FILM AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Increasingly historians have moved away from a history that chronicles battles, treaties, and presidential elections to one that tries to provide an image of the way daily life unfolded for the mass of people: how they worked, what they did for fun, how families were formed or fell apart, or how the fabric of daily life was formed or transformed. Film has an important role to play in these histories. While traditional historical documents tend to privilege great events and political leaders, historians now use other records to discern the lives of "ordinary" people: census records, accounts of harvests and markets, diaries and memoirs, and local newspapers. Film is perhaps more like these records of daily life than it is like the documents that record great events. Motion pictures may provide the best evidence of what it was like to walk down the streets of Paris in the 1890s, what a Japanese tea ceremony was like in the 1940s, what the World Series in 1950 looked like, or how people in factories did their work or spent a Sunday afternoon in the park. All of these subjects could be staged and distorted, of course, and film can be transformed in many ways. But as a record of time and motion, films preserve gestures, gaits, rhythms, attitudes, and human interactions in a variety of situations. In almost any film archive, and in numerous places on the Internet, one can glimpse images of simple actions, from the way a Buddhist monk in Ceylon folded his robe in 1912 to the way people boarded trolley cars in New York City in the 1930s. While film shares much of this information with other forms of documentation, especially still photography, motion pictures allow viewers to see and compare the everyday physical actions of people across the globe and throughout the twentieth century.

This is not to deny that film provides indelible images of some of the twentieth century's great events. Our horrified consciousness of the Holocaust relies partly on the filmed images from the liberation of the camps, and our knowledge of the devastation of the Atomic bomb comes partly from motion pictures of Hiroshima or of A-bomb test explosions. Conversely, twentieth-century disasters or traumas that went unrecorded by motion pictures -- such as the genocide of the Armenians or mass starvation in Asia -- are less present in public consciousness because of the lack of vivid images. But when we focus on social and cultural history, especially the important role of leisure in the lives of ordinary people, film not only provides evidence and records but takes on a key role.

In addition to the primarily non-fiction or documentary films discussed above, we must consider Hollywood's primary output, feature films. Can fictional film be used as historical evidence? As evidence of what? Fictional films serve as historical evidence in the same way that other representational art forms do -- by making events vivid, portraying social attitudes, and even revealing the unconscious assumptions of past societies. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* cannot be viewed as an objective or accurate view of the era of Reconstruction, but it does -- painfully, and even unintentionally -- indicate the sorts of hysterical anxieties and aggressive fantasies that underlay American racism, especially in the early twentieth century. Attitudes about gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as heroism, work, play, and "the good life" are all portrayed in fictional films as they are in an era's novels, plays, and paintings. But as a form of mass visual entertainment, films reflect social attitudes in a specific and vivid manner.

From 1915 to about 1955, movies were arguably America's most popular form of narrative entertainment. Movies, therefore, aimed at a wider target audience than that of most novels and plays. Does this mean that movies reflect social attitudes more accurately than any other medium, since they reached the greatest number of people? Possibly. But a mass audience does not mean that movies in America represented all points of view. It often indicates the opposite, with film studios avoiding certain controversial points of view in order not to offend a wide-ranging audience. Since films were released nationally and globally to make a profit, producers tried not to offend groups they recognized as influential and usually avoided political controversies or minority opinions.

Further, from 1916 until the 1950s, movies were not protected by the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. A court ruling in 1916 (concerning the state of Ohio's ban of *The Birth of A Nation*) held that film could legally be subject to censorship because of its vivid psychological effects and audiences (including women, children, and the "lower classes") who the court deemed more impressionable than the readers of printed matter. A number of states and localities created film censorship boards. Although Hollywood studios occasionally released controversial films, they usually avoided such themes as racial prejudice, child labor, and venereal disease. Likewise, in contrast to the current trend of niche marketing, Hollywood ignored small specialized markets. A small, and financially marginal, series of independent producers did make films targeted at minority markets (such as the African-American films produced by Oscar Micheaux or the Yiddish films directed by Edgar G. Ulmer). These independent films provide fascinating evidence about the issues and assumptions current in smaller communities, often in sharp contrast to Hollywood films.

Interpreting Hollywood movies as a reflection of prevailing social attitudes or generalizing from specific films requires great caution. Fictional films are complex industrial and social products and how they are made, distributed, exhibited, and received by audiences and critics must be investigated to fully evaluate their roles as historical evidence. For example, it is dangerous to interpret a few films from a specific period as simple reflections of American society. The attitudes portrayed in a specific film may represent a series of compromises carefully designed to be non-offensive. In addition, individual films can indicate very different attitudes toward labor unions, big business, race relations, or women's rights.

One Hollywood strategy for creating and pleasing a mass audience included designing films so that audiences could interpret movies in different ways. This is clearest in the carefully regulated portrayal of sexual behavior during the period of Hollywood's dominance (1917-1960). An adult or sexually aware audience member may decide that Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart have sex when *Casablanca* cuts from their passionate kiss to a brief image of the control tower beacon at the nearby airport. But a child or a socially conservative viewer may assume nothing happened. Most important, the studio could deny to a censor that any sexual activity took place. The Production Code Administration (an industry-created "watchdog" committee charged with locating scenes that might be considered objectionable and proposing ways to modify them) often suggested such ambiguous scenes to film producers to avoid problems with state or local censorship boards.

Ambiguous scenes provide rich material for studying social history, but they require complex interpretation and investigation. Such investigation requires moving beyond the evidence on the screen (whether movie theater, video, or computer monitor) to ask how reviewers, censors, and fans understood films. Likewise historians need to investigate the actual process of filmmaking and the variety of viewpoints involved in production. Hollywood studio archives are filled with discussions of what material should be cut from scripts, what might be offensive to different audiences, how to soften images of sexuality or violence, or how to blur political references. Every Hollywood film involved compromises between divergent viewpoints, often aimed at creating room for multiple interpretations.

Thus, a broad range of materials are needed to write a full history of the cinema as part of cultural life. Film production and film-going are social practices and important aspects of twentieth-century life. To understand them we need to investigate technology, economics (including business and industrial organization), advertising, and distribution -- all of which influenced where films were shown and who came to see them. A wide range of documents provide evidence in this quest, including letters, trade journals, movie reviews, contracts, financial information, scripts, and studio memos. In addition, many non-traditional sources are key to writing the social history of the movies. For example, the design of movie theaters or the switch to video rental stores; censorship and pressure group protests; fan magazines and movie-based souvenirs; fashion designs introduced by films; educational matinees for school children; and reactions by specific communities as gathered through oral histories. The actual role films play in people's daily lives, in their sense of themselves and their world, especially for the early part of the century, however are extremely difficult to document. Those vanished audiences will always remain somewhat elusive.

SOURCE: http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/socialhist.html