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# What is Film History?

– a Critical Discussion of some Aspects of Allen & Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*

General discussions of the theory and practice of film history are not daily fare. Therefore the study in "meta-history" by Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery<sup>1</sup> should be very heartily welcomed. Yet one way of welcoming and showing one's fascination of scholarly work is to subject it to a detailed critical discussion. That is what I intend to do in this essay, concentrating on the most general first part of the work, "Reading, Researching, and Writing Film History".

## Is Film History Possible?

And let me start at the practical, yet very absolute end: Is researching and writing film history possible at all? Do we who are interested in film history possess the necessary background knowledge, institutional framework, and not least available sources for research in film history? Or at least for research in *American* film history, since Allen and Gomery have chosen to delimit their subject to this.

The two authors have divided the responsibility for the individual chapters between them, and Gomery has written the second chapter of the book on, as he phrases it, the "film" part of "film history" (p. 25). As it turns out, he takes a rather gloomy stance on the possibility of getting ahead in film historical research, because of its "embryonic status" (p. 26).

There is no solid tradition which we can join. Though the first "important" film histories were written already in the twenties, and though lots of film historical books and scholarly articles have appeared since the sixties, "film historians hoping to build upon existing research nearly always discover the hoped-for prior work of film history to be slight and often unreliable" (p. 26).

One might perhaps think that the creation of film studies as an academic discipline since 1965, say, and not least the boom in film courses at colleges and universities, had changed the situation in a positive way. According to Gomery, however, the change has not only been favorable to serious scholarly work. The huge market for textbooks has been satisfied by introductory surveys of the history of American or world cinema, smooth overviews that in a way conceal the lack of cinema scholarship. On page 28 he writes:

*Such survey works do exist in all branches of history. However, historians in other areas are able to construct their "overviews" on the basis of an accumulated mass of original research reported in journal articles, monographs, case studies, and specialized booklength works built up over a period of decades, if not centuries. Film history's recent admission to the academy meant there existed no such reservoir of basic research – only a few seminal studies and a handful of historical surveys.*

Of course he is right – even though he may be seeing too large differences between his own branch of history and other branches. Only insiders feel the particular problems of a scholarly discipline and will therefore have a tendency to think that their problems are huger than anybody else's. I wouldn't be surprised if even political historians – the only ones who are really able to boast of a centuries long tradition – might claim of their own branch that most former work is "slight and nearly always unreliable".

Still, film history as a serious field of academic study is quite recent, and this does call for heavy, basic work. On the other hand, the mood of the practicing film historian is no more gloomy than that he also notes "that ours is a tremendously exciting field to work in and read about" (p. 28).

## The Availability of Primary Sources

But how long was Adam in Paradise? At least, my last, joyful quotation continues like this: "As students of film history quickly learn, however, the technological nature of film itself creates a further set of serious research constraints."

Obviously, Gomery is thinking of the fact that "nearly half of the theatrical-length motion pictures made in the United States are lost forever" (p. 29). A sad fact, indeed, yet at any rate an extremely and amazingly more profitable situation than what one should have expected, considering e.g. that all films up to the beginning of the 1950's were made of cellulose nitrate, a highly inflammable stuff, prone to rot, and an explosive capable of self-ignition when stored! Yet Gomery raises his voice in grief (on page 29):

*Consider the enormity of this loss for the historical study of the cinema. It is difficult to construct even a hypothetical analogy on the same scale in another branch of history. To do so we should have to propose, for example: What if two-thirds of all the paintings done in the twentieth century were destroyed, and most of the remaining one-third were saved through happenstance rather than systematic preservation?*

If not before, one now wonders which other branches of history Gomery has any acquaintance with – if any. If we stick to Gomery's own continent, I should think that historians of the American Indians before Columbus are worse off than film historians. And if we stick to the history of the arts of the twentieth century, I am sure that any historian of theater or ballet who reads this, will get a good laugh. If finding analogies to film history is difficult, the reason is not that other branches of history are better off, but rather that their situation is worse. The only branch of history (of the arts, at least) with a *better* percentage of saved "primary sources" than film history must be the history of literature.

Obviously, Gomery takes it for granted that a lot more than a third of all the paintings done in the twentieth century (and probably nearly all) have been carefully preserved for scrutiny by historians of art. *Of all the paintings!* My guess is that only the tiniest percentage of twentieth century paintings – good and bad – can be traced in museums, collections, and private homes.

What is amazing about the cinema is that not only a few outstanding works of art have been preserved, but (in the U.S.) more than half of the whole production, with very little regard to artistic quality!

## What is Film History?

The film historian has lots of sources to work on, both films and "nonfilmic evidence" – and Gomery is right in pointing out that the latter kind of evidence, data about the film industry, the cinemas, the social composition of the audiences, etc., is "underutilized" (p. 39). In Chapter 8 of the book, he gives some very good advice about where such data may be found in American archives.

But which kinds of questions should the film historian try to answer by studying the sources? What is film history? Gomery's co-author, Robert C. Allen, gives an answer in the first chapter.

Allen starts out (on pages 4-5) by distinguishing film history from film theory and film criticism.

Film *theory*, he says, "takes as its domain the nature, qualities and functions of film in general", and answers general questions like "What is film?" or "How does film produce meaning?"

Film *criticism* "concerns itself with the particular qualities of individual films or groups of films". The critic will ask questions like "How do the various elements of filmmaking come together in a given film?"

Film *history*, however, is concerned with "the temporal dimension of the cinema: how film as art, technology, social force, or economic institution developed over time or functioned at a given moment in the past".

This seems fair as far as it goes; one kind of test of the tentative definition might be whether the examples of various kinds of film history that the authors give in the book comply with it, and they all seem to do so. Yet Allen and Gomery also give examples of studies that they do not consider as film history in a strict sense, first of all survey histories constructed as chronological presentations of a row of "masterpieces". (The whole so-called "masterpiece tradition" in film history is discussed by Allen on pages 71-76.) One wonders, however, why these surveys do not qualify as stories of "how film as art (...) developed over time".

The answer is given indirectly in what must be considered Allen's primary statement of what film history is, since this time the "definition" is in italics (p. 5):

*(...) the film historian attempts to explain the changes that have occurred to the cinema since its origins, as well as account for aspects of the cinema that have resisted change.*

The central phrase here is *explain the changes*. Allen argues that by simply analyzing a series of old masterpieces in chronological order the author of a survey does not explain why *Citizen Kane* has another "aesthetics" and "language" than the two years older *Stagecoach*, say. And even though the actual authors of actual "masterpiece surveys" (like Gerald Mast) normally also sketch what we would all call "the historical background" of each main work, I do think that Allen has a good point here.

Yet maybe the strict sense of "film history" is *too* strict. One may get that feeling when one realizes that Allen's insistence on *changes* (and on quite the opposite: the unchanging, stable aspects of the cinema) not only excludes masterpiece surveys, but also – as far as I can see – several of his and Gomery's own examples of specific studies in film history.

I am thinking of the case studies that may carry the label "historical sociology", studies not primarily in historical changes (or quite stable features), but rather in "historical situations" or in what Allen in his preliminary description of film history called "how film (...) functioned at a given moment in the past". An example may be the studies in patterns of movie-going in New York and Durham, North Carolina, around 1910, presented by Gomery on pages 202-207. Here the differences between, say, 1907 and 1911 do not seem to be the actual topic, which is rather the fundamental social and geographic structure of audiences and theaters.

Even if Allen would not agree that such studies are not studies of "change" in any real sense, he should admit that he has forgotten "historical sociology" in his theoretical exposition of what film history is – just as he has forgotten the sociology of the cinema on his short list of the various branches of film studies.

What I miss in this connection, however, is not only a broader view of the character of film history, but also a discussion of the different *genres* of film historical writings – like, e.g., "the masterpiece survey". If this genre is not history in the strict sense, what is it? Why do people write and read these surveys? Which role do they play, e.g. as textbooks in film courses?

I, for one, would not be as critical as Allen against masterpiece surveys as such. I think that they have a triple role to play, and that they may fulfill the reader's expectations wonderfully, even though they may not really create historical understanding. The first two roles appeal to the beginner in film studies or film interest: you get an impression of which classical films you should at least know about, and you learn about their chronological order. The third role may even appeal to more experienced film buffs: you can use these books as works of reference, looking up the classics to get some facts about them, and to get an analytical sketch.

One might say that the masterpiece surveys, although not really works in history, are short encyclopedias of the film classics, ordered not alphabetically, but chronologically. And I feel that one has every reason to ask the naive question: What is so terrible about that?

But now, on to a discussion of the concept of "explaining change".

## Explanation and Understanding

To Allen, history is not just factfinding about the past. Allen does not want to deny that factfinding has a role to play; on the contrary, he insists (and rightly so) that "facts *do* matter" (p. 14). The historian must, however, also *interpret* the facts, and *explain* them. But do we ever have real facts, and are we ever able to give truthful explanations? Is objective knowledge about the past ever possible?

Allen tries to keep clear both of the Scylla of naive Positivism or Empiricism (and belief in objectivity) and the Charybdis of radical Conventionalism (and the slogan "everything is subjective"). His short exposition and critique of empiricism and conventionalism is, however, rather vague and evidently "unprofessional"; he is (and has every right to be) a film historian, not a philosopher.<sup>2</sup>

His choice of "the Realist response" under these circumstances seems quite intelligent; he rightly sees that the Realists like Rom Harré and Roy Bhaskar offer an epistemological stance that insists on the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, yet acknowledges some of the Conventionalist learning and critique of pure Empiricism. According to the Realists, we do study a material world that is independent of our concepts, values, etc., yet values, concepts, models, etc., are an indispensable element in any kind of scientific research.

For all its virtue, however, the Realism of Harré and Bhaskar is a wrong choice in connection with history, for the simple reason that Harré and Bhaskar discuss the natural sciences, not the humanities. And the use of the inspiration from the Realists for the discussion of what a historical explanation is, therefore has awkward results for Allen's theoretical exposition.

As I shall try to show, however, the professed theoretical stance does not hamper Allen's actual historical practice, which is demonstrated in his case studies through the book.

One reason for this discrepancy must obviously be that the experienced film historian with the task of writing historical theory has not dared base his theory on an analysis of his own work. He has felt on safer ground by searching in the general theoretical literature for a suitable exposition to rely on. And he has never tried to work as a historian along the lines laid out in the literature he found, and therefore neither forced himself into just as awkward film historical scholarship, nor realized that the theory doesn't fit.

It is the job of the historian to explain changes, Allen told us, and with the Realists he specifies that explaining some event is to point to its cause or causes – or more precisely: to point to what they call the *causal mechanism* or *generative mechanism* behind the event.

But this is certainly too narrow. A radical critique would claim that causes have no role in the cultural sphere, the sphere of human actions, institutions, etc.; causes belong to Nature and not to Culture, and causal analysis therefore to science, not to the humanities. Therefore the purpose of cultural studies will never be to *explain*, but to create *understanding*.

Less radically, I would prefer to say that *causes* only play a background role in cultural studies, because such studies are concerned not only with *events*, but just as much with human *actions*. To explain actions (and other cultural events), to answer the question *why* people acted and things turned out in certain ways, we do not only point to causes; we also give *reasons*. And among the reasons that we will pull forth, we first of all find human *intentions*, *motives*, *hopes*, etc. along with human ways of *comprehending* situations or background circumstances.

The first theoreticians who made a point of distinguishing in this way between causal explanations of events and reasons for actions were a group of German philosophers at the turn of the century (Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, among others). To them, causes and the concept of "explanation" belong to Nature and hence to science in the strict sense (*Naturwissenschaft*), whereas reasons and the concept of "understanding" belong to Culture,

the human sphere, and hence to the humanities and the social sciences (*Kultur-* or *Geisteswissenschaften*; both German words cover the humanities as well as the social sciences).

I see no reason, however, to refrain from using the concept of "explanation" in human and cultural studies; I would rather consider "explanation" not as the opposite of, but rather as the complement to "understanding": you explain to make people understand occurrences in "nature" as well as occurrences in "culture". The important distinction is the one between occurrences that can be explained through causes, the "natural" ones, and occurrences that demand references to the intentions and ways of thinking of human beings.

## Materialism or Idealism

Since this may sound as if I am pleading for some kind of "idealist history" or, still worse, even "Great Man History", with only human beings as the creators of historical events, let me hurry to put in a disclaimer:

First of all, I am not arguing that only *single* human beings shape history. At certain points, our historical research may force us to describe the actions of individuals, but just as often cultural events and developments are created by smaller or bigger groups of people, from the board of directors of a firm, over the complete audience of a certain film, to a whole social class or whole population. But even when studying such groups, we have to resort to a certain degree to intentional concepts like motives, hopes, ways of understanding, etc. The American cinema of the thirties, say, must partly be explained through what the cinema audience *wanted* to see, and through the fact that the producers *wanted* to satisfy the audience because they *hoped* to make money.

Further, I do not deny that cultural events presuppose specific material conditions. Many hopes and intentions are frustrated in attempted action because people have *construed* the material situation falsely. The material conditions make certain cultural events possible and others impossible. Yet they never make the events happen; cultural events only come about because people act in certain ways.

The material conditions may, however, make certain actions and therefore events as good as inevitable, and for most grander historical events (like in film history the coming of sound) we may surely suppose that if X had not actually made them happen, Y would have done so. Yet what the historian has to study is not what Y would have done if X hadn't, but what X actually did. Part of the explanation may be that anyone in X's position would have acted the way he or she did, considering the material situation, but still you have to show what X wanted to achieve, how X understood the situation etc.

If what actually happened was "as good as inevitable", this will come close to showing what quite a few other people wanted to achieve, how they understood the situation, etc. In that way, even the study of intentions etc. is an indirect study of dominating material factors, so I am not in any way denying their decisive role. But I am insisting that in the cultural sphere they play their role through human beings.

Even though this position contradicts Allen's theoretical statements, you can at certain points in the book find him stating nearly the same as I am trying to express. At page 45, e.g., he writes that

*individuals sometimes act in ways that produce significant historical consequences. In film history they might invent devices, make business decisions, or direct films that affect the course of film history, but individuals do not operate outside of historical contexts. In an institution as large and complex as the American cinema, innovation of whatever kind almost always occurs as a response to a set of economic, aesthetic, technological, or cultural forces far larger than the actions of one person.*

The only "extra" point I would like to make is that these "forces" bring nothing about by themselves; they work through the actions of men and women.

## The Historical Perspective

Yet to understand a cultural event or a human action is not just looking back to see what brought it about, the way you do both when you look for causal mechanisms and when you also point to intentions, etc. To understand a cultural event is also to grasp the *meaning* or *significance* of the event or action, which is just as much a way of looking ahead: you understand the event or action partly by seeing what it created. In a way, it is even to grasp what the event means to us today, in our perspective.

One might say that by insisting on causal explanations only, Allen fails to notice that historical research has two perspectives in time: then and now, past and present, the time of the object of the research and the time of the research. It is, however, exactly the play between these two dimensions that interests us; it is as film scholars today, fascinated as we are by a popular art form, that we want to know something about the historical background of the old films that we can still see, and something about the development that lead up to contemporary film culture.<sup>3</sup>

Thousands of shows of various kinds were going on in Paris at the end of the last century, and most of them were extremely more spectacular than the show the Lumière Brothers arranged on December 28, 1895 in the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines. But we are only interested in the Lumière show, for to us it was the beginning of film culture.

## Errors and Hindsight

**B**oth Allen and Gomery make a point of showing how many standard surveys of film history contain faults, and to a certain extent because they have been written "backwards", so to speak, in the light of what happened later. It is, e.g., important to them to show that the completely dominant position ascribed to Porter and Griffith as the creators of "the language of film" is highly exaggerated. At least Porter and Griffith were not alone. Even though most of the work of their fellow directors has disappeared (just as most of Porter's), there is every reason to believe that their innovations were only part of a larger development.

The two authors make a very respectable effort to clear away myths in this way, and to create a more nuanced picture of the development of film art. Yet even this is done in a modern perspective (since nothing else is possible!). The experimenting with filmic forms of narration that took place between 1905 and 1910, say, must have been seen quite differently then than we are liable to do now, if we do not put on our historical spectacles. So far Allen is right. But he is wrong in tacitly presupposing that a purely past perspective is possible. The right position must be to accept the dialectical position of the historian between then and now.

A full historical treatment of some event, therefore, must have three dimensions, so to speak. It must lay bare the background conditions, and not least look back into what happened before. This is the "causal" part. It must further chase the intentions, hopes, motives, etc. of the people involved, and reconstruct their way of construing the situation in which they were acting. This is a sort of "past contemporary" perspective. And it must look forward, showing the significance of the event, telling what it brought about.

Take the introduction of the talkies as an example. To explain the coming of sound you must lay bare the causal pedigree of technological innovations, economic curves, patterns of competition between firms, habits of movie-going, developments in film genres and film aesthetics in general, etc.

But if you really want to understand what happened, you must also show in which way these factors were conceived of by the Warner Brothers, say, their understanding of the situation. And you must at least make guesses about their hopes and motives (like proceeding to make money in the film industry, instead of selling out, say, and investing in oil).

Finally, your explanation of the "event" will not be complete if you do not touch on the historical importance of the talkies, i.e. if you do not point to its significance for the later development of film art and industry.

## A Case Study

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**T**hat this is the way you actually go about explaining film historical events, is – curiously enough – confirmed by Allen's own examples. As I said above, his theory is too narrow, but his (and Gomery's) actual practice is just to the point. Only take a look at the quotation below of the very case study that Allen presents to make us understand that "the event thus requires what Bhaskar calls 'causal analysis': a redescription of the event so as to uncover the possible causal mechanisms responsible for it" (p. 17)

The quotation (which follows on pages 18-19, right after the one above) is rather long, I regret, but interesting in its own right, I hope. To facilitate the reading, I have divided Allen's long sections into smaller parts; and to facilitate the following analysis, I have numbered the three parts of the quotation, after Allen's introduction to it:

*To give a very truncated example, let us take as a film historical "event" the first successful commercial exhibition of projected motion pictures in the United States: the public debut of the Edison/Armat Vitascope projector at Koster and Bial's Music Hall on April 23, 1896, in New York City.*

*(I) Since 1894 the Edison Company had been commercially exploiting motion pictures, but only as a peep-show device. During the summer of 1895, two Frenchmen, Auguste and Louis Lumière, had developed and demonstrated a motion picture projector. Other inventors in England, Germany, and the United States were also on the verge of solving the problems of screen projection. Edison had contracted with two businessmen, Norman Raff and Frank Gammon, to market his peep-show. By the summer of 1895, however, the market for the Kinetoscope, as the device was called, had nearly dried up – patrons had grown tired of seeing the same brief film "loops" shown over and over again.*

*Raff and Gammon realized that the only hope for their failing movie business lay in persuading Edison to develop a projection system. Edison, deeply involved in a host of other invention projects and disappointed by the financial return of the Kinetoscope, refused their entreaties to act quickly before others entered the projection market.*

*In December 1895, just as Raff and Gammon were contemplating selling what remained of their Kinetoscope venture, they came upon news of a projector invented by two Washington, D.C., men, Thomas Armat and Francis Jenkins. Raff and Gammon secured the rights to the device, the Vitascope, and persuaded Edison to manufacture it and supply them with new films. The Vitascope was demonstrated for the New York press in early April of 1896 and was touted as "the latest invention of Wizard Edison". The exhibition at Koster and Bial's, a prominent New York vaudeville theater, was the public debut of the Vitascope.*

*(II) Even this brief and greatly simplified account of the Koster and Bial exhibition reveals something of its historical complexity.*

*To the Edison Company, which had not invented the Vitascope but manufactured it, the exhibition provided exposure for yet another piece of Edison-manufactured technology and an opportunity to rejuvenate the flagging market for motion pictures, in which Edison had a considerable stake.*



To Raff and Gammon, the Koster and Bial showing represented the inauguration of their campaign to sell franchises for the Vitascope before other projectors were launched on the American market.

To Koster and Bial, the Vitascope premiere meant the display of a novelty act on their vaudeville program, the hoped-for publicity of which might give them an edge in the highly competitive New York vaudeville market.

To the patrons of Koster and Bial's on that April evening, their first glimpse of projected movies meant several things: the latest miracle from the "wizard of Menlo Park", one of a series of technological novelties they had seen on the vaudeville stage, and an extension of popular photography, among others.

(III) The redescription of the event under examination exposes the range of possible causal mechanisms responsible for it. The second stage of historical explanation involves analysis of these individual mechanisms. In the case just mentioned, this would include (but is not necessarily limited to) the organizational structure of vaudeville, the dynamics of technological change, the conventions of still photography, the constitution of the vaudeville audience, and the economics of popular entertainment. (...)

## An Analysis of the Example

Obviously, Part I of this quotation is a presentation of a string of events, etc., leading up to what happened on April 23, 1896; Part II an exposition of the "historical complexity" of the main event; and Part III a short review of the various "causal mechanisms" involved.

If we first concentrate on the cut-to-the-bone presentation of the basic string of events in Part I, we do not need much textual analysis to realize that "causes" are not mentioned or hardly even implied at all. The string of events turns out to be a string of human actions, backed up by statements about human ways of construing the situation (Raff and Gammon "realized that ...", Edison was "disappointed by ...") and about motives and intentions ("hope", "... were contemplating"). And already in these "intentional" phrases do we find a kind of looking ahead, not looking back.

If we then proceed to the second part, Allen's own analytical sketch of the presentation, we see that "the historical complexity" of the event does not consist in the complexity of a causal pedigree, but in the complexity of ways of grasping the significance of the event (what it "meant" or "represented" to various people).

The whole "direction" of this passage is also rather into the future than backwards towards some causal pedigree; only now and then the presentation of "now" implies a "before" ("rejuvenate", "the latest miracle"). The general tenor of the passage is the one we find, e.g., in a sentence like "To Raff and Gammon, the Koster and Bial showing represented the inauguration of their campaign to sell franchises for the Vitascope before other projectors were launched on the American Market".

Here I should like to ask the reader: Did the campaign unfold? Obviously, the answer is yes. A sentence like that does not only suggest that Raff and Gammon had planned a campaign that was to start in the music hall. The sentence has been written by someone who knows that the campaign did not stop there and then. It has been written in the perspective of hindsight. Of course.

And the whole exposition is given weight by our knowledge that what happened on April 23, 1896, was the beginning of a completely new art and cultural form. To the audience it meant an extension of popular photography, say, but to the author and his reader this was the audience's "first glimpse of projected movies", where not least the use of "first" shows us that the author is writing with all his knowledge of 90 years of film history in the back of his head.

Only in the last passage – Part III – do we meet "causes", or rather "causal mechanisms". Probably many readers will be surprised when they learn what kind of "objects" these "mechanisms" are. Unlike causes, they turn out not to be events, but organizational, social, and economic structures, conventions and institutions, and general trends ("the dynamics of technological change"). There you have the very background factors or material conditions I have been writing about above.<sup>4</sup>

## Allen's Inconsistencies

I have not quoted the presentation of the third and the fourth "stage of historical explanation", according to Allen. They are, however, both of the more theoretical kind, and therefore stress the causal point of view.

The third stage is that the historian must take into account "that these generative mechanisms or causal factors do not operate in isolation from one another, but are interrelated" (p. 19). And the fourth consists in recognizing "that the force or causal power of generative mechanisms is uneven in any particular historical event", so that the historian has to "assess their relative force or importance" (p. 20).

What Allen is saying, then, is that giving a historical explanation of some event consists in exposing the causal mechanisms behind it, and judging their relative weight. This, I claim, would however be too narrow to make us understand the event. Causal, or better generative mechanisms of this kind - background factors - undoubtedly represent a very important part of historical explanations, but as I have pointed out above, they are the soil, not the seed; they explain why events could happen, actions could or even would be performed, not why they actually did.

Yet what he is *doing*, is making us understand the event, seen not as something that "just happened" or grew spontaneously out of the background factors, but as a result of human endeavor; and he does this by telling us about people's actions, intentions, motives, hopes, etc., on the double background of material and institutional "generative mechanisms" and of people's understanding of these background factors – plus by looking forward to show us the significance of the event.

Allen is consistently inconsistent or ambiguous here. Take, e.g., two sentences and a half in a row like these from page 20:

*Time and again in film history we can see film companies acting in ways that they believe will result in the greatest long-term profitability. This is definitely not to say that all film history can be explained by economic forces alone. Economics is but one of a number of generative mechanisms (...)*

Actually, this is not even to *suggest* (as Allen seems to fear) that film history is only economic history; if anything is suggested here, it is rather that all film history can be explained by economic *decisions* of film companies alone, decisions that are based on their *beliefs* about where the money lies. The main reason why Allen's insistence on only causal mechanisms as explanations seems convincing, is that he consistently (but without noticing himself) uses the more comprehensive intentional parlance when presenting it.

## The Role of Narrative

Since Allen did not rely on his own practice as a basis of his theory, but preferred to find something to lean on in the general epistemological literature, one might ask whether it would have been possible to find some better and more "history minded" source of inspiration. The answer is yes. Instead of quoting anti-positivists within the theory of science, Allen could have gone to anti-positivists in the theory of history, e.g. by consulting the bibliography that his co-author Gomery has made for the book.

In the bibliography (on page 245) one finds a reference to Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1968), a book that is written in explicit polemic against the empiricist view of explanation, but not from a conventionalist point of view. One might even read Danto as a "realist" theoretician of history, presenting points of view parallel to the realism in the philosophy of science of Harré and Bhaskar. My guess is that Allen has not read this book. What makes me pretty sure is Allen's discussion of historical presentations in the form of narrative (pp. 43-47).

Allen makes it clear that "many historical analyses and almost all survey histories of film are couched in *narrative terms*" (p. 43; italics by Allen). Narrative, however, is only an outer form, according to Allen, and a form towards which he is very skeptical. He seems to have two different reasons for two different degrees of skepticism.

Firstly, he points out that "the qualities that make for a good story are not necessarily those that make for good history. Difficulties arise in the writing of film history when the conventions of traditional fictional narrative are allowed to take precedence over solid historical analysis" (p. 44). Reality does not necessarily present us with the heroes and villains a good story will demand. And historical research is not always able to provide the dense network of facts that you need to compose a coherent story with beginning, middle, and end.

Obviously, this argument is completely sound. It is not, however, directed against the narrative form as such, but against the use of the narrative form to distort the truth (if you will allow me such a grand word), and to conceal gaps in the evidence. It is an argument against a specific kind of bad scholarship in history, not against the use of narrative in presenting the results of good scholarship.

Secondly, Allen seems to make the more radical claim that *any* use of the narrative form works against the serious presentation of the results of historical research. This is astonishing, however, when we take his definition of "narrative" into consideration. Curiously enough, he does not take his definition from any general discussion of narrative theory, but from a more or less chance textbook for a film course, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (Addison-Wesley: Reading, Mass. 1979, p. 50): a narrative is "a chain of events in cause-effect relationships occurring in time" (quoted on page 43 in *Film History*).

Since Allen regards cause-effect relationships (or at least causal mechanisms) as the main element in historical explanations, one should expect that he would also regard the narrative form as the most suitable form of historical presentations. One should expect that the narrative form would be exactly the one standard form for laying bare historical arguments as conceived of by Allen. But on the contrary, he finds that the narrative form conceals rather than reveals, and that it "presents the reader with a serious obstacle to getting at the historical arguments behind the narratives" (p. 46<sup>5</sup>).

Allen is wrong, however, in regarding narration as simply one outer form among others for the presentation of results of historical research. He might be right on his own premises, so to speak, if he were willing to make a distinction between a simple presentation of facts and an interpretive rendering of the historical development. But as I have pointed out, being an anti-positivist, he certainly does not want to make a distinction like that, and neither do I, neither does Arthur Danto.

According to the standard view in the philosophy of science, the reason why causes can be used as parts of explanations of happenings in "nature" as in science and technology, is that they are backed up by general, so-called "covering" laws. Saying that the event A was caused by the event B is an explanation only if some general law guarantees that B-

events are always followed by A-events (under the relevant circumstances). Causality under general covering laws can be seen as the connecting link between events in nature – as we understand and explain nature.

The point Danto makes in his book is that the very role of causality and covering laws in nature, is taken over by narration in history. But of course narration is not what Bordwell and Thompson and therefore also Allen say it is. Narration is not "chain of events in cause-effect relationships", but a chain of events partly brought about through actions of human beings, the personae of the narration, and therefore explained partly through the motives, hopes, intentions, etc., of these personae, and by the ways they construe the situations in which they act. Any novel and any fiction film will prove my point.

The "generative mechanisms" Allen is looking for in his historical research are really elements to fit into narrations, historical narrations. These narrations have beginnings, middles, and ends, and if not real heroes and villains, at least forces and endeavors that pull in different directions. And they are presented with as much coherence in their course and as much consistency in the presentation of each person as possible.

Narration can be seen as the general connecting link between historical events – as we present, explain, and understand history.

That this is really so, can again be shown through Allen's and Gomery's own case studies. Obviously, it comes out most clearly in the only case study that is given a full treatment, Allen's analysis of "The Beginnings of American Cinema Verité" in Chapter 9 (pp. 215-241). But also the truncated example of the presentation of the Vitascope in 1896 will make my point. Just try to reread it (or rather Part I of it), and notice the narrative pattern:

We start in 1894 when the Edison firm began exploiting moving pictures commercially, but at first only as "peep show". We are introduced to a problem for Edison and the marketing people Raff and Gammon, namely the advent of the commercially much more interesting projected film. So far we have the background, the protagonists, and the problem. The story has started.

Then we are introduced to a possible solution to the problem; Edison might invent a projector. But he refuses. The marketing people are close to giving up. (And if they had given up, there wouldn't have been any story to tell!). The tension is growing.

Then in the very last moment Raff and Gammon stumble over some American inventors of a projector. They buy the patent, and persuade Edison to produce the projector and to make films for it. They demonstrate it to the press, and get rave reviews. And the story gets a happy end when the projector is introduced to the general audience some spectacular night at the famous Music Hall – all of which suggests that Edison, Raff, Gammon, and all the others lived happily ever after.

If that is not a clearcut narration, I do not know what a narration is. One can even imagine the film version, starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffmann as Raff and Gammon! It would certainly be hard to claim that it does not have narrative form. But what is more important, it would be hard to deny that what elevates this presentation over a pure chronological list of facts or incidents, what gives it coherence and therefore creates (a first glimpse of) historical understanding, is not cause-effect relations, but the narrative form. The explanation is the narration.

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## What is Film History?

Here, in a way, is the answer to the title of this essay: Film history is the story of the development of the cinema in its various aspects. Epistemologically, the main element in film history (as in any branch of history) is narration; narration is not an outer form, but the very kernel of historical explanation. And this in itself makes it clear what we should look for in film historical research.

The historical evidence we seek must be of a kind that fits into the various slots in the general narrative framework, so to speak, and that is background material conditions, people with their actions, emotions, will, and understanding, and to a certain degree a look into the future. In this sense, narration plays the same dialectical role in relation to historical evidence as theory does in relation to facts in science, and not only generally, but also in each specific case.

What counts as a fact in a specific piece of chemical research is determined by chemical theory, while the theory is backed up by the facts pertaining to it. And what counts as evidence for some historical narrative is determined by the narrative, while of course the narrative is backed up by the evidence. Historical facts are, in a way, not pieces of evidence before we see them in relation to a narrative that they support. It may be a fact that Edison was a busy man in 1895; this fact, however, is of no historical importance before it is used, e.g., in the Vitascope narrative to answer the question why Edison did not work on the projector himself, thereby at the same time supporting and pressing forward (and actually creating tension in) the narrative in case.

## Non-narrative Film History

Even though my general claim is that "film history is narration", I am not claiming that all film historical writing worthy of the name is in the narrative form. Books and essays in film history cover more than one genre. I should like to mention two non-narrative genres: what I have called "historical sociology", and what might be called "reporting of research".

As anybody will know who has worked on narrative theory as exemplified in actual wri-



ting, films, playacting, etc., you often reach a point where everything seems to be examples of narration. And when you do, you realize that you have emptied your concept of "narration" of content. Narration should be contrasted with other ways of "telling" or whichever general word we may prefer to use. And the best contrast to "narration" is *description*.<sup>6</sup>

Narration is telling about developments in time; description is telling about "frozen" situations. You describe a room, and narrate what is going on in it. Obviously, descriptions may be parts, and important parts, of a story: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich..." is the opening phrase of a well-known novel. Yet in the story, narration is the superior form into which descriptive elements are fitted. And just as obviously, a description remains a description even if elements of narrative enter into it, as when you tell about the traffic system of some town partly through some truncated narration of a car coming from the north, turning to the right at some crossing, etc.

Sociology is not a narrative discipline, but a descriptive one. And so is "historical sociology of the cinema", the branch of film history that Allen seems to have forgotten, as I made clear above, even though he does mention it in his first approximation to the concept of "film history", and with a phrase that is just to the point: it is the study of "how film as art, technology, social force, or economic institution (...) functioned at a given moment in the past" (p. 5).

The other kind of non-narrative film history is the "reporting of research", the rendering of questions asked, sources found (and not found!), interviews carried out, reasonings gone through – and, hopefully, of questions answered. Actually, such a report may have a tendency to turn out to be very narrative indeed, but the narration will not be about efforts made by Raff and Gammon in the middle of the 1890's, say, but about efforts made by historians in the middle of the 1980's. But that ironic fact is beside the point; even though the report is narrated, the development of the cinema is not.

I have a feeling that in his theoretical moments Allen prefers this kind of film historical writing, a cool presentation of facts and interpretations of facts, based on an earnest discussion of their basis in the available sources, and connected by explicit reasoning. And I gladly confess that I also have moments when reporting like this seems the better way of publishing results of research. Its main value seems to me (as to Allen, I feel) to be that it does not conceal the fact that what we know about the past of the cinema is a product of creative research, something *made*, not simply *found*.

Yet even in the main example in the book of what film history is, Allen's own case study on the American cinema *verité*, he does not report his research, even though he does make some of his reasoning explicit. Primarily, he tells an exciting story. And at any rate, to report research will always be to describe the search for elements of some narrative, just as proudly presenting solutions to puzzles will always amount to filling in holes in some preconceived narrative structure of film history.

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## Notes

1. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York 1985; ISBN 0-394-35040-5; xii + 276 pages, ill.).
2. His partner Gomery is certainly not a professional philosopher either. Gomery is responsible for the 25 pages of commented bibliography that constitutes Chapter 10 at the end of the book. In general, this bibliography is extremely useful, yet I get somewhat skeptical about its reliability on subjects I know very little about when I read a sentence like this on a field I do know about: "There has not been a great deal written by philosophers of science about empiricism and conventionalism" (p. 245).  
As a matter of fact, one might rather say that philosophers of science have been writing about nothing else during the last 25 years!
3. This, by the way, is one reason why, as is so often said, history has to be rewritten by each new generation; each generation has its own historical perspective.
4. Even though Allen tries to write consistently about "causal mechanisms" in this structural sense and not about causes, now and then he is quite evidently thinking about simple cause-effect relationships between events. I take an example from page 214: "The Realist historian is by no means absolved of the responsibility of assigning causes to historical phenomenon." (Obviously, he means "phenomena" – in the plural.)
5. The text is somewhat unclear. Literally, Allen here argues against *survey narrative histories* of film, and at once seems to change the direction of his discussion from the general critique of the narrative form to simply pointing out that "film history is still in its infancy" (p. 46), wherefore the knowledge necessary to make coherent survey narratives is simply not available yet.  
But even if Allen only has one reason for his skepticism towards narrative in history, i.e. that it may lead to bad scholarship and superficiality, this second, more radical stance is still worth contemplating.
6. Description is also often contrasted with explanation, but that is not my point here. As I use "description" in this connection, it covers both the simple rendering of facts and explanations.