

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xvi
1 Film and History: Artifact and Experience <i>Warren I. Susman</i>	1
2 Film History, Reconstruction, and Southern Legendary History in <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> <i>David Culbert</i>	11
3 The Hollywood Western, the Movement-Image, and Making History <i>Marcia Landy</i>	26
4 Ripping the Portieres at the Seams: Lessons from <i>Streetcar on Gone with the Wind</i> <i>Susan Courtney</i>	49
5 Hollywood about Hollywood: Genre as Historiography <i>Robert Sklar</i>	71
6 <i>Some Like It Hot</i> and the Virtues of Not Taking History Too Seriously <i>David Eldridge</i>	94
7 Vico's Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford's <i>The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</i> <i>Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Höslé</i>	120
8 Anatomy of a Shipwreck: Warner Bros., the White House, and the Celluloid Sinking of <i>PT 109</i> <i>Nicholas J. Cull</i>	138

9	The Long Road of Women's Memory: Fred Zinnemann's <i>Julia</i> <i>J.E. Smyth</i>	165
10	Inventing Historical Truth on the Silver Screen <i>Robert Rosenstone</i>	183
11	"This Is Not America: This Is Los Angeles": Crime, Space, and History in the City of Angels <i>Ian Scott</i>	192
12	Between Nostalgia and Regret: Strategies of Historical Disruption from Douglas Sirk to <i>Mad Men</i> <i>Vera Dika</i>	208
	<i>Further Reading</i>	234
	<i>Index</i>	238

## 1

# Film and History: Artifact and Experience<sup>1</sup>

Warren I. Susman

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For most historians films are first and foremost artifacts, human-made objects for particular human use much like the many other objects with which man fills his environment. For some historians these artifacts, again like many others, can become, in the historians' limited special vocabulary, "documents" or "sources"—works that can be read in such a way as to provide knowledge of the history of the people who make and use such objects. Not all historians are comfortable with such sources: they appear too slippery, too easily manipulated. Others confine their use to service as additional evidence confirming what they have already learned from the use of "harder" data: films of the Depression era "document" social tensions that historians know initially from social surveys; science fiction films of the 1950s "demonstrate" the anxieties of the period of McCarthy and the Cold War, already common knowledge as the result of research on Congressional investigations or detailed study of newspapers.

Yet historians do have, in their own pre-professional past, a major work that offers at least encouragement for a wider view of such artifacts. In *The New Science*, Giambattista Vico argued that there were, in fact, only three "totally incorruptible" sources for true historical knowledge: language, mythologies, and antiquities. Antiquities—literary monuments and the like—embodied the "beliefs of the age," the "common sense" of a people, the unquestioned and unreflected-upon assumptions held by all. Mythologies revealed the real "civic history" of the first peoples and expressed the way they saw, understood, and reacted to the world around them. Words and images were natural symbols by which men expressed their feelings, attitudes, and thoughts. In analyzing these, the historian might witness "the development of the morphology of the symbolic system" which was "one with the growth of a culture of which it is the central organ." Thus,

as Isaiah Berlin, one of Vico's ablest interpreters, sums up, "language, myths, antiquities reflect the various fashions in which the social or economic or spiritual problems or realities were refracted in the minds of our ancestors." They were—primitive and distorted as they might often be—important ways of recognizing social facts and reacting to them. If historians asked of them the right questions—always treating them seriously, if not literally—they might find that they had raised a curtain on the past enabling them to reconstruct, not simply a parade of famous men, significant events, and major institutions, but the very way of life, the very "style" of an entire society. But the new questions to be asked of old familiar data were what was important:

What kind of men can have talked, written . . . created as these men did? What must the natures and lives of such men have been, and what kind of social experiences must have shaped them, to have generated the successive stages through which they developed? Can a fixed order or pattern of such stages be shown to follow . . . from the changing nature of such men, or, may it be, of all men and societies as such? . . . What comes into being, at what time, in what fashion?

I am, of course, aware that Vico is speaking of ancient peoples, peoples without our modern exceptional self-consciousness and our sophisticated command of powerful technology. Further, I am not fully prepared to commit myself to the idea that film may be one of the "incorruptible" historical sources, as later comments on the problems of film text and contexts will suggest. But I am convinced that, as artifact, the individual film and the sequence of films that makes the history of the moving-image media can be analyzed in very much the way that Vico uses languages, myth, and antiquities. The result would offer us—along with the study of other cultural products—clues to the symbolic system basic to the culture, the fundamental patterns of belief, stated and unstated, the ways of responding to problems and realities that define the essence of a society, its style.

To move in this direction, historians must probe at least four questions that key on the relationship between "history" and "film." Each provides a special problematic of its own; each raises methodological issues centering on the complex relationship between "text" and "context," "film" and "history."

First, in what sense can film be seen as a *product* of history, and what do we learn as we treat it this way? We know that film and what we associate with the modern media is a function of a particular time and a particular place: they became possible at a given moment historians have designated the Communication Revolution, a period

when the application of new sources of power produced a series of remarkable inventions that facilitated an incredibly rapid movement of men, goods, services, and ideas. One of the most amazing consequences of these developments was the liberation of sound and image from any grounding in a specific time or a particular place. This was related to new ways of perceiving the world itself, and even new ideas about perception: an intellectual revolution with radically different ideas about time and space. But there was, as well, a significant transformation of the social order: historians speak of an Organizational Revolution, new forms of human organization that became characteristic of the culture, including the vital corporate form that a whole economic order depended upon. This Organizational Revolution, made possible in large part by the revolution in communications itself, produced a New Class: a growing group within the social order with considerable power who were neither traditional workers nor owners of the productive operations of the society. Rather, these were salaried or self-employed professional, engineers, managers, experts, technicians, white-collar workers, providers of service and ideas rather than goods. These changes were also accompanied by alterations in ideology or, at the very least, a movement toward a system of values and beliefs that challenged the long-established views of the traditional world of the Republican, Puritan, Pioneer, Producer-Capitalist. All of these transformations created tensions within and between each of the orders, changes often proceeding at different rates in the different orders.

If film is, in fact, the product of these changes—and that proposition is worth a firm effort to establish—it may be possible to examine individual films, groups of films, or the total sequences of all films in such a way as to discover the particular relationship that prevailed between the various orders at any particular moment in time or in any specific place. A film represents a significant arrangement of technology, social organization, and moral ideas; it comes into existence within the particular boundaries of a polity and an economy. The production history of a film itself thus often re-enacts the larger historical movement of forces, and the examination of a film can inform us of these developments. Moreover, the system of representation the filmmaker uses is a key to his ideological vision; in knowing how he perceives his world, we may have some insight into the view of a whole class, if not a whole culture. He may select certain technical devices (of narrative, for example) from the “past” but use them in ways that reveal something of the changes in the three orders that have or have not occurred. A technically avant-garde art may

be used to present a content that is morally traditional. A culture can be most easily recognized in terms of a series of words, images, sounds, rhythms, that are characteristically its own; each of these has a history and a careful examination of these histories—the changes in words, images, sounds, and the possible interrelationships between such changes—may give us the fundamental clues about the changes in the culture itself. Images and even sequences of images, for example, have their histories; how they are used and changed may tell us a good deal about the emerging symbolic system. A film *and* its many aspects each has its own history; those histories, in turn, can be examined as products of a larger history as well.

The second question may appear but a variant on the first: in what sense does a film *reflect* the society in which it is made and therefore tell us something about that time and that place that is of value for the historian? This is the question most often asked and most often too simply answered. In the most elemental sense—if not by definition—it is impossible to imagine any cultural product that doesn't "reflect" the culture. The issues ought, rather, to be the special or significant way in which this is, in fact, the case. In the most basic sense, films as source serve the historian as a museum does: providing vivid data about the way people looked, how they dressed, what they did and how they loved. Historians continue to mine this record. (Interestingly, in one most obvious area historians have failed to use their source: films provide a brilliant record of human movement, human speech, human gesture, and in terms of what we know about the significance of such operations in various cultures, it is surprising that historians have not devoted attention to these changing aspects of the human body in social arrangements and movements as they changed over time.) Historians also use films as a vital source of information on what people believed, their basic interests, values, and concerns at a particular moment in time. Films become an index to the key problems of a period and even more importantly, the way those problems were perceived. Too often historians fail to be alert to the warning Vico provides us: the words and images may contain disguised or unconscious assumptions and perceptions, clues to issues and concerns often fundamental to the filmmakers, but not obvious because we fail in our effort to see as they saw, feel as they felt. Obvious sociological reference frequently obscures less obvious but even more vital psychological reference. Recent re-examinations of the gangster films of the 1930s show an overwhelming concern about the nature and meaning of manhood that was often overlooked by those who picked up the more immediate clues to social issues

they were already aware of as a consequence of the Depression. And, finally, the very nature of the film, form as well as content, image as well as idea, reveals the “period” of which it comes—a vision of style. Historians can refer to a film of the 1930s or the 1960s and we can be aware of certain visual, technical, and thematic similarities that make such allusions meaningful. Yet, we need to work toward a more precise realization of questions of historical style and its meaning. There are here, too, methodological dangers that make it difficult for us to deal with often brutal conflicts of style and theme within a so-called period that go often unattended. Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and Kelly and Donen’s *Singin’ In the Rain* (1952) offer us not only two different Hollywoods, but also two different *histories* of Hollywood; both are early 1950s films that achieved considerable critical acclaim, professional awards, and enthusiastic audience responses. How can the same culture claim both?

Third, this suggests the even more significant issues that are involved in the question of how film operates as an *interpreter* of history, the provider of an explanation of historical development, and an analysis of the process of history itself. This is not only a question of subject matter. There are few major events and developments and fewer major historical figures from the American and European past that have not been translated into words and images on both the large and the small screen. But even more important than this, the filmmaker, simply because he operates directly in terms of the actual manipulation of time and space, because in his editing he makes arrangements of time and space that shatter simple chronology, the traditional unities of time and space act as an historian faced with the same problem of finding the proper arrangement of materials to provide a view of the process which is his history. Thus, films demonstrate—even if unconsciously and even when the subject matter is not specifically historical—a vision of history as process. Master directors who are self-conscious in their craft impose a vision of history—how it happens and what it means—that may have a significant impact on those who see his films. John Ford is perhaps the most influential *historian* of the United States in the twentieth century. Not only do his films provide a particular view of American development through his treatment of a variety of major historical experiences, but they provide as well a philosophy of history, a vision of the process and its meaning that I suspect many Americans, at least in Ford’s lifetime, held or came to hold in some measure because of his art.

With the issue of interpretation, we begin to move with film itself to the larger culture where we began. Our fourth question concerns

itself with the possible role of film as agent in history: how does film *shape* history? If it is a product of the historical process, a reflection of historical development, an interpretation of that history, can it also be said to be itself a transformer or maker of history? Again, the answers range from the simple to the most problematic. Films can have an impact on lifestyles: establishment of fashions in dress and home design; patterns of behavior; characteristic language and speech. The idea of audiences *imitating* films, using films as a standard by which to judge one's own life, offers an exceptional area for investigation that must lead us beyond the Payne studies' obsession with the fact that young boys like to be like Little Caesar. The public involvement with the roles stars play on the screen and the "real" lives of the stars—the whole world of fans and gossip that color our vision of the world—raises important questions: why is this so and what are the cultural consequences? Life may indeed imitate art, but such imitations are not trivial. That kind of behavior can often reveal even ideological matters of considerable importance: everyday life often provides major clues to the structure of consciousness and the symbolic and moral order. What audiences select—and what they choose *not* to imitate—makes the issue even more complex, for neither all stars nor all roles become sources for imitation. From films, as well, come many of the major icons that are fundamental to the culture. It is possible to begin to think in terms of a set of images, words, and sounds that form the basis for an iconography crucial in particular eras or fundamental in specific ways to the life of the culture in our century. Some film images, for example, develop and retain a special meaning outside the "text" of the film itself. The image of King Kong atop the Empire State Building remains a significant American icon to generations who have never seen the film and to millions of non-Americans who continue to associate that image with American life and culture. Further, the "independent" role of such icons provides a special problem: it is part of the "context" from which we now must view the text. It impinges upon what we may mean by the text.

Thus, with the question of film as agent in history, the historian has moved away from the traditional vision of the film as artifact and has moved specifically toward the second aspect of the historian's involvement with the film: as significant experience of women, men, and children in the twentieth century. Film is an important and, for some, a fundamental aspect of life in our time, and we must understand it as part of that huge field of interest, itself as invention and concern of our century, as Henri LeFebvre has brilliantly argued.<sup>2</sup> (It should be noted, of course, that film is one of the most important agents in

our desire to explore and record every aspect of that very everyday life, a fact that provides an ideological rationale for the entire film enterprise itself.) For an understanding of the film as experience, the historian must ask a completely new set of questions, and even seek a whole new set of materials for investigation. Here, the scholar's interest is no longer in the "document" or the text; rather, it centers on the context in which that document is experienced, the environment that may help shape the response and, even, meaning of the text and relate it to other aspects of life experience in the larger culture. Only a few examples should, at least, suggest the range of questions this raises: films themselves offer calculated images of the own worlds and work that may shape audience perceptions of film efforts: a particular view of Hollywood and what it is about; the publicity campaigns, the advertising, the promotions that sharply color our experience of a particular film; posters and still photographs (sometimes scenes not in the final film text as released); the glamour and the gossip; the fan apparatus—all of these have consequences of major importance. There is, as well, that contribution made by the particular manner and location of presentation or performance: the majestic and dimly-lighted movie palace and the comfortable well-lighted living room. There may even be, after all, a fundamental relationship between the question of viewing space and time (season as well as time of day) and the issue of social or ideological concern. Motion pictures were, in some sense, a response to the urgent social question much debated in the period in which the movies were born: how can an individual survive in a world of the crowd? Not only were the technical devices ideally suited to illustrate effectively and dramatically the problem (crowd "splendor" versus the close-up), but the huge theatre in which a patron sat among that very crowd heightened the audience's feeling of the problem. Filmmakers were aware of what was happening: the final moments of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) make this clear. The camera pulls back and the family, central to Vidor's drama, is finally realized by the audience to be only a very small element in a huge audience doing precisely the same thing. Television operates, often, on a very different premise. At least since the brilliant developments of the 1950s, television has frequently concentrated its cameras on the American family and its problems and joys. In a world increasingly concerned about the maintenance of a strong family life in the United States, television devoted much of its attention to that unit. As if to heighten the effect, the viewing area for much of TV is the living room—or, better yet, in the special language of the 1950s family room.

The question of audience, difficult as it always is, is an imperative for the historian of the film experience. This issue is especially complex. The experience we are discussing is social: if we do not share it with others in a theatre, in a bar, or living room, we share it by exchanging notes with others about our experience of it. Sometimes we have films specifically crafted for a particular audience; perhaps no films ever made could have such specific knowledge of its intended audience as Capra's *Why We Fight* series. But the producers' intentions represent only one aspect of the larger issue—where, when, with whom was the film seen?

The whole question of attendance raises the issue of film as ritual: that people go (or don't go) to the movies or watch (or don't watch) television, may be more important than what they see. The whole system of distribution colors that question of ritual attendance as well—what is available to whom and when and how? This, in turn, suggests the problem of programming and how it affects our experience. More work has been done on this important question for television—when and where do news programs appear and with what effect—than programming in films: how does continuous performance (with the audience wandering in and out), double features, the ritual bill (short subjects, previews of coming attractions, newsreels, cartoons, etc.) affect the experience of certain films? But the success of various films should never lead the historian to forget those who refuse to become an audience not only for particular films, but for all films: there was, from the start, a vigorous resistance to the world of moving images, a series of critical debates, a continuous effort at censorship—all of which are crucial in any effort to analyze the film experience or even frequent particular film texts.

Any examination of audience immediately raises the question that those who undergo any film experience are also operating at the same time in a culture in which they are being affected by other popular cultural instruments as well. Students of film need to pay attention to all aspects of the popular culture, especially those born out of the same universe as film, not as a special academic exercise in interdisciplinary studies but rather because the audience for one is usually the audience for all; and because the media borrow from one another, reinforce one another, play upon significant shared relationships. Sound was always part of the film experience, and the aim to record both sound and image centered even in the same inventor—Edison. The still photograph and photographer haunts the world of film; figures from the comics show up constantly; the world of radio and, especially, the world of the newspaper and newspaperman form almost a genre; the

changing world of popular music is a common film subject. These are but a few examples. There is a world of popular culture in which films function and which films comment upon. Those interrelationships are important in any cultural analysis. There is, of course, at the same time, an increasing self-conscious interest of filmmakers in the so-called high arts and an interesting continuing story of their use of images and perceptions from that area as well: the relationship between the various cultural forms becomes essential if we are to know the full meaning of the experience of Americans with the moving image itself.

It must be remembered that film in all its forms developed as a part of a series of aspirations of a class which wished somehow to be able to preserve for time a world of sound, motion, and color. Thus, in an important way, film is but an aspect of a cultural drive basic to the experience of everyday life so fundamental as to form the base of a new culture itself. Furthermore, the historian can never forget that, in this world—ever-dependent on an increasingly complex technology and therefore requiring ever more sharp divisions of labor, specialization, and professionalization—the possibility for the individual or amateur has grown, rather than disappeared, with ever-increasing consequences. There are home-movies and movie video-tapes (as well as amateur photographers and wide sales of tape recorders) and this very fact raises questions, not only about professional and amateurs, but also about the interrelationship between the two worlds: everyman his own filmmakers while at the same time the audience for the work of others. This aspect of participation—the vast increase of participation as maker as well as audience—is too important an aspect of the experience with moving images in our time to be ignored.

All of this suggests important questions about the relationship between text – the film as artifact—and the context—the film as experience. History too, represents two separate things: it is the ongoing flux of human experience over time and space, and the effort by men and women to order and struggle that experience in an effort to provide special meaning. That work itself—the history—also becomes an artifact and it, in turn, operates within a context as it becomes part of that flux of experience again. The historian sees the film in order, first, to reconstruct the major symbolic system that is at the core of the culture. But this very involvement becomes itself a part of the context, part of the world of experience. Thus, the text never remains static or even constant: text and context interrelate in history itself, and in the work of the historian.

**Notes**

1. This paper was originally presented at the Astoria Foundation in New York in November 1983. It was then reprinted for *Film and History* (1985) and is reprinted here with permission of the editor.
2. Henri LeFebvre (1901–91), French sociologist, wrote *The Critique of Everyday Life* (1947) and *The Production of Space* (1974), among other works.

## Index

- adaptation, xxiii, 33, 106–7, 138–9, 165, 169–71, 181 n15, 199, 204
- Addams, Jane, 179, 182 n.33
- African Americans, xxiii, 12–13, 18, 43, 54, 186–7, 223–5, 227–8
- Agee, James, 77–8
- Ali, Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), 210, 215–19
- All About Eve* (1950), 171
- All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), 146
- All That Heaven Allows* (1955), 211–18, 222, 225, 230
- American Empire* (1942), 30
- American Graffiti* (1973), 211, 221, 224, 231
- Andrews, Dana, 43
- Ankersmit, Frank, 185
- Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), 170
- Arizona* (1940), 30, 41, 45
- Arthur, Jean, 41
- audience, 5–9, 11, 33–4, 36, 41, 80, 95, 102–3, 108–9, 119 n122, 143, 155, 176–7, 214, 223
- auteur, xvii, 178
- Bad and the Beautiful, The* (1952), xxi, 72, 81–5, 90
- Badlands* (1973), 211, 221, 224
- Banky, Vilma, 78
- Barrymore, Diana, 81, 85
- Barrymore, John, 81, 85
- Baudrillard, Jean, 221, 222
- Belle Starr* (1941), 41, 45
- Bickford, Charles, 88
- biopic, xxiii, 138–58, 165, 167, 171–2
- Birth of a Nation, The* (1915), xviii, xx, 11–25, 69 n10, 226
- Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), 169
- Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), 157, 164 n118, 169
- Brownlow, Kevin, 28
- bootlegging, 95, 98
- box office, 41, 68 n1, 110, 155–6, 196
- Brackett, Charles, 74–80
- Bradshaw, George, 81
- Brando, Marlon, 51
- Breen, Joseph, 105–7
- Breen, Richard, 144–8
- Breil, Joseph Carl, 12, 19–21
- Broken Hearts of Hollywood* (1926), 87
- Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 29
- burlesque, 40–2
- Cagney, James, 103, 142
- Cahiers du cinéma*, xvii
- California, history of, 194–5, 198, 200–1, 204
- Capone, Al, 98–100, 108, 115, n50
- Capra, Frank, 8, 206
- Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1957), 50, 106
- Cawelti, John, 204
- copyright, 8, 12–13, 105–12
- Changeling* (2008), xviii, xxiii, 192–206
- Chaplin, Charles, 80, 206
- Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), 123
- Chicago, history of, 194–208
- Chinatown* (1974), xxiii, 192–205
- Cimarron* (1931), xix, 37, 45, 167, 170
- CinemaScope, 85, 88, 90
- cinematography, 14, 16, 51, 83, 218
- Citizen Kane* (1941), xxiii, xxiv, 82, 165, 169, 171–9, 181 n17
- Civil War, xxiii, 11, 15–16, 39, 61–3, 83, 186–7
- Clansman, The* (1906), 13
- Clarke, Mae, 103
- class, 3, 38, 41, 51, 169, 189, 213–14, 223–4
- Cold War, 1, 72, 166

## Index

- Coppola, Francis Ford, xxii, 222  
 Cooper, Gary, 36, 44  
 Cooper, James Fenimore, 29  
*Covered Wagon, The* (1923), 26, 28–30, 38  
*Crowd, The* (1928), 7  
 Crowther, Bosley, xxv n5, 156  
 Cruze, James, 26, 28–9  
 Cukor, George, 86, 88
- Davis, Natalie Zemon, 184  
 de Havilland, Olivia, 57, 78  
 Deleuze, Gilles, 26–8, 31, 36–7, 39, 42–3, 45  
 DeMille, Cecil B., 26, 30, 33–4, 74, 76–7, 79, 81  
*Destry Rides Again* (1939), 26, 40–2, 45  
 detective fiction, 192, 195, 200, 204  
 Diamond, I.A.L., xxi, 96–9, 102–4, 109, 111, 115, n50  
 Dietrich, Marlene, 40–42  
*Dillinger* (1973), 169  
 Dixon, Thomas, 13–14  
 document inserts, xviii  
*Dodge City* (1939), 30  
 Donovan, Robert, 139  
*Double Indemnity* (1944), 192, 197  
 Douglas, Kirk, 81, 83  
*Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), 168  
*Duel in the Sun* (1946), xix, xxv n5, 41, 45, 167, 170
- Eastwood, Clint, xviii, xxiii, 193–8, 203  
 Eldridge, David, xxi  
*Eddie Cantor Story, The* (1953), 72  
 editing, xvii, 5, 33, 69 n 10, 165, 174, 177  
 Ellroy, James, 199  
 ethnicity, 36, 41–4, 60, 70 n20
- Fail Safe* (1964), 43  
 Fairbanks, Douglas, 78, 95  
*Fanfaren der Liebe* (1951), 104  
*Far From Heaven* (2002), xviii, xix, xxiv, 210–11, 220–9  
*Farmer Takes a Wife, The* (1935), 168  
 fascism, 165, 167, 172, 176  
 Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 210, 214, 216–21, 225  
 feminism, 170, 178–9, 211, 213  
 Ferro, Marc, xvii, 189–90  
 film as agent of history, 6–7, 21–3  
 film as interpreter of history, 5–6, 14, 72, 80–7, 120–35, 166, 173, 186–90  
 film as product of history, 2–4  
 film as reflection of history, xvi–xvii, 4–5  
 film criticism, 54, 178  
 film historiography, 6, 14  
 film history, 71–21  
 film noir, xxiii, xxiv, 43, 192, 197  
 filmic writing of history, 189  
 Fine, David, 192, 199–200, 202  
 flashbacks, xviii, 82, 84, 123, 173  
 Fleming, Victor, 26, 34–35  
 Fonda, Henry, 42, 168  
 Fonda, Jane, 166, 168–69, 173  
 Ford, John, xvi–xvii, xxi, xxii, 5, 26, 30, 37, 120, 122, 124, 142  
 forewords, 169, 172, 180 n11  
 (see also intertitles)  
 Foster, Hal, 214, 221, 224  
 Foucade, Marie Madeleine, 169, 172, 179  
 Foy, Bryan W., 139–157  
*From Here to Eternity* (1953), 165, 169  
 frontier, xxii, 26, 30–42, 45, 46 n1, 47 n37, 122–3, 133, 192, 197, 202, 204
- Gable, Clark, 57  
 gangster genre, xviii, 98, 100, 102–3, 165  
 Gardiner, Muriel, 166, 179  
 Garland, Judy, 86, 89  
 Gaynor, Janet, 86–7

- genre, xviii–xix, 36–42, 46 n5, 72, 80, 96, 122, 168, 184–5, 195, 204, 233 n14
- genre cleansing, xviii
- Giant* (1956), xix, 170–1
- Gilbert, John, 78
- Gish, Lillian, 16
- Glory* (1989), xxiii, 186–8
- Gluck, Sherna Berger, 179
- Godfather, The* (1972), xxii
- Goldwyn, Samuel, 78, 171
- Gone with the Wind* (1936), 55, 170
- Gone with the Wind* (1939), xix, xx, 49–68
- Graham, Gloria, 83
- Great Depression, 1, 5, 38, 78
- Great Train Robbery, The* (1903), 30
- Griffith, D.W., xviii, 11–25, 32
- Grindon, Leger, 96
- Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), 139
- Hale, Alan, 29
- Hall, Virginia, 166, 179
- Hammett, Dashiell, 174, 176
- Hart, Moss, 86–7
- Haskell, Molly, 178–9
- Haver, Ronald, 87–8
- Haynes, Todd, xviii, 210, 214, 220–8
- Hearst, William Randolph, 171, 178, 181 n17
- Hellman, Lillian, 165–79
- heroes, 120–35
- historical fiction, 96, 167, 170, 181 n14
- historicity, 14, 100, 101, 148, 167, 169, 179, 184, 196
- historiography, 1–9, 11, 14–20, 26–8, 72, 77–8, 83, 87, 90, 96, 102, 165–7, 170, 174, 179
- historiophoty, xvii
- Hitchcock, Alfred, 82, 185, 221
- Holden, William, 74–80
- Hollywood history, xx, 71–93
- homosexuality, 105–6, 108, 112, 214, 225
- Horton, Andrew, 189
- Houseman, John, 81
- Howard, Leslie, 57
- Hunter, Kim, 51
- I Remember Mama* (1948), 171
- Imitation of Life* (1934), 224
- Imitation of Life* (1959), 224–5, 228, 230
- intertitles, xviii, 11, 14, 15–16, 28, 59, 170
- Iron Horse, The* (1924), 26, 30–31, 39
- It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), 79
- Jameson, Fredric, xxiv, xxv n8, n11, 204, 210, 221
- Jeanne Eagels* (1957), 170
- Jesse James* (1939), 168
- Jezebel* (1938), 170
- Jolie, Angelina, 193
- Jones, Jennifer, 41
- Jowett, Garth, 22
- Julia* (1977), xix, xxiii, 165–81
- Kael, Pauline, 178–9
- Kazan, Elia, xx, 69 n8
- Keaton, Buster, 78–9
- Kennedy, John F., 139–58
- Kennedy, Joseph, 140–3
- Kerrigan, J. Warren, 29–30
- King of Kings* (1927), 79
- Kitty Foyle* (1940), 171
- Klinger, Barbara, 214
- Kracauer, Siegfried, 72
- Ku Klux Klan, 16–17
- L.A. Confidential* (1997), xiv, 192, 198–9
- La Rocque, Rod, 78
- landscape, 26–9, 31–40, 44, 55, 57, 192, 195
- Landy, Marcia, 189
- Lang, Fritz, 82
- Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), 179, 154
- LeFebvre, Henri, 6
- Leigh, Vivien, 49–67
- Legion of Decency, 107, 110, 112

- Leites, Nathan, 71–2  
 Lemmon, Jack, 94, 104–5, 110–11  
 Lewton, Val, 82  
*Longest Day, The* (1962) 140, 154  
 Longo, Robert, 209, 232  
 Loos, Anita, 171  
 Los Angeles, history of, 192–206  
 Lost Cause, 16–16, 62  
*Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), 170  
 Luft, Sidney, 86  
 lynching, 32, 42–44
- Mad Men* (2007–), xxiv, 28–32  
 Malden, Karl, 52  
*Maltese Falcon* (1941), xxiv  
*Man For All Seasons, A* (1966), 167, 179  
*Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The* (1962), xix, xxi, 120–37  
 Mankiewicz, Herman, xxiii, 171, 173, 178  
 March, Fredric, 86  
 Marion, Frances, 171  
 marketing and publicity, 7, 22, 28, 117 n 91, 140, 152, 154–6  
*Marnie* (1964), 229  
 Marsh, Mae, 16  
 Mason, James, 86  
*Maverick Queen* (1956), 170  
 Mayer, Louis B., 72–4, 80–1  
 McCrea, Joel, 44  
 McDaniel, Hattie, 63  
*Meet John Doe* (1941), 78  
*Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), 44  
 melodrama, xviii (see also women's picture)  
 Milestone, Lewis, 146, 149–56, 161  
 Milliken, Carl Jr., 147–8  
 Minnelli, Vincente, 44, 81–2  
 miscegenation, 13–16  
 Mitchell, Margaret, 55, 170  
 Mitchell, Thomas, 37, 60  
 Monroe, Marilyn, 101, 104, 106, 109  
 montage, 26–27, 90  
*Moon Over Miami* (1941), 102  
 movement image, 27, 42
- mulatto, 14–15  
 Mulholland, William, 195–6, 201, 203  
*Mulholland Falls* (1996), 192, 199–205  
 Murch, Walter, 174  
*Murder, My Sweet* (1944), xxiv  
 Murnau, F.W., 73  
 musical, 75, 86  
 musical score, 19–21, 52  
*Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915), 12  
*My Darling Clementine* (1946), 43  
 myth, 2, 29–30, 39, 46, 50, 172, 194, 199, 205
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 13, 22, 141, 228  
 Native Americans, 28–9, 31  
 “New Western History,” xxii  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 27–8  
 Nilsson, Anna Q., 78–9  
 Normand, Mabel, 78  
*Nosferatu* (1922), 73  
 nostalgia, xxiv, 45, 55, 58, 62, 102, 131, 176, 210–11, 221–5, 232  
*Nun's Story, The* (1959), 165, 169
- objectivity, 11, 26, 121–9, 134, 165–7, 186–7, 190, 199  
*Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), 30  
*One From the Heart* (1983), 222  
 oral history, 167, 169, 170, 172, 179  
 Organization Man, 230  
*Out of the Past* (1947), xxiv  
*Ox-Bow Incident, The* (1943), 26, 42–4
- Paramount Studios, 75, 78, 80  
 Parkman, Francis, 26, 28  
 Pasley, Fred, 98–9  
 postwar Hollywood, 72  
*Pete Kelly's Blues* (1955), 98  
 Pidgeon, Walter, 82  
*Pinky* (1949), 170  
 Place, J. A., 135

- Plainsman, The* (1936), 37  
 plantation myth, 53–6  
 plantation suture, 56, 58, 61–2  
 Polan, Dana, 42  
 Polanski, Roman, xxiii, 194, 197, 200, 203–4  
 popular history, 71, 98, 110  
 postmodernism, xxi, xxv n11, 204, 221–2  
 Powdermaker, Hortense, 71  
 Powell, Dick, 82  
 Prairie Madonna, 30  
 prestige Western, 36  
*Prisoner of Shark Island, The* (1936), 169  
 Production Code Administration (PCA), 105–7, 112  
 Prohibition, 94, 97–8, 110, 112, 114 n. 25  
 progressive history, xiv, xxi, 26–7  
*PT 109* (1963), xxiii, 139–58  
*Public Enemy, The* (1931), 98, 102–3  
  
*Queen Kelly* (1929), 79–80  
  
 race, 12, 15, 43–4, 56, 58, 187, 219, 225–6  
 Raft, George, 97, 100, 101, 103, 108  
 railroad, 30–31  
*Ramona* (1936), 170  
 reception, 68 n5, 156, 178  
 Reconstruction, 11, 15–19, 61  
 Redgrave, Vanessa, 166, 177–8  
 regret, xiv, 210–213  
 relativism, 167, 173, 179  
 remakes, 71–2, 86–7, 104, 216, 221, 224, 229  
 research, xix, 23, 97–8, 147  
 Resistance, 165–7, 176, 178  
 revisionism, 43, 54–5, 75, 136 n8, 165–6, 170, 185, 213, 216, 224  
*Revolutionary Road* (2008), 229  
 Robards, Jason, 174–75  
 Robertson, Cliff, 146, 152–6  
*Robin Hood of El Dorado* (1937), 37  
 Robinson, Edward G., 100  
 Roosevelt, Theodore, 26, 28  
  
 Rosenstone, Robert, xvii xx, xxvii  
 Rotha, Paul, 72  
  
*Samson and Delilah* (1949), 76–7  
*Santa Fe Trail* (1940), 30  
*Saratoga Trunk* (1945), 170  
 Sargent, Alvin, 171, 173, 182 n26  
 Sarris, Andrew, 178  
*Scarface* (1932), 98, 100–01  
 Schary, Dore, 80  
 Schnee, Charles, 81  
 Schreck, Max, 73  
 screenwriters, 74–80, 166, 171, 178, 197  
 script development, xviii, 75–7, 105, 148–52, 173, 178, 195  
*Search, The* (1948), 165, 169  
*Searchers, The* (1956), 123  
 Second World War, 26, 38, 41, 45, 71, 152, 154, 165, 169, 194, 201, 212, 215–16  
 Seitz, John F., 78  
 Selznick, David O., 81, 85  
 Selznick Lewis J., 85  
 Sennett, Mack, 80  
*Serpico* (1973), 169  
*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), 79  
*Seven Year Itch, The* (1955)  
 Shaw, Robert Gould, 186  
 Sherman, Cindy, 209, 222, 230  
*Show Girl in Hollywood* (1930), 87  
 Shurlock, Geoffrey, 106–9  
 silent Hollywood, 5, 71–4, 76–80  
 silent historical film, 11–25, 28–35, 234  
 Simmons, Laurie, 208–10, 222  
*Singin' in the Rain* (1952), 5  
 Sirk, Douglas, 170, 210–30  
 Sklar, Robert, xxvi, 234  
 Slocombe, Douglas, 176  
 Smyth, J. E., 98, 102  
*So Proudly We Hail* (1943), 171  
*Soldier Blue* (1971), 170  
*Some Like It Hot* (1959), xix, xxi, 94–119

## Index

- sound bridge, 174  
 sound era, 35, 78  
 Southern belle, 50, 52, 65, 83  
 Southern space, 49–50  
 Southerners in Westerns, 32–40, 43  
 space, 49–68  
*Spirit of St. Louis, The* (1957), 97  
 St. Valentine's Day Massacre, 97, 108  
*Stagecoach* (1939), 37–40, 42, 45  
 star biopics, xxi  
*Star, The* (1952), 72  
*Star is Born, A* (1937), 72, 85–6  
*Star is Born, A* (1954), xxi, 72, 85–90  
 Stevens, George, 171  
 Stevens, George Jr., 143–5  
 Stevens, Thaddeus, 17–19  
 Stewart, James, 40  
 Stewart, Paul, 82  
 Stokes, Melvyn, 12, 22  
*Story of Alexander Graham Bell, The*  
 (1939), 168  
*Story of Will Rogers, The* (1952), 72  
*Streetcar Named Desire, A* (1951), xx,  
 49–53, 63–8  
 Stroheim, Erich von, 79–80  
 studio era, xix, xx, xxiv, 26–46,  
 71–90, 94–112, 169–70  
 subjectivity, 49–52, 170  
*Sunset Boulevard* (1950), xxi, 5, 72–80,  
 90, 170  
 Surtees, Robert, 83, 146, 155  
 Susman, Warren, xvi, xvii, xx  
 Swanson, Gloria, 73–80  
  
 Technicolor, 44, 77, 85, 109, 140,  
 212–13, 218  
 television, 7, 88, 90, 138, 231  
*Ten Commandments, The* (1956), 79  
*They Were Expendable* (1945), 142  
 Tierney, Gene, 41  
 time-image, 43  
*Titanic* (1953), 97, 144  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), 171  
 Toland, Gregg, 174  
 Tolson, Melvin B., 54, 69 n13  
 Toplin, Robert Brent, 96, 184  
  
 Towne, Robert, 195, 203  
 transsexuality, 112  
*Tree Grows in Brooklyn, A* (1945),  
 170–1  
 Trumbo, Dalton, 171  
 Turner, Frederick Jackson, 26, 37  
 Turner, Lana, 81  
*Twelve Angry Men* (1957), 43  
 Twentieth Century-Fox, 75–6  
  
*Union Pacific* (1939), 30  
  
*Valentino* (1951), 72  
 Valentino, Rudolph, 78  
*Vertigo* (1958), xxiv  
 Vico, Giambattista, xxi, 1–2, 4  
*Virginian, The* (1914), 26, 33–4, 42, 45  
*Virginian, The* (1923), 26, 34–5, 42, 45  
*Virginian, The* (1929), 26, 34–7, 39,  
 42, 45  
*Virginian, The* (1946), 26, 44–5  
 voiceover, xxiii, 73–4, 76–8, 82,  
 169–71, 177  
  
*Wachsfigurenkabinett Das* (1924), 78  
 Walsh, Raoul, 144–5  
 Warhol, Andy, 224  
 Warner, Harry B., 78–79  
 Warner, Jack, 86, 138, 140, 142,  
 145–6, 149–50, 154, 156  
 Warner Bros., 86–7, 139–58  
 Wayne, John, 37, 39–40  
 Welles, Orson, xxiii, 171, 173–4,  
 178  
 West, 27–38, 124, 128–34, 172,  
 192, 204  
 Western, xviii, 26–48  
*What Price Hollywood?* (1932), 87  
 White, Hayden, xvii  
 Wilder, Billy, xxi, 5, 71–80, 94–116  
 Williams, Tennessee, 49–51  
 Willis, Sharon, 225–7  
 Wilson, Lois, 30  
 Wilson, Woodrow, 12  
 Wister, Owen, 31–32  
 Wolfenstein, Martha, 71–72

- women, audiences, xxv n9, 34  
women and Westerns, 40–1  
women's history, xxiii, 167, 169–70,  
179  
women's picture, xviii, xxiii, 75,  
165–81
- Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), xvii, 43,  
136 n4, 168–9
- Zanuck, Darryl F., 75, 140, 168, 171  
Zinnemann, Fred, xxiii, 145–6,  
165–82