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Early cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, and film culture today: An interview with Ian Christie on new directions in film history

Malte Hagener & Annie van den Oever

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Keywords: early cinema, film studies, Ian Christie, interview, Robert Paul, Sergei Eisenstein

Martin Scorsese and production design, early British cinema and Sergei Eisenstein, the Archers and contemporary European film culture – Ian Christie is as versatile as he is prolific. We caught up with Ian between a visit to the Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, teaching at Birkbeck, UC London, and lectures on projection and Powell/Pressburger in the UK. He took the time to discuss some of the fields he is active in, but this is by no means exhaustive: the interview could have easily been three times as long if we wanted to cover every aspect of his activities. We focused mainly on his work on Eisenstein and early cinema. Other fields such as his engagement with Europa Cinemas, of which he was the President, his interest in production design (books on John Box), and the more general work around the long tail of film history in the digital age could not be touched upon in this relatively short interview.

As 2017 was an Eisensteinian year in many ways, we started the interview with a series of questions on Sergei Eisenstein, whose work Christie has been studying since the 1970s; with Richard Taylor, he published *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (1993). In 1988 he curated an exhibition titled Eisenstein: His Life and Art, and in 2016 he curated another exhibition in London titled Unexpected Eisenstein. The second half of the interview is devoted to a reflection on film studies in the 1970s in the UK, with *Screen* and Laura Mulvey and

Peter Wollen; and early cinema studies in the 1990s, sparked by film's centennial and drawing attention to UK film pioneers. Christie wrote about one of them, Robert Paul, for a book coming out next year; the research was accompanied by a blog (see paulsanimatographworks.wordpress.com).

Eisenstein's excessive canonisation

NECSUS: You have been working on Sergei Eisenstein since the 1970s, so almost 50 years. What in Eisenstein's work triggered your personal interest in that early phase?

Christie: Good heavens! That's nearly as long as the poor man lived. I think it was a conjunction of new approaches to Eisenstein that opened up at the end of the 1970s, making him seem very different from the rather monumental figure created by the original Film Society generation. First there was Peter Wollen's terrific essay in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969-1972), which made a radical case for reassessing Eisenstein, very much inspired by the belated discovery of his first film *Strike*. That had only just emerged in the wake of the Khrushchev 'thaw', which had also liberated the second part of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, banned by Stalin in the mid-1940s. But whereas *Ivan* seemed to many outdated, 'operatic' in a bad sense, *Strike* was almost like a 'new wave' film *avant la lettre*, perfectly at home in the world of Makavejev, Godard, May '68, Ciné Tracts, and even Sam Fuller. There was also a rising tide of interest in the early Soviet avant-garde during the 1960s. Camilla Gray's book *The Great Experiment* (1962) was an inspiration, and so was the 1971 exhibition Art in Revolution at the Hayward Gallery, for which Lutz Becker made a highly experimental accompanying documentary. So, many of us felt that Soviet film of the 1920s was surprisingly close to the independent film aspiration of our own era. I remember helping organise a programme at the London Filmmakers' Co-op which featured the Western avant-garde work that Ilya Ehrenburg brought back to Moscow in 1927 – which Eisenstein condemned, but I suspect was secretly influenced by.

And the other development that steered me towards an interest in Eisenstein was getting to know the battleground of Soviet cinema in the 1920s better, when I edited a booklet on 'Eccentrism' with John Gillett [a British film researcher who was also a Russian and Soviet cinema aficionado], to accompany a 1978 season at the National Film Theatre.[1] I realised that the young Eisenstein had been very close to joining the FEKS group of Kozintsev and

Trauberg, together with Yutkevich. And that really made ‘the old man’ seem a very different subject than the rather academic theorist of montage.

NECSUS: Has your interest in Eisenstein been consistently focused on specific aspects? Has it transformed over the years?

Christie: I think it’s had a fairly consistent basis through all these years, which is to rescue him from the excessive canonisation that engulfed him already during the 1920s, and then made him rather like the monuments or gods that he loved toppling. The first task is to replace him in the context of avant-garde confusion that came after the Civil War in Russia, when he was one of the youngsters seeking a ‘home’ and trying to make his reputation in this turbulent period. And the second is to trace the personal and contextual factors that continued to influence even his most seemingly intellectual and political projects. The theme of the ‘lost’ or bewildered child keeps returning, and I think I grasped early on that this is really Sergei himself – all the way from his childhood drawing, in which he tries to locate himself in a ‘kingdom of the animals’ (you can see this in the wonderful online presentation of the childhood notebooks that Oksana Bulgakowa made for the Foundation Daniel Langlois), through the child at the centre of the ‘lost’ film, *Bezhin Meadow*, and especially in the extraordinary flashback in *Ivan the Terrible*, which he moved close to the beginning of Part Two.[2]

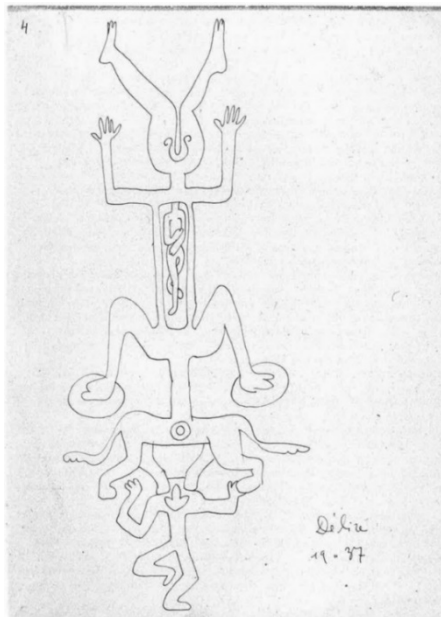
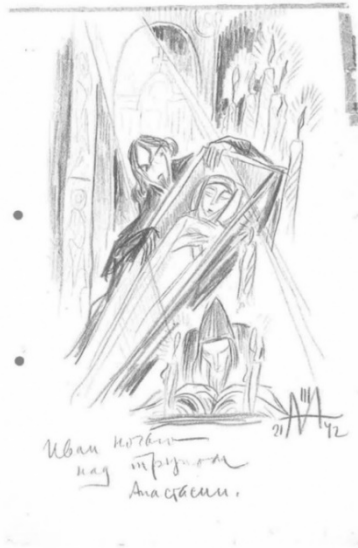


Fig. 1: Young Ivan attempting to circumvent a vast, open space right before his mother is poisoned by the Boyars. From *Ivan the Terrible: Part II*.

I remember the British distributor Contemporary Films had a new print of *Ivan the Terrible*, which I did a ‘retrospective’ review of for our *Monthly Film Bulletin* in the early 1980s, and I think it was realising just how autobiographical *Ivan* was that really shaped my approach. When (in *Ivan*) the Tsar beseeches his former best friend to return from a monastery to join him – it’s hard not to think of Eisenstein’s own sense of betrayal by Alexandrov after they both returned to Moscow from Mexico. And especially that searing ‘memory’ for Ivan of his mother’s murder, filmed in truly melodramatic style, before he’s placed on the throne as a puppet Tsar by the Boyars. So in the build-up to the exhibition that David Elliott [a British curator and writer who has extensively explored art in totalitarian regimes] and I did about Eisenstein’s life and work in 1988, I think I was mainly concerned to discover and reveal a more ‘human’ figure by whatever means we could.

But as a result of the exhibition, and encountering his drawings for the first time, I started to become interested in these as a ‘third text’, alongside the films and writings. And since then, contributing to the New York Drawing Center’s publication in 2002[3] and planning our Unexpected Eisenstein exhibition in London in 2016,[4] I’ve come to see the huge corpus of drawings as a field that still demands exploration and interpretation (see Figs 3-5).





Figs. 2, 3, 4: 'Synthesis: Eve, Europa, Jesus, Torerro' (1931); 'Ivan at Night beside the Corpse of Anastasia' (1942); 'Delirium' (1937).[5] Private collection. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London.

A Post-Eisensteinian period

NECSUS: At the NECS conference in Paris in 2017, you spoke about the ‘Graph of Eisenstein’s Reputation’, almost exactly 90 years after *October* premièred, and 100 years after the Russian Revolution. The 2017 centennial triggered quite a bit of attention for Eisenstein too it seems. Would you say that over the decades Eisenstein shared by and large in the waves of popularity, or the lack thereof, of the revolution?

Christie: What I call Eisenstein’s reputation is a complex, shifting business, not least because he has been taken as a poster-boy for the USSR, and for Stalinist culture, rather more than as a mere filmmaker or artist, or indeed as a victim of Stalinism. There’s a passage in Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, that great exposé of the gulag system, where one of the prisoners sounds off against Eisenstein as an ‘arse-licker’ who helped sell Stalin to the world. And Nadzheda Mandelstam, the poet’s widow, also has a telling phrase in her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, condemning the glamour surrounding Eisenstein in the 1920s. So you realise that his reputation has long been sharply contested at home as well as abroad.

I think the two biggest challenges for his reputation, apart from the even larger issue of identifying him with Stalinism, have been comparisons with two other Russian filmmakers: Dziga Vertov and Andrey Tarkovsky. Roughly speaking, Vertov began to be championed in the 1970s and 1980s as a more authentically ‘Soviet’ – meaning Constructivist – artist than Eisenstein, and one who paid the price of being silenced for his refusal to compromise; while Tarkovsky has increasingly been seen as an anti-Soviet ‘good Russian’, and moreover one who cast himself as the antithesis of Eisenstein. And the problem is that to embrace either of these ‘strong’ figures in the history of Russian cinema seems to mean adopting their hostility to Eisenstein. So Eisenstein’s reputation has tended to suffer, even though of course, it could be said both of the other filmmakers had their reasons for speaking ill of him. In Tarkovsky’s case, I think it was initially a generational matter, as he and his contemporaries looked out toward world cinema, having been brought up on a dull diet of Eisenstein as propagandist. I don’t think most of them had a clue about other aspects of his life and work, or any interest in finding out. I remember taking Elem Klimov [Russian-Soviet film director] around our Eisenstein exhibition in London in 1988, and when we came to a clip from *Romance Sentimentale*, the sound short that the Eisenstein trio made in Paris in 1929, he was intrigued but said he’d never heard of it!

And as for Eisenstein as an apologist for Stalin, of course it's difficult to see how he was resisting the version of Tsar Ivan that Stalin wanted – or indeed to remember how many of Eisenstein's own projects were aborted or ignored, before he realised that he had to make *Ivan*, while being determined to subvert it from within. Joan Neuberger's new book on *Ivan*, *This Thing of Darkness*, should make clear to those interested just what an all-consuming struggle Eisenstein had to make his film, and in fact how it ultimately consumed him.

NECSUS: Eisenstein is appropriated in videos and advertisements, he is present in exhibitions and as a writer, he might even be (re-)discovered as a visual artist, yet his films are being watched less and less. Would it make sense to speak of a Post-Eisensteinian period – in a similar way to the post-cinema era – since he seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time?

Christie: There certainly was a period when it was fashionable, and even expedient for educators, to point to the influence of Eisenstein on other filmmakers (*The Untouchables*, etc), and to cite the parodies (*Tango*) as evidence of his continuing fame. But I'm not sure the films are being watched any less than other films of their period(s). If people show any 1920s silent other than a comedy it is more than likely to be *Potemkin*. And during the centenary year of 2017, there were innumerable screenings of *October* – a number of which I introduced in the UK! What audiences for this discovered is just how 'eccentric' a chronicle of 1917 it was, and still is – Eisenstein already biting the hand that fed him and producing his own 'discourse on method' in the guise of a celebratory epic. After the big screening at the Barbican in London, accompanied by Meisel's score played by the full London Symphony Orchestra with Frank Strobel conducting, I felt the audience was almost literally shell-shocked by the explosive power of the film with its music – a performance that neither filmmaker nor composer ever experienced on this scale. So this is more a post-cinema (in the conventional sense) effect than post-Eisenstein. And Eisenstein scholars would point to his own grandiose vision of what cinema could become, in the 'Stereo-cinema' essay of 1947 that was only recently translated in full.[6]

NECSUS: Is Eisenstein by now a serious topic for museums and coffee table books rather than the feared iconoclast of the 1920s-1960s? Or, put differently: has Eisenstein (what he stands for, i.e. the chiffre, as much as the work of the artist) lost all the revolutionary energy that he used to be known for?

Christie: When we talk of Eisenstein's 'revolutionary energy' back in the 1920s, we have to remember that this was not merely a 'textual effect' of montage itself inciting revolution! If *Potemkin* was considered dangerously subversive, this was at least as much due to the actual social and political situation in which it was being shown in Germany, France, Britain, and other countries that had substantial socialist movements. It was this combination that made the film seem dangerous for the authorities that banned its exhibition. And in fact it could still have this effect later in special circumstances. I remember showing *Potemkin* to Latino students in a Chicago high school in 1986, when I was working at the Art Institute, and both the students and their teachers could relate easily to the Odessa Steps sequence, from their own knowledge of recent Latin American history.

But yes, the most marketable aspect of Eisenstein at present is probably the drawings, and especially the more scandalous ones that have come onto the art market, as presented by Matthew Stephenson [independent art consultant based in London who recently curated a private exhibition of Eisenstein's drawings in the US in 2017] and the gallery Alexander Gray Associates in New York. The very fact that these break many taboos on what can be exhibited, with their riotously uninhibited variations on sexual coupling, their cheerful blasphemy, and their polymorphous gay sexuality – all make for a revival of Eisenstein as a 'dangerous' artist, which we should be grateful for. It may not be how the Russians want to have their official greatest filmmaker remembered, but they've had him for long enough – so now it's time for him to be reconfigured (again) by outsiders. But I think the drawings may also send people back to the films, with new ideas about what they will find in them, as Mark Rappaport [American filmmaker and artist who recently made a video essay exploring the subtle bi-sexual underpinnings in Eisenstein's films] has shown in his video essay *Sir Gay*.



Figs. 5, 6: Untitled (1931); Untitled (1931).[7] Private Collection. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Matthew Stephenson, London.

If you think about how classic literature has been re-assessed over the centuries – as Frank Kermode [British literary critic, author, and editor] showed in his Eliot Lectures [published as *The Classic*] – then Eisenstein’s films are still in the early stages of interpretation and reassessment.[8] And thanks to digital access, this process can be compressed and accelerated, compared with literature. So I think the idea Eisenstein’s work might ‘lose revolutionary energy’ is taking a rather short-term view. You might say that October 1917 has lost considerable revolutionary appeal, but Eisenstein’s films – like for instance, Milton’s *Paradise* poems – have clearly transcended their rather narrow, sectarian origins to become enduring texts in which we can locate our current concerns. Classics, in fact.

NECSUS: You worked for twenty years, from 1976 to 1996, in various capacities at the British Film Institute (BFI). These are the decades when early cinema was rediscovered – as an academic subject, from the FIAF conference in Brighton in 1978, to the larger debates around attractions and narration in the 1980s, all the way to conceptualising cinema as part of a modern culture, but also as attractive material for a larger audience in spectacular screenings with musical accompaniment. How did you take part in this? How do you look back on this?

Christie: It’s become traditional to date the start of modern interest in ‘early cinema’ from the 1978 FIAF congress, when all the archives sent in their pre-1906 films for a grand viewing. I was involved peripherally in that Brighton event, as part of my BFI regional exhibition brief, and we organised several special programmes at the BFI Brighton Film Theatre. I think one of these included early radical film from the 1930s, but for me the most important event was a screening of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), in the only more or less complete version showable at the time – a composite of three fragmentary nitrate prints, which could only be screened in a very few licensed theatres. Our special guest in Brighton in 1978 was Emeric Pressburger, for whom we held a dinner before the screening, at which I think Peter Wollen and Jacques Ledoux were present. I remember it was running late, and I looked around the table suggesting we might skip having dessert – at which Ledoux, who really appreciated food, said sternly that he never trusted people who didn’t take dessert! After that, we had to keep the audience waiting for a good twenty minutes, before all the guests trooped in! But that screening was so impressive, that I determined right away we had to raise the money somehow to make a proper safety negative of *Blimp*. That proved a long struggle, since we couldn’t show anyone how magnificent the film

would be, and it took nearly seven years to get to the film's re-birth in 1985. One devout admirer, incidentally, was Derek Jarman, who helped us raise the very first charitable gift towards the restoration.

I didn't really get involved in presenting silent film with live accompaniment until I was trying to launch an alternative canon of Soviet cinema in the early 1980s, when I discovered that Shostakovich's score for the Kozintsev-Trauberg film *New Babylon* had never been properly reconstructed. That led to a three-night run in London, following the trail blazed by Brownlow's reconstruction of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. Then we started commissioning new scores for forgotten silent features, such as *Moulin Rouge* and *The Italian Straw Hat*, and eventually resurrecting the original Edmund Meisel scores for Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*.

Early cinema history on primetime television in the UK: *The Last Machine*

NECSUS: As writer and co-producer, you were responsible for the five episodes of the 'edutainment' series *The Last Machine*, hosted by Terry Gilliam, which aired nation-wide on BBC 2 in 1995 in primetime on Saturday evenings! In retrospect, would you say that such a TV series on early cinema with relatively high production values was only possible because it was made just before the internet really took off? Moreover, 1995 marked the centenary of film, a distinct moment for the UK as a country with a rich and vivid early film culture. Was there something like a broader awareness of this early history at that point in time, perhaps partly thanks to scholarly work being done on Britain's early film pioneers? We are thinking of Robert Paul, Esmé Collings, Cecil Hepworth, G.A. Smith, and Arthur Melbourne-Cooper as the pioneer of puppet animation.

Christie: I think it was sometime in 1991 that I realised there would soon be a unique opportunity to celebrate the centenary of cinema, around 1995. In fact France took an early lead in planning this, with a full-scale national committee, focused on the Lumiere centenary. In Britain, however, it was decided to celebrate 1996, as the first year of public exhibition, and I managed to persuade colleagues to commit to two centenary projects. One was what became *The Last Machine*, which was actually a co-production with a Dutch broadcaster, and aired in 1994, and the other was an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, which went through many changes of concept

over nearly five years, before it happened in 1996 as *Spellbound: Art and Film*, with work by filmmakers like Gilliam, Greenaway, and Ridley Scott, and films by artists such as Edoardo Paolozzi, Paula Rego, Damien Hirst, Boyd Webb – and Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*.

For *The Last Machine*, it was Colin McCabe who made the initial contact with BBC and asked me if I could write a short pitch that would imply something racier than historians explaining old equipment, punctuated by fragments of old film. I remember one inspiration was Anne Hollander's 1989 book *Moving Pictures*, which discussed 19th century fashion and painting in what seemed like a completely original, exciting way. If only we could find some way of equaling that, I felt we stood a chance of getting onto television at a civilised hour – and fortunately that book had also excited Michael Jackson, then controller of BBC2. I decided to try to weave together well-known cultural figures – Lewis Carroll, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Virginia Woolf – whose work foreshadowed or paralleled cinema, in a kind of phantasmagoria. I remember announcing that it would be 'cinema from c. 1700–1913', so dealing very much with the aspiration towards film that ran through the whole 19th century.

Despite his misgivings about 'men in top hats', Michael gave us the money, which allowed the producer John Wyver to rent studio space at Pinewood and to assemble an extraordinary cast of actors, who each played a wide range of parts. We only had Fiona Shaw, for instance, for one day, during which she was Virginia Woolf and a Russian heiress, who had plans to raise the standard of early Russian cinema theatres. Terry Gilliam had agreed to present the programmes, but he too was under extreme time pressure, preparing his new film *12 Monkeys*, so he had to be filmed doing all the intros and brief cameos in two hectic days of almost non-stop costume and make-up changes.

I wouldn't say it was a surge of interest in early British filmmaking that drove *The Last Machine*, although Michael Chanan's 1980 book *The Dream That Kicks* was certainly a good model for a new kind of history. One key source was Yuri Tsivian's *Early Russian Cinema*, which Richard Taylor and I had published in our Russian cinema book series, and which was part of the new trend towards focusing on exhibition and audiences, rather than producers. Charles Musser's *Before the Nickelodeon*, about Edison and Porter, was also an important source, and in fact John Wyver and I visited the Edison historic site in West Orange, as part of our preparation for the series, which

gave us a feel for the importance of Edison in inspiring all the European pioneers. But as we worked on the detailed texture of the programmes, weaving in as many early films as possible, among dramatisations of writers and audiences, I certainly became much more aware of the improvisatory climate of early film. And I emerged with the determination to make our true British pioneer, Robert Paul, better known. It's only taken me 25 years to bring that near to fruition!

NECSUS: How has the BFI, and UK film policy more generally, changed in the past 20 years since the centenary of the cinema? What role did the BFI play nationally and internationally, in terms of archiving, preserving, presenting film, museum displays, publishing, screening, etc, back then and what role does it play today?

Christie: Looking back from today, I would say the interest in early cinema from the BFI, and in promoting wider interest in film culture, seemed to peak in the 1990s, pivoting around the centenary celebrations. During that decade, it ran the Museum of the Moving Image, which although underfunded stood as a model for a new kind of museum experience for cinema. We were active as an adventurous video publisher, in partnership with the French producer Anatole Dauman of Argos, and in book and magazine publishing. And the BFI Production Board backed some of its most individual and innovative filmmakers, such as Terence Davies, Patrick Keiller, Shane Meadows, and crossover filmmaker-artists such as Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah. The end of the decade saw major changes, after the creation of the UK Film Council. Both the Museum of the Moving Image and the Production Board were closed, and the BFI disengaged from the network of regional exhibitors it had supported. Since the Film Council was wound up in 2011, the BFI has been markedly more focused on mainstream projects.

In the days of #MeToo

NECSUS: In the 1970s film studies in the UK was up and coming and there were vivid debates in the circles of the British film journal *Screen*, with Stephen Heath and Peter Wollen amongst them, as well as your longtime Birkbeck colleague and friend Laura Mulvey. You were all part of an assertive new generation, intellectually and politically, affecting the practices of film curating and film making as well as academic film studies, coining a new critical vocabulary in the process, most famously perhaps Laura's take on the male

gaze, which is a debate resonating again in the days of #MeToo. How do you look back on these days?

Christie: The film studies that emerged in the 1970s was very much a hybrid affair, and the product of a strange conjunction of opportunities and interests. There was the fashion for French structuralism and semiotics, together with the vogue for a largely American version of what had started with the highly partisan '*politique des auteurs*' of *Cahiers du cinema*, as interpreted by Andrew Sarris. The first wave of feminism in the mid-1970s also owed much to a fusion of American and British impulses. And both art schools and the 'new universities' of the 1960s provided the conditions where a new subject could be launched. But there were other factors too that are easily forgotten, such as the plentiful supply of 16mm projectors and the cheap rental price of films. New radical distributors had sprung up, often fuelled by memories of May '68, and by the varieties of militant cinema arriving from Latin America and from home-grown radical groups. Initially these followed very different paths from the avant-gardists who had founded the filmmakers' co-ops, but somewhere around the mid-1970s they began to cross-fertilise, with Peter and Laura becoming extremely active as emissaries between what Peter had called 'the two avant-gardes' and, as you rightly note, pioneers of essayistic filmmaking.

Looking back, I'm struck by the strange mixture of eclecticism and dogmatism of the period. We were quite capable of being fascinated by such disparate work as *Los horas de los hornos* [Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, 1968], *Jeanne Dielman* [Chantal Akerman, 1975], and the filmmakers Stan Brakhage, Sam Fuller, and Dziga Vertov, not to mention post-'68 Godard. When I came to London to work at the British Film Institute in 1976, I started co-teaching a London University evening course with Simon Field, one of the founders of *Afterimage* and later director of the Rotterdam Festival (IFFR), and the feminist critic Pam Cook. At some point we realised that Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* was being taught to students right across this range of classes under many different headings. And indeed *Screen* journal would publish a 50-page 'essay toward *Man with a Movie Camera*' by Steve Crofts and Olivia Rose in 1977, which canonised this as *the* fetish film of the era! It had become a proxy for many different theories and positions that had little to do with the USSR in 1928, and as such a focus for intensely dogmatic debates. With hindsight, I realise it was probably my growing distaste for many of these abstruse arguments that led me to try to understand the reality of early

Soviet cinema after I started travelling to the USSR in 1979 and meeting Russian critics and filmmakers.

NECSUS: Would you say there was, in retrospect, an interesting simultaneity with the emerging first American generation of film school students who were also critical, political, as well as personal, 'inspired equally by what they studied and by what was happening around them in the early sixties', as you wrote about Martin Scorsese?

Christie: Of course, there were strong generational parallels. But you have to remember that America offered a vast range of industrial opportunities for would-be filmmakers emerging from college. For Scorsese, there was the Newsreel movement, a music film like *Woodstock*, working for Roger Corman, and then for a studio – all within less than five years. Even during the height of the British 'new wave' of the 1960s, there were no such opportunities for cinephile outsiders to get a foothold in the British film industry. Nor indeed was there any tradition of being able to study film at a university in Britain before the Slade's short-lived Film Unit in the early 1960s. So Peter Wollen getting to co-write Antonioni's *The Passenger* in 1975 seemed altogether exceptional. But by the end of the 1970s, these separate strands had all started to fuse into the beginnings of what we consider 'film culture' today. After all, it was the ex-Slade student Ray Durgnat who had first written appreciatively about Michael Powell in *Movie* in 1965; and it was Powell himself who urged me to compile a book from interviews with Scorsese, which became *Scorsese on Scorsese*, edited with David Thompson in 1989.

'Dead' film history

NECSUS: And what do you feel about the state of film and media studies today?

Christie: For the most part, I'm obviously happy that studying film and other audiovisual media has finally claimed its place in the academy. Today there are film and media courses offered at every level, from school to post-graduate – which could hardly have been foreseen back in the 1970s, when people like me were sneaking these into our teaching in art schools.

And yet, I also have some regrets as I contemplate the state of play today. One is that the theoretical eclecticism which was typical of early work in film studies seems to have become rather ossified. Teachers are often still offering

students what used to be the theoretical framework in the 80s and 90s – essentially the tail-end of structuralism, and Gilles Deleuze’s strange Bergsonian attempt to ‘philosophise’ the history of cinema. I’m not denying that there are important insights to take from Deleuze, as well as from Foucault and Barthes (though neither of them were particularly interested in cinema). But I think this habit of deference to French *maîtres à penser* has tended to make film studies somewhat cultish, as a kind of continuation of the early deference to what was understood of ‘auteur theory’.

More importantly, I think it has inhibited students and scholars working in film studies from ‘boldly going’ (as in *Star Trek*) where they could go in order to develop new paradigms for understanding how audiovisual media work, and especially how they work on us as embodied subjects. ‘Film’ is clearly not what it was as a cultural object or practice back in the 60s and 70s. We engage with it in so many different ways today, and we have so many new ways of studying its material and operation. So why shouldn’t ‘film and media studies’ continue to be a crucible for developing new paradigms for analysis and research?

For me personally, it seems clear that there is still much to be gained from the psychoanalytic tradition – and I’m proud to be involved with the European Psychoanalytic Film Festival, and to draw on new insights from once-neglected figures such as Wilfred Bion and D.W. Winnicott. But it seems just as obvious that there is potentially as much, if not more, to be gained from paying attention to current research in experimental psychology, such as that of my Birkbeck colleague Tim Smith, as well as cognitive neuroscience – which interestingly seems to connect with ongoing research into Eisenstein’s theoretical writings, as Julia Vassilieva and Anna Kolesnikova have shown. These approaches are often considered mutually exclusive, even contradictory, but I don’t agree. I am all for a principled, pragmatic eclecticism! Whatever seems to work, to offer insight into the problems or questions we’re trying to answer, we should try.

This kind of eclecticism seems to me what film studies first proposed back in the 60s and 70s, and it had a profound influence across the humanities, especially in literature and art history. But I think it’s symptomatic of the current conservative state of our field that it’s not having such a visible impact. When you consider the massive importance of audiovisual media in the contemporary world, doesn’t it seem surprising that scholars who specialise in studying these are not having their work widely noticed? Perhaps they don’t want to be noticed, but I think we still have an obligation to make our

colleagues, and a wider public, aware of what we know about the history and influence of the media. So, for myself, I am happy to contribute to the media whenever there is a chance to set the record straight, on radio and television and in mainstream newspapers. Or to try to bridge the gap between what some of my purist colleagues think about a work such as Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* and the obvious impact that has had on a wider public.[9] And in the books I have edited for the AUP Key Debates series, particularly *Audiences* and *Stories*, I have tried to demonstrate how this 'eclecticism' can work, by bringing together contributors who might not often consider themselves compatible.

I would like to see film and media studies return to being methodologically (not 'theoretically') ambitious, promiscuous even, in making use of the tools we have at our disposal. For instance, I think understanding the experiential reality of how we engage with digital media today could benefit from the input of 'attentional economics', as well as from the work of cultural geographers on space and place. We should also be aware of new techniques in handling 'big data', since what is the extent of our subject matter if not 'big'? Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's *Classical Hollywood Cinema* tried to do this, and remains an impressive landmark. But that's nearly 35 years ago, and it has hardly stimulated further work on a similar scale.

My remaining disappointment in film studies is really the lack of major historical work which could reshape the general understanding of our media-saturated world. Most of us have had the dismal experience of looking in the indexes of blockbuster historical studies, to see what film sources and examples appear. And almost invariably we find the same few, often inaccurate or inadequate, references. My current main project is to try to reorient understanding of the origins of cinema in Britain, with a book about our unknown pioneer Robert Paul, so I am especially conscious of how much 'dead' film history has accumulated in the public sphere. Let's hope that the rising generation of film and media scholars will have the courage and imagination – and ambition – to make themselves heard outside as well as inside the academy!

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Notes

- [1] Christie & Gillet 1978.
- [2] See Fig. 2.
- [3] A publication based on an exhibition of Eisenstein's drawings called *The Body of the Line* which can be found in 'The Drawing Center's *Drawing Paper, Volume 4* with an introduction by Catherine de Zegher and a text on drawings by Sergei Eisenstein. [It] also includes an attachment featuring essays collected during the symposium on January 27, 2000.' De Zegher & Bulgakowa & Christie & Gagnon & Iampolski & Michelson 2000, p. 29.
- [4] Curated by Ian Christie and co-curated by Elena Sudakova, *Unexpected Eisenstein* exhibits Eisenstein's drawings, sketches, and more, while at the same time draws connections to his life, his relationship to England, and his films.
- [5] De Zegher & Bulgakowa & Christie & Gagnon & Iampolski & Michelson 2000, pp. 11, 13, 24.
- [6] Eisenstein 2013 (originally published in 1947), pp. 20-59.
- [7] Kurchanova 2017.
- [8] Kermode 1983.
- [9] In a short essay for *Sight & Sound* online: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/they-shall-not-grow-old-peter-jackson-imperial-war-museum-world-war-one-archive-footage-revived>.