

The Historical Value of Motion Pictures

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AN INTRIGUING note of prophecy runs through the thoughts of motion picture specialists in our country and abroad. As early as 1895, W. K. L. Dickson, who was instrumental in the development and perfection of the Edison machine, suggested:

The advantages to students and historians will be immeasurable. Instead of dry and misleading accounts, tinged with the exaggerations of the chroniclers' minds, our archives will be enriched by the vitalized pictures of great national scenes, instinct with all the glowing personalities which characterized them.

What is the future of the kinetograph? Ask rather, from what conceivable phase of the future it can be debarred. In the promotion of business interests, in the advancement of science, in the revelation of unguessed worlds, in its educational and re-creative powers, and in its ability to immortalize our fleeting but beloved associations, the kinetograph stands foremost among the creations of modern inventive genius.¹

Dickson's enthusiasm might be interpreted simply as the prophecy of a man given to rhapsodies about his work. Indeed, his comments about the power of the film medium to immortalize our associations and thereby to recreate the past might easily be discounted as visionary, the product of a man who, as he himself wrote, viewed his invention as "the crown and flower of nineteenth century magic."²

But Dickson's prophecy, which seems at first to be exaggerated and to reach the level of an imaginative vision, has persisted and has been often repeated in more specific terms during the ensuing seventy-odd years since the motion picture became a reality. A few examples should suffice to document the persistence of this vision. In 1948, John Bradley, the motion picture consultant of the Library of Congress, wrote:

Again, in motion pictures we find a new and flexible instrument for recording the history of people, things, and events so that they attain a realism never attained before. The ancients documented their history on tablets of stone, others in monuments, paintings, and folk tales, and more recently, the printing press has served this basic urge to be remembered either as individuals or as nations. Now we record in motion and sound on film.

The author, a Senior Councilman of the Society of Cinematologists, is head of the Motion Picture Section, Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. This paper was read to the Society of American Archivists, Oct. 19, 1967, at a session on audiovisual records during the Society's 31st annual meeting in Santa Fe, N. Mex.

¹ W. K. L. and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetograph*, p. 51-52 (New York, 1895).

² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Such documentation or recording has a fidelity not found in any other medium. For example, the printed word is an artificial thing and its use is based on an acquired art . . . Motion Pictures transcend these limitations. . . .

History so recorded will have not only a new fidelity but a present tense value not found in other mediums.³

More recently, in a magnificent paper delivered last year in England and buttressed with specific film excerpts to illustrate the use of motion pictures as historical evidence, Christopher H. Roads, Deputy Director and Keeper of the Department of Records at the Imperial War Museum, London, was led to conclude that "authenticated film sequences, can not only record invaluable but uniquely innumerable aspects of the social, economic, administrative, military and political history of this century."⁴ The richness of the examples offered by Dr. Roads, which will be discussed later in this paper, seems to indicate that in this decade we have approached the realization of the prophecies of such men as Dickson and Bradley.

But there remain some very difficult questions and problems to be faced before film can take its place among the records consulted by historians. In point of fact, the actual patterns of reference service provided by large American film archives such as the Library of Congress indicate that most historians of the 20th century do not consult film materials. This is not to say that our collections are neglected by scholars. Indeed, in several areas of scholarly research there have been notable successes, and one need only glance through the annual bibliographic supplement of *American Quarterly* to document the success of research in the art of the film and in mass culture.⁵ Today our archives of film are busy providing materials for scholars in these areas. The increasing sophistication and the employment of film as a teaching device has also stimulated the use of our collections. Even though our statistics continue to rise by geometric ratio, however, there remains an exceedingly curious contrast between visionary statements about the unique historical value of motion pictures and the fact that they are not used by the majority of contemporary historians. An investigation of this contrast is the theme of this paper.

A first and obvious deterrent to historians who want to use film is the problem of availability. Perhaps this problem is best explained by citing an example from recent experience. With increasing frequency during the past 2 years the Library of Congress has received requests for advice and help from State and local historical associations who have recently bought or accepted as gifts modest amounts of old nitrate

³ John G. Bradley, "Motion Picture Activities of the Library of Congress," processed report, July 20, 1948, p. 6.

⁴ Christopher H. Roads, "Film as Historical Evidence," in Society of Archivists, *Journal*, 3:183-191 (Oct., 1966).

⁵ See "Articles in American Studies, 1965," and "American Studies Dissertations, 1965-66," in *American Quarterly*, 18:270-335, 336-346 (Summer 1966).

film depicting local history. In every case the new owners are convinced of the historical value of their new acquisition but are astounded by the awkwardness, fragility, and extreme inconvenience of the film medium. Frequently no local laboratory can copy their film, for motion pictures that arrive at an archive seem always to be printed on a width of film that local film laboratories are not equipped to handle. Often, too, the nearest laboratory capable of making duplicates will refuse to do so because of the fire hazard involved in handling old nitrate film. At this point most archivists are tempted to conclude that the only asset motion picture film possesses is "motion," and that this is a dubious asset indeed because it is so costly to control and so difficult to put into the hands of a researcher.

Even when the problems of physical preservation and reference use are solved by budgets that permit good laboratory work and adequate viewing machinery, there remain problems of indexing, cataloging, and the as yet little realized problem of providing a historian with supplementary and authenticating documents about films. In this regard some useful and illuminating comments have recently been made by Raymond Fielding in the *American Archivist*⁶ and by the English critic, Penelope Houston, writing in a recent issue of *Sight and Sound*.⁷ Miss Houston's remarks pinpoint some of the shortcomings of film images as an historical source:

Cameramen have provided us with a kind of shorthand visual imagery for this century: a British political crisis means a crowd in the rain outside Number Ten; the depression means cloth-capped men on street corners; the General Strike, a shot of idle machinery or empty railway lines; the Battle of Britain, that shot from *Fires Were Started* of fire-hoses snaking away down a London street after a raid. But look behind the shots, and the film image can't help you. What political crisis? How many men out of work? Which air-raid, and which street? Even when the camera records an assassination, it answers no questions. We saw the shooting of Kennedy, and of Lee Harvey Oswald, and the circumstances of the killings still defy belief.⁸

Professor Fielding's article, although it is concerned primarily with film as an art form, is an important contribution to our knowledge of building a film archive because of the stress he places upon the collection of the records and materials that document the planning and creation of a film. Many of the questions a film leaves unanswered can be clarified only by supporting and authenticating nonfilm documents. To make effective use of a film, the historian must have these records available as well as the actual film material itself.

⁶ Raymond Fielding, "Archives of the Motion Picture: A General View," in *American Archivist*, 30:493-500 (July 1967).

⁷ Penelope Houston, "The Nature of the Evidence," in *Sight and Sound*, 36:88-92 (Spring 1967).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

The scant availability of films for students and for research use and the lack of supporting descriptive documents about films have discouraged historians from utilizing film material. But perhaps a greater hindrance is the complexity of the film medium itself. In the first place, there is a vast continuum of film types, from the purely technical record of a scientific experiment to the dramatic film that depicts social and political attitudes. Within this continuum, Roads has distinguished five significant classes of films useful to the historian,⁹ and many years ago Barbara Deming, writing from an acquisitions point of view, distinguished two basic modes in which films may reflect the period in which they are made.¹⁰ Considering that the film medium is over 70 years old, it has taken a surprisingly long time for us to grasp its complexity as a visual statement.

An important byproduct of our growth in knowledge about the film medium has been an increasing mistrust of the truthfulness of film recordings. Penelope Houston is the latest person to question in print the validity of the moving image. Her comments are quoted here to indicate the extent of this mistrust:

These are a filmgoer's rather than a historian's stray reflections on the nature of film as evidence: untrustworthy, superficial, vulnerable to every kind of distortion; and at the same time irreplaceable, necessary, a source material that no twentieth century historian ought to disregard, though many may still seem prepared to. But one thing, it seems to me, that historians are going to have to reckon with is the unfixed nature of the image, and its partisanship.¹¹

Miss Houston reminds us of facts we should have mastered and accepted at least three decades ago when Arnheim's study differentiating film images from reality first appeared in our language.¹²

Perhaps it is because the structure of film is deceptively like history itself that we have so long been beguiled by its images and have not made the effort to examine them as a *source* for history. A source, as Sir Arthur Elton once put it, "in the sense that the palimpsest and parchment, hieroglyph and rune, clay tablet and manorial roll are source materials—fragments, sometimes fragments of fragments, often defaced by time, and applied to purposes of historical reconstruction rarely contemplated by the original authors."¹³ Film is deceptively like history because it is based on our awareness of time. A film document looks like time recorded, it has a "before" and "after"; in a word, it has "continuity," which is exactly the quality that historians tell us

⁹ Roads, in Society of Archivists, *Journal*, 3:184.

¹⁰ Barbara Deming, "The Library of Congress Film Project: Exposition of a Method," in Library of Congress, *Quarterly Journal*, 2:3-36 (1944).

¹¹ Houston, in *Sight and Sound*, 36:92.

¹² Rudolph Arnheim, *Film* (London, 1933).

¹³ Sir Arthur Elton, "The Film as Source Material for History," in *Aslib Proceedings*, 7:1 (Nov. 1955).

is history.¹⁴ But film's continuity is just as much a human invention as is the syntax of written documents, and it is just as susceptible to distortion. The fact that we have been slow to recognize and identify the methods of film distortion has delayed the development of suitable methodological approaches to the film medium. Given the complex and misleading nature of the medium, it is not surprising that historians have ignored even the simplest problems of truth and causation of film images.

After reading Roads' presentation mentioned earlier in this paper, there can be little doubt that film documents are a valuable historical resource. This is neither the time or place to recapitulate Dr. Roads' arguments, and a simple summary of the nature of his illustrations will have to suffice.¹⁵ Roads has been able to isolate at least seven ways in which film documents are of value as historical evidence. In terms of *vividness* film excerpts can bridge time and engender excitement in an audience for an event long since forgotten, such as the Boer War. They can also confirm and make vivid for future generations the nature of actions which might, from written evidence alone, overwhelm judgment, such as the nature of Nazi concentration camps or the distortions of the legal process under the pressure of Nazism. As a vivifying agent film can condense experience and in a minimum of time give the historian a perspective of a whole field surrounding his particular field of study. Film segments can depict the *attitudes* of the people shown in them towards the events being depicted. Roads illustrates this point with a film excerpt of troops returning from war. Films can describe the *physical conditions* and *geography* of people and of places, as in a film of an aging leader and film records of difficult or impassable terrain found in a German Army training film about the Eastern Front. There are, too, motion picture records that give a *measurement of performance or effectiveness* of machinery or of administrative operations, as in films showing the functions of specific military weapons and others that depict the difficulty of training airplane gunners. Film records may also be found that effectively *show the personality* of leaders, as Adolph Hitler's is disclosed in the film of the 1934 Nuremberg NSDAP rally, "Triumph of the Will." Films also serve the historian as *direct records of experiments* in the development of new technological devices—vehicles, planes, and the like. Dr. Roads concludes his list of illustrations with comments that bear repeating in full:

I do not think that one could omit mention of film as a corrective of distorted perspective. The film industry and TV must find new subjects for their attentions and sometimes the epic they create for the entertainment of the public has such

¹⁴ This distinction is made by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff in the *Modern Researcher*, p. 44 (New York, 1957).

¹⁵ The categories assigned to Dr. Roads' illustrations are my own, derived from a close reading of the article but not from any correspondence or discussion with its author.

an impact that it is difficult to fix a limit to its unseen influence upon the attitude of those who later turn to a serious consideration of these subjects. *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* is, perhaps, a recent example. One could be excused the thought if one felt after seeing this film, that the world had revolved around T. E. Lawrence. I include the next film excerpt in the belief that it goes some way toward restoring the true perspective.¹⁶

At this point Roads presented film extracts from British and French sources of Feisal and other Arab leaders with Lawrence and of Lawrence in Jerusalem on the day of Allenby's official entry.

The importance of Roads' work is that he has clearly indicated specific ways in which motion pictures can serve the historian. However, as Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., once pointed out in a slightly different context:

History shall remain the preserve of the historian, the challenge is to discover who this historian is who will use the different approach, the redirected emphasis, the materials for a monographic story, the revelations of other disciplines.¹⁷

Inevitably then, as archivists of the motion picture, we must be concerned with the education of historians as well as with the problems of availability, cataloging, selection, and acquisition, although there is no doubt that these problems must also be given fresh treatment. We serve as the bridge between our collections and the clearer understanding of the century that our collections undoubtedly provide. But the guidelines for the exploration of our collections are still unclear. We must find ways to encourage studies that help historians develop and explore concepts about film as a historical resource. We need to penetrate the glibness of the visionaries in our field who, while seeing and defining our common goals so well, have left it to us to define not in words but in substance.

¹⁶ Roads, in *Society of Archivists, Journal*, 3:190.

¹⁷ Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., "Conference Summary," unpublished report of the Mass Communications History Center, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Mar. 28, 1961, p. 15.

SAA Awards

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GONDOS MEMORIAL AWARD

and the

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

will be announced in the January 1969 issue of the **American Archivist**.