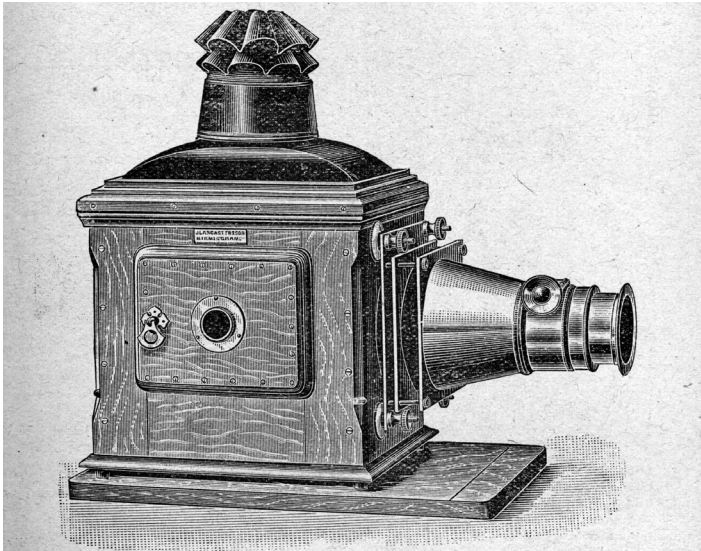

Introduction

The coming of film

‘Then came the film’, wrote the German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, recalling with excitement the arrival of a new art form at the end of the nineteenth century. For Benjamin, film’s techniques such as slow motion and the close-up held the promise of reconfiguring time and space, thus blowing apart the ‘prison-world’ of previous daily life (1999: 229). In his account, film is not only liberating but a medium that can be differentiated clearly from earlier forms of visual culture. A number of other scholars, however, have taken issue with Benjamin and described the late-Victorian emergence of film less as a singular event than as a synthesis and modification of multiple existing technologies and practices. Simply to cite the names initially bestowed upon this art form is, Rick Altman argues, to recognise its conservation and appropriation of what came before, rather than its revolutionary newness: *photoplay, electric theatre, living photographs, pictorial vaudeville* and so on (2004: 19–20).

How long a story should film studies tell about the emergence of the medium with which it is concerned? Although, traditionally, the founding moment was taken to be the Lumière brothers’ first public demonstration of their cinematograph in Paris shortly after Christmas 1895, this is much too straightforward a birth-narrative. Instead, genealogists of film have constructed extensive timelines. For the French director Abel Gance and the American critic and poet Vachel Lindsay, both writing early in the twentieth century, film actually descends from ancient visual

forms like Egyptian hieroglyphics. While Laurent Mannoni does not look back quite so far in his magisterial history of film's emergence, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, he nevertheless finds an early 'cinema' in the experiments conducted by thirteenth-century scholars who projected images in a darkened room by reflecting light from outside through a small aperture (2000: 5). Mannoni's book goes on to detail a host of technologies of image capture and projection that appeared in succeeding centuries. The best-known of these is the *magic lantern* (see Figure 1), a device which peaked in popularity during the Victorian period and enthralled spectators by projecting slides of variously picturesque, wondrous and terrifying images upon a wall, curtain or even primitive screen. Many other optical machines, however, also contained in miniature aspects of the future cinematic experience. Consider, for example, the Phenakistoscope, invented in the 1830s and consisting of a disk decorated with pictures which was spun in front of a mirror so as to produce a sense of movement comparable to later cinematic animation. Or, from roughly the same period,



1 A magic lantern, one of film's precursor technologies

think of the Zoetrope, memorialised in the name of American director Francis Ford Coppola's production company and comprising a drum rotated at sufficiently high speed for the pictures painted on its interior surface to cohere in a film-like sequence. To explore nineteenth-century visual culture is thus to enter what Michael Wood calls 'a cabinet of wonders' (2012: 16), with other fantastically named inventions such as the Photobioscope, Phasmatrope and Praxinoscope also requiring placement somewhere in film's many-branched family tree. And so, too, do wax-works, dioramas, panoramic paintings, theatre and, of course, photography.

The early intertwining of film with other forms that is disclosed here provides a starting point for this book. In recalling this media overlap, however, we do not simply indulge historical curiosity, but witness something that eerily foreshadows the visual culture of our own moment. Much of the twentieth century saw attempts by film criticism and, later, by a more academicised film studies to demarcate securely its object of attention. Enthusiasts and students of film alike sought to identify and evaluate a distinct body of work produced for public delight, excitement and reflection by capturing light on a series of photographic frames and projecting the results so as to generate a sense of movement. Now, however, the assumptions underlying this enterprise are increasingly subject to challenge. In the first instance, as Tom Gunning writes, film is in the process of being 'dispersed into a number of new image technologies. The last modern art seems to be dissolving into a postmodern haze' (2000: 317). A moment's reflection on the irrepressible visuality of contemporary life – at least in economically privileged societies – bears out Gunning's contention. The primary works with which film criticism has traditionally been preoccupied have unstable boundaries now with a host of other spectacles, including video games, internet sites, TV shows, advertisements and amusement park simulations. Second, major changes to long-established ways of thinking about film are prompted by the progressive replacement of the medium's photochemical basis by *digital imaging*. Some of the challenges this latter development poses to familiar areas and protocols of film studies are raised during the course of this book and reviewed in detail in its Conclusion.

To dwell at the start of a text such as this upon film's instability and mutability might seem self-defeating, even suicidal. This is not so, however: the point is simply to acknowledge that now, just as earlier in its history, film studies takes as its object of inquiry something which is messy rather than pristine, in flux rather than fixed, and entangled with other cultural forms rather than self-sufficient. Alain Badiou, one of a number of major French philosophers to have been highly engaged by film, speaks in this vein of 'the fundamental impurity of cinema' (2013: 7). Gunning, too, is unfazed by suggestions that film's 'contemporary crisis threatens an established sacral identity'; there is, he says, 'no single identity to guard' (2000: 327). In the wake of the medium's own multiplicity, film studies itself should be understood as plural and contentious, not settled or monolithic. Hence, of course, the discipline's great intellectual excitement and its ongoing life.

The invention of film studies

From its beginnings, film has precipitated not only sensory stimulation but intellectual inquiry. A significant wave of recent scholarship has returned to the first discourse about film, produced early in the twentieth century, and has registered how it asked fundamental questions about the new medium's artistic parameters, ideological implications and cultural effects. Was film 'science or was it art', for example (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 1)? With respect to audiences, was it likely to 'elevate and educate, or distract and corrupt' (1)? Film's earliest students included major figures from other creative fields such as literature and painting, repelled by its mechanical and chemical constituents but also drawn to it for its exhilarating modernity and for the elasticity of its presentation of time and space. Virginia Woolf was among these founding intellectuals of film, sustaining a complex engagement with the new art form across diary entries and novels as well as, more overtly, in her essay 'The Cinema' (1926). And, if a number of writers of fiction and poetry were driven to reflect on film, so too were figures from a background in the visual arts. In the United States, Victor Freeburg, for example, drew at times upon established precepts of art criticism when responding to the new medium in *The Art of Photoplay Making*

(1918) and *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen* (1923). At the same time, however, Freeburg had to acknowledge ‘a quality of movement in film which was radically different to that of the other visual and plastic arts’ (Marcus, 2007: 215).

While early critics such as these prioritised aesthetic investigation – seeking to identify film’s distinctiveness as an art form – other writers approached the medium with different concerns in mind. So, for example, Hugo Münsterberg aimed in a pioneering book of 1916 to uncover and analyse the psychological activity initiated by what he continued to call ‘the photoplay’. His interest, as he phrased it, was in ‘the means by which the photoplay influences the mind of the spectator [...] We analyze the mental processes which this specific form of mental endeavor produces in us’ (Münsterberg, 2002: 65). The type of psychological inquiry developed by Münsterberg was not always a rarefied intellectual activity in this early period: on the contrary, it was also practised by government agencies on both sides of the Atlantic, anxious about the social effects of the psychological reconditioning produced by film. Hollywood, too, took an interest in this strand of early film scholarship, sensing commercial value in research into exactly what goes on in the spectator’s cortex during the viewing process. An adequate account of the first work on film has to acknowledge, then, that it was characterised by a range of intellectual orientations and carried out by a multiplicity of agencies and institutions.

All of this varied activity in the early decades of the twentieth century occurred, however, before the emergence of film studies as a named and demarcated subject area. ‘Film was studied before 1935’, Dana Polan writes, ‘but largely without disciplinary solidification into an academic tradition’ (2007: 19). The first degree in film studies, in fact, was that offered by the University of Southern California from 1933 onwards. While, initially, the student intake on this and some other university programmes in the United States was dominated not by young scholars drawn to the subject for its intellectual challenges but by Hollywood technicians aiming to upscale their skills, film studies gradually disavowed any vocational bias. The subject was also internationalised, emerging as an accredited academic discipline not only in the United States but in such locations as Britain and continental Europe.

This is, of course, not the place for a detailed history of film studies. Interested readers can find fascinating accounts of the gradual disciplinisation of this field of study in texts such as Dana Polan's *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (2007) and Lee Grieveson's and Haidee Wasson's edited collection, *Inventing Film Studies* (2008). However, two points might be made briefly. The first is to emphasise that, compared with subjects such as history, philosophy, theology and even literary study, film studies as a discipline is relatively youthful. Thus the work on film that readers of this book will do themselves is a contribution to a field not yet as thickly accreted with existing scholarship as some others. Second, it is important not to condescend to early film studies, despite its fragmented and diffuse aspects. This body of work, in fact, holds valuable lessons for us in our own moment, both in the range of projects and approaches it entertained and in its tendency to ask the most searching questions about film's nature, purpose and effect.

About this book

This volume offers readers a critical introduction to key subjects, concepts and methodologies in film studies. Specifically, it aims to provide:

- a knowledge of conceptual shifts in twentieth- and twenty-first-century film studies
- a vocabulary for the analysis of film form and style
- a sense of the ideological dimensions of film
- an awareness of key *post-textual* or *extra-textual* domains of film studies
- a prospectus of possible directions for film studies in the future.

Running throughout the book is the conviction that film studies is less a single set of orthodoxies for its participants to master and repeat than a field of diverse activities to engage in and extend. At times, it is true, particular critical and theoretical positions have come close to supplying the discipline with received wisdoms. The two strongest candidates to date are the director-centred auteur theory that emerged from France in the late 1950s and early 1960s

(discussed in Chapter 6) and the composite of Marxist, psycho-analytic, feminist and semiotic approaches that started to form a decade later (discussed in Chapter 8). Even during the period of rule of each of these critical doctrines, however, dissenting voices could still be heard, hinting at other valuable and interesting ways in which to do film studies. The book will assess the benefits of these 'strong' conceptual frameworks while welcoming the fact of their relaxation to the point whereby film studies at present is hospitable to a wide range of research projects.

The organisation of chapters can be regarded as a set of concentric circles, at the centre of the smallest of which is found the film text itself. Chapters 1–3 assume that knowledge of film's stylistic repertoire as it has developed from the late nineteenth century to the present is indispensable for any work in film studies (whatever its focus). These chapters aim, therefore, to equip readers with resources for cataloguing and evaluating aspects of mise-en-scène (film's visual field), editing and soundtrack. From early, pre-disciplinary days, film studies has understandably been interested in assessing in detail the formal qualities of films themselves. Such narrowing of focus has not been without costs. Charles Acland suggests wittily that 'the problem with film studies has been *film*, that is, the use of a medium in order to designate the boundaries of a discipline' (2003: 46). At times, Acland's withdrawal of interest from the particularities of film texts is so complete that he resembles a literature professor who has stopped reading books in order to discuss instead the economics of publishing or the design of Kindles. Nevertheless, his critique of an 'artifactual approach to film' (52) is bracing, and helps to guard against the kind of formalism that reads a film minutely but has no awareness of the dense contexts of production and consumption in which it is enmeshed.

If the book's first three chapters focus closely on film stylistics, Chapters 4–8 move outwards, while continuing to promote detailed engagement with the film text itself. They are concerned respectively with film narrative, film genre, film authorship, film stars and the ideologies – class, gender, sexual and racial – of film representation. In each of these chapters, the text is less a self-enclosed, impermeable thing than a prism reflective of a host of real-world concerns that range from genre's importance in film industry economics to

mutations of film authorship in the digital era, or from questions of social power raised by film narrative to cinema's role in the stereotyping of non-white or non-straight identities.

Chapters 9 and 10, however, decentre the film text more thoroughly, along the lines proposed by Acland and some other contemporary critics. For these writers, film studies has now mined the last seams of a textual approach and can renew itself only by other kinds of research. This desire to turn away from 'readings' of the primary material and do something radically different is not unique to contemporary film studies. Franco Moretti – whose work on genre features in Chapter 5 – urges a similar change of direction for his own field of literary study. Instead of focusing upon 'concrete, individual works' (2005: 1), or restricting itself to 'separate bits of knowledge about individual cases' (4), literary criticism in Moretti's view should take as its proper object of inquiry 'a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole' (4). In film studies, systemically oriented work of this type aims to provide ever more detailed accounts of production, distribution and consumption. *Extra-textual* or *post-textual* scholarship might focus, say, on the mechanisms by which 'global Hollywood' extends the commercial reach of its products, or on the cultural politics of watching films in multiplexes. Chapters 9 and 10 welcome and review these emerging lines of inquiry, while arguing that the best work in film studies will combine savviness about broad institutional forces with sensitivity still to how these play themselves out in the detail of specific films.

Three other things should be said briefly at this stage. Firstly, some readers new to the subject may be anxious that film's manifold pleasures will be lost as a result of cultivating an analytical habit. What happens to the thrill we feel at the kinetics of a chase sequence, or at the star's beauty on screen, once films are watched in a resolutely critical and theoretical spirit? One (weak) answer is that the absorptive power of much cinema is such as potentially to deflect earnest interrogation until after each act of viewing. However, a stronger response is to emphasise the pleasures bound up in engagement with film criticism and theory themselves – gratifications different from sensuous reward by the screen, it is true, but not to be belittled by comparison. As well as introducing a wide range of critical models and theoretical vocabularies, the book includes many

'Stop and Think' sections that encourage readers to recognise not only the explanatory power but also the intellectual exhilaration of these frameworks.

Secondly, a word might be said about the language of film studies. Drawn from such disparate fields as narratology, genre study, Marxist theory, psychoanalysis and so on, the terminology employed by the discipline may sometimes seem off-puttingly abstract. It certainly did to the great Spanish director Luis Buñuel. Given his subversive, Surrealist imagination exhibited across half-a-century of work, Buñuel was hardly a maker of briskly commonsensical films; nevertheless, in his autobiography he tells the story of encountering 'a young man in a suit and tie' at a film studies centre in Mexico City: 'When I asked him what he taught, he replied "The Semiology of the Clonic Image."' Buñuel adds: 'I could have murdered him on the spot' (1985: 222). But while absorbing the lesson here about a self-regarding or rebarbative jargon, we should not rush to abandon abstract discourse in itself. The critic Peter Wollen puts the case well for film studies' specialised language: 'clearly any kind of serious critical work must involve a distance, a gap between the film and the criticism, the text and the meta-text. It is as though meteorologists were reproached for getting away from the "lived experience" of walking in the rain or sunbathing' (1998: 115).

Finally, attention should be drawn to the book's choice of films to support its discussion. For the most part, the case studies that conclude each chapter are taken from the strain of recent, popular American cinema with which most readers will be especially familiar. This should not, however, be taken as uncritical endorsement of Hollywood's current global hegemony. Instead, these already known primary materials have been selected so as to facilitate more readily readers' work with a range of critical models that may be being encountered here for the first time. Elsewhere, however, the book is committed to a wide geographical remit. While regrettable lacunae remain – for example, African cinema both north and south of the Sahara – the films drawn upon across the chapters originate in nations ranging from Spain to South Korea, Iran to Chile, India to Uruguay. Chronologically, too, the book aspires to breadth, aiming not only to be up-to-the-minute but also to venture beyond the recent and contemporary into such earlier filmmaking as the first

single-shot documentaries, the radical Soviet experiments of the 1920s and Hollywood film noir of World War II and its aftermath.

A note on references

Film studies is an activity not only of serious watching but of serious *reading*. In this spirit the book is dialogical, interacting with many written sources. These are referenced here in author/date style, with the full set of 'References' placed at the end of the book. Some of these texts appear also in the annotated lists of 'Selected reading' that conclude each chapter. Dates of all films when first mentioned are given in parentheses; where a film appears without a date, this has been supplied earlier. Following the practice of a number of other texts, the titles of foreign films, where these are very familiar in English, are given as such. Again, this is intended only to enhance the book's accessibility, and should certainly not be read as proselytising for an Anglocentric film culture or a monolingual film studies. Finally, every effort has been made to check the viability of websites listed in the text: all URLs are correct at the time of publication.

Selected reading

Grievson, Lee and Haidee Wasson (eds) (2008), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

Substantial collection of essays on the discipline's plural and dispersed origins.

Mannoni, Laurent (2000), *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press).

A mighty scholarly achievement, placing the cinematic apparatus in a densely recovered history of optical experiments beginning as early as the thirteenth century.

Marcus, Laura (2007), *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Dense and absorbing study of attempts by modernist writers, early in the twentieth century, to uncover the artistic, cultural and political potentials of film.

Polan, Dana (2007), *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Lucid, scrupulously researched account of disparate early twentieth-century American ventures in the study of film, prior to film studies' consolidation as a discipline.

Online resources

'Early Cinema', <http://earlycinema.com>.

Well-maintained site on cinema's inaugural decade from 1895 to 1905.

'Invention of Entertainment: The Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies', Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/edison-company-motion-pictures-and-sound-recordings/.

Helpful introduction to the emergence of American cinema, featuring scholarly articles alongside many examples of early short films.

'Who's Who of Victorian Cinema', <http://victorian-cinema.net/>.

Excellent, scholarly resource on the personalities and technologies involved in cinema's beginnings from the 1870s to the end of the nineteenth century.