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CUSP: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Cultures, Volume
1, Number 1, Winter 2023, pp. 45-54 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cusp.2023.0012>



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From Early Film to “Popular Shows”

JOE KEMBER

For almost four decades now, revisionist studies of film between 1895 and 1915 have served as both impetus and consequence for broader reassessments of cinema theory and history. Inspired partly by the difference that interpreters such as Noël Burch had emphasized in the 1970s and 1980s between early and later cinemas, scholars of film and other media have sometimes applied paradigms designed in the context of early film history, or from the histories of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century media such as the magic lantern and panorama, in order to reorient the tenets of pre-existing doctrines, and especially those derived from classical and postclassical studies.¹ The “cinema of attractions” is only the most obvious of the paradigms that have come to animate parts of the “new film history,” with early definitions that emphasized the discontinuity and immediacy of the early film show encouraging productive comparisons with later cinemas and other media.² For example, the notion of direct address drawn from this type of study of early film shows had always been discerned in certain genres, but its presence in mainstream media forms of all kinds has also helped to create a renewed focus on characteristics such as performativity, self-reflexivity, and spectacle, all key terms for influential work in digital media, too.³ These trends and others have arguably participated in a related corporeal shift in film studies, pointing scholars towards the affective dimensions of the moving image.⁴ Reversing the direction of cause and effect, here, Thomas Elsaesser’s recent challenge and renewal of the field of media archaeology has suggested that it was in fact contemporary points of contention concerning early film, digital

media, and the presence of moving pictures in museums that has occasioned this multimodal return to the body in historical cinematic experience, and might inaugurate other paradigm shifts, too. Adopting a metacritical tone, Elsaesser argues that media archaeology “is only one among several parallel developments, where a discipline becomes reflexive in order to redefine its object of study,” with tensions concerning physiological optics and the body serving as just one example of a new “episteme” that might ultimately come to reorient our contemporary visual cultures, too.⁵

The far-reaching disciplinary implications of this perspective have yet to be fully realized, within or outside of film studies but, of course, one does not need to look very hard to find disciplinary self-consciousness asserting itself. In the field of early film studies, for example, corporeal, and archival imperatives have been felt as keenly as anywhere else.⁶ In this sense, Elsaesser is speaking of nothing more here than the perpetual process of disciplinary renewal, with early film serving as one of a few Good Objects for current innovations; however, he also makes an unusually direct case for a fundamental re-evaluation of the functions of cinema both in our own lives and in the realms of film theory and history. By way of comparison, one might also consider the key statements of “Thing Theory” or postcolonial theory in Victorian or modernist studies as examples of similarly transformative disciplinary/social motives at work.⁷ However, more specific to the reading of media archaeology is the acknowledgment that this movement has been the product as well as the motivation for the recent waves of digitization that have reconfigured the archives. Herein lie opportunities for fresh reflections and new work.

Errki Huhtamo, one of the principal exponents of media archaeology, and Doron Galili have recently confirmed and extended characterization of its work in the context of a special edition on this theme in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, itself a journal dedicated to visual and popular cultures before 1914. Their description is worth quoting in full, since it has a direct bearing on the ideology of research inaugurated and supported by modern archiving:

Clearly, media archaeology is what any of its practitioners make of it, but four commonly shared attributes can be identified. . . . The first is the emphasis on non-linear historical trajectories, which separates media archaeology from accounts endorsing the idea of linear progress. The second is the involvement with non-discursive aspects of media, which refers to the shift away from textual analyses of media contents to investigations of the material, technical, and operational properties of media and analyses of the media user's share. The third is the rejection of medium-specific historiographies in favor of intermedial connections, exchanges, and convergences. The fourth is the attention to forgotten or obsolete technologies, failed experimental media devices, and imaginary media that were never realized.⁸

The first clause here is vital, acknowledging the openness to novel materials and approaches that has sometimes led to critique of this body of work. The authors confirm that these are features of a normative description rather than a strict definition, and while this methodological anchorage may yet be forthcoming, not all of these features will carry conceptual weight in every media archaeological work bearing the name. Furthermore, they soon qualify that a fully “metacritical” consideration of media historiography represents a “fifth attribute,” one we might consider in passing that Elsaesser was primarily engaged with.⁹ However, as a researcher in film and visual media of this period, I am struck, too, by the types of archival data that must support all four items on Huhtamo and Galili's initial list and would add that, present or not in written studies, the fifth point therefore inevitably supplements all of the others. While the emphasis on nonhistorical linear narratives (attribute 1) and on forgotten media and devices (4) leads researchers to recover texts and artifacts from material and digital archives within and outside of image repositories, the focus on media users and properties (2) and intermediality (3) have especially been facilitated by increasingly routinized access to digitized newspapers, journals, and other first-hand sources now available in much of the world, which have detailed mixed practices at work during production, distribution, and exhibition. The question therefore remains: in its productive shift from a linear understanding of media history to grounded analysis of dead-ends and alternative paths, has media archaeology also

enthroned the contingent logic of the digital archive alongside the researcher's contingent selection of teleologies? And regardless of answers to this question we must add an imperative, if less contested, assertion: even in the course of digital research our histories will still be selected for us, to some extent, by the curation of digitized materials, by the architecture of digitization, and above all by the relatively low prevalence of digitization projects, or access to them, in poorer or less-interested regions. "Contingency," in such cases, is hardly an ideologically neutral affair, and while this is acknowledged very openly in heritage studies and many heritage organizations, it should habitually become more explicit in fields dependent on archived and digital heritage, too.¹⁰

In more specific relation to this journal, the imperative is to consider the productive consequences of archival contingency for researchers, rather than claim that definitive answers to this question are possible, or desirable. Outlining these consequences fully would be an impossible task and in any case beyond my remit here, so in what follows I will emphasize what seem to me especially intriguing possibilities opened up for current researchers. In particular, the current arrangement of research resource and scholarly hermeneutic seem to me to promote work engaged in two senses with the *experience* of media, both of which have already been approached by media scholars.¹¹ Firstly, the multiple access points provided by material and digital archives allow us to consider some aspects of the heterogeneity of experiences they cultured for audiences from 1880 to 1920, if never to recover the full range of them or deploy paradigms that seek to encapsulate any one of them in their entirety. Secondly, reflexive account can be made of the scholar's necessarily partial, present-tense experiences with archival resources, whether as interpreter or creator. Synthesizing both of these aspects, we might say that the model of scholarly enterprise advocated here is closer to the methodology of patchwork than representation, a form of crafting which allows for comparison and aggregation, gaining force from the present combination of and tensions between older components, as well as by accepting, rather than concealing, its own methods of work and its own contingency. A preferred metaphor, in early film studies at least, might be "trash aesthetics," drawing here on Ben Highmore's reading of Walter Benjamin's

collage-like historical work in *The Arcades Project*.¹² I prefer “patchwork” in this case because it more openly acknowledges the skills-based crafting always involved in such research, and therefore mirrors the rigorous, deliberate work of assembly and composition involved in the historical labor of crafting films, film shows, and archives too.

From this point of view, it is the openness of both historical and contemporary popular cultures that scholars should seek to emulate. As far as the evidence permits, we can take the practical step of reading for the tessellation of multiple properties as revealed by historical texts and artifacts, comparing the complex, sometimes lost experiences of historical subjects with the equally complex, though different, experiences of modern readers and audiences. The approach is comparable to Katharine Groo’s version of a new film historiography, “one that turns toward the free play of contingent documents and archival encounters, one that attends to the dialogical particularities of film material, and one that abandons the search for historical wholes and engages the absences at the center of the early film archive,” though, for sure, I also share the belief that modern archives represent a resource so enormous that an understanding of “free play” must begin with open, cautious, rigorous research in these multiple, incomplete archives, before we even know where the “absences” are that must be engaged with.¹³

I would like to suggest two possible and interconnected directions in this type of study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular culture, corresponding roughly with the two forms of experience mentioned above. The first position draws heavily, once again, from early film studies, though in this case it is the cumulative scholarly engagement with the archives, shared by early film studies with other disciplines, which creates new opportunities. As I have suggested, since the 1980s, prominent early film paradigms have shaken loose implications for new film histories across genres and media; however, with growing vehemence since the 2000s, further work detailing the historical specificity of early film texts and shows has done much more to emphasize the contingency of these paradigms. One might easily cite here the plethora of early film publications associated with biannual conference proceedings published by Domitor, the primary international early cinema association, which evidences the undimmed pro-

ductivity of academics and postgraduates engaged with very specific production, distribution, and exhibition histories.¹⁴ But the diversification of modes of engagement now recognized within early films shows has also contributed to a further, highly self-conscious, and discipline-wide shift. Studies of early film have occupied a prominent place in so-called “new cinema histories,” not least because they tend to typify the productivity of examining regional, local, and individual patterns of film distribution and exhibition. According to Richard Maltby in a definitive 2011 article, without this type of rigor at various scales, film scholars have risked overlooking the diversity of screenings and viewer responses, creating abstract, imaginary audiences in place of concretely located ones, and even missing the “social experience of cinema.”¹⁵ One might say that such studies have uncovered multiple paradigms for film exhibition and viewing, and they find these everywhere, though, when multiplied in this kind of way, the idea of the paradigm itself becomes unstable. Instead, the unifying emphasis here might be the “resilient parochialism of individuals and local communities” across the world and throughout the history of cinema.¹⁶ This is definitively scattered material approached, piecemeal, through the contemporary wealth of physical and digitized archives and processed within new kinds of database and software, but always acknowledging the partial nature of any resource we might deploy and anticipating the welcome possibility that new fragments of information might reorient the whole.

A synoptic position such as Maltby’s neatly illustrates the ever-unfinished, patchwork effect of scholarship such as this, though it is implicit in the methodologies of these projects, too, especially those conducted on larger scales. The recent “Early Cinema in Scotland 1896–1927” project, for example, has mined a seemingly exhaustive range of material and digital archives in this small country and beyond, adopting an exploratory research methodology intended to approach a specific period and type of experience from as many vantage points as possible. For me, the prime virtue of this type of triangulation is not necessarily more “depth” concerning film production and interpretation, nor clearer models of development (though these things are also possible), but just *more*. Across eleven densely evidenced chapters the book suggests a selection of the ways that film shows were experienced

in different regions during this period, and the project website further evidences both the scale and diversity of these enterprises.¹⁷ The notion of a unified “Scottish cinema” or single supra-national model of spectatorship is revealed as merely contingent and, consequently, so are previous abstractions of film experience: a modification of thought which new cinema histories have uncovered across a long international history of film shows. Moreover, the information generated by the Scottish project joins this larger patchwork of resources helping to distinguish and connect exhibition histories across the world.

The approach here is thoroughly empirical, in that it deploys available resources to define specific types of historical filmgoing as closely as seems possible, but this does not mean that a history such as this “exists without us, outside of use, beyond the senses,” as Groo suggests of implicitly “empirical” film histories more generally.¹⁸ Rather, new cinema history is at its strongest as a comparative practice, working between regions and time periods, and above all in its historiographical scrutiny of available resources, the particularities of their construction, and the uses we seek to make of them. In short, it is a form of historical practice that is sharply aware of its theoretical underpinnings, and only seems likely to generate new paradigms of film experience, diversifying the current emphasis on embodied experience, in the years to come. Self-evidently, there is a massive scope for proliferation of such projects on both large and small scales, with this information only likely to feed further into theories of film, finding new ways to account for experiences that have not before been deemed fully “filmic” or “cinematic.” One might pause to consider, for example, the largely overlooked role played by amateur filmmakers internationally, or commercial units employed by businesses and charities, as well as the massive (and no longer “idiosyncratic”) audiences these productions were intended to reach, but there is literally a world full of moving image experience that potentially awaits. Once understood, the massive diversity of institutional and non-institutional film viewing patterns suggested should permit further advances in our analogizing and pattern-making, illustrating more inclusively what film is, was, or could be.

Still more significant, though, are the much broader realms of experience previously considered as even further beyond the remit of

film studies. For if we have redefined the primary object of study as “film experience” rather than “film” as such, there is little reason to neglect all the components of this experience that have classically been left to other disciplines. It is in this sense that what I am referring to as the “popular show”—or even “popular culture”—becomes the primary object of study, and one which proposes interdisciplinary meeting-points at all of the discoverable exhibition venues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the home to the variety theatre to the mission station. Working against the still-powerful institutional imperative to maintain disciplinary provenance for such studies, the virtue of patchworking resides in diversity, composition, pattern-making: all features that require the copresence of—for starters—film studies, theatre studies, heritage studies, anthropology, business studies, literary and cultural studies, and also to gnaw away further at the regional and linguistic barriers that still hinder their exchange. Where each of these disciplines has its central emphases and margins, there is instead the productive possibility for reconfiguring the boundaries, or removing them altogether, in the service of understanding the events and experiences that comprise exhibition history and its reception. Such a perspective might be a priority for *Cusp*, since it is the long fin de siècle that has most obviously generated film-centered work embracing all of these fields, and more, already.

It is the openness to all varieties of historical experience, so far as these can be construed, that also permits reflexive comparison with researchers’ own multiple, encultured predispositions as well as their engagement with the archives. One vital place for this historiographical reflection, most certainly, is our own writing: it is certainly true that there has been resistance to “grand” or other theories in the work of some early film scholars, and that sometimes work has been insufficiently open to the insights of feminist thinkers in particular, or even to simple acknowledgment of the subjective nature of research in general.¹⁹ Openly embracing a metacritical perspective, as Elsaesser, Groo, and others already have, destabilizes the discursive distinction between film history and theory, confirming their co-constitution. In specific relation to popular shows, perhaps especially in this historical period, it also explains why the four imperatives of media archaeology identified

by Huhtamo and Galili are so firmly embedded in contemporary digital media studies. Mapping the many articulations of experience preserved in historical archives against the many articulations of experience explicit, partly grasped, or overlooked in our own lives acknowledges our own positions in this form of pattern-making, and productively opens out onto interdisciplinary and intermedial worlds, past and present, we only partially understand. Finally, this fifth—vital—perspective, represents perhaps the most marked aspect at work in many heritage-based institutions, both material and digital, and we should note that scholars and archivists engaged with creating and curating such resources are at the forefront of this type of historiographical thought.²⁰ At their best, the modern museum and digital archive are wide open—in fact, doubly so. Busy on the one hand with the curatorial work of representing the diversity of historical experiences implied by their collections, and on the other with engaging the diversity of contemporary experiences represented by their heterogeneous publics, effective archiving shows that these labors are entangled, the past and present, history and theory, helping to make sense of each other.²¹ For those of us engaged with researching popular shows of this period, the explicitly creative impulse enshrined by this type of work in the heritage industries represents both a point of methodological departure and a further prompt for thoughtful, comparative, public-facing work.

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NOTES

- 1 Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990); Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990).
- 2 Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3–4 (1986): 63–70. For an edited collection, which typifies the intermedial ambitions of this work, see Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
- 3 For mixed examples of related work in digital media, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

- 4 The movement is extremely varied, though Vivian Sobchack's influential *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) is sometimes emphasized as a high water-mark for thinking of this kind.
- 5 Elsaesser, *Film History*, 365, 383.
- 6 For recent conference proceedings related to these topics from Domitor, the chief early film association, see Marina Dahlquist, Doron Galili, Jan Olsson, and Valentine Robert, ed., *Corporeality in Early Cinema: Viscera, Skin, and Physical Form* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), and Joanne Bernardi, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Tami Williams, and Joshua Yumibe, ed., *Provenance and Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).
- 7 For example, Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22; and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Pantheon Books, 1978).
- 8 Errki Huhtamo and Doron Galili, "The Pasts and Prospects of Media Archaeology," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 18, no. 4 (2020): 333–39, at 334.
- 9 Huhtamo and Galili, "Pasts and Prospects," 334.
- 10 See, for example, Maghan Bowe, Bianca Carpeneti and Ian Dull, eds., *Heritage Studies: Stories in the Making* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
- 11 See, for example, Robert C. Allen, "Getting to Going to the Show," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 3 (2010): 264–76; and Katharine Groo, *Bad Film Histories: Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- 12 Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002), 60–75.
- 13 Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 38.
- 14 See, especially Kaveh Askari, Scott Curtis, Frank Gray, Louis Pelletier, Tami Williams, and Joshua Yumibe, eds., *Performing New Media, 1890–1915* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
- 15 Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Phillipe Meers, ed., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 3–40, at 32.
- 16 Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 14.
- 17 John Caughie, Trevor Griffiths, and María A. Vélez-Serna, *Early Cinema in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); "The Early Cinema in Scotland Research Project," <https://www.earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/>, accessed June 23, 2022.
- 18 Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 22.
- 19 Here, again, I agree with Groo, *Bad Film Histories*, 23–36.
- 20 See Ian Dull, "Introduction: Sketching Heritage Studies," in Bowe et al., eds., *Heritage Studies: Stories in the Making*, 1–16.
- 21 For explorations of this type of thinking in relation to early cinema, see Martin Loiperdinger, ed., *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance* (New Barnett: John Libbey, 2012).