

# ‘JUST THE FACTS, M’AM?’

## A SHORT HISTORY OF AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS EMPIRICISM IN CINEMA STUDIES<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I want to reflect on some reasons for the ambivalence, or indeed hostility, that has often been detected towards empirical film studies. Immediately, this involves some clarifications and caveats. According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, ‘empirical’ means ‘based on observation and experiment’, while ‘empiricism’ is a philosophical tradition with a strong base in Britain, that insists on experience as ‘the only source of knowledge’.<sup>2</sup> My conclusion will be that, essentially, we should not be surprised by the ambivalence towards empiricism in cinema studies, since it does in fact point towards a very real dilemma. If Film Studies as a discipline is committed to defending an essentially *cultural* view of cinema, then to assert an *industrial* basis for analysis is to run the risk of undermining the whole enterprise. Why should Film Studies not become a division of economic or social studies?

By ‘empiricist’ I mean approaches that define a problem or a question and set out a methodology for answering it – which might well sound like the normal strategy in any field of reputable inquiry. However, as David Bordwell and others have shown, the turn towards ‘grand theory’ in the emergent field of Film Studies led to a methodological perversion, whereby history was often subordinated to polemic or to theoretical generalisation. This resulted in the prolongation of Manichean distinctions – ‘Lumière vs Méliès’ – and in the maintenance of unsupported assumptions about priority and innovation. The antidote as advocated by Bordwell in his work since the mid-1990s is ‘mid-level research’.<sup>3</sup> This might mean counting types of shot, or measuring the length of shots – in a small or a large group of films. Or it might mean quantifying some aspect of films’ production or reception. Or it might mean ignoring the film altogether and dealing with the conditions of its reception in cinemas or through other media – but in quantitative and structural rather than qualitative terms.

### The challenge of early cinema

The quantitative non-text approach is a direct outgrowth of the early cinema movement of the 1980s, which in turn sprang from the archival project of looking afresh at all the surviving examples of pre-1906 film – the ‘Brighton project’



The first Lumière show at the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square, London 1896. Source: London Screen Study Collection

of 1978.<sup>4</sup> But, crucially, what began as a movement to study these films empirically – to look at them as archaeological objects – soon became an exploration of their context – of production, circulation and reception – and thus necessarily a study of what *no longer existed* – namely the vast bulk of these film texts and their places and modes of screening.

We should not underestimate how revolutionary this was, in a discipline which had been founded on studying a relatively small canon of accessible existing films; and moreover which had been quite actively hostile towards the ‘silent’ period and antiquarian approaches to this. And of course it didn’t happen overnight. The founders of early cinema studies subjected the surviving texts of the pioneer period – films like the first Lumière tableaux, the Pathé key-hole comedies, and highly compressed narratives such as *THE STORY THE BIOGRAPH TOLD* (Biograph, 1904) – to the kinds of psychosexual textual analysis that had been developed by Film Studies. But soon they began to explore more widely, realising the need to study what could only be inferred from contextual evidence – the composition of the early film programme, the conditions of

screening and reception, the nature of the audience. Film studies without masterpieces, without *auteurs* – indeed without directors – and finally without viewable films, since many early films only existed as entries in catalogues.

Now I want to make two suggestions about why this proved revolutionary and ultimately unacceptable to the growing cohorts of Film Studies scholars. What was initially at stake was the *connoisseurship* they had built up during the previous quarter century. While the skilled reading of *mise-en-scène*, editing etc. could be applied to surviving early films – and often was, with the ahistorical abandon typical of the infant ‘discipline’; you couldn’t do this to non-existent films. And indeed you couldn’t sensibly do it to large corpora of essentially unauthored films, such as the reconstituted Lumière catalogue. These required different techniques, which were essentially archaeological and *industrial*.

Before dealing with the industrial issue, it should also be noted in passing that Film Studies had indeed entered a new phase of ‘inverted connoisseurship’ when it began to embrace popular television; and had equally begun to interest itself more seriously in film and entertainment industry issues. But this industrial underpinning of cinema and television had remained something of a sideline for the majority of the profession – and those who specialised in it were often suspect, like the men in overalls who occasionally came in to fix the central heating or the audiovisual equipment. Necessary perhaps – but clearly trades people rather than scholars. A pioneering anthology edited by Tino Balio appeared in 1976 and long served to satisfy the guilty awareness among Film Studies scholars that some attention should be paid to economic and legal matters.<sup>5</sup>

### In the beginning... the pioneers of cinema history

However, the underlying reason for resistance to a thoroughgoing engagement with cinema *in toto* was surely that most of cinema’s earliest historians were precisely concerned to wrest their subject *away* from any association with mere industry or commerce. There had been an early phase of writing about the moving picture phenomenon in technical, though rarely industrial, terms, as in Frederick Talbot’s *Moving Pictures, How They Are Made and Worked* in 1912.<sup>6</sup> But when the first generation of historians of the medium emerged in the 1920s, their agenda was to assert the cultural status of what was necessarily a minority of films: the cultural canon of ‘film art’. Certainly there was a primitive period to be considered; but this was only the backdrop to the arrival of the artists, who had bent the apparatus of cinema to their vision. So in France, the writings of Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein and Léon Moussinac;<sup>7</sup> and in Britain, Paul Rotha in *The Film Till Now* and the Close-Up group;<sup>8</sup> and even in the us, Terry Ramsaye’s *Mil-lion and One Nights*, written from a position much nearer to the industry<sup>9</sup> – all these asserted cinema’s claim to artistic status, which they could only do by sepa-

rating canonic works and authors from the mass of mere entertainment or factual film. And so it continued, though the years of elaborating and consolidating what David Bordwell has called ‘the basic story’ of cinema’s growth to artistic maturity – a process which of course was conducted almost entirely outside the academy until the 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

But there were dissenting, or least differing voices during these years. The crucial ones were probably Georges Sadoul in France and Rachael Low in Britain, both of whom began to publish in the immediate post-World War II period.<sup>11</sup> Sadoul’s concern was to chronicle a rather different pre-history from Ramsaye’s somewhat fanciful Hegelianism (which traced the history of cinema from prehistoric times and ‘the desire to attain the objects of the Wish’<sup>12</sup>). He wanted to insist that ‘the cinematograph borrowed from railways, from cartwheels and fencing, from the sewing machine, from bicycles, revolvers and machine-guns and from electricity’.<sup>13</sup> And it was Sadoul’s first volume that provoked Bazin’s famous essay, ‘The Myth of Total Cinema’<sup>14</sup> – which amounts to an idealist recuperation of its inspiration, and has since been read by generations of students unaware of the Marxist materialism of the original or of Bazin’s own ideological position, influenced by Emmanuel Mounier’s Catholic-socialist *personalisme*. But Sadoul



Premier Cinema, North London. Source: Collection Haringey Local History and Archives Centre

also had much to say about the early industry, about the rise and fall of the European companies, and about the progressive role of such international genres as the 'film d'art'. Alas, Sadoul was never translated into English.

Rachael Low, in her first three volumes – and especially the second two, covering 1906-14 and 1914-18 respectively – wrote the first fully researched, industrially based history of a national cinema. She read the trade journals assiduously, studied catalogues, interviewed pioneers who were still alive, and offered an analytic structure which still stands up well today. Indeed it stands up much better now than it seemed to during the 1960s and 1970s, when it was largely ignored or even derided by the first generation of film studies scholars. Low's achievement did not attract followers, or create a new school of cinema history, until it was rediscovered in the 1990s and re-read, often with embarrassed admiration.

For all their prescience and rigour, Sadoul and Low were scholars of their time, and they were writing at a crucial juncture in the global political economy of cinema. The post-war period was when America set out to reassert its industrial dominance, especially in liberated Europe. So Sadoul's and Low's accounts are informed by an underlying desire to validate – or in Low's case more often castigate – local national production. Despite their strenuous attempts at objectivity, both obviously belong to the conjuncture in which they were working.

In Low's case there is also the severe limitation of the *national cinema* paradigm, understandably in the context of the 1948 crisis in British cinema, when attempts to tax American box-office earnings backfired and crippled the major British producers who overreached themselves. Much subsequent scholarship has accepted this paradigm and laboured to refine it, while ignoring the obvious fact that, other than in the US local production forms only a minority part of the whole cinema industry and culture. The challenge that is now being taken up by the Cinema Context database in the Netherlands and by the London Project in Britain is to reflect the full range of films in circulation without unduly privileging national production.

## Second generation of film historians: quantitative text analysis

Let us return to the progress and vicissitudes of empirically (as distinct from aesthetically) based cinema history – in fact to its return in the 1980s, which might be attributed to the conjunctural features of that time, when theatrical cinema exhibition seemed to be in sharp, possibly terminal, decline throughout Europe. The 1980s saw two important new empiricist (in the positivistic sense) developments: the publication of Barry Salt's *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*.<sup>15</sup> Salt initially had to self-publish his book, partly perhaps because of his combative and dismissive tone; but he was reacting against the culturalism and technical illiteracy that he saw in the emergent discipline of aca-

demic Film Studies. Salt set out to challenge assumptions about the history of style by itemising counter-examples. He also introduced a new technique for analysing films as texts: the measurement of *average shot length* (ASL) – although his impact was no doubt blunted by a tendency towards crass polemic, as in his attack on the critical cult of Ophuls. But two years later, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson made an empiricist approach more palatable, and introduced the idea of an objective means of studying films in aggregate, by creating a random corpus from which to derive verifiable claims about trends in film construction, such as shot length, format and narrative form. This method aimed at providing an empirical and historical underpinning for the neo-formalist poetics that both Bordwell and Thompson would deploy in separate works.<sup>16</sup> The sheer scope of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* could hardly be ignored, but while its title entered the vocabulary of Film Studies, it is doubtful if its methodology was widely emulated, or even fully understood. However, it undoubtedly helped to correct the received history of early American film, and led in due course to the new historiography of Musser for the early period, and to the Scribner's History of the American Cinema series.<sup>17</sup> In Bordwell's own case, it led to his historiographic study of the construction of film history's 'basic story' and 'standard version' in his *History of Film Style*.

## The new empiricisms

The achievements of the 1980s and 1990s might suggest that empiricism, whether positivistic or more nuanced, has finally triumphed in the face of hermeneutics, culturalism and sheer hagiography and fandom. But this would hardly be true. Instead, there is a wide spectrum of methodologies being used in cinema and media history, many of which continue to resist the rigour of testing hypotheses and seeking to test received opinion by 'falsifying' it, or showing how it might be disproved.<sup>18</sup> But if the current *Zeitgeist* is pluralistic, let me point to three diverse trends which indicate how cinema history is developing different forms of empiricism. The first of these is effectively a revival of Salt's 'measuring' approach to statistical style analysis, using ASL. Yuri Tsivian has launched, together with his son, the CineMetrics website,<sup>19</sup> which offers a tool for recording the shot lengths in any film, with the aim of creating an ever-growing archive of analyses that can serve a similar function to the corpus used by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson. Here we can also see a return of the Russian Formalist desire to create a scientific poetics, now making use of the apparatus of digital culture to amass and share large amounts of data.

The second trend is a continuing emphasis on the *local* – choosing arenas of study that are concrete, knowable, researchable – a practice which started with early cinema studies, has now spread to become one of the most important methodologies in contextual cinema studies. Again, there are many versions of



*Irish Cinemobile. Source: Photo Ian Christie*

the localism: Robert Allen has been studying the cinemas of a Southern US town as a way of exploring how race, gender et cetera all affect the very conditions of access to film as well as its reception. In my own case, I have been studying the British pioneer Robert Paul with an increasing focus on him as a 'local' North London filmmaker, embedded in his district and making extensive use of it, while also sending his films around Britain and into the wider world. I also serve as vice-president of Europa Cinemas, an initiative of the MEDIA Programme of the European Union, which tries to support cinemas throughout the continent that show European films to a local audience. Here the issue of locality is more complex, since we are inviting audience to sample *other* localities – as well as trying to ensure that small communities still have access to cinema, even if it is by means of travelling exhibition that uses the Cinemobile.

I want to end by insisting on what should be obvious. The new empirically-minded cinema studies needs to be prepared to learn from and to interact with other disciplines. Economic history has been important since Low's pioneering intervention in the 1940s, and continues in Britain in the work of John

Sedgwick, Gerben Bakker and others. But we can also learn from radical work in parallel fields. William St Clair has recently published a massive study of book circulation and the publishing industry, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*.<sup>20</sup> This takes a robust approach to received literary history, tracing links between pricing, print runs and copyright regimes from the late 18th to the mid 19th century. St Clair shows how, for instance, the contemporary sale figures for Wordsworth call into question just how influential or widely known he could have been – while equally those for Byron prove how comprehensively popular and widely read he was. St Clair, who incidentally is a former Treasury official, makes two important points: one is that there is a great deal more data available for use, even from early publishing, than many realise. Suitably analysed, this can lead to challenges to received literary history, and a welcome, belated, turn towards the history of readers rather than of writers. A project such as St Clair's should help rally support for similar fundamental work in cinema history, seeking new sources of data and using this to question the familiar scales of values. Clearly we are still only at the beginning of the study of film and screen spectatorship, but already it is proving rich, rewarding and controversial.

## Notes

1 This paper was originally given as a deliberately polemical contribution to the Cinema in Context conference at the University of Amsterdam in April 2006, and has not been substantially re-worked for publication.

2 *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford 1973, p. 648.

3 See D. Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Theory and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory', in: D. Bordwell and N. Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison 1996, p. 26-30; also D. Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, Cambridge MA 1998, especially 'Piecemeal History', p. 118-138. I would maintain, however, that to adopt Bordwell's project is not necessarily to reject the value of hermeneutic theory for other purposes.

4 The Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) screened over five hundred of the surviving pre-1906 films at its annual conference in Brighton in 1978, from which much empirically based revisionist scholarship flowed by such figures as Noël Burch, Charles Musser and Tom Gunning.

5 T. Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry*, Madison 1975 (updated in 1985). This book reflects the growth of industry studies, although these remained predominantly focused on the Hollywood studios, as in the work of Douglas Gomery.

6 F.A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures; How They Are Made and Worked*, London 1912.

7 Books by Louis Delluc, such as *Cinéma et Cie* (Paris 1919) and *Le Jungle du cinéma* (Paris 1921), and Jean Epstein's *Bonjour Cinéma* (Paris 1921), paved the way for Léon Moussinac's more historical *Naissance du cinéma* (Paris 1925) and *Panoramique du cinéma* (Paris 1929).

8 P. Rotha, *The Film Till Now: A Survey of the Cinema*, London 1930.

9 T. Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture Through 1925*, New York 1926. Ramsaye was editor of the trade journal *The Motion Picture Herald* and active in title-writing.

10 Bordwell elaborates the interrelationship of 'the basic story' of cinema's technological development and 'the standard version' of cinema aesthetics in chapter 2 of *On the History of Film Style*, p. 12-34.



11 Georges Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma* began to appear in 1946, while Rachael Low's first volume of *The History of the British Film* appeared in 1948. Subsequent volumes of both would appear over an extended period, Sadoul eventually reaching six and Low seven volumes (although finishing her study in 1939).

12 Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. xxxlviii.

13 G. Sadoul, 'Note du travail', 1941-1942. Fonds Georges Sadoul, Bibliothèque du film (BiFi).

14 A. Bazin, 'The Myth of Total Cinema' (1946), in: *What Is Cinema?* vol 1, Berkeley 1968, p. 17-22. This most widely read version of Bazin's essay contains only a cryptic reference to Sadoul in the text, but no indication that it is a review.

15 B. Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London 1983; D. Bordwell, J. Staiger and K. Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, New York & London 1985.

16 D. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London 1985; K. Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armour*, Princeton 1988.

17 The Scribner's series has now reached ten volumes, stretching from Charles Musser's *The Emergence of Cinema* (1990) to those of David Cook and Stephen Prince, covering the 1970s and 1980s respectively.

18 'Falsifiability' was the test of true scientific method for logical positivists and for followers of the philosopher Karl Popper, who maintained that science advances by means of 'conjectures and refutations'.

19 'CineMetrics: Movie measurement and study tool database': <http://www.cinematics.lv/index.php>.

20 W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, Cambridge 2005.