

Introduction

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'Of the scholars, nothing is to be expected, I am afraid', wrote Sir Arthur Elton, a pioneer of the documentary film, pleading in a much-quoted article of 1955 for greater recognition of the value of film as a source material for history.¹ It was true that up to that time professional historians, in Britain at least, had shown small interest in the utilisation of film, either in research or in teaching. Yet even in 1955 Elton's words disregarded some significant developments. If in the early days of film it had tended to be those involved in the craft of film-making themselves, like the American W.K.L. Dickson or the Pole Matuszewski, who called attention to its potential historical importance, there had none the less been considerable discussion of the matter by scholars between the wars within the International Congress of Historical Sciences and elsewhere, and a distinguished Cambridge historian, George Kitson Clark, had been among those who, in 1948, founded the British Universities Film Council to promote the use of film in higher education. Moreover, had Elton's vision extended to Germany, the gloom generated by the British situation would have been lightened. Not for the first time in the history of historiography, the Anglo-Saxons were lagging behind. In Göttingen, serious work on film regarded as a historical document had been in progress since 1949 under the aegis of such figures as Professors Walther Hubatsch, Percy Ernst Schramm and Wilhelm Treue. The 'Referat für zeitgeschichtliche Filmforschung und Filmdokumentation' established in 1953 at the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in Göttingen, working in close co-operation with the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, was already beginning to produce edited film documents of contemporary German history for research and teaching purposes.² History was catching up with the moving picture.

It was, however, not until the sixties that the use of film (which term is taken to include television) in historical studies could be seen to be advancing on a broad international front. The status of film as evidence was becoming accepted: already in 1961 the French historian Charles Samaran felt it appropriate to include in his massive manual, *L'Histoire et ses méthodes*, important sections on film sources from the pen of Georges Sadoul. Increasingly, film was coming to be used in teaching, though often only in an elementary way, as incidental illustration. Historians were even embarking on making their own films for teaching purposes. In 1966 Dr R.L. Schuursma, then head of the Sound Archive at the Historical Institute of the University of Utrecht, was responsible, in

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collaboration with the Stichting Film en Wetenschap, Utrecht, for the production of a film on the life of the Dutch Fascist leader Anton Mussert, soon to be followed by another on the battle of Arnhem. Britain was not far behind in this field, for in 1968 Professor John Grenville and Nicholas Pronay produced at the University of Leeds *The Munich Crisis*, and initiated the British Inter-University History Film Consortium to promote further ventures. In many ways, 1968 was a year of take-off for the application of film in historical studies, not least because of the increasing publicity given to the subject among historians and others and the establishment of contact between those who had hitherto tended to work in isolation. An important step was taken in April 1968 when the Slade Film Department at University College, London, already much involved under Professor Thorold Dickinson in showing film material to history students, organised, in conjunction with the British Universities Film Council, a conference on 'Film and the Historian', whose published proceedings, together with the first (February 1968) issue of the Council's new journal, *University Vision*, devoted entirely to film and history, were to play a substantial role in stimulating and guiding interest in the field. The Slade Film Department went on to secure support from the Social Science Research Council to compile a register of film material in Britain of use to history and the social sciences. At the same time Marc Ferro, who had already been involved, with the collaboration of other French historians, in two major productions for French television, *La Grande Guerre* and *1917*, published in *Annales* (23, 1968), in the section devoted to 'Débats et combats', an urgent call for greater attention by historians to the documents which film placed at their disposal. And in Göttingen the group of young historians, educationists and social scientists which had formed in 1964 as the Studienkreis Geschichte und Publizistik, under the wing of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, was holding a working meeting on contemporary film and television documents in research and higher education from which resulted the publication in 1970, under the editorship of Günter Moltmann and Karl Reimers, of a collection of studies entitled *Zeitgeschichte im Film- und Tondokument*, still the most substantial work in its sphere.

Even in the short perspective of seven years from which I am writing now, 1968 seems an age of cheerful innocence. So much has been done since then, in many parts of Europe and North America, as to defy a brief summary. Work has progressed steadily on all three main fronts, investigation of film as source material, use of film in teaching, and making of films for academic purposes, with concomitant publication both in print and on film. A string of international conferences in London, Utrecht, Göttingen and elsewhere has helped to maintain contacts and sometimes to promote mutual comprehension, not only among historians and other scholars, but also between academics as a whole and those professionally involved with film, as producers, directors and archivists. There have inevitably been committees, too. In Britain, the University Historians' Film Committee set up at the 1968 conference has to a large extent been content to

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see the work of liaison and information performed by the British Universities Film Council, through its network of representatives in universities and other institutions of higher education, and its publications, including a regular news-letter and journal. The Film Committee established by the Historical Association, much concerned with school- as well as university-level work, has now gone out of existence. In the U.S.A., the Historians' Film Committee formed in 1970 maintains in *Film and History* the only periodical devoted to the subject.

On the whole, organisation among those engaged in exploring the use of film in historical studies has remained loose and informal, and this has perhaps helped them to avoid the excessive self-consciousness, search for dogma and tedious proselytising that would have vested their co-operative efforts with all the panoply of a movement. None the less, from the point of view of historical scholarship, there might appear to be something odd in meetings, publications and committees devoted to the utilisation of film. Historians normally interest themselves in history, rather than in particular media of record and communication. There are no groups, to the writer's knowledge, devoted to the study of print and history, or even of newspapers and history. Concentration on film as such can produce curious results, as in those faintly unreal sessions at film and history conferences when the natural professional instinct of at least a part of the audience to discuss a historical topic in the round, from the standpoint of all available evidence, is frustrated by the necessity to restrict consideration to those aspects which are illuminated by one, not always central, source. What is needed in the long run is, of course, the full integration of film into the range of resources at the historian's disposal, so that its use, where appropriate, is a matter of course, not needing special remark. But it is precisely in order to make the use of film commonplace that it has been necessary to give it special emphasis and study. Awareness of film and willingness to take it seriously were not widespread even among contemporary historians in the sixties: hence the need to devote to it an attention that may sometimes have seemed to border on the eccentric.

The situation has changed a good deal in recent years. Film is now becoming fully assimilated into the accepted corpus of historical source materials and means of instruction. The experience of the graduate student at Columbia University in the early sixties who was reproved by his professor for using so dubious a source as film and advised by a sympathetic instructor to establish himself academically before dabbling further with it is less and less likely to be duplicated.³ Yet there remain a good many historians of the modern period who are insufficiently acquainted with film's possible uses or who are diffident in face of the practical and theoretical problems which those uses may pose. As the acceptance of film grows, in fact, the need to devote careful investigation to its nature, content and mode of use increases rather than decreases.

There is much ignorance about what sort of material is available, what it can provide, and how it can be employed both in research and in teaching. At present, the search for guidance has to be conducted through many scattered

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publications, not all of them easily accessible, as a glance at the bibliography of this book will show. There is no wide-ranging handbook in English comparable to Moltmann and Reimers, itself confined to German and Austrian experience. This volume attempts to supply some part of the deficiency. It does not set out to provide a complete manual of the use of film by historians, desirable though such a production will be in due time, or to offer a series of definitive pronouncements about the areas with which it deals. The field is too new, its exploitation still too experimental and unskilled, to make such aims feasible at the moment. What we have tried to do here is rather to provide a survey of the actual and potential uses of film material in historical research, teaching and presentation, reporting on the position that has been reached and indicating the problems and possibilities with whose resolution and exploration we shall be concerned in the future. No line has been laid down to which contributors have been required to conform; their diversity of opinion reflects, as is proper, the state of the subject.

The book seeks first to outline the nature and range of the material available and to look at its preservation and provision to users through the film archives and other collections; second, to consider film as a historical document and the types of evidence that can be derived from it; third, to see film as a historical factor, developing within and operating upon a particular historical context, by means of a case study of the newsreel; fourth, to discuss the use of film as a teaching instrument and as a medium for the interpretation and presentation of history both to students and to a wider public. A select bibliography offers a guide to further study, and a list of addresses of organisations is appended to help those seeking practical information and assistance. It is the hope of its authors that the book will not only aid and encourage those students of history who feel that film may be of value to them but help to stimulate the further work on film resources and the methodology of film's use which is needed.

Perhaps, also, it will do something to persuade those who remained unconvinced of film's relevance to serious historical study to think again. Even if the necessity to argue the case for taking film seriously is much less acute than it was ten years ago, it has not altogether vanished. Given that the film in the modern sense made its *début* in 1895, it has taken historians a long time to come to terms with it either as a source or as a possible medium of interpretation and instruction, and the prejudices, suspicions and difficulties which have held them back have not yet been entirely removed.

Possibly the deepest root of historians' reserve has been the unthinking but not unnatural identification of film with 'films' or 'the pictures', understood in the sense of the production of the commercial cinema and classed simply as a medium of trivial and ephemeral popular entertainment. Film thus regarded has retained the taint of its café and fairground origins, of being in Georges Duhamel's phrase 'une machine d'abêtissement et de dissolution, un passe-temps d'illettrés, de créatures misérables abusées par leur besogne'.⁴ Traditional history

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has tended to be snobbish about materials, arranging them roughly in the order of the social strata which produced them. Archivists codify historians' prejudices, and the following, from the classification scheme of a German archivist arranging papers in Strasbourg in the early 1940s, is symptomatic of the status assigned by old-style history to film: 'G I Höhere Kunst (auch Theater); G II Kleinkunst: Theater, Lichtspiele, Zirkusse usw'. Even the gradual conversion of cinema from a resort of the masses to a pastime of intellectuals has not altogether wiped out this stigma or succeeded in transferring it to television. And if the historian is now less likely to dismiss the film as 'mere popular entertainment' and more likely to be a devotee of it himself, that perhaps only increases his reluctance, now that it has become a source of pleasure, to make it yet another object of work.

A second reason for neglect of film has undoubtedly been the conservatism which affects all professions, in which acquired wisdom may find itself consorting uncomfortably with sloth and narrow-mindedness. A third has more to do with limits of time and mental endurance: the contemporary historian, overwhelmed by the mass of written and printed materials for the study of the twentieth century, may well shy at the thought of taking on another large area of unfamiliar character. It is an area, too, and here lies a fourth reason, in which he may find it practically difficult to operate. Not only may he need to master new techniques of analysis and perhaps of presentation, but he will have to face possibly substantial problems of availability of material and of the time, money and facilities required to utilise it. Finally, and very important, there have been serious doubts about whether film could yield results of a value proportionate to the trouble invested in using it. As a source, it has often been pointed out, film is subject to grave disadvantages, considered from the point of view of factual record. It reaches the observer almost always in highly edited form, from raw material representing in itself only a very partial and selective view. It can quite easily be faked, or put together in such a way as to distort reality, give a tendentious picture, and practise upon the emotions of the spectator. Moreover it is often a relatively trivial and superficial record, capturing only the external appearance of its subjects and offering few insights into the processes and relationships, causes and motives which are the historian's concern. It may simply illustrate without helping to explain. This thralldom to externals may seem, too, to make it a difficult medium to employ for historical instruction and interpretation. All these misgivings about the value of film rest on substantial grounds. None constitutes a sufficient reason for excluding it from the field of historical scholarship.

Film, after all, is a fact, which historians can ignore no more than other facts. They labour under Clío's curse, the omnipresence of meaning, which dictates that there can be no area or product of human activity without relevance to their concerns, unamenable to their curiosity. It is not for them so to circumscribe the boundaries of their subject as arbitrarily to exclude any of the available means of

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furthering it. Whatever exists has to be examined for whatever it can yield, and if the examination suggests new objects or methods of investigation they must be assimilated into the canon, for a conception of history narrower than our means of exploring history is an absurdity. From this standpoint, there is no natural or necessary hierarchy of sources, or, for that matter, of modes of communication, no divine distinction between serious and unserious, trivial and important. There can be only provisional and particular hierarchies related to specific questions and aims. Film will be towards the bottom or the top according to what the individual historian is interested in and wants to know or to do: the bottom if he is studying or expounding, say, conventional diplomatic history; the top if he is studying, say, the development of popular culture, and finds in the mass entertainment aspect of the film not a reason for despising it but an essential source, or if he desires to communicate a body of knowledge to which film is integral. To neglect a source of such multifarious character and vast extent as film is for the twentieth century, to ignore a means of communication which may be peculiarly appropriate to certain tasks of presentation or indispensable in reaching certain types of audience (notably the mass audience now perhaps attainable only through television) deserves the harshest of epithets: it is simply unprofessional. That does not mean that all historians, or even all contemporary historians, are under an obligation to use film; only that none should exclude the possibility of doing so.

Just as there is no immutable hierarchy of sources in terms of their historical significance, so there is none in terms of their intrinsic purity or impurity. All the historian's sources are more or less impure: if they were not, there would be small need for his professional skills. Film sources are not inherently worse than any others. The criticisms outlined earlier of film regarded as record can be levelled at other forms of source material: written and printed documents, for instance, may equally be partial, subjective, tendentious, emotive, and even forged. Nothing has been more curious in discussions of film's role in historical studies than the degree of suspicion directed against it by historians who are prepared to accept verbal material with far less critical apprehension. The pitfalls of film may in some cases be of a slightly different character, and it may require a somewhat different training to detect them, but it is hard to see that they are necessarily deeper or more numerous. It is largely the comparative unfamiliarity of film, decreasing with each new generation of historians, which has earned it such suspicion, and perhaps, too, the insistence of so many of its pioneers on exploiting it as an illusionist device.

Even the criticism that film evidence is often trivial and superficial, which tends again to place film low in a qualitative source hierarchy, has its force only in a limited context. It rests partly on an excessive preoccupation with film viewed as a record of fact and event narrowly defined, especially in relation to conventional political history, and on disillusionment at what may be called the broken promise of reality, a promise held out not by film to its users but by the

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more naïve of its users to themselves. Since the birth of the cinema, it has seemed at first sight reasonable to suppose that the major advantage of the cine-camera for history would be to permit an exact recording of reality, to enable us to 'see it as it happened'. But what we get from film is only rarely an untainted and unmanipulated reproduction of the external reality at which the camera was originally pointed, and it is always a very partial reproduction of that reality, both because of the circumstances of shooting and editing and because reality does not consist solely of the external physical appearances which may be all that the camera can capture. If film is regarded as a record of facts, of events, processes and people, external to its making, then it is necessary to recognise that it has important limitations, just as it is necessary to assert that it sometimes has considerable merits.

These limitations, however, reduce to their proper proportions when we take an enlarged conception of 'facts' and 'events' and concentrate on the reality represented by, rather than that represented through, film. For a piece of film itself and the circumstances of its making, exhibition and reception are facts and events for which the film is prime evidence. Reality inheres even in a fake: it is a real fake, the result of real events, mental as well as physical, composed of elements individually genuine, and can usefully be analysed in that sense. The film records the outlook, intentions and capacities of those who made it; it illustrates in some way the character of the society in which it was produced and for which it was designed; it is the most perfect record of one factor operating within and upon that society – itself. It is in these aspects, rather than as evidence of external facts seen through the camera lens, that film can offer the richest reward for our interest.

The present book reflects this broad view of the evidential value of film, both in the general discussion of film resources and the evaluation of film evidence conducted by Lisa Pontecorvo and William Hughes and in the contributions on the analysis of fiction film and the historical development of the newsreel by Marc Ferro and Nicholas Pronay. The role that film can play in the factual recording of events, processes, personalities and things is not depreciated, nor is it forgotten that the external appearances which form so large a part of the camera's haul of information are for certain purposes of first-rate importance to the historian, even to the political historian if we think of, say, the theatrical dimension of politics as represented by oratorical style or by the visual self-projection of a mass movement.

But to a large extent attention is concentrated less upon what film overtly records and says than upon what Arthur Marwick has described as its 'unwitting testimony', upon the information that can be derived from it about the mental and social world of its makers and audiences. All categories of film can be examined from this point of view, from the 'factual' to the fantastic. The newsreel may be of value less for the study of its ostensible subjects than for the examination of the assumptions and intentions behind the way it presents them

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and of the influence which that presentation exerts upon its audience. The documentary film (a misleading title, which has cast a specious mantle of objectivity over some highly tendentious productions) may well turn out to be a document less of what it purports to record than of the values and purposes of its makers and of the manipulations of reality to which these drove them, often, paradoxically, in the interest of the true reality as they saw it.⁵ But perhaps it is the fiction film which comes most into its own under this type of analysis. Often neglected by historians whose primary concern is with film in relation to propaganda and mass communication, the fiction film is in fact relevant in both spheres. It is central to the study of mass entertainment and popular taste. Most important, it is arguably (or, perhaps, was until the rise of television) the most 'social' product of the film industry, by virtue of the variety of people employed in its manufacture, its explicit relation to an audience (usually a mass audience), and its influence on that audience. Hence it may well be the richest source of information about the society in which it has its birth and its impact. The exploration of that information by historians is still in its infancy. The best-known attempt to probe the deeper evidential content of the fiction film, Siegfried Kracauer's search for 'the inner dispositions of the German people' as reflected through the medium of the German screen between the wars, in *From Caligari to Hitler*, has not furnished us with a satisfactory analytical model, and it is hard to say that more recent essays in the same direction have been more convincing. Marc Ferro is a leading present-day exponent of the quest for the 'non-visible' beneath the surface of the fiction film, and gives us in this volume a practical example of what it can yield.⁶

Evidently, to say that film reflects and affects aspects of the society which creates it is one thing; to define the nature and analyse the content of its relations with society is another. There are methodological problems of great complexity here, which no one pretends yet to have solved, problems which, of course, have to do not simply with the analysis of film but with the analysis of society. What does a film mean, what does it contain, either for its creators or for any particular audience? These are not simple questions. The difficulty of answering them is intensified by the fact that it clearly does not suffice to look at the film alone. There is a context of production and reception to be examined. Thus we need, for example, what at the moment we scarcely possess, good studies of the motion picture industry as an economic and social mechanism, in order to determine how far and in what ways film has been conditioned by the nature and purposes of the organisation required to produce it. Too often films have been discussed as though generated in a vacuum by the spontaneous power of individual genius: we have much on films as art, too little on films as consumption goods. We need analyses of censorship from within and without, to see how far films have been adapted to conventions and requirements external to the creative impulse. 'When coarse story is being told, Vicar should not be present.' Much history lies in that 1949 comment of the British Board of Film Censors on

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a scenario submitted to it; still more in its 1932 remarks on the portrayal of strikes and labour movements: 'It is impossible to show such a scene without taking a definite side either with or against the strikers and this would range the film as political propaganda of a type that we have always held to be unsuitable for exhibition in this country.'⁷ We need, too, studies of the reception of films. There is frequently no evidence of the effect of particular films on particular audiences, but there is a good deal of the effect of cinema in general. It is important not to neglect the conditions in which reception takes place: we have to study not simply film but the cinema and the nature of the cinematic experience, that extraordinary barrage of sensations falling upon the spectator in an artificial world of darkness and abstraction, relieved sometimes by the diversions to which darkness lends aid and even enchantment. Perhaps there is a special television experience, too, different at least in being fully lit, which we ought to analyse. In all these areas of the investigation of film's relation to society we are simply groping.

How far historians have the necessary skills to grope effectively is a moot point. In order to deal adequately with film, it is probably essential for them to acquire some specialised knowledge of its nature and of the range of possible approaches to its understanding, including such modern fashions as semiology. They must become what Thorold Dickinson has dubbed 'cinemate', as distinct from literate. William Hughes, who outlines below the techniques available for 'decoding the message structure of film', has elsewhere suggested a course for historians wishing to use film, including practical experience in making films, which some would regard as a prerequisite of full comprehension of the medium.⁸ Certainly historians engaged with film on a broad front will need sometimes to call in aid practitioners of other disciplines. A practical lead in such collaborative effort has been given by the work of the Göttingen-based Studienkreis Geschichte und Publizistik, devoted primarily to the investigation of film's role as an instrument of mass communication, and combining the talents of historians, sociologists, communications specialists, etc. So far, co-operation with those who would regard themselves as specialists in film or the cinema has been very limited. Film historians tend too often to treat their subject simply as the history of a self-contained art form, ignoring its wider connotations and connections, providing catalogues of technical and aesthetic developments, synopses of plots and roll-calls of directors and their stars, which provide little help in the task of situating film in its social context. From film theorists, analysts and aestheticians there may be more to learn. Historians may well have something to gain from contact with the film studies departments already widespread in North American universities and gradually being introduced, rather tentatively, in Britain, where their survival in a chill economic climate may depend on their ability to strike up working relationships with established subjects and to set their concerns in the widest context.

The need for the historian to extend his skills applies equally if we transfer

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the emphasis from the use of film as source material to its use as teaching material and as a medium of instruction and interpretation. Even for the simplest presentation of film material to students, some understanding of the medium is desirable in order to guide their appreciation of its content and significance, and in order to gauge the likely character of its effect on them (student response to film as opposed to other forms of communication in history is something which has yet been very little investigated). The students, too, are being required to extend their skills, for critical analysis of film is still seldom taught in schools, and in helping them to do so the aid of film studies departments may again be valuable. The case for the acquisition of specialist knowledge is obviously stronger still when the historian's aim is not merely to show films but to make them. Technical expertise he may not need: the handling of film, television, videotape, etc. by historians as by other academics has been rendered very much easier in recent years by the establishment in most higher education institutions, at least in Britain and North America, of audio-visual units capable of providing almost any service from operating a projector to producing a complete film. But unless he has some grasp of the nature of film and the basic procedure involved in using it as a medium of expression, he is going to find difficulty in ensuring that the media specialists produce the kind of result he wants. It has indeed been argued that the academic should know enough to be his own producer.

The use of film in teaching is surveyed in general terms in this volume by Arthur Marwick, with the advantage of the unique experience of the Open University in incorporating television teaching programmes into its courses, and by Bryan Haworth from the point of view of the schools, while Rolf Schuurmsma and John Grenville bring to the discussion of the problems and opportunities facing the historian as film-maker their background as pioneers in this field. It is perhaps the making of films that has aroused most controversy in the area of film and history. The initiative in Britain has been taken by the British Inter-University History Film Consortium with a series of productions which, though intended for use in a context of lectures, tutorials and guided reading, set out to provide a rounded exposition and interpretation of their subjects on film. Critics have argued that this impulse to produce a 'freestanding' object involves spending a good deal of time and money in trying to do on film things that film does not do easily or well – providing background information, explaining complicated political and diplomatic manoeuvres, and so on – and that a film of its nature tends towards too dogmatic and un-nuanced a style of exposition to lend itself readily to the needs of historical interpretation. They have therefore preferred to the historiographical exercise in film the alternative approach of producing either editions of film documents or compilations of film source material. The production of editions of film documents, accompanied by printed critical commentaries, has been a speciality for some twenty years of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, with its series, 'Filmdokumente zur Zeitgeschichte', on contemporary German history.⁹ Compilations of sources have