale'. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), pp. 441–2.

7 Robert Mandrou, quoted in Stoianovich, *French Historical Method*, p. 112.

8 David Bordwell, 'Our dream cinema: western historiography and the Japanese film', *Film Reader*, no. 4 (1979), p. 58. I use Bordwell's phrase 'totalized view' because of its suggestiveness for my analysis, while acknowledging that our perspectives on the relations between film and culture differ.

9 Mike Budd, 'The moments of Caligari', in Mike Budd (ed.), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 7–119; Maria LaPlace, 'Producing and consuming the woman's film: discursive struggle in *Now, Voyager*', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 138–66.
10 I am indebted to Dana Polan for coining the apt phrase 'discursive surround' as a means of describing film's contextual situation.

environments or levels of society involved in the production of a particular event, effecting a historical synthesis, an integrated picture of synchronic as well as diachronic change. In Foucauldian terms, total history appears as the general episteme of an archaeological stratum which would include the system of relations between heterogeneous forms of discourse in that stratum. A Marxist gloss defines total history as a 'dialectical history of ceaseless interaction among the political, economic, and cultural, as a result of which the whole society is ultimately transformed'.[7] Whatever the specific permutation, the grand view behind a *histoire totale* has several valuable functions for film history. Embodying a scholarly aim rather than an absolutely achievable reality, the concept promises to press historians' enquiries beyond established frontiers, broadening the scope of their enterprise, and continually refining their historical methods and perspectives. What David Bordwell refers to in other contexts as a 'a totalized view' of history suggests that recovering the past is eminently tied not only to the discovery of documents of yore, but to reflection upon how best to engage thoroughly with that past.[8] In addition, pursuing this idea in the context of film studies provides the occasion for imagining what a cinematic version of *histoire totale* might comprise, creating a panoramic view of the contexts most associated with cinema's social and historical conditions of existence, and returning us to the question of what exactly is at stake in materialist approaches to textuality.

Before considering the details of a cinematic *histoire totale* for a dominant kind of filmmaking – the classical Hollywood cinema – I would like to examine briefly how such an enterprise necessarily reorients some existing tendencies of research in reception studies. Keeping in mind that the historians I mention never set out to produce a synthetic social picture, a more global view of a film's reception history raises several questions about the parameters of contemporary contextual research.

The first question pertains to the selection and use of the external discourses the researcher includes in a case study. Some scholars, such as Mike Budd and Maria LaPlace, mobilize a number of different extrafilmic fields to interrogate cinema's relation to its historical context – respectively advertising, censorship, and reviews for *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919); and star discourse, conventions of women's fiction, and consumerism for *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942).[9] The hermeneutic importance of this position becomes clear when we weigh the implications of the 'single discourse' approach to reception. Studying a film's connection to a single external field, such as reviews, is obviously not enough to portray exhaustively the elements involved in a film's social circulation. Such a study can tell us how that field produced meaning for the film and give us a partial view of its discursive surround.[10] But

at the same time, and perhaps less obviously, it can result in an insufficient depiction of film's relationship to its social context, with consequences for how we hypothesize cinema's historical and ideological meaning.

This point finds illustration in Mary Beth Haralovich's commentary on *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) in which she initially speculates that its mise-en-scene be understood against the 'external social fact of suburbia in the 1950s'. She sees the film as participating in social consciousness about housing and its role in the social order, particularly in its expressive mise-en-scene, which acts potentially to resist 'idealist discourses about the qualities of suburban liveability'. But aware that a single historical frame is insufficient, she suggests further investigating the film's production, the state of domestic architecture, consumerism at the time, and other factors necessary to a more complete social history.[11] And, indeed, if one were to look at the industry's production strategies for the style of the film, and reviewers' reception of it against consumerism and other historical tides, one would find that *All That Heaven Allows* was planned and received largely as a support for consumer culture and the affluent climate of the 1950s. The point here is that if the researcher rests with discussing a film's connection to a particular contextual frame, she/he may assess its historical role and ideology too hastily. In this case, such haste might produce a monolithic view of *All That Heaven Allows* as subversive of 1950s domestic ideology by focusing too narrowly on the relation of its self-reflexive mise-en-scene to discourses on housing at the time. By neglecting to consider how the mise-en-scene is situated within broader discursive activities, the researcher's assessment of the film's ideology would be premature.

By contrast, a totalized view provides a sense, not of *the* ideology the text had in historical context, but its *many* ideologies. By placing a film within multifarious intertextual and historical frames – the elements that define its situation in a complex discursive and social milieu – the film's variable, even contradictory, ideological meanings come into focus. There is then a desired *Rashomon*-like effect in totalized reception studies, where the researcher uncovers different historical 'truths' about a film as she/he analyses how it has been deployed within past social relations. A totalized view necessarily addresses the competing voices involved in a particular film's public signification as a means of attempting to describe its full historicity. It thus avoids arriving at premature, partial, ideological identities for films, that result from imposing a unity between a film and its historical moment at the expense of considering the intricate untidiness of this relationship.

Another tendency in historical reception studies forecloses the impulse towards a cinematic *histoire totale* in a different way. Here, the researcher stays too close to home. 'Home' happens to be the film industry, the environment with the closest ties to the film text and the

11 Mary Beth Haralovich, 'Film history and social history', *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1986), pp. 12–13.

one that has long been of interest to historians. On occasion, reception studies focused on the industry fail to raise the question of how the industrial context connects to surrounding social and historical processes. Part of this provincialism results from the debt reception studies owes to the 'new' revisionist film history: the former has been revolutionized by the latter's interest in displacing secondary and anecdotal forms of history with primary documentation, archival research and other historiographical tools of evidence and verification. The new film history has concentrated particularly on industry practices, including modes of production and exhibition, film style and technology. But, as Miriam Hansen has pointed out, this concentration has led at times to a 'self-imposed abstinency . . . with regard to the social and cultural dynamics of cinematic consumption, with discourses of experience and ideology'.[12]

We can see a distinction between historical accounts emphasizing the industrial and those exploring connections to external social and historical discourses in Lea Jacobs's and Annette Kuhn's respective works on film censorship. Jacobs analyses how the operation of censorship affected the style and narrative of the 'fallen woman' cycle of the woman's film from the late 1920s and the 1940s. She illuminates the intricate business of censorship as it attempts to regulate sexual difference in this significant subgenre, but does not extend her analysis to consider its positioning within larger social processes. Kuhn, taking a different tack, contextualizes her discussion of censorship of early British cinema by discussing the eugenics movement, sexology, wartime Britain, and broader conceptions of cinema in the public sphere.[13] The two authors clearly have different objectives. But for a totalized view, questions of history must extend beyond the industry to engage in a potentially vast system of interconnections, from the film and its immediate industrial context to social and historical developments.

Besides addressing the problems of single discourses and industrial preoccupations, this view demands a diachronic dimension. Almost all film historians are 'stuck in synchrony', focusing on the conjuncture in which films initially appeared to reveal their original circumstances of production, exhibition and reception. Reception studies scholars almost exclusively come to terms with a film's meaning by considering the impact that its original conditions had on its social significance. Research into origins, while all-consuming, can ultimately lapse into a kind of historicism that sidesteps the big meaning question: that is, the radical flux of meaning brought on by changing social and historical horizons over time. Studies of reception can synchronically excavate texts without necessarily speculating on how this context helps reconceive the process of meaning-production – how the act of historicizing challenges notions about the stability of textual meaning. At an extreme, textual exegesis is replaced by historical exegesis. *Now, Voyager* is no longer, via psychoanalytic close readings, a visual

12 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 5.

13 Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London: Routledge, 1988).

14 Lea Jacobs, 'Now, Voyager:
some problems of enunciation
and sexual difference', Camera
Obscura, no. 7 (1981), pp. 89–
104; LaPlace, 'Producing and
consuming the woman's film'.

15 See Jonathan Culler on this
point in Framing the Sign:
Criticism and Its Institutions
(Norman: University of Oklahoma
Press, 1988), p. 148.

16 Janet Staiger, Interpreting Films:
Studies in the Historical
Reception of American Cinema
(Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1992), pp. 80–81.

essay on sexual difference figuring the potentially liberatory enunciation of woman's desire, but, via historical analysis, a reappropriation of discourses of consumerism as liberatory for women in the 1940s.[14]

Without question, historical reception studies has a strong interpretive dimension: the chief arena for the discovery of meaning and significance has in a sense been displaced from text to context.[15] But, as Janet Staiger writes, the prime objective of materialist approaches is not simply to secure new contextualized meanings for texts, but to attempt a 'historical *explanation* of the event of interpreting a text' by tracing the 'range of [interpretive] strategies available in particular social formations'.[16] Once one makes this meta-interpretive move, questions of value, continuously at the heart of interpretive enterprise, become themselves contextualized. That is, the aesthetic or political value of a film is no longer a matter of its intrinsic characteristics, but of the way those characteristics are deployed by various intertextual and historical forces. A danger of synchronic research is that researchers can find themselves attempting to settle a film's historical meaning, much like a standard interpretation would fix its textual meaning. Ideally, reception theory influenced by cultural and historical materialism analyses, rather, the discontinuities and differences characterizing the uses of a particular film within and beyond its initial appearance. This is not to say that the film in question has no definite historical meanings; simply that what appears to be definite at one moment will be subject to penetrating alterations with the ascendancy of new cultural eras.

Diachronic research is especially important to reception studies, then, because it forces consideration of a film's fluid, changeable and volatile relation to history. These qualifiers are essential for realizing the historicity of meaning beyond origins, and for giving authority to all of the semiotic intrigues surrounding films during the course of their social and historical circulation. The issue of diachrony thus advances the film/culture relation well beyond even 'the massive data of its origins', addressing how that relation is remade continuously through diverse institutions and historical circumstances over the decades subsequent to initial release dates.

The diachronic dimension of Charles Maland's work on Charlie Chaplin, for example, explains how conditions upon the rerelease of this director's films in the 1960s and 1970s helped restore his artistic reputation and star persona, after all of the previous negative publicity stemming from his controversial radicalism and marital mishaps. The changing, more self-critical, political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with auteurism and other transformations in film reviewing and criticism, helped rewrite Chaplin and his films, emphasizing his victimization by Cold War zealots, his artistic genius and his comic persona over his 'Communism' and disastrous relationships. These

17 Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: the Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially pp. 317–60. See also Robert Kapsis's evolutionary treatment of Hitchcock in *Hitchcock: the Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

combined historical factors thus resulted in a new canonization of his works.[17]

A cinematic *histoire totale* thus presses against the boundaries of historical reception study by asking at least that researchers analyse public combat over film meaning rather than unities, historicize their enquiries beyond industrial practices, and pursue diachronic meanings not only to better represent the text's social circulation, but to engage fully with the impact historical context has on meaning. It now remains to ask: what might a cinematic version of *histoire totale* look like?

Before getting to the heart of the matter, a few words about the parameters of this account are in order. Because classical Hollywood cinema has been centre stage for a great deal of work in historical reception studies, my discussion here will pertain primarily to this kind of film. I will address the contextual factors involved in negotiating the meaning of films made in Hollywood roughly between 1917 and 1960 – the so-called classical period in US filmmaking. Though the model I propose may have application to other modes of production (such as documentary and avant-garde film), other national cinemas and visual communications media (such as television), I do not suggest that a total history for one particular kind of filmmaking, no matter how dominant, somehow comprehensively represents others.[18]

18 Some examples of work in reception studies on other modes of production include: Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–1971* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). In the area of other national cinemas, see Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, Kyoko Hirano, *Mr Smith Goes to Tokyo Under the American Occupation, 1945–1952* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); and Jostein Gripsrud and Kathrine Skretting (eds), *History of Moving Images: Reports from a Norwegian Project* (Oslo: Research Council of Norway, 1994). Since television and film are such different media, I could not simply equate the two. However, reception studies in film have much to learn from similar enquiries in television studies.

I have divided a total history for this kind of film into two large categories: the synchronic and diachronic. The more specific subdivisions under the synchronic are organized in a progressively outward-bound direction, beginning with those areas most closely associated with the production of a film ('cinematic practices'), moving to those technically outside the industry, but closely affiliated with a film's appearance ('intertextual zones'), and ending with social and historical contexts circulating through and around its borders. As we shall see, while each of these areas still apply, the peculiarities of the diachronic dimension dictate a slightly different organization.

These subdivisions are so labelled to maintain familiar distinctions between contextual areas typically explored by researchers. I do not mean to deny the intertextuality and discursivity of all that surrounds the film, as well as the film itself: but for the purposes of clarity in discussion, I wish to avoid collapsing everything contextual into a single, chaotic identity. These three subdivisions – cinematic practices, intertextual zones, and social and historical contexts – depict a geographic space which suggests the intricate situations in which cinema exists historically. Of course, not all of these regions may be equally important to each film analysed. The researcher attempts to discover which regions seem particularly applicable to reconstructing the vital relations which comprise the contexts in which particular films are produced and received.

In addition, the nature of interrelations between various areas is deeply interactive. The film in question, for example, is not just *acted upon* by external forces, it in turn can affect and transform the contextual activities which surround it – as, for example, when controversy over a film's censorship results in changes in censorship codes or public debate about the regulation of media content. Similarly, the relations between an aspect of cinematic practice, such as film style or exhibition, to intertextual zones and historical contexts are not to be understood as ultimately separable, but as fluid and reciprocal: for example, the lushness of 1950s Technicolor melodramatic mise-en-scene in Hollywood is linked intertextually to decors shown in *Better Homes and Gardens* within the overall spectacle of postwar consumer culture.[19] In this example, intertexts and history penetrate the films' visuals at the same time as those visuals continue to construct a utopian vision of consumption. By imagining such reciprocity between areas, we can see historically how film and its contexts act as participants in the discursive fray of which they are a part.

A reception history aimed at a totalized view, then, would ask how the factors within these general areas helped reconstruct the historical conditions of existence for a film at the moment of its first and subsequent releases. However, researchers in reception are not primarily interested in these conditions *per se*, as some film historians might be. Rather, those pursuing issues of reception interrogate such contextual elements to understand how they helped negotiate the film's social meanings and public reception, attempting to pinpoint the meanings in circulation at a given historical moment.

It is important to point out that the viewer in this semantic geography is everywhere and nowhere, neither the product nor the subject of one particular discourse.[20] The viewer does not exist in one stable location in relation to the flux of historical meanings around a film, and therefore cannot be placed conveniently at the centre, the periphery or some other 'niche' within this interaction. Thus, a total history does not tell us (except in the case of empirical research on fans and spectators) how specific individuals responded to films: it cannot generally 'pin' the viewer down as subject to a series of discursive manoeuvres. Instead, it provides a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment. A totalized perspective thus depicts how social forces invite viewers to assume positions, giving us a range of possible influences on spectatorship, without securing an embodied viewer. As a result, this depiction is not 'subject free', but underpinned by the assumption that social discourses recruit and depend on social subjects to support them.

Below is a schematic account of the more specific factors that enter into a total history for the classical Hollywood cinema. Many of these have been individually identified as relevant to understanding the

19 Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 57–68.

20 See Michel Foucault's discussion of subjectivity in relation to discursivity in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 200. Foucault does not wish to exclude the problem of the subject, but to 'define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse'.

historicity of the cinema. Taken together, they begin to provide a
sense of the magnitude of a total reception history of a film.

Synchronic areas of study

Cinematic practices
These are primarily all of the practices associated with film
production, distribution and exhibition that shape the film the audience
finally sees. At the same time, they generate all sorts of materials,
from studio memos to posters, that allow the historian to grasp their
struggles over how the film should ultimately signify to audiences to
make a profit. As a 'meaning-making' institution generally responsible
for first introducing the film to the public, the industry represents a
powerful source with which to historicize the impact one contextual
arena had on creating 'preferred' readings for films.

Film Production What factors within this arena affected the ultimate
constitution of the film(s) in question? Research here might focus on
how the economic structure and production practices of a studio
during a specific historical period helped shape the film product. How
did that studio's house style govern the selection of producers,
directors, stars, scriptwriters and other personnel? How did it influence
the genre, narrative and style of its product (for example, as the
post-sound expansion, Depression-era thrift of Warner Bros
contributed to the 'direct from the headlines' stories, sparse
mise-en-scene and similarly functional cinematography, editing, sound,
scriptwriting, and so on, of their cycle of 'realist' gangster and social
problem films in the early 1930s)? Research would in addition
consider technological developments in so far as they affect film style
(arc lights, Technicolor, widescreen formats, and so on). Also
fundamentally involved in the production process is film censorship,
specifically the negotiations between studios, state and/or film industry
censors and special interest groups over the content and form of
motion pictures. These negotiations, as historians have shown, result
in battles over, and potential changes in, virtually any aspect of a film
from its dialogue to its ending.

The analyst, then, provides a production history for the film being
studied, seeking to grasp how its narrative and style were negotiated
by industry factors and developments affecting industry practices. In
such an analysis, new film histories involving Hollywood provide
formative models for this aspect of reception study.[21]

Film Distribution How was the film in question distributed nationally
and internationally, affecting where and under what conditions it
appeared theatrically? While there are many possible applications here,

21 David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson
and Janet Staiger's *The Classical
Hollywood Cinema: Film Style
and Mode of Production to 1960*
(New York: Columbia University
Press, 1985) has stood as a
tutor-text of new film historicism.
In addition, scholars such as Tino
Balio and Tom Schatz have
afforded insight into the impact
studio affiliation has had on
individual motion pictures in
terms of house style and other
considerations. See Balio, *United
Artists: the Company Built By the
Stars* (Madison: University of
Wisconsin Press, 1976) and
Schatz, *The Genius of the
System: Hollywood Filmmaking in
the Studio Era* (New York:
Pantheon Books, 1988). Studies
of film technology, such as John
Belton's work on widescreen, as
well as studies of censorship,
such as Lea Jacobs's work,
demonstrate, respectively, how
technology and the film
industry's moral considerations
deeply influenced the appearance
of certain films. See John Belton,
Widescreen Cinema (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press,
1992) and Lea Jacobs, *The
Wages of Sin*.

22 Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: a History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 66–9. For other texts that treat distribution practices, see Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) and Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–34* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).

23 Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, pp. 36–57.

24 Diane Waldman treats this aspect of exploitation gimmickry in 'From midnight shows to marriage vows: woman, exploitation, and exhibition', *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1984), pp. 40–48.

25 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, pp. 57–82.

one example emerges from Douglas Gomery's work on the domestic distribution tactics of the 'Big Five' studios during the classic era. As he has shown, the distribution exchanges of these studios helped maintain a strict pattern of exhibition for films as 'first', 'second' or 'clearance' runs within certain kinds of cinemas and geographical territories. Clearly a profit-motivated strategy on the part of the studios, such definitions of venues for films helped define the cinemagoing attitudes of patrons toward these films (for example, seeing a much anticipated blockbuster with big name stars during its first week of release at top admission prices as opposed to seeing it months or years later with far less fanfare, in less glamorous cinemas and at a bargain price).[22]

Film Exhibition A particularly rich terrain for considering the industry's impact on the public presentation of a film, there are at least three central areas to examine here: national exhibition, local exhibition and the cinema site itself.

Materials the studio uses in national exhibition range from trailers, posters and lobby cards shown in or adorning cinemas, to nationally broadcast star interviews and tie-ins with major businesses such as General Motors, or, more recently, McDonald's. The researcher considers how the ephemera around the release of a film – trailers, posters and tie-ins – contribute to its social identity. Trailers, for example, obviously indicate how a studio wishes to sell a film. At the same time, the sales strategies used tell us how the film was semiotically presented to its potential audiences – that is, how the studios foregrounded certain of its aspects to appeal to industry and social trends of the time (as when studio trailers amplified the 'illicit' sexual content of 1950s Hollywood melodramas to sell them as representatives of the increasing 'sexual display' within 1950s culture).[23] Tactics and materials used by local cinema owners and managers to sell films to their particular demographic audiences include specially designed posters, as well as such exploitation devices as product giveaways or star lookalike contests. These materials again help indicate how meanings for films can be motivated: a star lookalike contest emphasizes not only the particular star as commodity and the forces of identification between star and audiences already at work, but also reifies the film as spectacle of genderized glamour and visual appeal, among other things.[24] Lastly, the design, location and other features of the cinema site itself constitute significant determinants of the filmgoing experience. Trends affecting the exhibition site, such as the development of the picture palace with its grand architecture, the introduction of air conditioning, concession stands, double features and many other theatrical innovations, create 'framing' devices that strongly interact with the phenomenon of viewing, affecting the historical apprehension of films.[25]

26 Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 58–60.

Film Personnel While this category belongs both to production and exhibition, its significance to the social circulation of a film merits separate attention. The studio's choice of actors, scriptwriters, directors, producers, and so on has a lively impact on a film's social appropriation via the studio's circulation of stories in the print and visual media about those personnel. While the director is often considered the most important of these personnel, these background stories, interviews and gossip items often feature stars, scriptwriters, original source authors and others involved in the making of a film. Such discussions are often intended to incite greater interest in the film among cinemagoers and to guide audiences to preferred reading(s) the production company may have in mind. A contemporary instance would be interviews with stars Demi Moore and Michael Douglas in which they try to steer the viewer away from seeing *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994) as a backlash film about sexual harassment. Hence what Terry Eagleton once called authorial ideology[26] does not simply apply to the primary author, but, within the collective enterprise of filmmaking, potentially to all those involved in the process. Various personnel's biographies, commentaries and reported worldviews become part of the public's structuring principles for viewing films.

Among works attempting synthetic production histories for specific films which touch on many of the above considerations (though not necessarily from a reception studies perspective) is Stephen Rebello's *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*.[27]

27 Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

Intertextual zones

These zones mainly acknowledge cinema's relation to other media and businesses, the mutual influences between film and associated practices external to the film industry. These include such influences as adaptation from an original source or reference to conventions from preexisting forms that entered into the audience's experience of film, as in the case of vaudeville's impact on early cinema audiences in the USA. For reception studies these intertextual situations are particularly important in helping to depict further formative influences on the film text itself, sets of expectations or desires audience members may have brought to their filmgoing from their participation in other adjacent spheres, and modes of evaluation other media may have brought to bear on the cinema at specific times. Hence, studying the film's association with closely related terrains illuminates just how strongly intertextual its existence is, as this provides another step in reconstructing its historical meaning.

Other Businesses and Industries These would include fashion, advertising, the car industry, fast food, and myriad other businesses that have served not only on occasion as models for Hollywood enterprise, but also as rich sources of tie-ins for film promotion,

28 Jane Gaines, 'The *Queen Christina* tie-ups: convergence of show window and screen', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1989), pp. 35–60.

publicity, and exploitation. These external influences, as in the case of fashion, have the power to influence the film's visuals, as well as provide a strategy of appeal to viewers. Productive research in this area that targets the tie-in includes Jane Gaines's work on *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) where Gaines traces the strategies used by US department stores to sell versions of the film's costumes against the historical backdrop of the development of the department store window and cinema screen as spectacles of consumer luxuries.[28]

Other Media and Arts The performing arts, popular media, and 'high' art forms comprise a vital intertextual environment in which films are made and viewed. Thus vaudeville, radio, comic strips, pulp fiction, bestselling novels, television, music, 'classic' literature, theatre, painting, dance and opera are all potential influences on films and their reception. Such forms serve, most familiarly, as sources of adaptation (for instance, MGM's adaptation of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* [George Cukor, 1935]). But they can also affect the film industry's economic decisions (when, for example, a studio decides to make 'A' productions to maintain or gain a first-run market by producing prestige pictures based on classic literature). In addition, media intertexts deeply affect film style: one can think here of the impact of the sharp repartee of Raymond Chandler's literary noir characters on acting styles and dialogue in film noir or the pervasive presence of music video's rapid editing style in a variety of media from advertisements to film today.

Through their characters, conventions, genres, and styles, forms external to cinema create horizons of expectation for their audiences as well, shaping how they view the cinema. Film historians have written extensively about the influence vaudeville had on film – how, specifically, vaudevillian stage acts helped determine the narrative and exhibition strategies of the early US film, and the expectations of its emerging audiences.[29] As for a less examined intertextual alliance, Gaylyn Studlar has argued that developments in dance (such as European-influenced art dance and the tango) shaped the textual features of Rudolph Valentino's films and the star's public reception via the controversial vision of masculinity these dance forms suggested.[30]

29 For a work that analyses other intertextual influences on early cinema, including Shakespearian drama, see William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: the Case of Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

30 Gaylyn Studlar, 'Valentino, "optic intoxication," and dance madness', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 23–45.

31 Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 90.

Review Journalism This refers to film criticism that appears in newspapers, magazines, radio and television. As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery comment, such criticism helps establish the terms by which films will be discussed and evaluated in public.[31] By illuminating the critical standards and tastes within the aesthetic ideologies and social preoccupations of a given historical moment, the study of review journalism reveals a great deal about the terms governing a film's cultural circulation.

32 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies:
Film Stars and Society* (New
York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

Star Journalism and Fan Culture Stories about stars appear in numerous sources, including women's and fan magazines, tabloids, tell-all biographies and television. Like studio-generated materials about stars, which often cross over into this arena, star stories as they circulate in the wider culture are vital to an understanding of the social semiotics of the celebrity image in conjunction with the celebrity's roles and what she or he might signify to various social groups. Richard Dyer's work on Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland in *Heavenly Bodies* has influentially demonstrated the significance of such forms of intertextuality in understanding how these stars signified, respectively, white female sexuality, blackness and gay iconicity, within specific historical circumstances.[32]

Social and historical contexts

Although cinematic practices and intertextual zones occupy distinct spheres with their own respective operations, they not only intersect with one another but also interact with social and historical developments. This category attempts to come to terms with a series of larger social processes which, in concert with cinematic practices and intertextual zones, help produce meanings for films. Below are a series of admittedly large terrains which suggest aspects of the social formation involved in the complex negotiation of what films mean publicly.

33 Thomas Schatz, 'The new
Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary
Radner and Ava Preacher Collins
(eds), *Film Theory Goes to the
Movies* (New York: Routledge,
1993), pp. 8–36.

34 Charles Eckert's early work has
spawned a small cottage
industry on this subject. See 'The
Carole Lombard in Macy's
window', *Quarterly Review of
Film Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1978):
pp. 1–21.

The Economy The cinematic institution, its practices and its alliances with other media and businesses can be associated with economic considerations within any conjuncture (for example, the rise of transnational corporations in the 1960s and their effect on creating what Thomas Schatz has called the 'blockbuster syndrome' in Hollywood filmmaking in the 1970s).[33] Film historians have also frequently emphasized the relationship between consumerism and the cinema by analysing a series of connections between historical eras emphasizing consumerism, the fashion and advertising industries, film style (including decor and costumes), exhibition practices and the female consumer.[34]

Law Here the analyst places a film, related cinematic practices, and intertextual zones within the framework of legal rulings. As in the other areas, the applications are potentially as broad as the category itself and depend on the film's specific historical situation. Researchers of US film history might explore the relationship between film censorship and regulations on obscenity from the municipal to Supreme Court levels. On completely different fronts, they may investigate the impact local or federal rules regarding city planning, zoning and housing (such as post-World War II practices of red and green lining) had on film exhibition or how import–export trends affected film exhibition and film culture. As Janet Staiger has pointed

35 Staiger, *Interpreting Films*,
pp. 178–95.

out, the influx of foreign films into the USA after World War II
influenced standards of review journalism applied to domestic films,
helping to put a premium on cinematic realism and mature themes.[35]

Religion Religious groups or trends can affect the production, public
circulation and reception of specific films. The strong involvement,
from the earliest moments of the history of the medium up to the
present day, of religious interests in film censorship and in firing the
public imagination about the immorality of certain films are well
documented. In addition, there are magazines with religious affiliations
which review films, such as the Catholic sources *Commonweal* and
America, tying religion to the intertextual circumstances of reception.

Politics Scholars have long linked films with political developments,
ranging from turn-of-the-century US policies on immigration to the
Reaganism of the 1980s. For example, critics have chronicled the
government's greater influence on Hollywood during World War II, an
influence resulting in films that supported such official platforms as

36 See, for example, Dana Polan,
*Power and Paranoia: History,
Narrative, and the American
Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1986);
and Clayton R. Koppes and
Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood
Goes to War: How Politics,
Profits, and Propaganda Shaped
World War II Movies* (Berkeley:
University of California Press,
1987).

37 Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies
Black: the Hollywood Message
Movie from World War II to the
Civil Rights Era* (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1993).

national unity and equality.[36] They have also shown how, in the period
directly following the war, these platforms helped inspire Hollywood
to make a series of 'conscience liberal' films addressing antisemitism
and racism in the USA.[37] A total history would relate film and its
discursive context to the political climate, government policies,
legislation and other factors involved in political history on national
and local levels.

Class Class relations permeate films and their discursive surrounds in
numerous ways, including the division of labour within the studio
system itself, and representation of class and class conflicts within
films. Familiar examples of this latter case are the working-class
musicals and gangster films produced by Warner Bros in the early
1930s in the wake of the Great Depression, an economic crisis that
precipitated a reassessment of class relations in the USA. Jane Gaines
has also examined how the narrative and characters of a 'race' film,
Scar of Shame (Frank Peregini, 1927), appealed to the class
constituency of the urban African–American audience of the time, as

38 Jane Gaines, 'The Scar of
Shame: skin color and caste in
black silent melodrama', in
Marcia Landy (ed.), *Imitations of
Life* (Detroit: Wayne State
University Press, 1991), pp.
331–48.

well as the attitudes of that audience towards racial caste.[38] Debates
about early US cinema have demonstrated the central role played by
the class status of film patrons in the evolution of film narrative and
patterns of exhibition. The factor of class, then, ranges in its effects
from the economic structure of the film industry to the demography of
its audiences.

Race and Ethnicity Similarly, the social constitution of ethnic and
racial identities broadly affects the cinema. One can think here of the
neonativist movement in the 1920s that demonized ethnic others. As
Miriam Hansen has shown, this movement helped shape a deeply

39 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 245–68.

40 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 67–139.

41 For a discussion of the rise of sexual liberalism in the 1950s, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: a History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 239–74; for a connection between *Playboy* magazine and the blond bombshell, see Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 19–66.

42 George Lipsitz discusses this shift in relation to the television situation comedy in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 39–96.

ambivalent public reception of Rudolph Valentino, whose films strongly amplified his ethnic otherness and 'exoticism'.[39] As mentioned, the postwar development of 'race liberalism' spawned a series of race films in Hollywood, including *Home of the Brave* (Mark Robson, 1949). In addition, Richard Dyer has argued that Paul Robeson's image was influenced by public conceptions of folk culture, atavism and the African–American male body from the 1920s to the 1940s.[40] In each of these cases, social attitudes toward race and ethnicity, as well as the perspectives of the racial or ethnic group itself, penetrate films and their discursive surrounds, helping to negotiate the terms of reception.

Gender and Sexual Difference Researchers have amply chronicled the relationship between social developments constituting definitions of femininity, masculinity and sexuality and the cinema. There is, for example, the rise of 'sexual liberalism' in the USA of the 1950s due to a host of factors, including the release of the Alfred Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality. The publication of *Playboy* magazine in the early 1950s escalated the atmosphere of sexual display and helped define the appeal of a succession of blonde bombshells on the screen, including Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren.[41] During the same historical moment, the greater visibility of gays after World War II led to a series of Hollywood films concerning homosexuality, including *Tea and Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1959). In the postwar era these and other forces, such as the powerful image of the nuclear family, defined gender and sexuality in multiple ways. In any era, representations of gender and sexuality respond to such social developments and discourses as they attempt to establish standards of deviant and normal sexuality and appropriate sex roles. As in the categories above, the appeals made by films and their circumstances of exhibition to specific demographic audiences also occur in relation to gender (as, for example, in the case of the production of women's films or promotion strategies aimed at the housewife). In addition, research into the impact of class, race and gender on film reception can engage in empirical/ethnographic studies of particular audience reactions to the cinema.

Family Reception studies can also examine the social forces affecting the family's definition during specific historical moments. For example, in the USA there was a shift in ideal family configurations from the extended urban ethnic family to the white middle-class nuclear family immediately after World War II. This was due in part to the demands of an expanding consumer economy which required consuming units like the suburban family for growth. Films such as *I Remember Mama* (George Stevens, 1948) and *Marty* (Delbert Mann, 1955) attempted to negotiate this shift in response to changing ideals.[42]

Discourses about the family circulating in the social formation thus describe its ideal configurations, its crises and its inadequacies. Reception theorists can study the impact historical definitions of the family have had on the film industry (where the family has served as a target audience and marketing focus for certain productions), on the intertextual zones surrounding the film, and on the representations of the family in specific films as they participate in social dialogues about the state of the family during a given era.

Ideology Few researchers in reception studies continue to employ a classic Marxist or Althusserian concept of dominant ideology in their discussions of film and context. In light of the work of Raymond Williams, Foucault and Gramsci, scholars often treat the historical moment as an ensemble of discourses, from the filmic to the social, that exist within a contested ideological space in the throes of uneven development. Research on cinema and the public sphere, in particular, has emphasized the necessity of a non-reductive approach to cinema and ideology. Miriam Hansen, for example, theorizes cinema's place within a 'contested field of multiple positions and conflicting interests'. Annette Kuhn also argues that, as cinema actively participates within the production of 'certain discursive positions', it does so in 'a complex and contradictory manner', because meanings 'may vary according to circumstance'.[43] A totalized view thus looks at the instabilities of the historical moment, its assembly of conflicting voices. At the same time, such a view considers the manner in which films are differently appropriated within the social formation by potentially contradictory ideological interests. A total history seeks to avoid reductively equating a text with an ideology (where the text is either reactionary or subversive). Researchers attempt instead to depict the many ideological interests that intersect with a film during its public circulation and to engage as fully as possible the range of its social meanings within its historical moment.

Crosscultural Reception Another dimension of a film's 'meaningful' existence is its reception in foreign countries. Inquiries into crosscultural reception activate the areas already mentioned, but these areas need to be reconsidered with the specificity of the national culture in mind. Crosscultural analyses have perhaps a more established place in studies of contemporary television,[44] but scholars have begun to explore this aspect of a film's reception as well. Jackie Stacey writes of the enormous appeal female Hollywood stars had for British women in the 1940s and 1950s, in part because Hollywood's glamour and displays of wealth attracted an audience accustomed to wartime deprivations in goods. Similarly, Helen Taylor analyses how women in Britain and the southern United States read and viewed *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), an indisputable 'classic' in both literature and cinema, through the screens of their indigenous

43 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 7; Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, p. 10.

44 See, for example, this recent crosscultural study: Jostein Gripsrud, *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995).

45 Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and Its Female Fans* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

cultural, historical, and personal preoccupations.[45] Such perspectives emphasize how malleable film meaning is by demonstrating the difference national contexts make to how texts are appropriated.

Diachronic areas of study

While considering a film in relation to cinematic practices, intertextual zones, and social and historical contexts is still relevant to discussing diachronic dimensions of meaning, some adjustments in these categories are necessary. Prime among these is a shift in the definition of what I have previously called cinematic practices. Since films often exist in surrogate form in their post-origin appearances – that is, in broadcast, video, laserdisc and other new technology formats – the industry practices involved in producing, distributing and exhibiting films from the past are no longer contained within the studio system, but include the operations of other forums. For example, while a production company or studio now often manufactures laser versions of its films, on occasion companies that sell laserdiscs, such as Voyager (a joint venture with Criterion-Janus Films), have produced their own lasers in league with film distributors who have the rights to certain titles.[46] In addition, contemporary exhibition of classic Hollywood films is subject to the institutional practices of art museums, retrospective houses, academic classrooms, broadcast and cable stations, video stores, and other venues through which 'old' films now have a public existence. Thus, the category of cinematic practices must be reconsidered more generally as a conglomeration of media industry and associated practices.

46 Thanks to Kriss Ravetto for this insight.

  While these various practices afford film a new public presence, they also produce certain intertextual commentaries to create significations for a cinematic text far removed from those defining its origins. Since these practices and intertextual zones are most visibly active in the reappearance and circulation of classic era films through new moments in history, I will consider them in concert by focusing on several significant ways in which Hollywood films are resuscitated for contemporary audiences. To approach a totalized view adequately, the practices described below require more detail, particularly in regard to the specificity of the means of production, distribution, and exhibition employed by the various involved industries. Since film and its discursive surround act symbiotically with social and historical developments to create arenas of reception for a film, these practices and intertexts would need to be positioned in relation to these developments as well.

  I intend what follows, then, as a suggestive mapping of terrains significant to the diachronic study of the classic film, rather than an exhaustive discussion. Clearly, more research is needed on the intricacies of the diachronic life of this type of cinema.

Practices and zones

Revivals and Retrospectives Films from the past appear in revival houses (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s); in retrospectives held in such venues as art museums, film festivals and archives; and through gala special screenings of restored, previously censored, forgotten or rare films (for example, the early 1980s big screen rereleases of several of Alfred Hitchcock's films, including *Rear Window* [1954] and *Vertigo* [1958], after they had been out of 35mm distribution for many years). Reception theorists can gauge the new meanings generated for a film by weighing the impact the particular exhibition site (revival house or art museum) has on reception. Other elements that come into play include: accompanying materials such as programme notes, newspaper advertisements and commentary from film or 'art scene' reviewers; the state of alternative filmgoing at the moment of revival; and relevant aspects of the moment itself.

Reviews Reviewers comment directly on revived films, evaluating them against whatever aesthetic canons dominate journalism at the time to renovate the films' appeal for new audiences within existing systems of professional taste and social and aesthetic ideologies. A striking feature of review aesthetics in the USA in the 1970s, for example, was a penetrating nostalgia for classic Hollywood films and their auteurs, including Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk. Reviewers touted the originality and artistry of these filmmakers' works to strike a contrast with what was perceived as the greater commercialism of New Hollywood films. This nostalgia led to lavish praise for such films from the classic era as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939) and *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and helped extend the force of auteurism from the academy into the popular press. In any case, from popularly canonized works such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) to the more obscure, films from the past are routinely mentioned and often evaluated in newspapers and magazines, guidebooks to films on television and video, film encyclopedias in print and CD–Rom formats, and books about the making of a particular work (including Janet Leigh's *Psycho*, a recent behind-the-scenes book on Hitchcock's film).

Academic Theory, Criticism, and History This is one of the regions most prolific in remotivating the meaning of films via contemporary institutions and perspectives. As David Bordwell has exhaustively elaborated, academic interpretation operates with its own set of protocols and conventions to make films signify.[47] Like revivals and retrospectives, academia constructs assessments that differ dramatically from any the film may have earned in its original context. We can see how shifts in academic protocols of interpretation, as well as such theoretical and critical developments as auteurism, semiotics,

47 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

48 For an interesting essay on the academic construction of the avant garde, see Gregory T. Taylor, ' "The cognitive instrument in the service of revolutionary change": Sergei Eisenstein, Annette Michelson, and the avant garde's scholarly aspiration', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1992), pp. 42–59.

49 Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

50 Perhaps here undertaking a cinematic version of David Morley's work in *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Routledge, 1986).

psychoanalysis, feminism and the new film history, affect transformations of cinematic meaning through time within the institution itself.[48]

Broadcast, Satellite, and Cable Television It is impossible to account for a film's reception each and every time it is broadcast on television. However, scholars can begin to address the phenomenon of rebroadcast by looking at specific cases and historical situations. As one instance of this kind of research, Robert Ray has written about how the massive broadcast of classic Hollywood films on US television in the 1950s and 1960s helped create an audience steeped in the conventions of Hollywood narratives, thus paving the way for the self-conscious and at times parodic products of the New American Cinema within the 'revolutionary' context of the era.[49] Researchers might also consider how specific television channels attempt to define a film for consumption. Each channel seems to have a particular 'persona' in its presentation of films, whether it be an archival sensibility which presents the film as a classic or an irreverent 'kitschy' format which updates the entertainment value of an old film through parody.

Any consideration of this diachronic dimension of a film's life would also need to theorize the effects of watching films on television, where they are inserted into the US home and into a particular social formation.[50] In any case, by examining the impact of exhibiting films on television, researchers address the factors that influenced the ways in which films were substantially 're-viewed' by audiences in one of the most influential of post-film media.

Video and Laserdisc Reproduction Like television broadcast, the release of films on video and laserdisc constitutes a major contemporary forum for viewing which reception studies should address. These formats represent a completely different mode of reproduction and exhibition, one which engages specific media industry practices as well as a transformed viewing situation. There are many different kinds of issues to be raised here: they include the technologies and business practices involved in the development and institution of these new formats, as well as the film classification or commentary used by video stores, laserdisc packagers and surrounding media that orient the viewer towards the film in question. How, for example, are laserdiscs marketed to their audiences in speciality magazines such as *Widescreen Review*? How do the special editions of films appearing on laser – which come with extended commentary from critics, directors and stars, as well as guidelines for using the film for 'study purposes' – reconfigure a film's identity and reception? In further examining the implications of laser and video for reception, what of the possibility these formats present to re-view films frequently? And, to ask the most difficult question, what role do video

or laser reproductions of films play within the social interactions, larger patterns of consumption, and historical developments that circle around the film/viewer relationship during a particular diachronic moment?

Fan Culture On its first appearance, a film's stars may very well have a coterie of fans or fan clubs. But as critics such as Helen Taylor have shown, fan culture extends well beyond the original moments of reception, lingering long afterwards to solidify group identity around media products, as well as develop or dispute certain reading strategies.[51] This is then a powerful region for considering how the media may be reactivated over time by specific groups with particular social identities and interpretive agendas. It also allows scholars to study how rereading, even to the extreme of fetishized rereading, affects individual media products. As recent work by Henry Jenkins has suggested, contemporary fan culture solicits consideration of the role played by new technologies, such as computer networks and lists, in creating, maintaining and disseminating textual identities far removed from the 'official' readings offered by the production company in question.[52]

The Biographical Legend Much of the commentary involved in the above areas helps constitute 'biographical legends' for various personnel, legends that deeply affect contemporary meanings for past artefacts. The biographical legend of film personnel begins in the synchronic moment, but through the cumulative effects of time achieves potentially its biggest impact on meaning. In studies of Chaplin and Hitchcock, Maland and Robert Kapsis have respectively shown how each director's reputation – constructed through such varied sources as his films, production companies, the mass media and academia – affects the reception of his work in contemporary contexts. The creation and re-creation of the author's personal and creative 'legend' through time (for example, Hitchcock as entertainer, Catholic auteur, moralist, subversive and sexual obsessive from the 1950s to the present) dovetails with both journalistic and academic enterprises. At the same time, it relates to developments in cultural history (for instance, after years of political exile, Chaplin was belatedly embraced by cinephiles within a more radical 1960s and 1970s US culture). As in the synchronic dimension of film meaning, biographical legends are not created solely in relation to film directors, but also pertain to other film 'authors', including screenwriters, composers, cinematographers and, particularly, stars. Rock Hudson serves as one of the most dramatic recent examples of how revelations about a star's identity occurring well after the appearance of his films affect their contemporary reception. In 1985, the public disclosure of Hudson's AIDS diagnosis and homosexual lifestyle caused a radical shift in his legendary heterosexual screen identity, retrospectively interfering with the seamless sexuality of his past roles.[53]

51 Taylor, *Scarlett's Women.*

52 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); also Taylor, *Scarlett's Women.*

53 For more on Hudson's iconic shift, see Richard Meyer, 'Rock Hudson's body', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 259–88.

Crosscultural reception Like US revivals, foreign film festivals, retrospectives and screenings can reactivate old US films for reception in different national contexts and historical situations. Scotland's Edinburgh Film Festival and England's National Film Theatre, for example, boosted the cause of auteurism in the 1970s with respect to such directors as Frank Tashlin and Douglas Sirk by organizing programmes devoted to their films. Such revivals of classic Hollywood films abroad occur constantly. The screenings at the Action Rive-Gauche and Action Ecoles theatres in Paris specialize in new prints of old classics, while French art houses feature mini-revivals of various US directors' films. Classic Hollywood films also appear more bountifully in other national contexts through their broadcast on television and distribution on videotape and laserdisc. When studying these crossnational resuscitations of US films, researchers must also take into account potentially all of the other diachronic issues mentioned above. In addition, there are questions peculiar to this kind of reception, such as the country's contemporary relations with the United States, as well as its own cultural, historical, and national characteristics.

A total history, in conclusion, may well be an impossible enterprise. But as I have argued, pursuing a fleet of 'multiple historicities' excites reflection on the practices of reception theory in necessary ways. At the same time, it emphasizes vexing problems which are already very much a part of film historiography. How does the historian conceive of the interactions between text and history? How does the historian establish relations between the different phenomena she or he sets out to describe? Is there an ultimate determination of, or hierarchy in, relations between levels (a question aggravated especially by post-Marxist thought with its attack on the classic base/superstructure model)? What is the researcher's working conception of history?

Somewhat paradoxically, by showing us impossible vistas a totalized view reveals how all manner of semiotic baggage encumbers textuality in its public existence. And by raising difficult questions, it reinforces the need to attend to the fine points of historiography. In addition, we cannot expect any single approach to solve all of the mysteries of the text/ideology relationship, nor will we find any that do not need to perform a critique of their own basic terms and assumptions. Both text-based and context-based criticism find that their ultimate object – the text – eventually eludes their grasp, transformed by new critical paradigms, new information and other events endemic to the passage of time and the 'natural' rhythms of revisionism within the academy as well as in the surrounding culture.

Bringing this point to bear specifically on film history, this state of affairs does not lead inescapably to absolute relativism and cynicism about historical research. As Tony Bennett writes, it does not necessarily follow that 'because we cannot establish certain

54 Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 55–6. On this issue, see also David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, 'Linearity, materialism, and the study of early American cinema', *Wide Angle*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1983), pp. 4–15.

55 As Raymond Aron writes, 'The past is never definitely fixed except when it has no future'. 'Relativism in history', in Hans Meyerhold (ed.), *The Philosophy of History* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 158.

56 Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis terminable and interminable', in *Therapy and Technique* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 268. (From his 1937 essay 'Die endliche und unendliche Analyse'.)

propositions as absolutely true . . . we have no means of establishing their provisional truth – of determining that they meet conditions which justify our regarding them as true and so as capable of serving as a basis for both further thought and action'. History as a discipline provides some of these conditions through its protocols of investigation that help regulate standards of evidence and verification. The 'evidential standing' of historical facts must pass at the very least the 'test of disciplinary scrutiny'.[54] The 'quality controls' on historical research exercised through its disciplinary institution do not guarantee truth, but they do promote rigour in making propositions about the past, which are the best possible at the time of writing.

In addition, there is much at stake in the writing of history, in giving the past a future.[55] The knowledge propagated by a historical account becomes part of the social fabric. It enters into the competition over what the past signifies to contemporary culture and thus attains a political dimension as it manoeuvres to reawaken concepts of the past to serve the present: note how politicians have used a certain image of the 1950s to support their call for a return to 'family values' in the 1980s and 1990s. With their focus on primary documents in relation to such issues as gender, race and class, reception histories enable us to rethink the past. Because what they find demonstrates the complicated heterogeneity of the past, they can combat the kind of monolithic summaries that usually characterize public accounts of bygone eras. These histories can thus make the past useful in current political struggles over social issues. In this sense, the changeability of the past is not so much a liability as a significant register of the activity of conflicting and competing ideological interests: in this situation, not having a voice in interpreting history can mean the silencing of contestation.

Despite the endless complexity of issues involved in considering a total history, this is not to say, finally, that such a history need be interminable. Like Freud's model of psychoanalytic therapy, film history is both terminable and interminable. Paraphrasing Freud, the analysis can be ended appropriately when the historian has secured the best possible explanation for the functioning of a historical moment.[56] But, in theory, it could extend indefinitely, because of the vastness of the enterprise – the difficulty of detecting all of the complicating factors involved in the past – but also because of the unpredictable concerns of the present and the future which continue to animate and otherwise affect the events of the past. The point is not to abandon the enterprise, but to deepen it by confronting its difficulties, securing historical writing as a vigorously self-reflective activity.