
Amy Villarejo
Film Studies
the basics
Third Edition
ROUTLEDGE

FILM STUDIES

A comprehensive overview of how to study film, this updated third edition provides concise and provocative summaries for approaching the language of film analysis, ways of thinking about film history, and approaches and methods for studying cinema, from national cinemas to genre to stardom and beyond.

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Film Studies: The Basics provides beginning students in film studies, as well as lifelong film buffs, with the tools to pursue film analysis, film history, and further inquiries into the medium.

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THE BASICS

Third edition

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INTRODUCTION TO FILM STUDIES

If you've picked up this book to learn something about what it means to study film, you already know in large measure what cinema is: you've been watching movies since you first toddled out to the television set, or since you braved your first excursion to a multiplex matinee. If you're old enough, you may have witnessed formats come and go. Perhaps you were thrilled by your first chance to watch a beloved film at home on videocassette, rewinding the tape over and over to watch Gene Kelly singin' in the rain or Greta Garbo unleashing her famous first spoken line in *Anna Christie* (Clarence Brown, 1931): "Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side, and don't be stingy, baby." DVDs (digital video discs), repackaged with all of the "extras" that persuaded us to replace those VHS ("Video Home System") tapes, are also going the way of compact discs (CDs), right into the dustbin that receives the detritus of digital culture. No matter the acronym: they're largely gone. We live in a world in which cinema streams in bits onto our computer and mobile device screens, as much as it still lights up the screens of our theaters in malls and neighborhoods. Or it did before the COVID-19 pandemic and will, we sorely hope, return to unite viewers together in dark theatres.

No matter your point of entry into the matrix of cinema, welcome. Cinema lives and has always lived in multiple forms, some slowly dying, some newly emerging. Over the past two centuries, we've seen

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various forms of the audio-visual imagination, fascinating inventions that lead into cinema and prefigure its specific accomplishments; in revisiting that history here, perhaps we glimpse something of cinema's own future, too, as it becomes digital, mobile, and three-dimensional. In the late nineteenth century, to begin this story, cinema emerged from a diverse world of toys and machines that created the illusion of movement. Christened with perversely scientific names, these Phenakistoscopes, Thaumatropes, Zoetropes, and Praxinoscopes competed with magic lantern projections and panoramas to entertain audiences with dizzying perspectives and steaming locomotives, acrobatic feats, and elaborate stories. Forms of magic lanterns collected at the George Eastman House in Rochester (Lampascopes, Kodiopticons, Moviegraphs, and even a contraption dubbed "Le Galerie Gothique") testify to the ingenuity and variety of "pre-cinema." Some project, throwing larger-than-life images from slides onto screens and surfaces. Others invite spectators into more private viewings, into simulacra of theaters, or, as with the late Edison Kinetoscopes, into solitary "peep" shows of sequential images that suggest movement (see Figure 1.1). Some exploit the ideas of **sequence** or series, while others concentrate on the fantastic and imaginary worlds of storytelling. All of these aspects of pre-cinema morph into aspects of today's image-world: we project from our laptops, share intimate glimpses of each other via YouTube and Zoom, tell stories with Flickr sequences, and so on. Taken as a whole, however, these aspects of pre-cinema anticipate but don't quite cross the threshold of cinema's particular illusion of continuous movement.

Enter early photographic studies of motion. Eadweard Muybridge perfected the large-scale photographic panorama of San Francisco in 1878, a sequence of 13 photographs taken at different moments that together offer the spectator a 360° view of the city from atop Nob Hill. As opposed to the painted panorama, which conceals or renders irrelevant issues of duration, the photographic series creates from many individual instants an illusion of continuity. But it is Muybridge's later famous analysis of a trotting horse that transforms those possibilities for thinking about time and motion into cinema itself. The story goes like this: California former governor, robber baron, and racing horse aficionado Leland Stanford wanted to know whether, in the course of a running horse's stride, all four hooves were off the ground at one time. He hired California's best photographer Muybridge – though

FIGURE 1.1 Film history: pre-cinema.
Source: Kobal/Shutterstock

he was both an Englishman and a murderer, no relationship implied – to find out. Muybridge's feat was not only to string threads across the racetrack to be tripped by the trotting horse, each triggering a camera's shutter in turn, but actually to create images from these enormously quick exposures. Silhouettes of the horse, to give him his due named Occident, answered Stanford's question in the affirmative: the horse lifts all four hooves off the ground. Muybridge's larger practical and philosophical accomplishments, however, are his legacy to cinema (see Figure 1.2). First, Muybridge created what was, in essence, a miniature film studio at the racetrack, discovering how to manipulate his environment to capture the images he needed: to compensate for slow film speeds, for example, he created a blindingly white environment for the horses to pass through, complete with distance markers to create choice framings. Second, Muybridge fused technological

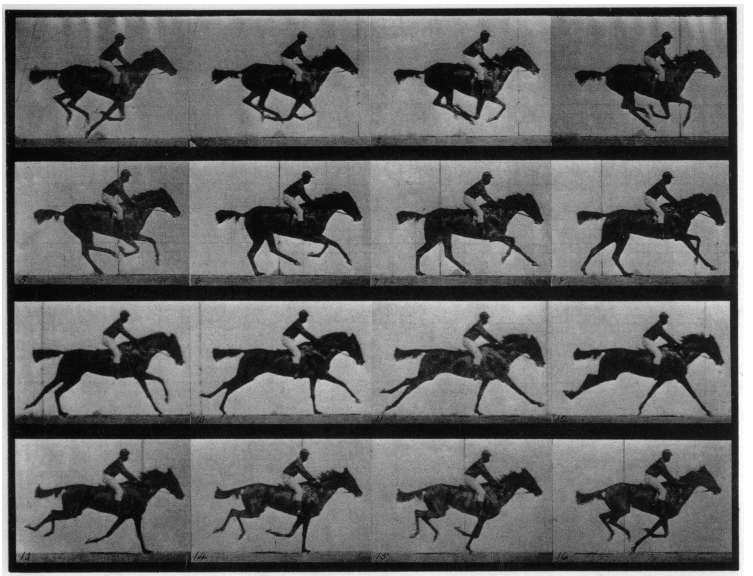

FIGURE 1.2 Eadweard Muybridge.
Source: Kobal/Shutterstock

developments (of the triggers, shutters, chemistry) with the subjects he sought to photograph in order to invent the new medium of motion photography, much as the cinema was to do in the decade following Muybridge's study for Stanford. But, third, Muybridge returned movement, and particularly movement in a series that anticipates narrative, to photography:

> Muybridge had reduced the narrative to its most basic element: the unfolding of motions in time and space. Most of his sequences depicted the events of a few seconds or less, and he boasted that the individual exposures were as brief as one two-thousandths of a second. By imposing stillness on its subjects, photography had represented the world as a world of objects. But now, in Muybridge's work, it was a world of processes again, for one picture showed a horse, but six pictures showed an act, a motion, an event. The subject of the pictures was not the images per se, but the change from one to another, the change that represented time and motion more vividly, more urgently,

> than the slow motion of parades passing and buildings rising. It was a fundamental change in the nature of photography and of what could be represented.
>
> (Solnit 2003: 194)

Muybridge was not alone in this exploration of motion photography, but it was his work, alongside the "chronophotographic" camera of French photographer Etienne-Jules Marey, that suggested a way of thinking about time and motion through successive **frames**. Cameras equipped with a **shutter**, creating an interval of blackness in the exposure of each frame of film coated with a light-sensitive **emulsion**, recorded frame after frame (from 10 to 40 frames per second, or **fps**) of whatever lay before it. When these individual frames are projected, again with a moving shutter and at the same rate, the human eye perceives them as continuous motion, due to a still-baffling phenomenon scientists first called "**persistence of vision**" and tend now to call "persistent afterimages." The cinema, then, arises truly from an interface: a technology of continuously moving still images and a process of perception on the part of the human spectator which readies him or her to receive this continuity as motion itself. More recent experiments in vision and participation such as **VR (virtual reality)** and **AR (augmented reality)** partake of a very similar interest in fusing technologies of image capture with the specific activities and parameters of human perception.

Following upon Muybridge's experiments, Thomas Edison's Kinetograph and the Cinématographe of the Lumière brothers in France soon recorded our first films upon the principles and techniques Muybridge made concrete: more acrobats and strongmen, like the stock images of the pre-cinema, but also everyday images, the Lumière *actualités* of workers, babies, and their short gags, like *L'Arroseur Arrose* ("The Sprinkler Sprinkled," 1895) (see Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4). It was in the very interval between meeting Muybridge and meeting Marey, in fact, that Edison transferred his model for sound recording and playback to images:

> He assigned the job of studying two apparatuses – one for the recording of images, baptized the Kinetograph, and the other for viewing them, named the Kinetoscope – to an employee with a passion for photography, the Englishman William Kennedy Laurie Dickson. The two men

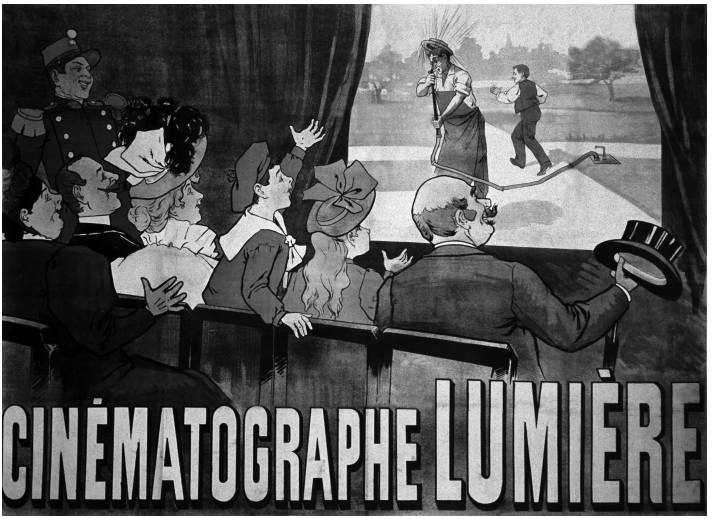

FIGURE 1.3 Cinématographe Lumière.
Source: Kobal/Shutterstock

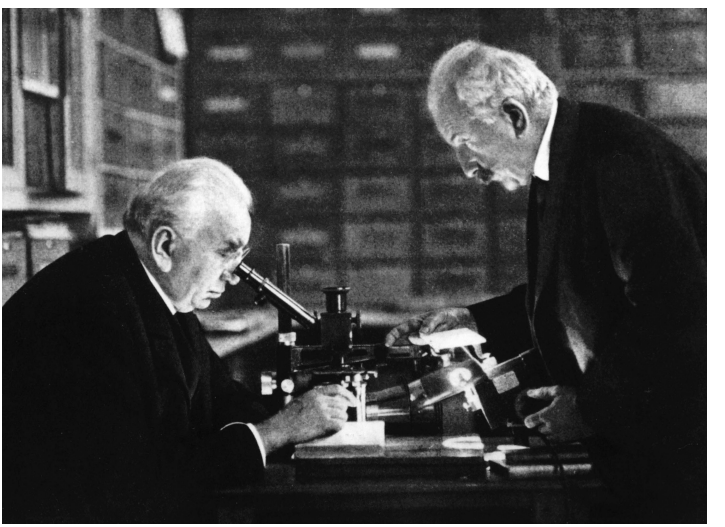

FIGURE 1.4 Lumière Brothers.
Source: Kobal/Shutterstock

> proceeded cautiously. Arriving in Paris for the Universal Exposition of 1889, Edison met Marey, who told him about the progress of his own work. Eventually, in order to record photographic views, the American inventor abandoned the cylinder for a celluloid roll with perforations (sprocket holes) along each side, through which a toothed sprocket wheel would run; this ensured a uniform feed.
>
> (Toulet 1995: 35)

To feed his Kinetoscopes, machines for peep shows or solitary viewing, Edison built a movie studio in what were then the wilds of New Jersey, dubbed the "Black Maria" for its resemblance to the New York paddy wagons called by that name. From here, Edison "cranked out" (a phrase derived from the hand-cranking of the movie camera) film after film: "Horses jumping over hurdles, Niagara Falls with its torrents plunging to rocky depths, trains rushing headlong across the screen, cooch-girls dancing, vaudeville acrobats taking their falls with aplomb, parades, boats, and people hurrying or scurrying along," summarized an early film historian (Jacobs 1967 [1939]: 4). In France, the Lumière brothers went a step further, perfecting a device that could record *and* project films: the Cinématographe. Building upon Edison's invention, the Lumières solved the remaining problem of how to ensure that the film advances at a uniform rate to resynthesize the recorded image. The solution came to Louis Lumière in a dream: "In one night, my brother invented the Cinématographe," recalled Auguste (Toulet 1995: 40). Audiences responded hungrily and immediately to those images of ourselves "hurrying and scurrying" captured by mobile cameras and projected larger than life in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

In the mid-1890s, then, in these first years of cinema's life, congealed the essence of what we now mean when we refer to cinema, incorporating elements from all of the other entertainments that supplied its ingredients, including legitimate and illegitimate theater, vaudeville, museums, fairs, stunts, and magic shows. Above all, cinema is dynamic. It animates the world around us. It transports us to worlds we imagine or know only through images (and sounds, about which more later). Muybridge's experiments revealed the very idea of the interval: the transformation or the mutation of the object from one state to the next, the essence of change itself. The inventor who soon became one of Edison's chief cinematographers, our passionate

employee Englishman Dickson, dreamed deliciously of cinema's reach as early as 1895, when he and his wife wrote its first history:

> No scene, however animated and extensive, but will eventually be within reproductive power. Martial evolutions, naval exercises, processions and countless kindred exhibitions will be recorded for the leisurely gratification of those who are debarred from attendance, or who desire to recall them. The invalid, the isolated country recluse, and the harassed business man can indulge in needed recreation without undue expenditure, without fear of weather, without damage to raiment, elbows, and toes, and without the sacrifice of health or important engagements. Not only our own resources but those of the entire world will be at our command, nay, we may even anticipate the time when sociable relations will be established between ourselves and the planetary system, and when the latest doings in Mars, Saturn, and Venus will be recorded by enterprising kinetographic recorders.
>
> (Dickson and Dickson 2000 [1895]: 51)

Incredibly, this last bit of Dickson's dream has been fulfilled, when in 2005 the first "cinematographer" of the Mars Rover mission received an Emmy Award nomination and when, in 2021, a new set of higher resolution images from the Perseverance Rover left viewers in awe of the Red Planet once again.

At the same time that we dream of cinema's reach, most of our films on celluloid are literally dying: **prints** and **negatives** decomposing or bursting into flame, fading or melting into illegibility. Paulo Cherchi Usai, senior curator of the Motion Picture Department at George Eastman House and one of the leading figures in film preservation, elaborates on the philosophical, aesthetic, and political consequences of the proliferation of images in the opening years of the twenty-first century, combined with the phenomenon of the ongoing death of cinema, which can result from physical and environmental factors:

> In addition to the factors which can prevent its coming into being (malfunction of the apparatus, inadequate processing of the negative or its accidental exposure to light, human interference of various kinds), there is the host of physical and chemical agents affecting the image carrier: scratches or tears on the print caused by the projecting machine or its operator, curling of the film base as a result of a too intense exposure to the light source, colour alterations arising out of the film stock itself, environmental variables such as temperature

> and humidity. As soon as it is deposited on a matrix, the digital image is subject to a similar destiny; its causes may be different, but the effects are the same. Chronicles [read by Cherchi Usai] also mention catastrophes and extraordinary events such as fires, wars, floods, and destructive interventions from the makers themselves or the people who finance their activities.
>
> (Cherchi Usai 2001: 13)

By his estimate, fully 80% of the films manufactured worldwide during the silent era (until the mid-1920s) are lost (Cherchi Usai 2001: 122). In Cherchi Usai's view, loss pervades the film experience, too. It is a product of the physical reality of perception, in which we "watch" a black screen each time a shutter passes over the projected beam of light, in which we turn away from the image each time we blink (according, in turn, to the level of humidity in the room), in which we may find ourselves distracted or bored, drawn into reveries other than those onscreen. This physicality of perception – whatever the format, analog or digital – alerts us to the fact that each viewing of a film is an evanescent experience, archived in memory, consigned to the realm of the unseen. If preservationists reclaim some of what has been lost, they and we will never be able to assert full or final control over the visible world; we will only catch glimpses of it. Experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) is composed entirely of decaying archival footage, recording this process of loss. Seeking out footage filmed on highly flammable nitrate stock, Morrison painstakingly transferred this compilation of fragile images and set them to an original symphonic score: ghost-like figures (camels, dervishes) emerge out of the scratches, discolorations, and static to haunt us briefly before they yield to the texture of the film's surface.

BOX 1.1: THE UNITED STATES' LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

One treasure trove remains the United States' Library of Congress, which houses a very large film collection and makes available online over 400 early films, including those photographed by Dickson for Edison, through its American Memory collection.

Some sample films from the collection

General Lee's procession/Havana (Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1899). A magnificent view of the Prado, from the balcony of the United States Club. The procession is headed by a troop of horsemen. Prominent among them is General Lee. Then come the soldiers, file after file and company after company, filling the broad avenue from curb to curb and as far as the eye can reach with marching men. It is the Seventh Army Corps. Great crowds of people fill the sidewalks; and through the trees that line the promenade in the middle of the Prado are seen carriages and vehicles following the parade. The crowning event of the Spanish–American war! The great procession on Evacuation Day.

The boxing cats (Prof. Welton's) (Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1894), WKL Dickson. A very interesting and amusing subject.

Edison kinetoscopic record of a sneeze (January 7, 1894), WKL Dickson. Film made for publicity purposes, as a series of still photographs to accompany an article in *Harper's Weekly*.

These films can be accessed through the Library of Congress website: www.loc.gov.

From its birth, then, until the present moment, cinema has assumed multiple guises and forms, circling into and out of sight, from its roots in the early motion of toys and machines: vaudeville-style exhibition; the invention of the "talkies" (from the recording of sound on discs to accompany the projection of silent films to today's use of digital Dolby surround sound); various uses of color (from early cinema's hand-tinted frames to Technicolor and beyond); widescreen formats like Cinemascope and VistaVision; different film **gauges** (from 8 mm for home movies to the past theatrical standard of 35 mm to IMAX films in 65 mm and 70 mm, such as *The Master* [Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012]); and various reproductive, transfer, and storage technologies. And from those early kisses, trains, and trips to the moon? We may have replaced May Irwin, the first kissing lady of the screen, with J-Lo and Madhuri Dixit, but we're still traveling.

WHY STUDY FILM?

Cinema's dynamism, its capacity to arrange and rearrange time and motion, thus reveals its dimensions that are deeply social, historical, industrial, technical, philosophical, political, aesthetic, psychological, personal, and so forth. The aggregate of these multiple dimensions indeed *is* "cinema"; for individual works, I reserve the word "film" or "movie." For enthusiasts, cinema rewards study like few other objects precisely because its reach is so great that it is never exhausted, its scope so varied that one rarely finds oneself thinking along a single plane of thought. Cinema is about everything and always about itself. About each image, we might ask, as Reynold Humphries does of the films of Jean-Luc Godard, "What values and ideas are already contained in an image from the fact of its mere presence?" (Humphries 1975: 13). If various images presented by cinema delight or thrill, agitate or unnerve, those images further offer themselves for analysis of their combinatory logic, for example. The great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, like the British (and later Hollywood) legend Alfred Hitchcock, advocated a science of audience stimulation whereby the director could calibrate, with unfailing precision, the image to the intended audience effect. While Eisenstein called his theory of combination **montage**, seeking to continue cinematically the political agitation of the Bolshevik Revolution, Hitchcock pursued his own ideas toward the end of pure response, what he among many others called "pure cinema," in the genre of the thriller:

> Ernie, do you realize what we are doing in this picture? The audience is like a giant organ that you and I are playing. At one moment, we play this note and get this reaction, and then we play that chord and they react that way. And someday we won't even have to make a movie – there'll be electrodes implanted in their brains, and we'll just press different buttons and they'll go "oooh" and "aaah" and we'll frighten them, and make them laugh. Won't that be wonderful?
>
> (Spoto 1984: 440)

Likewise, if stories emerge from particular socio-historical contexts, those narratives benefit from careful studies of their correspondences and divergences with the moment or context, but also of how they *mold* their moments and contexts, sometimes indelibly. Orson Welles'