

## **Writing and Rewriting Film History: Terms of a Debate**

© Thomas Elsaesser, 1995

### **Introduction: Back to the Future with Early Cinema?**

Early Cinema has become important for several interconnected reasons, both historical and theoretical, suggesting that the study of early cinema is important not only for its own sake, but for our understanding of contemporary and maybe future media culture. This article gives a brief overview of the present state of studies in Early Cinema, emphasising the difference between the so-called New Film History and more traditional ways of conceptualising the history of the cinema. The occasion also gives me an opportunity to reaffirm my faith in the joint -and truly international- effort among archives, curators and scholars, to rescue for posterity the very rich heritage of the first years of the cinema. As a film historian and university teacher, I have always been interested in the origins of the cinema, but I have not always fully appreciated what was at stake. In the 1960s, when I began to write about film, I did not challenge conventional opinion, namely that the films of the Lumieres, of Melies, Edison, Messter and Hepworth (to name some of the pioneers) were interesting mainly by their primitive artlessness, when compared with what came after: the films of Griffith, Sjöstrom, Stiller, or Maurice Tourneur. Charming and naive, the films from 1896 to 1912 seemed to testify to the childhood of a medium which I loved only in its maturity and adulthood.

A number of events during the 1980s radically changed my mind on this. Most dramatically, it was the 'Giornate del cinema muto', held annually in Pordenone, Italy since 1981. This event, which combines extensive retrospectives of rarely seen, recently rediscovered or restored films, with meetings between scholars and archivists, is justly famous for revolutionising our view of the American cinema of the 1910s. But it has also contributed enormously to our knowledge of early cinema in Europe, due to the retrospectives of different national cinemas: Italian cinema, French Gaumont and Pathe productions, the early cinema of Denmark and Sweden (1986), of Russia (1989), of Germany (1990). The one single event, however, which prior to Pordenone had gathered the world's leading experts on early cinema, and which in turn inspired many scholars to take a second look at the very first years of the cinema, was the 1978 FIAF Conference held in Brighton, England. There, for the first time, a group of curators and historians systematically viewed and discussed most of the surviving films from 1900-1906.

The reports and papers presented there were a revelation, and since then, a veritable explosion of scholarship devoted to Early Cinema has occurred. Already in the early 1980s, the material seemed to me so rich in the perspectives it opened, and so fundamental for

helping us to rethink the history of the cinema that, after co-organising a conference on the emergence of narrative ('Space Frame Narrative') at the University of East Anglia in 1982, I decided to edit a collection of essays by the leading scholars in the field, which was published in 1990, under the title 'Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative'.

What I want to do, then, is to give a rapid overview of why I think the study of Early Cinema (roughly, from 1895 to 1917) has become so important, not only for its own sake, but for our understanding of contemporary culture.

### **Why Early Cinema?**

It is not difficult to discern a conjuncture of several factors which has contributed to the renewed interest in Early Cinema. Firstly: It has become commonplace to say that this century has seen a quantum leap in the function of the audio-visual media, bringing with it the sense that we need a new archaeology of our culture, the irreversible shift from one representational code (in which our notion of truth, our system of rationality was based on and supported by print), to another representational code (increasingly relying on, defining itself and communicating via the combination of sounds, images and graphics, alongside narrative and argumentative discourse). The approaching centenary of the first public showings of projected images is therefore a convenient marker to begin to undertake this archaeology.

Secondly, and more specifically, the revival of interest in Early Cinema came from a pressing sense that the models for understanding the cinema, and the histories derived from these models, were inadequate, contradictory, unsound. Three basic assumptions in particular, have seemed in need of revision: that film history is the history of individual films; that the development of cinema has been in the direction of greater and greater 'realism'; and that this drive for realism explains why the cinema became a narrative medium for telling fictional stories. But when we look at the introduction of sound or colour, for instance, we realise that sound was first used mainly in musicals, and that colour at first connoted 'fantasy': in both cases, realism was associated with that which the new technologies displaced. However, if we look at the history of early cinema, even this revision gets considerably more complicated: early films were rarely silent, and indeed the technology of sound synchronisation was already very sophisticated by around 1906. Secondly, early cinema was not in black and white, but at a rough estimate, about 80% of it was stencilled, tinted or toned, which is to say, 'in colour'. This raises not only questions of evidence, of accuracy, of individual film prints and their history, but more fundamental questions. Why was this knowledge repressed for so long? why was industrially produced sound film delayed for so long? why did colour disappear in the early to mid-1920s, and not reappear until the late 1930s? This in turn raises an even more fundamental question: why did the cinema appear when it did, which is to say why did it take

so long to appear at all? What are the reasons for the delay of cinema? To the history of what had been, there needed to be added the history of what might have been, or at least an awareness of dead-ends and paths not taken. For what became increasingly evident was that no inevitable logic about the development of the cinema could be derived from technology itself: many of the features we now associate with the cinema, such as safety film, colour or sound were discovered well before they were adopted by the film industry. Solving the technical problems associated with film was no guarantee that these might be implemented: too many other variables, from cost factors to patent rights, from monopolistic exploitation of a market to trying to gain a competitive edge over a rival. Such interrogations run counter to any linear conception of 'progress' in film history, they also challenged the notion that mankind had always been waiting and dreaming of the cinema, ever since stone-age man had painted outlines of animals on the walls of his caves.

Already in the late 1960s/early 1970s we find a radical critique of 'idealist' film theory and its notion of both origin and teleology (Jean Louis Comolli, Jean Louis Baudry, Noel Burch) in the name of a new (epistemological, archaeological, non-linear, 'materialist') history. Early Cinema (or as Burch called it, 'primitive cinema') seemed a useful way of challenging the linear, organic account, not least because so many of the films made before 1905 seemed incomprehensible when viewed by the standards of classical cinema (see Burch's important essay 'Porter or Ambivalence', in *Screen*, vol 19, no 4, 1978/9).

Parallel to this predominantly French, theory-oriented challenge to film scholars from the 1950s like Andre Bazin and Jean Mitry, we also find, among American film historians, a more empirically minded critique of traditional film history (which had until then been, by and large, the story of pioneers, of 'firsts', of adventure, discovery, of great masters and masterpieces). Robert Allen, Douglas Gomery, Charles Musser, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, Russell Merritt and others demanded more exacting scholarship, and in the process, challenged the accounts of Terry Ramsaye, Lewis Jacobs or Arthur Knight in the name of different determinants (mainly economic, industrial, technological rather than artistic or biographical) and different kinds of evidence (demographic data, business files, law-suits and patent wars rather than anecdotal or interpretative evidence). Yet they also showed how closely the cinema was imbricated in other media, such as vaudeville, Hale's Tours, travel and colonialism, the popular stage melodrama, the burlesque (the 'media-intertexts' as they came to be known, of Early Cinema).

The cinema, in other words, was itself part of the enormous transformations that reshaped, in the name of modernity and modernisation, our idea of work and pleasure, the private and the public sphere, leading to the progressive industrialisation and commercial exploitation of entertainment, tourism and leisure). From this vantage-point, Early Cinema

could be seen as quite distinct from what came after, suggesting less of a continuous progress towards classical Hollywood cinema and more a series of 'breaks', shifts and reorientations. But it can also be understood from a contemporary perspective: in the patent wars, the cartel formation, and the rush for making popular films we recognise today's struggle to acquire the kind of software, which allows the manufacturers of the hardware to impose their operating systems as the 'industry-standard' on to a particular branch of the entertainment business.

This also has implications for the way we think of cinematic style. Writers of the 'new film history' were not looking for the film which had the first close-up, or the first eye-line match, or the first trick shot. Such issues of originality and influence belonged to the paradigms of the individual artist or of romantic genius, which -derived from literature and art history- were seen as inappropriate for the history of film styles and cinematic practice. Instead, scholars became interested in when and how such devices became the 'norm', when and how they imposed themselves as a general practice, or when they were accepted not as the marks of an artistic avant-garde, but as the stock-in-trade of the filmmaker working for the public at large.

### **Film and the other Arts**

Thus, the champions of Early Cinema are in a counter-current also to the many histories of the film that try to define the 'essence' of the 7th art, by contrasting it with the plastic arts, music, literature, painting and architecture. However, while it may seem that the 'new film history' simply views cinema as an industry, and film as the commodity which this industry produces, there is actually a very vivid interest in redefining the relation between film and the others arts, though perhaps not so much as individual creative acts, and more as 'media' competing for public attention and the public sphere of culture.

Take the example of literature. While traditionally, much time had been spent on the question of adaptation, on comparing a novel with its transposition to the screen, historical research -notably by Nicholas Vardac, and more recently, by Rick Altman, showed that many popular novels of the late C19th were throughout the 1880s and 1890s adapted into plays for the popular theatre, before they became, in the 1900s, the material for filmed adaptations. When we come to the 1910s, at least in the united States, the greatest literary influence on the cinema is not the novel, but the short-story, itself the product of the expansion and popularity of the monthly magazine, made possible by cheaper paper and printing techniques.

As far as the theatre is concerned, the direction of recent research has been to differentiate more precisely between different kinds of theatre, and besides the bourgeois theatre, to explore the very rich and varied traditions of vaudeville, variety theatre, music hall and other staged entertainments as precursors, rivals or intermediaries, when it comes to

understanding the interaction between the popular, the respectable and the less reputable in popular spectacle arts. Early Cinema, in each case, both drew on and transformed these arts, which is particularly important when it comes to understanding the (often non-narrative, sketch-like) subject matter of the first films, but also their manner of presentation, which makes them seem to us incomplete or incomprehensible, but would have made perfect sense to their original audiences, since they were already familiar with the gags or comic routines from vaudeville.

When it comes to the visual arts, the situation is once again, more complex than mere borrowing or influence would suggest. What is typical of the first phase of the cinema is the fact that before it became a predominantly narrative medium (i.e. from around 1907 onwards), much of the cinema's pleasure derived from its illusionist capacities, its *tromp l'oeil* techniques, its animation sequences and trick shots - in short, its affinities with stage magic on the one hand, and a baroque or at any rate non-realistic image tradition on the other. Tom Gunning and Donald Crafton, for instance, have written important new studies of the Melies tradition, and of animation pioneers like Emile Cohl.

### **The Archives and the Film Scholars**

At the same time, the 1970s also saw a new urgency on the part of film archives about the preservation and accessibility of the surviving materials from the early period, partly in response to specific crises in film archiving (the Langlois Affair in Paris, various fires of nitrate film -Sweden, George Eastman House-, the fate of the Desmet collection in Amsterdam), partly because the natural lifespan of nitrate film was coming to an end, but also partly in response to the increased demand being made on all kinds of audio-visual records by television, with its hunger for authentic material for political, documentary, biographical, educational programmes.

This in turn required the collaboration between scholars and archivists, the sifting and processing of filmic and non-filmic material, but also ways of reliably identifying films, and thus methods of dating, attributing, periodising films and especially film-fragments. Hence the need for establishing not so much aesthetic criteria of excellence and artistic value but of normative and comparative criteria.

As one would expect, such diverse motives do not make for unanimity. Indeed, there is a quite perceptible tension between scholars with an interest in Early Cinema as part of a 'cultural' or ideological or theoretical history, and scholars who are only concerned with micro-analyses, who are revisionists and neo-empiricists. On the other hand, it is remarkable - and sign of the vigour of this field of research - that the diverse contributions do actually form part of a debate, that there is a perceptible coherence and a central set of issues and problems

of which almost every scholar of Early Cinema is aware.

### **Film Style**

One of the central issues is that of film style, defined not as the visual flair of an individual director, but as the formal characteristics of works that are similar either in provenance (e.g. Pathé productions, Vitagraph films), in period (say, the multi-shot films between 1900-1906), or genre (the chase films or filmed versions of the Passion). This idea of style, first put forward by Early Cinema scholars such as Barry Salt, looks for the 'zero degree' of a given filmmaking practice, that is, what would have been considered the profession's own practice in lighting, camera work, or composition. To this one would add the limits and constraints imposed by the technology available at the time, which requires detailed knowledge of the equipment available and in use at the time, as well as a study of manuals and trade publications. Salt also regarded the average shot length in a film as telling us much about style. Pursuing a similar objective, Noel Burch argued that one could identify, for instance, in the cinema before 1907 a distinct style paradigm, typified by frontal staging, a 'flat' screen space, non-centred action, and various other formal features. Proceeding inductively, Burch recognised what all these features had in common: they emphasised the autonomy of the shot as a complete scene, and the priority given to spatial coherence over temporal logic. This, in essence, was what he called the 'Primitive Mode of Representation' (PMR) which he distinguished from the 'Institutional Mode of Representation' (IMR) For Burch, the object of inquiry was explain the interdependence and dialectical relationship between the two, which could be explained in terms of distinct historical and ideological factors. Hence his interest in the filmic avant-gardes and in alternative national cinemas, such as that of Japan, or of Germany and Russia in the 1920s. Far from simply developing from the primitive to the classical mode, the history of the cinema for Burch is involved in a constant process between aspects of the primitive and the institutional mode, each responding to a certain set of problems and constraints.

The parameters that have been identified as pertinent for Early Cinema include, apart from shot length, that of shot scale and shot density, of deep staging and shallow staging, of shot division (e.g. into different playing areas: left/right, foreground/background), and the presence or absence of off-screen space. Together, or in certain combinations, such parameters may be said to constitute a coherent system, and therefore a style. When, for instance, André Bazin contrasted montage on one side and the long take on the other, he was applying the parameters of shot scale, shot length, and staging (shot density), in order to construct two contrasting stylistic systems. Early Cinema studies have begun to historicise these systems and to locate the reasons for the mutation of stylistic features, in order to be

able to explain change, and to create the basis for historical periodisation. Style, especially when treated as a series of interdependent variables, can thus be a very important tool for the film historians. Ben Brewster, for instance, has combined the index of staging (deep-staging vs shallow staging) with that of shot length (slow cutting vs fast cutting) to arrive at a possible stylistic system which could be the basis for differentiating between European styles and American styles in the 1910s.

### **From Film History to the History of the Cinema**

The double historical conjuncture -that of the cinema between 1896 and 1917, and of its rediscovery in the late 1970s- does situate Early Cinema also in a wider context, the one opened up by the revitalisation of film theory during the previous decade: the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hence, several sets of questions have influenced the debate: firstly, when and how did the very diverse technical processes and economic pressures behind early film production undergo the kind of integration that was necessary to turn filmmaking into the film industry? Secondly, how did this industrial logic impose itself to the point of becoming inextricably bound up with the textual logic of the cinema we call 'classical'? Perhaps most intriguingly, given that the cinema manifests a unique combination of the drives towards pleasure and intelligibility, what is its psychic dimension, its connection with and extension of those older and more permanent desires to picture the world in images and to experience it as doubled and mirrored?

In trying to answer these questions, a new terminology emerged: alongside the need to define and delimit the cinema's 'mode of production' (can we talk about Early Cinema as 'artisanal' and workshop-based, while post-1917 cinema is different, because it is an industry?), Burch introduced the term 'mode of representation', meaning thereby the different kinds of logic of the visible, the different technical but also psychic 'dispositifs' of showing and projecting which marks the Early Cinema off from what came later. In short, what the concentration on Early Cinema had brought was to reorient scholars away from film history as the history of films to film history as cinema history (the history of exhibition practice, of audiences, of the social and physical spaces where the cinema was experienced, as well as the history of the institutions -industrial as well as legal- which needed to be developed for the cinema to become a mass medium).

Many other histories, it now seemed, had to be considered as part of the history of the cinema, and it greatly expanded the sphere of expertise on which a film scholar could draw. There was the general history of modern technology, and in particular, its phases of invention, innovation, implementation, its cycles of research and development, of diffusion. Thus, the history of capitalism, its developments from competitive, via corporate to multi-national

capitalism became as much an integral part as were the histories of related technologies of reproduction, transmission and representation. The phonograph, the typewriter, the telephone, the machine gun and even the sewing machine were seen as belonging both historically and sociologically to the same technological environment to which we owe the kinetoscope and the cinématographe (two apparatus which differ from each other not so much in their technical specification as they do in their social uses, or 'social imaginary').

### **A Gathering of Audiences**

Implied in the shift from film history to the history of the cinema is also a quite noticeable impulse to study audiences and the history of spectatorship. If it has always been evident that the rise of the cinema depended on its huge popularity, the conditions of this popularity had never been seriously investigated. On the contrary, scholars in the past had to make a case for studying the cinema seriously, despite its popularity with general audiences rather than because of it, if they did not want to risk the charge of crass commercialism. What the example of Early Cinema offered was the realisation just how complex and diverse had been the processes by which audiences had to be gathered, and audiences had to be 'built' that would regularly return to the cinema and make it a focus of their leisure life. Starting with travelling shows, and as parts of the vaudeville programme, films only were gradually projected at fixed sites, thus establishing the principle that it was economically more profitable to show different films to the same people, rather than the same films to different people.

This in turn meant that exhibitors were dependent on film-exchanges, ie 'distributors', instead of buying films outright. Along with the rise in purpose-built film theatres, the so-called nickelodeons, the increasing power of the film exchanges profoundly altered the cinema as an institution: not only the physical spaces where films were seen (the architecture, the amenities, the social environment), but also the types of films (from one-reel films to full-length narrative films), and perhaps most significantly, the audiences. It has been shown how, in the period between 1905 and 1909 the cinema industry began to attract a more middle-class audience, and also a female audience, finally targeting the so-called 'family audience' that became the mainstay of the film-going public from the mid-1910s to the mid-1960s.

Early Cinema therefore can be characterised as that period when the exhibition context was still so strong that it exerted control not only over production, but also over how films were being interpreted by their audiences. Charles Musser in particular has documented the way that films depended for their meaning on what he calls the 'screen practice' of individual exhibitors, and how a veritable struggle for editorial control typifies the relation between exhibitors on the one side and producers on the other. Not only were early films not

'silent', because an elaborate musical programme would accompany all performances, but both the commentary of a 'lecturer' as well as the programming itself (i.e. the order in which single-reel films were shown) could alter the viewing experience. An often quoted example is the shot of the gunman firing his gun at the audience in E.S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* which could be shown at the beginning or the end of the film - a choice that would seem nonsensical to a modern audience, used to the precise place and narrative integration of such a crucial visual and dramatic event.

It is a good example of how the study of early cinema has given a new status of evidence to hitherto unexplored non-filmic sources and documents, such as exhibitor's catalogues, the advertisements in trade papers, or the records of a local cinema. How important for a historian a collection can be has been demonstrated by Roland Cosandey's work on the Abbé Joye collection at the National Film Archive in London, because the films there reassembled are in themselves a history of film-spectatorship, as well as a document of the Catholic Church's use of the new medium. Similarly, the Desmet collection in Amsterdam, which provides such an important resource for the study of the international dimension of early cinema, is based on the films exhibited in a particular cinema, and therefore allows one to reconstruct the actual way in which films were seen, as well as how audiences might have responded. At the limit, each film is an original, because its physical state, its splices or markings give precious information about the exhibition practice. Similarly, each performance of a film becomes a singular and unique event: often, cinemas rivalled with each other not by the film they were showing but by the size of the orchestra, or the wit of its lecturer- aspects of the film performance known to the audience.

The move away from the film-text to the context of exhibition, to spectatorship and the attraction of audiences not only signals an awareness of the institutional factors influencing the style and content of films, it also represents a pragmatic turn in a more narrowly linguistic sense: the conviction that meaning is not inherent in the filmic-textual articulation, but derives from what different (groups of) spectators make of a film. This stands in contrast to the semiological and psychoanalytic currents in film theory which was looking to how the text constructs the spectator, positions him/her as a (gendered) subject. Students of Early Cinema asked instead how spectators experience film-texts in determined contexts which make them meaningful in the spectators' time and place.

Early Cinema, then, provides in a very real sense a juncture between film history and film theory in the form of a 'historical pragmatics': to understand how films are understood (adapting a famous phrase of Christian Metz'), by understanding how historical spectators understood films. It means learning as much as possible about the conditions of exhibition, but also about the mental dispositif and the mode of representation.

## **Narrative and Narration**

One such mode of representation, and historically perhaps the most important one, is 'narrative'. What separates Early Cinema from other modes of representation and makes it comparable in some respects to avant-garde filmmaking is the fact that narrative does not seem to have been as central to films before 1905 as it was to become subsequently. The consequence is that our explanation of why the cinema became an almost exclusively narrative medium needs to be revised. If narrative is often equated with storytelling, we find that Early Cinema also told stories but that it told them by adopting quite different narrational stances or narrational gestures. Not the linear logic of implication and causation, but the parallel logic of different and discrete action spaces or the paratactic logic of 'one thing after another'. In each case, the function of the narrator is more crucial and prominent, compared to the embedded or invisible narrator of the classical cinema. Implied in all Early Cinema, therefore, is the (often physical) act of showing, of presentation, or as André Gaudreault calls it 'monstration'. This may be done by a lecturer present in the auditorium, or the showman present in the film, but it may also be more indirect and 'textual', as in the practice of the iris shot, or the fade to black. Tom Gunning has called this type of presentational cinema a 'cinema of attraction', contrasting it typologically to a 'cinema of narrative integration'.

But how to explain the change from one form of narration to another? Early Cinema, as we saw, teaches us not to look to either technical perfection or realism as the inevitable destiny of the cinema. And so it is with 'narrative': it emerges not as the necessary adjunct to verisimilitude, but as the most 'economical' solution to a number of contradictory demands made in the representation of space and time, but also in the representation of the spectator within this space-time.

The compromise hinged on what one might call a logic of commutation or substitution, which in turn depended on the cinema severing two kinds of bond with the represented: the (ontological) one between the filmic and the pro-filmic, and the (physical) one between spectator and the screen. At first, films were presentations in the sense of reproducing situations already existing elsewhere: as self-contained actions, as topical events, as scenic views, as vaudeville sketches, jokes or gags- brought before a 'live' audience. But the historical dynamics was such that cinema developed its autonomy by working out how to convert this double 'reality' (that of the pro-filmic occasion and that of the spectator-screen relation) into a single one, in which each is somehow contained, yet also drastically refigured. The spectator had to be bound not to the screen (as a performative space) nor to the event or spectacle, but to their representations: this implied changing both the logic of the event represented and the place of the spectator vis-à-vis the event.

While some scholars insist, for early cinema, on the autonomy of the events/actions as 'attractions', addressed to a collective audience who experience the viewing situation as external to and separate from the views represented. It is only when more complex actions are being put on screen (the multi-shot film and the beginnings of analytical editing) that a change occurred in the way spectators experienced the event or action: the history of the insert shot and the point of view shot, of overlaps and cross cutting being the most obvious instances of this change from presentation to representation, from monstration to narration. The cinema's turn to 'narrative' appears thus as the consequence, rather than as the cause of turning audiences into isolated spectators, bound to the representation by the spectacle of seeing space and time as variables of another logic which we perhaps too unproblematically identify with narrative.

But why did the cinema have to convert collective audiences into isolated spectators? In order to answer this, we must look to the so-called institution cinema, a term naming a number of apparently very heterogeneous aspects: the social spaces needed to gather audiences and the practices regulating their admission; the production companies' competition for access to and control of technology; the changes in distribution from selling to exchanging and renting, and most fundamental of all, the standardisation of an agreed commodity, recognised by producers and audiences alike. At first glance, none of this appears to have to do with questions of film form and the development of narrative as outlined above. Yet what is emerging from work done on early cinema's institutional context is how crucially the emergence of narrative as the dominant mode is inflected if not outright determined by the particular definition which the viewing spaces, the mode of production and the distribution of product received. Thus, from the institutional perspective, too, narrative represents a compromise of different factors dovetailing in practice while nonetheless remaining contradictory in their effects.

### **Conclusion: A Sense of an Ending of (classical) Cinema**

With this, we have come full circle. Early Cinema studies have helped to invigorate not only historical film studies, but also set a new agenda for film theory. I would like to conclude by pointing to another, more amorphous, but nonetheless important conjuncture in which the interest in Early Cinema is playing its part: (1) that of alternative cinemas, be they avant-garde or European art-cinema: historically, it was avant-garde filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s who 'rediscovered' early cinema, in order to displace the hegemony of Hollywood (Ken Jacobs, Noel Burch, Malcolm LeGrice); (2) the contemporary transformation of cinema-viewing through television, video-tape and other new technologies of storage and reproduction has echoes in the period of rapid technological change at the beginning of the

century; (3) the contemporary predominance of technology and special effects in providing the primary attraction of cinema is in fact a return to the beginnings, when it was the technology that people went to see rather than the stories on offer; (4) finally, the resurgence (through television and popular music) of performative and spectacle modes as against purely narrative modes makes the post-classical cinema resemble the pre-classical period.

The fact that so many contemporary phenomena seem to have analogies with the first decades of film history has meant that the questions raised about Early Cinema (that of a 'cinema of attraction' versus a 'cinema of narrative integration'; question of audiences and gender; definitions of the public sphere of cinema; the role of technology and standardisation) have a self-evident relevance in our own audio-visual environment, where cinema and television have to coexist.

Future work in this area, accordingly, will want to look at individual films with the (cultural, demographic, industrial and institutional) contexts firmly in mind. In historical explanation, which is a retrospective process, the object of analysis only emerges as the construction of a theoretical discourse, and the question that I want to leave you with is simply this: Early Cinema - can we enjoy it as merely a storehouse of marvellous films, of treasures somehow miraculously saved for posterity, or do we not have to think into our pleasure the fact that Early Cinema also exists as an object of theoretical reflection which tells us more than we sometimes realise about us and our present?

From: Thomas Elsaesser, "Writing and Rewriting Film History - Back to the Future with Early Cinema?" *Norsk medietidsskrift* 2/95, 35-48.