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Why Film History Should Not Repeat Itself

_Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema_

Edited by John Fullerton

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This broad-ranging anthology features a selection of essays delivered at a 1995 conference sponsored by the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, and the University of Derby. 'Celebrating 1895' provided a forum to commemorate and to interrogate contemporary understandings of early film, and this collection represents both the breadth and international scope of the undertaking.

Consisting of twenty-seven short essays, segmented into five parts, the book contains a sampling of scholarship addressing the formal and historical elements that conditioned the production and reception of early cinema, and that, in the words of the volume's editor, John Fullerton, reflects 'the sense of occasion' (ix) that inspired conference participants. The attempt, however, to attain representativeness -- of the event, of diverse critical approaches, of cultural and social identities -- necessarily sacrifices more sustained theoretical inquiry into the revisionary historicism at work in some of the essays. _Celebrating 1895_ nevertheless remains an informative and provocative collection that effectively illustrates the various cultural, social, and technological milieux from which cinema emerged.

Part one, 'Inscribing a New Technology', questions the technological determinism underlying linear historical narratives. Starting with a brief history of how the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television acquired and developed many of its present-day holdings for exhibition, the section proceeds to characterize some of the institutional agendas and structures that have shaped our understanding of film. Simon Popple demonstrates how pre-1913 film historiography catalogued technologies and celebrated individual ingenuity, a procedure that obscured the economic incentives, the social pressures, that spurred invention. Popple contends that 'cinema's status as a mongrel technology' (20) -- as a 'bricolage' of chemical, optical, and engineering advances, bearing aesthetic, economic, and social implications -- merits in-depth examination and he briefly points to some primary sources that would facilitate more textured research in this field. Deac Rossell likewise challenges originative histories by placing the emergence of cinema within the context of an existing magic lantern culture, which used, among other techniques, narration and slide projection to simulate the kind of temporal progression and visual immediacy subsequently enabled by film. The section also pays homage to two frequently-overlooked cinematic pioneers from Poland: Kazimierz Proszynski, an inventor who constructed and designed several innovative cameras and projection devices, and theorist Karol Irzykowski, who philosophized about the impact of film upon the human senses.

Section two, 'Exhibition and Audiences', looks at the exhibition contexts for, as well as the viewers of early film. Richard Abel reevaluates the French movie company Pathe's most successful releases in the United States between 1908 and 1916. He weighs claims made in the French Trade Press as potential evidence that an increase in female moviegoers in pre-World War II France
The third segment, 'Popular Culture', evaluates how conventions and themes from other cultural forms carried over into film. As Gary and Estela Keller contend, stereotypical representations of Hispanics prevalent in popular literature transferred seamlessly to celluloid. Peter Kramer's essay discusses how literary 'bad boy' figures a la Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer gained a cinematic afterlife in American film adaptations, and Stephen Johnson demonstrates how _Uncle Tom's Cabin_ became highly popularized through a variety of stage productions and Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film, which continued the 'Tom Show' tradition. Richard Crangle's 'Saturday Night at the X-rays: The Moving Picture and The New Photography in Britain, 1896' cannily points out that X-rays initially attained greater recognition than the cinema. The X-rays novelty waned, however, once the public became immune to static representations of skeletal structures; on the other hand, film thrived because of its representational mobility, because its newness could be perpetually recuperated via the narrative possibilities of visual sequencing. Finally, Casper Tyberg challenges critics who dismiss the sensation film genre in Denmark as a form of alienation, as a series of fleeting 'shocks', and examines autobiographical and journalistic sources that suggest the genre invigorated its subjects just as often as it 'shocked' them.

Perhaps the most ambitious and unwieldy part of _Celebrating 1895_ is the fourth section, 'Cultural Representation', which is organized around the ways in which film wrought changes upon earlier conceptions of the public and the private. Opening with Karen Kenkel's essay on nationalism in the film reform movement of Wilhelmine Germany and the attendant difficulties it encountered when trying to reconcile a mass audience with traditional understandings of German culture, the next essay by Constances Balides argues that Cecil B. DeMille's _The Cheat_ (1915) articulates an American Fordist agenda in its depiction of a modern woman responsible for managing the domestic sphere. Stephen Bottomore shifts concerns back across the Atlantic, tracing how British and continental monarchs made the transition from experiencing film as a private amusement, to becoming targeted by media blitzes, which subjected royal families to persistent public scrutiny. On this critical front, Andrew Higson examines how nationalistic heritage discourses -- the hallmark of contemporary Merchant Ivory productions -- first made their way into cinema. The focus then shuttles back across the Atlantic, as Alison Griffiths engagingly sketches the application of moving pictures to ethnographic research and considers 'the institutional negotiation of the demands of scientific education and popular appeal' (192) at the American Museum of Natural History. The section rounds off by turning to films about South East Asia: Frank Gray considers the reception of James Williamson's _Attack on a China Mission_ Bluejackets to the Rescue_ (1900) amid other contemporary illustrations of the Boxer Rebellion, and Clodualdo del Mondo discusses problematically racist cultural and historical representations of the Spanish-American conflict in the Philippines.

Part five, 'Reconsidering Formal Histories', commences with Kristin Thompson's investigation of scenario manuals from the 1910s. These provided formulaic narrative guidelines for the production of screenplays, and she shows these to be remarkably consistent with the structure of screenplays produced within the past twenty years. Jan Olsson's essay factors censorship restrictions placed upon the screenplays of Swedish films during the 1910s, and Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs evaluate how the 'pictorial style' of acting, that was prominent in live theater productions, became a useful expressive tool in European films, especially when close-up shots and sophisticated editing techniques were not readily possible. Thomas Elsaesser concludes with a discussion of German film historiography. He considers how antecedent theatrical forms influenced the structure of film programs, how this reconfigured narrative space and the reception of film.

Although Fullerton's anthology captures the atmosphere of the conference, it perhaps could have benefited from more thorough editing. The sections would cohere better with prefatory remarks and with fewer essays, arranged within a more specifically-defined framework of concerns. This would have helped place the essays in dialogue with each other -- the books existing format leaves this work up to the reader's imagination. Also, the condensed introduction leaves little room to parse out the perceived stakes of the respective sections, and the prose becomes bogged down by the mantra 'the ways in which' (a transitional phrase rendered distracting and empty when repeated more than twenty times in three pages). While I think such measures would have better distilled both the atmosphere and content of the conference, this remains a rich and thought-provoking collection that tells us as much about the state of film criticism in 1999 as it does about film's emergence in 1895.