

A RESEARCHER'S TALE

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Researchers' Tales is an occasional series of informal discussions for BFI National Library members in which leading writers, historians and practitioners in film, television, artists' film and the moving image reflect on their past and future work.

Good evening, everyone. It is an honour to be here in the BFI National Library and to be able to speak as part of its Researchers' Tales series. I am grateful to David Sharp and Pete Todd for the invitation, still more grateful to you all for having booked to come here, without necessarily knowing what the weather forecast would be.

The Researchers' Tales series invites 'writers, historians and practitioners in film, television, artists' film and the moving image reflect on their past and future work.' I have written many papers and given many talks, but never before have I been invited essentially to talk about why I do what I do. It is an intriguing question. I can give some quick, bland answers, such as I like films, particularly early films, and it is a pleasure to spend my time investigating them, but seldom is there the opportunity to stop still for a while and examine really what it is that you do as a researcher, what its meaning is, ultimately what its value is.

So, when invited to talk about any area of my research into early films that I might like to choose, I decided to take publication as my theme, particularly publication online, a subject that greatly interests me. Professionally and personally I have become heavily involved in recent years in publishing research information of one kind or another as websites, databases, downloadable documents, discussion lists, and most recently blogs. The blog – a terrible word but an engrossing subject – is what I want to make my central theme, but to get there firstly I am going to indulge in a little autobiography, if you'll forgive me, because reflecting on past work should help to illuminate the present, and future.

I was never that much interested in films to begin with. Culture, for me, meant books. Of course, films and television programmes were everywhere from childhood onwards. I am of the last

generation that experienced the anarchic joys of children's Saturday morning cinema shows, a heady mix of cowboys and Indians, battered prints of endlessly recycled Superman serials, worthy offerings from the Children's Film Foundation, and boisterous sing-a-longs. Cinema was otherwise the occasional treat to see the latest Disney, but meanwhile television was doing its best in the late sixties to educate the young in cinema history. Bob Monkhouse and Michael Bentine hosted compilation programmes which showed us all the best gags from Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, and Chaplin's early films were a staple of children's programming, so that unwittingly we all became connoisseurs of the art of silent film comedy, though with little or no sense of a history where these films came first and the common entertainment that was now offered on cinema and television screens was heir to these pioneers. It was all just one giant, mixed-up soup of experiences.

But books and plays and poetry and with them an increasing sense of a literary history became my abiding interest, and in the 1970s the cinema was a miserable place to visit, strangely disconnected from the rest of life. Films, of course, were of course a staple of television programming, and television was central to life as it had to be lived, tied into the daily routine just as cinema had been for past generations. And so that is where one gradually picked up a sense of a richer history, of films current and films past, stars that once were, styles that had come and gone, all preserved and given new meaning through television's continuous now. Progressively you sensed a sense of artistry and qualitative values. Foreign films were never going to come to the Oxford cinema in Whitstable high street, but on television you saw these mysteriously different films with subtitles, which were somehow better, or classier than common entertainment fare.

But English literature was my subject first and foremost, and I judged the world by the word. Then, one day in 1979 (when I was eighteen, if you are interested in the specifics), I heard a peculiarly beautiful song on the radio; Elisabeth Welch singing 'Stormy Weather'. I'd heard nothing else quite like it, and I was intrigued to find out that it came from a film based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's plays I knew and loved, and I collected performances of them with a fervour. I'd seen televised Shakespeare programmes, which were always an exciting treat the rare times in which television was brave enough to put on one of the plays, but I'd never seen a Shakespeare film. So I went up to London to see it, I think at the Screen on the Hill in Belsize Park.

I date my conversion to the art of film to seeing Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* that day. It hit me like a sledgehammer. It certainly helped that I knew, or thought that I knew, the play. I saw what the director had done. He had completely re-imagined the text visually. Every single scene had

been artfully arranged to tell what it had to tell with the camera in mind, or rather with the human eye in mind. It was so ingeniously composed, in sight and in sound, despite what had clearly been a threadbare budget. Moreover, Shakespeare's words (which were beautifully spoken) were enriched by the visual associations. It was a triumph of the imagination, and I saw what films were, or could be, really for the first time. Films re-ordered the world to their own devising; they made us see things, better.

That said, I did not become a film buff, still less a researcher of film overnight. Far from it. But as I went through university, I found myself more and more skipping out of lectures on the less compelling corners of English literature, and slipping out to one of Manchester many cinemas, or else sampling the offerings of the University of Manchester's marvellous film society. Five or six films a week – on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday evenings. I first saw *Citizen Kane* and *Metropolis* as a double bill on a Sunday – what an evening that was. I discovered Eric Rohmer, John Cassavetes, Jacques Rivette, Alain Resnais, absorbed so many classics (and good deal of complete junk besides). Moreover, those university years coincided with the arrival of Channel 4 on British television, which not only introduced a wide range of television programming, but gave new screening opportunities to films. Of course, Film Four showcased what was exciting and new about current British cinema, but tucked away in the afternoon programming there were British films of the 1930s and 40s which were a revelation. Films could be interesting without necessarily having subtitles, and, further, there was a sense of discovery of a lost world, whose parameters one might start to comprehend through seeing how they comported themselves through film. *The Good Companions*, *The Proud Valley*, *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*, *The Man in the Mirror*. Such discoveries among 1930s British cinema moved me beyond an initial appreciation of the art of film into something that promised more of a sense of discovery. These films were not written about in cinema histories, their filmmakers were not *auteurs*. Did that invalidate them, or was there something deeper here, a wider film history than that which was keeping the film studies courses and the film book publishing sector going?

By the time it came to leaving university, films so filled my imagination that I found it hard to read a book without automatically trying to visualise it. This became an annoying compulsion for a while, but at the same time I discovered another component to film historiography that was to indicate further where I wanted to go. I discovered filmographies. Specifically, I discovered the work of Leslie Halliwell, who set out to list and to provide a pithy comment on every film a Western audience might hope to see. *Halliwell's Film Guide*, which continues to this day despite Halliwell himself having died some twenty years ago, fascinated for the discipline that went into its construction, its consistency of records, and its apparent comprehensiveness. I had always been the annoying sort of person who accumulated facts and figures and then told people about them,

whether they wanted to hear them or not, and this implication of the entirety of a subject that might be encompassed within one form intrigued me. How might one do this? Was it possible to list everything? What were the rules? How did you go about such a project? How did you describe your findings coherently? And what was the point of doing it?

I have to admit I didn't consider that last question. Instead I started to bring together a profligate fondness for cinema, a curiosity about its less familiar corners, and a natural propensity towards making lists of things, together into something that might sustain a career. The ambition was not to make films, but to be surrounded by information about films. I'm not going to bore you with my life history – the point I want to make is about changing states of awareness of the meaning of film, and the progressive steps towards embarking on research and the publication of such research. So, skipping over a period at library college, where I based all my studies on film and where I ran the college film society with singular ineptitude, I next found myself putting heart and soul into writing the very best job application that ever had been written in order that I might get a job on the lowest rung at that place which I now realised stood at the very peak of my ambitions – the library of the British Film Institute.

I didn't even get an interview. But, at the same time, I wrote a more measured application to become an assistant cataloguer at the National Film Archive, and there I was to work for the next fourteen years.

Working in a film archive, certainly one with as broad and well-grounded a remit as that of the National Film Archive, made one start properly to understand what films are for. The feature film, the latest release, the festival favourite – these are just the cream on the cake. The real stuff, that which reflected society, which demonstrated purpose, versatility and utility, lay underneath. Here were documentaries, instructional films, newsreels, magazine films, commercials, animation films, amateur films, home movies, scientific films, exploration films, medical films, field recordings, out-takes, rough cuts, remakes, unreleased films, unfinished films, films of no clear intention at all, unidentified films. Here, in short, was everything. The world reflected through a medium. And not just film, of course. Television enjoyed equal status at the Archive, a medium with an equally rich history whose component parts could be found arrayed on the shelves, bringing new meaning and a sense of preciousness to that which had just seemed to have been a constant stream of matter on the box in the corner of the living room.

Moreover, one now learned of the component parts of the medium. Gertrude Stein may have been right to say a rose is a rose is a rose, but you can never say a film is a film is a film. Behind every print lay a negative, and beyond and between that a bewildering line-up of intermediate

parts: interpositives, dupe negatives, fine grains, sep mag tracks, combined optical prints, viewing prints, on nitrate, acetate and polyester, films that you could see and films that you could not see. A medium that was damaged every time you chose to watch it. A medium that could simply rot before your eyes, losing its unique content forever. You existed in a permanent state of impending horror. Images of nitrate films deteriorated beyond coherence were always being shown to you, like warnings to naughty children of another age of what evils would befall them if they did not behave.

What fascinated most of all was learning to understand what these films meant, this huge and various mix of film and television history. This was essentially a three-part matter. The film, as physical object, has particular meaning to the Archive, based on its physical status: films that were most in peril were most important, to put it simplistically. They had to be cared for first. Then there were the meanings that films had for those interested in them; most intriguingly, programme makers who would take a piece of footage from the Archive and confer on it new meanings by how it was placed or explained in their own film. This could delight or infuriate us, depending on the degree to which the filmmaker had deviated from our own understanding of that piece of film. For the third meaning was that which we, as archivists and lovers of film history (which is what we were), understood the films to have. This was based on who made them, the purpose for which they were made, and the form in which they were first shown. Of course, films had to be re-interpreted just as they had to be reprinted, as subsequent generations discovered them, but that original conception was paramount. It gave the films their fundamental meaning. This was a gospel that I took on board fully, as I became particularly drawn to the less frequented corners of the Archive: early films, forgotten films, non-fiction films.

My career as a researcher began at the Archive, and it began with newsreels. It is a curious journey, to have moved from that initial excited discovery of film artistry in a work such as *The Tempest*, to finding oneself a few years later engrossed in the world of silent newsreels, but this is where all the component parts started to make sense. In 1986 the National Film Archive took in the library of newsreel, *Topical Budget*. This comprised some 8,000 films, dating 1911 to 1931, the company's papers, and the newsreel's original subject index cards. Here was a rich array of material; the films themselves, which included outtakes, library footage and the like; and the documentation to explain them; and all for a newsreel that, as far as printed film history was concerned, did not exist. Precious little was written about British newsreels at all, but of *Topical Budget* there was no more to be found than a couple of footnotes. It had no history. Was this merited? Somebody produced these films, somebody filmed them, somebody saw them, there sufficient economic reason to keep producing them for twenty years, and there was twenty years

of British social and political life reflected in some way in these unexamined cans. What this called for, of course, was research.

So one moves from enthusiasm, to profession, to dipping toes into becoming researcher – whatever that was going to mean. Here I was fortunate. Working on the *Topical Budget* collection in the common round of things would have meant indexing the films from secondary sources and entering these details into the Archive's catalogue, for others eventually to find them. There would be little time for asking questions of the material, even little time for viewing it. It was a passive role, being a cataloguer – identify the object, describe it quickly and accurately, log it in the system, and then wait for someone else to discover it and bring it to life again. But at that time the British Film Institute, which is a wise and caring institution, decided to have an internal research programme. Staff could apply to have six month sabbaticals to undertake research into some aspect of the collection. I was first in the queue and first to be awarded what was initially six months but later grew to nine months of research leave, studying the history of an obscure silent newsreel.

The great thrill of research is discovering that you are stepping into unexplored territory. It doesn't matter how extensive or not that territory might be, nor how 'important' it might turn out to be once mapped and identified. Those are secondary considerations. What matters is that you have come across some corner of the map where the directions run out, turned a page in the book and found nothing but empty whiteness. Suddenly it is up to you to fill in that gap. You will have some of the evidence in front of you – in this case films and company documents – but they signify nothing in terms of new understanding until you take on the task of putting them in order. This is all that research is, and there is rather too much these days of what calls itself research but is too often the easy recycling of received ideas and familiar material. To be a researcher requires a little fear: to be faced with confusing evidence, an absence of directions, and the realisation that no one has been here before and you cannot just go to the bookshelves and look up the answers to the questions that are flooding into your mind, because they will not be there. If you do not experience that tremor of fear at the start then you will never be a true researcher. Equally, if you don't overcome that fear, or make best use of it, then you will never succeed.

My small corner of the map was a silent newsreel. A very small corner as far as film history is concerned, but out of the work I produced a catalogue, a book, several talks and papers, and a videocassette, so I hope that I left sufficient signposts for future travellers. I wanted each can of film in that collection to have its own history – to know who filmed it, who ordered for it to be filmed, what the news event was that it showed, who saw it, where silent newsreels fitted in within the general history of things. It turned out to be a richer history than had been expected (which is

so often the way with research), not least because *Topical Budget* had been commandeered by the British government to turn itself into a propaganda newsreel during the First World War. This news form had not been created in a vacuum, but had been shaped by significant economic, social and political factors, and from such lessons one acquired a set of mental tools for examining any future subject. One research subject begets another, turning the researcher into a useful person, not just expert in the one subject but equipped to analyse and explain subjects to come.

This leads us on to the next stage in development, publication. Research is useless unless it is made available in a form that others can appreciate. It has to be distilled, and popularised. But research also has its essential rituals, much of them formularised around university practice. You must present papers, you must be published in peer-reviewed journals. You must annotate correctly, cite your sources, conform to style. It puzzles me greatly that it is so often deemed a satisfactory outcome of research that all you may produce is some impenetrable paper published in a journal few can find and still fewer will ever read. There is too much reliance on the established rituals, too little appreciation of effect. But then one must view the larger picture, and see such modes of publication as stepping stones, means to train a researcher on how to have something to say, and the right ways in which to say it. Very simply, the more you publish, the more you are likely to be read.

I have painful memories of giving the first talk based on my *Topical Budget* research. It was in the basement here at Stephen Street, and a dozen or so generous colleagues gathered to hear me speak with head bowed down, speaking in mumbled monotone, overburdening them with earnest fact after earnest fact. Colin MacCabe, then head of research at the BFI and the person who had given me the opportunity to work on *Topical Budget* in the first place, was in the audience, but had just come into the country from some long-haul flight, and was clearly tired. Ten minutes into my talk, gentle but clearly audible snores could be heard, counterpointing my every word. It is hard to talk when part of your audience is asleep and letting you know about it, harder still when the person you have driven to this state is the person who encouraged you to take up the research in the first place. I staggered through to the end. Not a handclap followed, as all slipped quietly out of the room, numbed with tedium.

I have tried to improve a little on that dreadful first start. Publication, in whatever form – talk, paper, book, catalogue, database, website – demands an audience, and audiences demand to be entertained. By entertainment, I do not mean that one has to be trivial, or to put on a show – though the latter has been a route that I have ended up following to some degree. The art of presentation is not to say what you know but what the audience needs and wants to know. You

are writing or saying or presenting something that someone is going to have to take in, someone who does not necessarily see the world in the same way that you do. They may be reading in a hurry, or with a quite particular purpose in mind; they may be sitting in an audience listening to you but their mind wanders to what they were doing earlier in the day, or what the person sitting next to them might be doing; they may be worrying about the time, whether you are going to finish on the time scheduled, or just wondering where your argument is wandering to. Writing is selfish in execution, but must be selfless in presentation. What you present is no longer yours, but owned by someone else. If they do not read it, or listen to it, if they do not get something out of it, then it is worthless.

Working on *Topical Budget* therefore taught me about much more than the newsreel itself; it taught me about the process of research itself – or at least it pointed out lessons that I would have to try and absorb. It demonstrated that no subject need be so narrow that it does not have general applications. So it has been that my subsequent career as a researcher has largely focussed on early and non-fiction films, delighting in their specifics but, through the various means in which the results have been made public, striving to make them comprehensible – indeed enjoyable – for any interested observer.

This philosophy came to dominate my subsequent work. All the while that I had been working on newsreels, I had become increasingly engrossed in early film; that is, film before the First World War. Partly this was due to the inestimable advantage of working in a film archive where the raw materials were all about you, and where special value was always placed upon the earliest films, simply because they came first. Partly it was the convenience of the centenary of cinema, which occurred at some point in the mid-1990s, which called upon some basic informational expertise on the part the Archive which I was happy to acquire and to put to good use. And partly it was that same curiosity which drove me in all things film-related: who made these films, under what conditions, who saw them, what did they mean, what do they mean for us now? That they came from the formative period of cinema, when the rules had not been set, when the whole of film production could be seen as its own form of research project, greatly added to the attraction. To explain early film, it seemed, was to gain some understanding of how humans seek to communicate, of what the modern age meant, and of film's place in it.

Knowing about film was not enough, and, increasingly, simply being able to give a title, date and creator to and previously unidentified piece of film, was not enough. Early film did not exist in isolation, and to understand it, and to make it comprehensible to others, it was necessary to see it in its many wider contexts. This seems self-evident, but it is very easy for those in the cosy world of film, enclosed within the comfortable confines of their cinemas, not to see anything beyond the

film itself. There is an inferiority complex that has underwritten film studies until really quite recently, and it may to some extent still be there. There is a desire to prove film's worth as an art, something that can hold its head up high the older arts of literature, painting, music and so forth. It comes out of some deep-rooted shame at the mechanical nature of the medium, and of its very popularity. It is not difficult to like films; in fact it is all too easy. The British Film Institute was established with the remit to encourage the art of film, and that aspiration towards art has been, arguably, a cause of the institution's disquiet ever since. But that art should only be seen as a means to an end. Film encompasses everything; it is a particular, and essential way of understanding the world, and ourselves. Charles Urban, the producer of early non-fiction films whose life and work I went on to research in detail, had a slogan for his catalogues and film shows which read: 'We put the world before you'. That should be the slogan of what is now the BFI National Archive.

So my time as a researcher since those early forays has been largely devoted to the worlds of early film. It has not been a conventional academic career, in that I have worked for public, or semi-public institutions, rather than a university, something which has certainly helped reinforce a belief in the need for research to be clearly-expressed and relevant. Indeed, I have progressively moved on to a next stage in the process, from conducting my own research to encouraging the research work of others, or creating environments in which research outputs might flourish. This developed in particular when I left the BFI some eight years ago and moved to the British Universities Film & Video Council, an organisation dedicated to promoting the use of film in UK universities across all academic disciplines. There could be no better place to exercise a belief in the fundamental utility of the medium.

So I want to concentrate now on the modes of publication. As indicated, I have long been interested in ways of presenting research findings that go beyond the traditional academic route of scholarly papers and monographs, as necessary and sometimes valuable as these outputs no doubt are. I have followed two routes in particular. One is the presentation of film shows of specialist, usually silent material, in ways that hopefully entertain and inform in equal measure. That's a subject for another talk on another day. This evening, I want to focus on the other route, using the Internet as a means to publish research outputs in creative and extensive ways.

The Internet has changed the world in many ways, and one is that it has made us determined to give things away. It has removed the compulsion towards secrecy, or information that might only be shared among the elect. It has compelled governments and institutions to pour vast amounts of money into making available in new forms artefacts and information systems that already existed, but which had been restricted by the access that could be offered to them. Billions have

been invested in knowledge, a noble exercise without precedent in human history. Of course, not everything on the Internet is free, and any researcher outside the walls of academia will have experienced the frustration of digitised resources or datasets which have been made exclusively available to universities alone. This is a temporary phase; the walls cannot be put up forever. Every barrier put up to general access is only a sign of weakness, a promise that those barriers will be brought down eventually, just so long as we keep demanding more, keep needing to know and to discover more.

As part of this process, it is essential that we as individuals contribute as much as do institutions. If you know something, there is no excuse for not sharing it. Let me demonstrate. I built my first website in 1999. Its subject was the aforementioned Charles Urban, the subject by then of my thesis-in-progress. With an easy guide to HTML in one hand, and 'borrowing' the code from an existing site to be adapted to my own purposes. I came up with a site that advertised my research and shaped itself around the themes of that research, **Charles Urban: Motion Picture Pioneer** (<http://www.charlesurban.com>). I put up everything that I knew about Urban on the site. Academics got in touch; humble as it was, the site became a link for students to follow on university courses. People started borrowing information from it, citing it. I put up more information on the site, as I became more confident in the online medium, publishing documents, images, writing more extensive text, providing links to a wider range of online sources, referencing the material I had found, indicating to researchers where original materials were to be located, and how to access them. I had not just published a paper or a monograph; I had produced a gateway of information, there to be found by anyone. The intoxicating thing about web publishing is that you find that you have a readership. Publish an academic paper, and the only evidence you may have for years after that anyone read it is if you find it cited in someone else's equally obscure paper. This may be passing knowledge around, but if so it is at a snail's pace. With the Web, there are tools to enable you to see who is looking for your website, who has linked their site to yours, where they came from, what they were looking for. Such evidence then becomes encouragement to produce more, to answer questions raised that your site may not yet have addressed, always to try and do better.

Building on what I felt was the right way to go about things, I next built a website based on a book I had co-edited with Stephen Herbert in 1996, published by the BFI, **Who's Who of Victorian Cinema** (<http://www.victorian-cinema.net>). The book was a biographical guide to the pioneers of cinema before 1901, timed to coincide with the centenary of cinema. It was a specialised work, and priced accordingly – at forty-five pounds a time, it was only going to be purchased by institutions. It received due notice, and we were proud of it as a publication, but we always felt that we could do more with it to explain our subject to a wider audience. A second edition was

never likely to happen, but instead we could turn to the Net. The book sales having dwindled to nothing, we obtained permission from the BFI to republish the text of the book online. We also obtained permission from each of the twenty or more contributors. With a 30-day trial copy of Dreamweaver software, designed for building websites, I worked furiously to enter all 250 biographies from the book into the framework of the site. But that was just the starting point; now to make properly interactive, and to augment it. So every reference became a hyperlink; we added new ways of searching the material, grouping the subjects into categories, such as scientists, camera operators, or women; we added rare illustrations of Victorian cinema technology; we updated the biographies with new information as it was published; we added new biographies; we added new resources: a reference section, essays on venues, technology and imagery; and we included a news section, turning what had been a book published and fixed by its 1996 date into an active research resource, constantly updated, cited in numerous publications (both printed and online), and used by around 1,000 people per month. Not a huge number by some standards, but probably more readers in a few months than the book enjoyed in several years, and of course it is there to be found by the casual researcher as well as the expert. Hopefully it has been the starting point for others' investigations – in fact I know it has. Of course, there is the continual responsibility of keeping the reference source up-to-date, and who can say what its long-term future will be. There is an advantage to reference books being fixed to the time in when they were published, as opposed to a website which must always try and keep up with the here and now. But it is that sense of the here and now, of engagement with ideas, of interactivity, that makes a web resource such as *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema* a rewarding exercise to have undertaken. It just felt like the right thing to do.

There are many such resources, for film history and beyond, that exist online, of course. What I want to point out here is the value of the individual effort. Cultural and educational institutions can and should produce such reference works: it is what they are there to do. But the individual researcher, whether attached to an institution or not, has so much that can be contributed that adds to knowledge, an act that should be its own reward. Here are just a few examples of generous efforts by knowledgeable individuals: David Pierce's **The Silent Bookshelf** (<http://cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf>, which though no longer being kept up makes available thematically-arranged original documents on aspects of silent film history; Herbert Birett's **Quellen zur Filmgeschichte und einiges anderes** (<http://www.kinematographie.de>), a site that will win no design awards but which makes available a huge amount of painstakingly uncovered filmographic data which the author previously published in book form; **Brian Pritchard's** wide range of resources on film preservation and cinema technology (<http://www.brianpritchard.com>); or Martin Hart's extensive and much-cited **American Widescreen Museum** (<http://www.widescreenmuseum.com>), on widescreen, colour and sound

technologies; all resources lovingly put together by knowledgeable individuals who felt the compulsion to do so, now that the easy means to published were available.

And then there is blogging. This, for me, has been the great discovery of the past couple of years, a means to promote research and publish research whose value is only just starting to be realised, so it is worth recounting the background history a little.

The word 'blog' is short for 'web log'. The first blogs started to appear in the mid-1990s, but since 2004, with emergence of free and easy-to-use software such as Blogger, TypePad and WordPress, blogs have proliferated on the web to an extraordinary extent. There are now over 100 million blogs in existence, and it is estimated that a new one is created every seven seconds.

Blogs began as online diaries, and for the majority of users that is what they remain, all too easy means of expressing thoughts and opinions on any subject under the sun, recording the minutiae of personal lives. Inevitably, the vast majority of blogs range from the inconsequential to the annoying, and hold little interest for anyone except their authors. However, the versatility of the form has attracted political commentators, journalists, cultural institutions, public figures, knowledgeable subject specialists and academic researchers to create intelligent online resources which not only report on events, thoughts and discoveries, but archive them and make the web an ever increasingly rich source of contextualised material for a vast range of subjects.

Central to a blog is posting. Posts are the individual items the blogger uploads onto the blog, identified by title, date, time of posting and 'tags' (or keywords) which classifying the post under the subjects it covers, and which build up into a subject-classified archive. The most recent post always appears at the top of the blog. Individual posts each come with their own URL, or permalink, for ease of linking and future access. Posts can be of any length, and can be illustrated. Copying images from other sites for use in one's blog is all too easy, and bloggers tend to be notably cavalier where copyright is concerned. It is possible to add moving images as well: sites such as YouTube offer the option automatically to embed videos into your blog. Down the right or left-hand column of a blog are such features as the subject categories used, the archived posts accessible month-by-month, and the blogroll, or links to other sites (it is a common courtesy among bloggers to link to other blogs, particularly those with a shared interest). Underpinning a blog is a content management system, accessible only to the blogger, which controls content and style, and which can supply statistics of usage, such as the number of visitors, the links visitors click on, popular subjects, and the search terms user have employed to find the blog. The other key aspect is commenting: any post can be commented on (some blogs

restrict such access, for instance by requiring users to sign in first), and a popular post will generally attract a number of comments from readers.

It was in 2006 that I started reading blogs for the first time, noticed the potential of the form, and decided to create one for myself. Entitled The Bioscope, it had ambitions to discuss a wide range of visual media dating from before the First World War. I took it down after a few weeks, not satisfied with the approach I had taken, and in February 2007 it reappeared under the same title, subtitled 'Reporting on the world of early and silent cinema.' Now the plan was to recreate a resource for those interested in early cinema (soon expanded to silent cinema overall), providing news, reports, and descriptions of ongoing research and available research resources online. I had noted that there were other subject specialist blogs which had multiple contributors, and for the first few months, perhaps a little over-ambitiously, I invited a number of experts in early and silent cinema to become co-authors (the content management system of a blog allows for multiple authors, with different levels of control for different categories of contributor). Although sound in principle, as I wanted there to be accounts from people actively involved in researching early film from around the world, in practice too few early film experts were comfortable with the medium, or had the time to devote to keeping up with a blog on a regular basis. A few hardy souls signed up and made some contributions, but eventually I decided that The Bioscope was going to work best as an individual endeavour.

From slow beginnings, **The Bioscope** (<http://bioscopic.wordpress.com>) has built up into a news and research resource of some popularity, and hopefully some value. It now attracts around 12,000 visitors per month, who range from experts in the field to new enthusiasts for silent cinema. There are some sixty-five subject categories, from Advertising to Women. I have been publishing a post per day, a compulsive level of commitment which is probably going to have to be reduced in the future. The information comes from personal interests and research work, information sent by others, or material uncovered through news alerts, web searches, and the activity of other blogs. Anything and everything can be included in a blog. The great virtue (as well as vice) of the form is that it encourages the blogger to write on unformed as well as formed subjects, sometimes engaging in random speculation, but also putting down observations or discoveries where they are fresh. For the academic, it is an opportunity to write on subjects beyond those of the essay or a monograph, and in an abbreviated, journalistic form. It is an excellent lesson in writing communicatively and concisely. In the first year of The Bioscope's existence, I wrote over 100,000 words – the equivalent of an entire book. But every month I get more people reading what I have done than have probably read all the books and all the academic papers that I have published in twenty years. Writing a blog is not the same as writing a

book – it opens up new approaches, and encourages the explorations of new subjects or old subjects in new ways – but it is a powerful and refreshing means of communication.

The Bioscope is a name with rich associations. It was the name of a British film trade journal of the silent era, a film projector marketed by my old friend Charles Urban, and a name given to fairground film shows and some of the first cinemas. The word hails from an early nineteenth-century religious tract, and its original definition was ‘a view of life or survey of life.’ So it echoes that intention to make a seemingly narrow subject, early cinema, become richer through the connections it can make with a wider world of interests – which is precisely what is enabled by the blog form.

The Bioscope reports on the latest news on early and silent cinema, alerting readers to new publications, conferences, festivals, television and radio programming, DVD releases and screenings. I cannot hope to be comprehensive for the latter two, but as time goes on the blogger gets a sense of what fits in to the growing scheme of things, and what the readers will want to see. Where I have decided to specialise is in identifying research resources available online. I have pointed out websites, databases, image collections, essays, legal online videos and catalogues. In particular, I have highlighted relevant freely available digitised texts on sites like the Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg, contextualising and collecting them in the ‘Library’ section of The Bioscope. There have also been series on subjects such as ‘How to run a picture theatre’ (extracted from a 1912 guide), ‘Lost and Found’ film collections, a history of colour cinematography in silent cinema, stories of the engagement between literary figures and early cinema, and – possibly my favourite – the Bioscope’s very own film festival, in this case a festival of lost films, virtuality taken to its logical conclusion. I have been able to indulge in personal interests, such as family history resources of use to film historians, memoirs of early cinema-going, and the potential of digitised newspaper collections for film history research.

There are thousands of blogs dedicated to film, most of which take the form of fan sites and reviews of the latest cinema or DVD releases. All well and good; the better you write, the more readers you will acquire, so good luck to them. I am interested in the form as a means to disseminate information. There are a number of excellent examples devoted to the silent film era. They include **Edna’s Place** (<http://ednapurviance.blogspot.com>), more than just a blog dedicated to Edna Purviance and Charlie Chaplin; **The Crowd Roars** (<http://silentfilmlegend.blogspot.com>), on films from silents to the 1940s; **Film of the Year** (<http://filmyear.typepad.com/blog>), intelligently discussing one film per year of the history of cinema; and the idiosyncratic but knowledgeable **Ferdinand von Galitzien** (<http://ferdinandvongalitzien.blogspot.com>), reviewing silents in the guise of a German count. For the multilingual, there is the informative news source

Stummfilm-blog (<http://blog.stummfilm.info>), **Recanto Silente** (<http://recantosilente.blogspot.com>) and **Pasión Silente** (<http://pasionsilente.blogspot.com>). And there is blogging that goes on here at the BFI; for example, Michael Brooke's remarkable attempt to log and describe every single film on the recent five-disc DVD set of the works of **Georges Méliès** (<http://filmjournal.net/melies>).

Silent film practitioners have also got in on the act; for example, silent film pianist **Ben Model** (<http://www.silentfilmmusicblog.com/>). Others use the blog form as an easy way to create web reference sources rather than blogs as such; for example, the **Women and Silent British Cinema** site (<http://womenandsilentbritishcinema.wordpress.com/>).

If one wanted any further evidence of the validity of the blog form as a means of publication, then look no further than David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's **Observations on film art and Film Art** (<http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog>). Bordwell, who is the main author, uses the blog to expound his ideas about the art of film and film history, each post usually sparked off by films he has just seen, DVDs just purchased, conferences or festivals attended. The approach may seem random, but everything is underpinned by the research questions and methods of analysis with which he built up his reputation as a writer. The blog in its first year alone attracted 250,000 visitors, and now attracts 1,000 people a day (the Bioscope's on 3-400 a day). As Bordwell writes:

In the last twelve months, we've posted about 200,000 words, or enough for two books. We've tried to make most entries as attentive to ideas and information as what we'd write for a print publication—if not a scholarly book, at least a mainstream article. Kristin and I think of our blog as a sort of column, published in a magazine we edit, with no length restrictions, no assigned topics, and as many pictures as we like. It's been fun to write more informally than we usually do ... While the blog originally aimed to supplement *Film Art: An Introduction*, we think that the best way to do that is to keep reminding our readers that the world of film is dazzling in its diversity and unpredictability. One commentator said that our blog was aimed at students and nonspecialists, but we find that many professional film scholars and film journalists check on us. Perhaps that's because we wander where we like, from very old films to recent films we see at multiplexes and festivals, and we propose ideas that could be considered more closely and researched more exactly. One correspondent said that many of our entries could be the basis for research articles. Maybe, but we have more ideas than we can ever write up systematically, so off to the blog they have gone. In addition, we've sometimes used the blog to extend or supplement things we've published in books and articles.

(Our first anniversary, with a note on the unexpected fruits of film piracy, 27 September 2007, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=1351>)

So the blog is an expression of a mind, or minds, at work. It interrelates with other forms of publication, finding space or unformed or early ideas, extending work done elsewhere, and above all communicating with generalists and specialists. It looks outwards, not inwards.

Blogging points to a means of scholarly discourse, or exchange of knowledge, that along with other so-called Web 2.0 technologies, will inevitably overturn the means by which we create, publish and learn from research in the future. The key is in the structure of the data, and the socialisation of that data. Whatever I write on a blog, or a Wiki, or any other web form which can be edited and commented upon is the initial form of expression. But what gives it additional meaning is in how the text is enriched by tagging, hyperlinking, the comments of others, and then the use of search tools which investigate other such blogs, analyse them and come up with collective results. The publication is therefore defined by its component parts, and what these mean to others, whose own interests thereby enrich what has been written. The original research process remains the same – we still have to go out, explore intelligently and express coherently what we have found – it is just the means of finding, comprehending, sharing and augmenting such work that are now available are stupendous. There is no excuse for anyone with a modicum of knowledge in any subject not to be taking part.

I have been writing *The Bioscope* for a year and a half now, and it has become dangerously compulsive. Perhaps there is a residue of guilt feeling that I would have better spent the time writing those earnest papers to be read by the dedicated few, or the well-received monograph that might find its way to a university library shelf or two. There's always something more solid about print and paper. Well, I have got to work harder at the online publication, not less. The versatility of the forms available demands it, and the future of research – in early cinema and in any other kind of subject – will be controlled by it. The tools for creating online resource grow by the day, and all that it requires is sufficient application to make best use of them.

As it is, I haven't stopped writing for print publication, nor exploring other forms of online publication beyond the blog. As David Bordwell demonstrates, it is the interrelatedness between different forms of publication that is key. My research into newsreels all those years ago eventually informed the **British Universities Newsreel Database** (<http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsreels>), a resource hosted by the BUFVC designed to encourage others to research their own projects using the newsreels, which I was honoured to manage while I was at the BUFVC. Another BUFVC database that I started up and which gets formally published later this year, **An International Database of Shakespeare on Film, Radio and Television** (<http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare>), perhaps owes something to that initial thrill at seeing what only the camera could do when I came across *The Tempest*, nigh on thirty years ago.

And then there is my own website. Inspired by the example of some academics who made papers available on university web pages, I created my personal site, www.lukemckernan.com, just under two years ago. Here I put up copies of all the papers I produce (where I have permission to do so), scripts of talks I've given (where I didn't just improvise), links to databases and other web resources I've worked on, as well as including a plain listing of articles written, talks given, shows presented, and so on. I'll be putting up my thesis there in its entirety in the near future, and there are creative ways in which I would like to develop it further. And, sure enough, you'll find a copy of my text for this paper there, ready to download and read again should feel so compelled to do so (plus there will be links for the resources I have mentioned this evening).

But now my research interests in film are moving on. I have found myself more and more looking away from the screen and more at those at whom the films were directed. The meaning of film now seems to lie in who saw it, for the audience must always be the ultimate judge of what meanings a film may hold. When I first considered the propagandist use of the Topical Budget newsreel, the differences between what the propagandists expected the films to say and myself as their viewer were all too apparent, and it seemed reasonable to infer that there were similar differences felt at the time. A film unseen is a film without meaning, but anyone may view any film differently. The interest for me now is to identify those differences, and the circumstances that created them. I am not sure that I will ever move entirely from film historian to social historian, but the work I have done on pre-First World War cinema audiences in London – some fruits of which, of course, have been published online as **The London Project** (<http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk>) – has opened up many new avenues of discovery. Once again, I am not quite sure of where I am going, faced with unexplored territory. The maps of where I want to go are blank ones, and I am not even too sure which way the compass is pointing. But that knowing uncertainty is what research is all about.

Note

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