

Resumé

The Historiography of Filmmaking – through the Lens of Carl Th. Dreyer

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The aim of my book is to provide a solid theoretical and methodological grounding for a film historiography focused on films and filmmaking. As the book draws on a number of disparate fields and research traditions, and because I have wanted to stress the importance of keeping theoretical issues grounded in practical examples, I have chosen to use one particular film as my focal point, providing the bulk of my examples. This film is *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, France 1928), directed by Carl Th. Dreyer.

The book consists of nine chapters. They can be roughly divided into three groups of three chapters each. The first three chapters survey the field and discuss issues that are specific to working with film as a historical source and material object. The second group of chapters focus on the way archival findings get turned into accounts for us to read, and the degree to which the sources and the historian's situation influence that process. The third group deals with the rhetoric of film historiography. The structure of the book thus roughly follows the course of the research process, discussing problems related to sources and evidence first, followed by a discussion of issues related to the composition of the historian's account.

Chapter 1, "Approaches to the Historiography of Films," provides an overview of existing literature on researching and writing about film history. It discusses the two major books on the subject, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985) and Michèle Lagny's *De l'histoire du cinema* (1992). I examine two more recent trends, the New Cinema History, promoted by a number of researchers with a strong interest in cinema as a social phenomenon and a commitment to working with archival sources, and film historiography-as-critique (what some might call postmodernist film historiography), exemplified by Jane Gaines' *Pink-Slipped* (2018). Although I have tried to keep my discussion focused on theoretical and methodological debates directly concerning film historiography, I have included a section addressing the influential work of Hayden White, where I side with the critics who find it inimical to empirical historiography. I also discuss the work of disciplinary historians who have engaged with film, or Screened History, which has concentrated on two main areas of interest: film as a medium of historical communication, and film as a social document. In connection with the latter, I examine the accusations of anti-English bias leveled at *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* by some contemporary critics. I conclude that most of these approaches have focused on cinema as a social phenomenon, and that there remains a need for a theoretically and methodological grounding of a film historiography that deepens our understanding of the art and craft of the filmmakers of the past.

Chapter 2, “Film as Historical Artifact,” gives close attention to issues that are specific to working with films, including the way films can be used as sources for the process of their own making, their *facture*, a term proposed by the art historian David Summers. The chapter addresses the problems produced by the notion that films are “texts” rather than artifacts. The chapter also explores the kinds of verbal descriptions we make of films, fundamentally visual artworks, arguing for the advantages of adopting what the art historian Michael Baxandall calls inferential language, words that point to makers of the artwork or the process of making it. I exemplify this artifact-oriented approach and how it can clear up scholarly disagreements by discussing two aspects of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*: whether the film’s style, with its rapid cuts and close framings, defeats our efforts to make the narrative space cohere; and what the film’s overall structure is and how best to segment it into large-scale narrative units.

Chapter 3, “The Need for Film Ecdotics,” describes the field of *film ecdotics*, the study of films as physical objects and of the many ways different instances (copies, versions, reproductions) of the same title may vary. I explain the advantages of the term compared to a possible alternative like “filmic textual criticism,” arguing that the terminology and practice of literary textual criticism ignores that moving image works are not texts that can exist independently of the physical objects in which they inhere. The usefulness of the concept of film ecdotics is exemplified with a discussion of the history of the various versions of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, clearing up some controversies about them in the research literature.

Chapter 4, “The Revelation of the Document,” turns to the study of non-filmic historical documents. It is focused on a particular case, the transcript of the Rouen trial, the proceedings that led to the conviction and execution of Joan of Arc. It examines the oft-repeated claim that Dreyer’s screenplay for *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* followed the transcript closely and therefore produced the most accurate cinematic portrayal of Joan of Arc. The evidence shows that Dreyer shaped his portrayal of Joan to emphasize her Christ-like character, an interpretation very similar to that of Pierre Champion, his historical advisor, but one contradicted by parts of the transcript and the historical record. From this case, the chapter turns to a more general issue of how it is possible for the evidence to act as a check on the “free play” of the historian’s account, refuting the claim made by certain theorists of historiography that historians cannot compare historiographical accounts to the evidence and determine whether they hold up or not.

Chapter 5, “The Reading of the Remains,” broadens the discussion of source criticism, *Quellenkritik*. I examine a book about historical films written by historians, *Past Imperfect* (Mark Carnes, ed., 1995), and particularly its discussion of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* and other films about Joan of Arc, showing that the historians failed to apply the methods of their discipline to matters of *film* history. From this, the chapter proceeds to a discussion of the distinction between primary and secondary sources, arguing that it is ambiguous and often taken to be an absolute distinction between different kinds of documents rather than a relative distinction that reflects the source-value *to a particular inquiry* of a given document. To illustrate this, the chapter discusses various portrayals of Joan of Arc. The chapter proceeds to argue that the distinction drawn by Danish historian Kristian Erslev between inferences from production and inferences from reports is an extremely useful one, because it makes clear how the same document or artifact may be approached in different ways.

Chapter 6, “The Works of the Historians,” discusses the issue of the historian’s positioning in relation to the use of the work of other historians in the construction of the account. The chapter begins with a discussion of the way the theorist Dominic LaCapra has proposed distinguishing between two ways of dealing with historical documents: they not only have a documentary aspect, but also a work-like aspect, the latter best analyzed with the kinds of theoretical tools usually applied to literary or philosophical texts. I argue that this idea has much to recommend it, but also that the kinds of suspicious readings these techniques sometimes produce must be tempered by an understanding of context and intention – you cannot really treat others respectfully and as equals if you treat their more or less explicit intentions as self-deceptions or lies. Since it acknowledges the agency of film-makers, I argue David Bordwell’s historical poetics is the most suitable tool for engaging with the work-like aspects of films, adding an example comparing the different transitions between two scenes in two different versions of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. I also examine the radical notion that works of historiography are “adaptations” of source texts, and that historiography can only be about other works of historiography, and I reject it because it produces problems similar to those created by the suspicious reading of artworks and historical documents. The issue of how to treat the works of other historians leads to a discussion various older survey histories of film and their treatment of Dreyer and *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, showing that even in cases where the political convictions of authors are evident, these convictions cannot be assumed without evidence to determine how they write their histories.

Chapter 7, “The Truthfulness of the Telling,” discusses the oft-repeated claim that we cannot distinguish historiography from fiction and refutes it through narratological analysis. It initially focuses on a particular book on Dreyer, Maurice Drouzy’s *Carl Th. Dreyer né Nilsson* (1982), controversial for its use of fictional techniques – Drouzy even compared his technique to Dreyer’s treatment of historical figures in *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* and other works. I argue, however, that historians’ crafting of their accounts can and should be distinguished from that of authors of fiction writing their novels. Arguments to the contrary, I show, exploit the ambiguity of the word “fiction” in unsustainable ways. Using arguments drawn from Carl Plantinga’s and Noël Carroll’s philosophically sophisticated discussions of documentary films, I show that it is both possible and necessary to distinguish make-believe from fact. I support these arguments through narratological analysis. I draw examples from a number of novels about Joan of Arc, demonstrating the weakness of the claim – often used to minimize the difference between historiography and fiction – that traditional historiographical narratives have omniscient narrators.

Chapter 8, “The Disposition of the Structure,” examines the overall disposition or arrangement of historiographical accounts, particularly those that are non-narrative in form. I analyze a non-narrative work of historiography in detail: Charles O’Brien’s article “Rethinking National Cinema: Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* and the Academic Aesthetic” (1996). I also show that non-narrative formats are quite prevalent in film historiography. I go on to argue that one argument sometimes offered in favor of certain non-narrative formats – that they make the research process more transparent than narrative accounts – should be treated with skepticism. It underplays the tendency for scholars writing in this fashion to use abstract, de-personalized, noun-heavy language that makes it difficult for the reader to discern who did what to whom. As far as film historiography was concerned, I show that the choice of any

particular macro-rhetorical structure (narrative or non-narrative) would not in and of itself ensure that readers could discern how the research was conducted and how the researcher drew his or her conclusions from it.

Chapter 9, “The Rendering of the Account,” continues the argument that film historiography can make use of a range of different rhetorical options. What may seem like unbridgeable differences between incompatible philosophical positions may be better understood as differences between scholarly personae and stylistic forms. I argue that rhetorical choices are not decided by a supposed set of underlying metaphysical assumptions; nor can the choices reliably tell us about what those assumptions were. I support Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner’s argument that built into the rhetorical stances we assume, whatever they are, are assumptions about truth and language that are likely false or at least vulnerable to philosophical attacks that cannot easily be countered. Instead of getting stuck on metaphysical conundrums, film historians and other humanities scholars should pick the stance most suitable to the rhetorical purpose they seek to accomplish. I further argued that a film historian’s choice of rhetorical stance is better seen as part of an effort to take on a certain scholarly persona, a set of habits, norms, and practices that reflect what kind of historian they want to be. I draw examples from two small books with important discussions of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, James Schamus’ *Carl Theodor Dreyer’s Gertrud: The Moving Word* (2008) and Ebbe Neergaard’s *En Filminstruktørs Arbejde: Carl Th. Dreyer og hans ti Film* (1940). In the final section of the chapter, I turn these tools for the analysis of scholarly rhetoric and practice on myself and my book, using a discussion of reference systems as a springboard for asserting the importance of the humanities’ curatorial role and my own commitment to it.