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Reframing Cinema Histories

Editorial

Pierluigi Ercole, Oxford Brookes University, and Gwenda Young, University College Cork

This issue of Alphaville originates in a one-day symposium, "Reframing Cinema Histories", which was organised at University College Cork in March 2013. The aim of the event was to bring together a select group of scholars working on a range of historical projects and, through presentations of specific case studies and a round table discussion, highlight the variety of methodological approaches that may be adopted by the researcher studying and writing about cinema history

Proponents of what has been termed "new cinema history" or "new film history" (see Maltby et al.; Chapman et al.) have repeatedly called for an interdisciplinary research model and for practices that require the use of a wide range of primary sources. In his introduction to the collection *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, Richard Maltby notes a shift away from an emphasis on "the content of films" towards a consideration of "their circulation and consumption" (3). In a similar vein, Janet Staiger has suggested that "the history of cinema might very well be radically rewritten if you pursue it, not solely from the perspective of the production of films, but equally from their reception" (12). Several of the articles printed here present the reader with case studies of specific films: from an important propaganda film made for the Fascist regime in Italy in the 1930s, to a "race issue" film produced by a major Hollywood studio in the 1940s, and a star vehicle released by Columbia in the 1970s. However, the focus is less on the content of the individual film, and more on how the material was shaped to accommodate the specific needs of the studio—or, in the case of the propaganda film, a political regime—and, in turn, how the film was "read" by the public and by critics. In Pierluigi Ercole's examination of *Camicia nera* (1933), a film produced by LUCE to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's accession to power, he outlines the importance of cinema to the Duce and details the genesis and evolution of the production proclaimed as "the greatest film of the Fascist era". Gwenda Young's analysis of MGM's *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) focuses on how the director, Clarence Brown, drew from his personal experiences to translate William Faulkner's novel into a film that offered audiences a complex meditation on America's attitudes to race and the dynamics of interracial relations. Peter Krämer's article on the 1970s nuclear thriller *The China Syndrome* (1979) examines the role that the film's star, Jane Fonda, had in shaping the material from script to screen and how her star persona, which included her much-publicised political activism, was used promote the film and reinforce its antinuclear stance.

In *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches,* the editors note that one of the features of the new film history is its interest in unearthing "evidence of actual audience responses and [locating these] within the context of the audience's time, place and identity" (Chapman et al. 6–7). While extant accounts of how particular audiences responded to a given film are often difficult to locate, the greater accessibility of archival material and, for instance, historical newspapers online, undoubtedly helps to facilitate new research and enables scholars to piece together a sense of how films were received by their audiences and by contemporary commentators. To gauge how *Camicia nera* was received by the Italian diaspora, Ercole draws upon accounts offered by schoolchildren invited to the screening in London, and published in the local Italian Fascist newspaper *L'Italia Nostra*. Young's argument that *Intruder in the Dust* was both a divided and divisive text is illuminated by the survey she offers of critical reviews, not simply in the national press (such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*) but also in regional newspapers and, even more pertinently, in the black press. Similarly, by drawing on reviews published on *The China Syndrome* (and, indeed, on profiles of Jane Fonda), and on coverage of American society's growing anxieties about the dangers of nuclear power—stemming from a specific disaster, the Three Mile Island meltdown that same year—Krämer emphasises how the film acquired a cultural significance that few could have predicted.

Krämer's stress on the centrality of Jane Fonda in the evolution of both the content and meaning of *The China Syndrome* underlines the importance of the star as cultural figure. In her case study of famed endurance swimmer, Mercedes Gleitze, Ciara Chambers considers how one athlete became a celebrity with a fame that almost rivalled some of the stars of the Hollywood screen of the 1920s. Drawing on a selection of print and visual sources, Chambers argues that the representation and construction of Gleitze in newspaper profiles, advertising and, most importantly, in newsreels can help elucidate our understanding of cultural responses to the "new woman" and her place within a larger patriarchal system that sought to control women's roles and their presentation within media. In her examination of the body of Gleitze, Chambers shows how the swimmer became a loaded construction—used to sell luxury products and endorse a newly emerging commodity culture. She also investigates the ways in which Gleitze's activities, both in the water and in her social life, were reported in the press and how the threat that her active body, as well as her much-quoted attitudes to her career and to marriage, were "managed" by the media.

If, as Maltby argues, the new cinema history foregrounds the notion of "cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange" (3), then the case studies offered here by Denis Condon and Judith Thissen are particularly relevant. Both are representative of an empirical approach to the study of film exhibition, cinema audiences and movie-going experiences, in line with the more recent "historical turn" and the cinema history "from below" approach increasingly adopted within film and screen studies. Both articles provide evidence for similarities and differences in the experience of diverse European audiences.

Drawing upon André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion's notion of cinema's "second birth" as an autonomous institution, Denis Condon investigates how cinema as a cultural and social practice adapted to and developed within a very specific local context during the 1910s. Focusing on the city of Cork, which by 1911 was the third largest urban area in Ireland, Condon discusses the emergence of cinema as a cultural institution and how cinemagoing was accepted,

promoted and regulated as a social practice in light of both national and local political and religious factors. He argues that by 1913–14 "cinema became a cultural institution in Cork not because it could assert itself in defiance of the church and local politics but because it could adapt itself to the operations of such powerful local institutions".

Similarly, in her article Judith Thissen analyses the dynamics of cinemagoing in the Netherlands and calls for a comparative approach between national and regional case studies. Taking into account the results reached by film historiography focused on the Netherlands, and specifically studies that consider the impact of religious and ideological forces on Dutch cinema culture, Thissen questions the exceptionality of the Dutch case. Focusing on two rural regions, the peat-district in the Protestant province of Groningen and the mining district in the Catholic province of Limburg, Thissen's article combines a qualitative analysis of the cultural context with a quantitative study of the population's demographic.

The final article in this issue stems from a conference address given by Lee Grieveson in 2011 at the Permanent Seminar on the History of Film Theories in Montreal, Canada. In it he offers his thoughts on the relevance of including the history of cinema technology within a wider economic and political history. Considering cinema as a product of the second industrial revolution, Grieveson poses questions on how the medium operates within capitalist practices, such as how corporations and states used the technology of cinema for their economic and political projects. Grieveson points to the connection between mining (for the silver that was used in the photosensitive film stock) and the film medium—a particularly apt metaphor for a journal issue that seeks to present new "excavations" in cinema history.

If, as Maltby concludes, the "new cinema history is a quilt of many methods and many localities" (34), then this issue of *Alphaville* attempts to offer readers a sample of the "patches" that might make up such a quilt. In doing so, it is hoped to generate more discussion, more consideration of the various methodological tools that might be used and their effectiveness, and ultimately confirm that the "new cinema history" offers researchers a vibrant, questioning and always-evolving field.

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Pierluigi Ercole is a researcher at Oxford Brookes University. His work on Anglo-Italian film culture and film distribution has been published in a number of publications, including *Silent Italian Cinema: A Reader* (2013), edited by Giorgio Bertellini and *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History* (2011), edited by Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers.

Gwenda Young lectures in Film Studies in University College Cork and is Co-director of the Film and Screen Media programme there. Her work has appeared in a variety of national and international journals, including *Sight and Sound; Popular Culture Review; Film/Film Culture; Film Ireland; Journal of Irish Association for American Studies* and in edited collections on American cinema of the 1920s and Irish American cinema. She has also contributed to radio programmes on the national broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, on local radio, and on Irish national television. Her monograph on American director Clarence Brown will be published in 2014.