"The Challenges in Archiving Film History": David A. Cook’s A History of Narrative Film (Fifth Edition)

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David A. Cook’s fifth edition of A History of Narrative Film is a perceptive examination of the past, present, and potential future of narrative film in the many forms it has taken across world cinemas. As introduction to film form, the book provides insight into the origins of the cinematic apparatus, subsequently giving generous coverage to unpacking cinema’s multiple dominant centres of historical influence: from early formative silent pieces of French and American cinema (tracking the Lumieres’ building blocks to Melies’ magic pictures, Griffith’s founding father work to Chaplin’s pedestrian slapstick, Feuillade’s innovation in narrative to Gance’s aesthetic experimentation), the Soviet influence (among them Kuleshov, Eisentstein, and Kino Eye founder Vertov), the seminal work of Italian neorealism to the widely disparate yet rich French, British, Czechoslovak and German New Waves of the 1960s. What surfaces in
Cook’s text is a particularly keen eye for exploration: sentences filled with an extraordinary amount of enthusiasm spill over each page. While the text is premeditated and for the most part chronologically structured, one gets the impression that Cook is writing anew, discovering the medium himself. Its tone is infectious and the content rich and filled with surprising filmic anecdotes. In balancing form and content so effortlessly, it enables both cinephiles and elated newcomers to learn something new about cinema from the material and to savour the journey through his writing style. Cinema is treated as concrete occurrence within history, always specific to the political context of a country and the aesthetic sensibilities of its filmmakers.

Besides the careful contextualization of the country at hand, Cook’s work takes a threaded approach in weaving together parts of film history that may not always appear related. In other words, Cook maps out the relations across different cinemas as well as describing the ones that existed. In this way he is successful in equally generating a “narrative”, one of many from which cinema, as realized in history, can be observed. A way he does this for instance is, in describing Indian cinema (Chapter 18), he talks about dialogical influences among filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, and their relationship to the wider political environment. In doing this, Cook shows the cultural, national sensibilities of the specific cinema (India) and then proceeds to evince the cross-cultural, transnational capacity of cinema by clarifying, in one case, the neorealist influence on Ray, whose films in turn influenced world cinema at large. Such allusions to the boundlessness of film form are often brief but they are necessary, in particular to welcoming newcomers into film. This is because Cook shows how seemingly unrelated cinemas across the globe – like art and politics in a wider sense – remain related in dialogue with one another, learning from each other. However, this dialogical dimension of film is somewhat compromised in the book. Cook spends nearly ten chapters out of twenty two discussing North American and Hollywood cinema, thus lionizing Anglo-Saxon tradition in the cinematic imaginary.

Nonetheless, in mapping out the simultaneously occurring relations in filmic creation, Cook manages to incriminate several layers of history: the socio-political (film influenced by relations among people and in turn influences joint realm in which we act and manifest ourselves as human beings); the economic (the business element, that is, the modes of production and the art’s everlasting war with capital); the individual or personal (filmmaker as person with unique vision; the ability of cinema for vital expression of the human condition); and finally the metaphysical (film as a platform for channeling the transcendent). In doing so, the book recognizes that a challenge in archiving film history lies in recognizing the multiple layers of a film by its very occurrence in the world. This is the film’s ability to serve as an archive of human history: it is a sophisticated platform for channeling, negotiating, and challenging our perceptions of reality. The notion of reality is first tackled at the beginning of Chapter 1 and carries all the way through to the Digital Domain section, unpacking the various changing political realities of the twentieth century and how they influenced film form. An illustrative example of this can be found in the Chapter 4 discussion of German expressionism as an artistic reaction that follows World War I, and at the same time, through its stark representation of reality, foreshadows the fatalism of World War II.

In discussing archiving as a means of preserving reality the crucial question is what should remain and what should be left out? This may be a difficult question to answer and perhaps to some it may seem unnecessary. After all, it is precisely the archivist that is to collect and to preserve regardless of his/her own bias and personal interpretation. However, when it comes to writing any larger text on the history of world cinema, one can be forced to excise or at least summarize certain traits or tendencies in specific cinemas. Cook’s work proves exceptional in preserving much of world heritage in film and describing, albeit in a condensed form, the parallel cinemas arising over the last hundred years. The text does suffer, however, when it comes to the point of excision, as many national cinemas – including South Korea and Filipino – are never given treatment. Similarly, cinemas like that of East Germany, a cornerstone in socialist
culture of the last century, are mentioned in the context of West Germany, but never discussed beyond on their own terms. Excision demonstrates a serious danger in archiving film by excluding certain cinemas altogether. The criteria for exclusion, although in technical terms this should be avoided, will vary depending on the archivist and Institute in question. When it comes to Cook's work this particular incision should be sutured when releasing future editions of the text, in order to supplement the rich historical analysis on display and retain a degree of objectivity. The title of the book, however, presumably by intention, poses a clever strategy in solving the problem of objectivity in calling it "A History…", the article 'a' indicating the book presents more an account on the genealogy of narrative film rather than a definitive canon. In this title, Cook may relieve the tension of appearing definitive and allow the text to read more as deeply-insightful and tasteful kaleidoscopic view of cinema's history without the danger of appearing 'objective'.

In the ways discussed above we learn that archiving may not consist only of collection or amalgamation of information but structuring of information. In other words, it is a creative (in the most conservative sense of the word) chiselling: a sculpting of individual instances of history into collective history, all aimed at the preservation of the human condition for future generations. Cook's work serves a fine starter for preservation: an introduction outlining most essential elements about narrative film, from which the reader can build a more comprehensive awareness of film form and aesthetics.

More specifically, the book provides an excellent overview of the many countries around the world which number lower by population but remain aesthetically immense national cinemas. Cook's strength lies in contextualizing much underrepresented yet essential work of world cinema, including but not limited to pre-war Japan all the way through to post-war film and anime, carving out candid director profiles including that of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu, Oshima, Masamura, Yoshida, Kinoshita, Wakamatsu, Kobayashi, Teshigahara and Oguri (the one great addition for the future would be Shuji Terayama who is surprisingly left out of the avant-garde discussion, even though he was crucial in shaping it in 1970s Japan). Cook contextualizes the Three Schools of Polish cinema and Australian and Oceanic works, from mesmeric Peter Weir to Geoff Murphey work in New Zealand. There is equally coverage of Transcaucasian and Central Asian Cinema, ranging from Georgia and the visually-arresting art pieces of Georgi and Eldar Shengalaia to the harmonic experiments of Otar Iosselian, to silent Azerbaijani cinema (Boris Svetlov), Kyrgyz experimental work of the 1960s and the Turkmenistan film industry. The text also spans Chinese cinema in the People's Republic and the fluid politically-charged aesthetics of multiple Latin American cinemas.

Cook critically examines the traditions of great filmmaking countries, highlighting many that are often left out of critical and historical debate. It is countries such as the ones mentioned above that deserve further treatment in books on film history. Such examination would work to expand much of the grassroots writing displayed in this book. What one particularly finds more rare in writing on film history is an elementary overview of the cinemas of Yugoslavia, a unique force in European aesthetics, but one frequently left out. Therefore, Cook's advantage is his information-packed yet brief examination of Yugoslav cinema. Working from the new sensibilities emerging with Dušan Makavejev and Živojin Pavlović in the Yugoslav Black Wave, Cook manages to also cover the basics of Partisan cinema and the essential works of the Prague School group, including the existential comedies of Goran Marković, the artistic twists-and-turns of Goran Paskaljević and the palliative heaviness of Srdjan Karanović, the last of whom is especially left out of historical discussion. His poignant Petria's Wreath (1980) warrants further treatment, building on its inclusion in this book. Most of all, what remains commendable is that Cook recognizes the national sensibility of the country's cinema by keeping the very title "Yugoslavia" when referring to the films made within the country during the period of its existence. He thereby avoids a recently popularized tendency of former Yugoslav countries to 'reclaim' films from within each newly formed country (Serbia taking the "Serbian" productions, Croatia the
“Croatian” and likewise), which while understandable may mark historically an inaccuracy. Therefore Cook’s treatment of Yugoslavia, like many of the countries and cinemas handled in this book, proves perceptive and inclusive.

An inclination, however, present in much historical writing is the tendency to institutionalize filmmakers. Case in point: the institutionalization of Swedish regisseur Ingmar Bergman by film historians in the cultural imaginary may become clear in the very structure of the text: precisely three full pages are spent on Ingmar Bergman while Sweden as film industry and its other major figures including giants Victor Sjöström and Jan Troell are treated in altogether two paragraphs. This is less a critique of Cook’s writing and more a reflection of wider historical misappropriation when it comes to Swedish cinema, where Bergman is perceived as the beginning and end of a country’s national cinema, with everything else lying on the periphery. This claim serves not to dispute Bergman’s significance in the annals of cinema, but rather to point to other existent and equally significant figures, in order to remind readers that a national cinema cannot be reduced historically to one director, if only for the reason that it gives the impression that he is the only one around.

Cook appears selective when it comes to Greek and Turkish cinema as well. These national cinemas are discussed in two pages, primarily highlighting filmmakers Theo Angelopoulos and Yılmaz Güney. In the case of Greece, the formative work of Yorgos Javellas, Alexis Damianos, Michael Cacoyannis, Orestis Laskos and avant-garde formalists Nikos Koundouros and Nikos Nikolaidis, along with the country’s rich platter of actors, cinematographers, writers and editors, should not be left out of any historical analysis, be it of narrative, aesthetics or context. In Cook’s case it would be good to fill such gaps in later editions of the book, as well as altering the rather inappropriate subheading under which Greece and Turkey are treated, that of “Other Balkan Cinemas” which connotes a degree of Othering and exoticization. While national cinemas like that of the United States may certainly be more dominant in shaping convention and particular forms of narrative film, it is the historian or theoretician’s job to weigh out the significance of that influence and to balance it in relation to national cinemas across the world. Giving more space to examine national cinemas including Greece and Turkey, as well as Finland and Spain among others, would bring back balance into this fine text, thereby providing an even more accurate look at the various histories of narrative film.

A History of Narrative Film functions as a perceptive reading of history, being both informative, rich in detail and analysis, jubilant in tone, in many ways posing challenges to how we perceive cinema and reality, and finally offering a sampling of what the new digital domain may bring for the future of the medium. Will cinema die out or evolve into something new? Perhaps this is not something we should ask as the archivist is the one who preserves history and constantly updates it as the cinema updates itself. This book works well to the goal of preservation. I hope its future editions will build on the collection assembled here.