

Using Newspapers and Films as Tools for Cultural History Research

Mara Arts, University of London, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how media historians can gain valuable insight by using newspapers as well as fiction films as their primary source materials. It exhibits the value of considering press and cinema sources next to one another, through a case study of the representation of London's public transport network in popular newspapers and fiction films of interwar Britain. Through a close reading of relevant newspaper articles and films, it becomes evident that whilst both media paid heed to the sensational and potentially hazardous aspects of public transport, newspaper reports also sought to reassure readers which used transport every day. This indicates a more complicated relationship to the dangers of modernisation than an analysis of fiction films alone would suggest. Newspapers and films provide adjacent, complementary forms of representation. The press report on real-life events, but increased commercialisation of the press means that fictional storytelling devices are frequently used by reporters. Fiction films provide the inverse; its made-up stories need to be grounded in reality to permit audiences to connect with them. Considering both media alongside one another can create a new and richer understanding of social and cultural history.

Keywords: Film History, Media History, London, Methodology

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Introduction

This paper sets out a novel research methodology for cultural history research: the use of both film texts and newspaper reports as primary sources. Using these sources alongside one another can lead to valuable new insights in cultural history. As well as describing a possible approach to this methodology, the paper demonstrates its usefulness by providing an analysis of the representation of London's public transport system in interwar British films and newspapers.

During the 1920s and 1930s, British citizens were likely to consume both films and newspapers in their day-to-day life, as both media industries expanded rapidly. Audiences' interpretation of the world around them was influenced by the representation of that world in both films and newspapers. Newspapers and films provide different but supplementary representations of topics. Excavating the representations across both media therefore gives new insights in how a topic or phenomenon was presented to audiences.

In relation to London's public transport system, both media took differing approaches to representing this topic, which could lead to the *Daily Mirror* printing an article in 1929 about the unfortunate Miss Organ who got brutally attacked in a train; and the film *Underground* being released a year prior to this and displaying the underground train as a space for courtship. These two depictions appear to give conflicting messages about public transport.

This paper first makes the case for using newspapers and films as primary texts alongside one another. It then offers a practical insight into how one may design and conduct a project that considers both films and newspapers as primary texts. The second half of the paper explores the representation of public transport in interwar British films and newspapers, to demonstrate the methodology in action.

Using Newspapers and Films as Primary Sources

Using multiple, disparate types of source material for cultural history work is of course not new, and this approach has been used by other cultural historians and film historians to great effect. It is the combination of daily newspapers and films that is not commonly used, and of which I will set out the benefits. As D. L. LeMahieu (1998, p. 9) has demonstrated, newspapers and films both became particularly influential forms of mass-media in Britain between the wars, and, he argues, they democratised culture by allowing many more people to participate in the consumption of cultural expressions.

Richard Abel, who has looked at how newspapers reported on the emerging habit of filmgoing in the US, calls newspapers the 'Cultural Partner of the Movies' (2015, p. 6). His book *Menus for Movieland* persuasively demonstrates the role that the daily newspaper industry played in the promotion and growth of filmgoing as a new habit. The approach set out in this paper is different; rather than looking at newspaper articles *about film*, it explores how one can compare the representations of a specific topic or event in both film and newspapers, to gain a rounded understanding of how the topic or event was mediated for everyday audiences.

Existing scholarship, then, has agreed on the importance of newspapers and films in early 20th century Western cultures. There has been exploration of how newspapers and fictional sources wrote about film; but there has not yet been much work done on how newspaper and film together reflected on the world around them.

Methodology

When planning to embark on a project that considers both films and newspapers, the main consideration is the difference in volumes between both media. A newspaper consists of hundreds of articles per issue. Depending on the country and period under observation, the film output within scope of the project could also run into the hundreds of film texts. To make the volume of potential primary sources manageable, sampling is required.

My own project only considered newspaper articles in three newspapers: The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*. These three titles were selected because they were all popular, national, daily newspapers. All were founded around the turn of the century, and hugely increased their circulation during the interwar period. Using these three papers as primary material allowed for an analysis of how newspapers aimed at the mass, lower-middle-class audience, represented the world to their readers.

But even with three newspaper titles, the amount of content over twenty years can be overwhelming. To narrow down the possible range of material, for each newspaper only two months' coverage, for each of the years in my period were considered. For the *Daily Express* for example, papers published in March and April for each of the years between 1920 and 1939 were included. The sampling for the other two papers covered different months, allowing for the total amount of primary material to cover six months out of twelve for each calendar year. This meant the sampling did not include any coverage about some big events: The General Strike in 1926 for example did not fall within it. The random approach to deciding which months to sample precluded the possibility of any unconscious bias towards certain historical events over others. After deciding on the sample, each newspaper issue within it was read on microfilm and its contents analysed. Any article that fell within the research parameters was noted down and coded against defined topics of interest.

Rather than reading the newspapers on microfilm, it is also possible to use word search cues in digital databases to find relevant articles. Whilst this approach may be the only available option if the researcher is not physically able to access microfilms or the original documents, there are limitations to using digital databases. Not all archives have sophisticated word search functionality, and any search is naturally limited to the terminology the researcher is aware of. Journalists may be using unfamiliar terms to describe the same topic, particularly if they were working in a different cultural or historical context. This may lead to valuable reports being missed by the researcher. Alternatively, a smaller sample size would likely allow for a more thorough read-through of each individual issue.

In comparison, the film corpus is almost inevitably smaller than the newspaper archive. If one is researching early cinema or cinema of a country where preservation has been limited, the sample is necessarily limited. As films can be less easily accessible than newspaper copies, online databases can in this instance really help the researcher to calculate how many films in theory exist that would be relevant to the research topic. From these, a representative sample can be drawn up to be included in the research.

The temporal nature of film brings its own challenges; they can require a significant time commitment to review and depending on the topic of research interest, the film's synopsis may not clarify whether it should be included or not. In those instances, a full viewing of the film is required to determine its suitability.

Findings

After setting out the practicalities of designing a research project that considers both newspapers and fiction films, the second half of this paper demonstrates how combining these sources can lead to new insights. As noted above, this is done with reference to the representation of London's public transport system in the period 1919-1939.

London's transport system continues to receive ample scholarly attention. Although it was originally created in the mid-19th century, the interwar period is also a pivotal time for its development. The public transport network expanded rapidly during the 1920s and 1930s, to facilitate travel to and from the many new suburban developments at the edges of the city. The period also saw the rationalisation of the network and its unification under the name London Transport. The scholarly conversation around London's public transport in the interwar period is therefore often around ideas of unification, creating community, and rationalisation (Harrington, 2017).

Whilst fiction films do subscribe to the notion of public transport as a space of community and levelling, newspaper reports highlight very different aspects of the public transport experience. When reviewing the reporting of London's public transport system in popular newspapers of the interwar period, two main topics emerge. The first are reports of violence against passengers, and the second are reports on transport accidents.

Attacks on passengers were particularly aimed at women using public transport. The introduction of public transport had given women more ability to navigate the city independently, for example to travel to and from their places of work. This mobility evoked some concern about the changing place of women in society. Attacks on female passengers were one way to limit these women's new-found freedom.

Take for example what befell Miss Daisy Tyler, a sixteen-year-old who travelled home to Barking on the tube in April 1921. Whilst in an apparently crowded carriage, an unknown attacker sidled behind Daisy and cut her braid off with a razor. According to the *Daily Express* article that reported on the incident, the type of blond hair that Daisy had was in 'considerable demand', although it leaves up to the reader's imagination what the hair would be used for. More telling is the key concern that an anonymous friend of Daisy raises after the attack: Daisy was upset not because of the violation per se but because she had been intending to go to a dance later that evening, suggesting that her main upset was around an apparent loss of feminine appeal. In this incident, the community in the crowded carriage offered no protection to Daisy. Rather, it offered protection to the attacker, as he (or she) was able to be obscured by the other commuters.

If crowded carriages could be dangerous, the same was true for empty ones. In December 1929, Miss Organ, a podiatrist in her mid-20s, was brutally attacked in a train between Bromley and New Cross, south London. Like Daisy Tyler, Miss Organ was also travelling home from work. The train was an overground suburban train and therefore had separate compartments which offered the opportunity to attack passengers' unseen. According to Miss Organ's testimony, the man who attacked her had gotten on at the same time as her. After sitting in the carriage without speaking for a number of minutes, the man suddenly jumped up and attacked her, stealing her money and leaving her badly wounded.

Finally, trains could be used as conduits for even more serious violence against women. In September 1922 a parcel was found in a train travelling from Waterloo station, which contained a girl's hand, arm, shin bone and foot. The parcel was left on the luggage rack in a carriage. A man had reportedly been sitting below the parcel but had left the train without taking the parcel with him. The parcel was handed in at the left luggage office and opened a few days later. The transitory and anonymous space of the rail carriage allowed the perpetrator to get rid of the evidence of a crime.

The other type of transport news that was regularly reported in the papers were occasions where accidents and technical failure caused potentially dangerous situations. Take for example the report on a 'triple smash' that took place in Leyton in 1925. The accident involved a bus, a lorry and a tramcar; the lorry first crashed into the tram and then smashed into the bus. The force of the impact cut the bus nearly in two. Miraculously, no-one in the bus died, but 16 passengers were injured, 7 of whom had to be taken to hospital. The *Daily Mail* article notes that "Most of the injured were young women", again those who were returning from their jobs in Central London to their homes in the suburbs.

Although transport accidents were serious and no doubt had a significant impact on the lives of those involved, newspaper reports on them are remarkably subdued, particularly in comparison to some of the other, more sensational reporting taking place in British tabloids at the time. None of the articles include images of wrecked vehicles, even though the technology was available to print reportage photographs. The 'immediacy of the visual medium', to borrow a phrase by Lucy Bland (2008), was considered too shocking and inappropriate for reporting on accidents. Instead, the articles adopt a factual tone, focusing on the details of the location of the accident and the identities of the casualties. Although some of the accidents at least appear to have been caused by poor driving skills, the articles are reluctant to blame anyone for the accidents. Instead, they tend to be 'inexplicable', with drivers and mechanics claiming they are unable to understand how the accidents could have happened.

What emerged from the newspaper research was that public transport was largely presented as a potential and unmanageable danger, particularly for female travellers. Unlike newspaper reports, films of the same period foregrounded positive possibilities of public transport. In contrast to the notion of the bus or train carriages as a space that could leave you vulnerable to attack, as newspapers presented them, films showed these same spaces as spaces of possibility. The anonymity of the train carriage makes it a place for opportunity rather than danger. Films also highlighted public transport's function of bringing people of all walks of life together, and framed this as a positive feature.

This supposed feature of public transport as a democratic space is particularly foregrounded in the 1928 film *Underground* (Asquith). This film takes as its premise that the London Underground is a space where people from all backgrounds and classes meet by chance. The plot is concerned with four characters: Nell, a shop girl in a department store; Bill, an attendant in an underground station; Bert, a 'rogue' who works in Lots Road power station; and Kate, a seamstress and Bert's long-suffering girlfriend.

The film opens with the following title:

The 'Underground' of the Great Metropolis of the British Empire, with its teeming multitudes of 'all sorts and conditions of men', contributes its share of light and shade, romance and tragedy and all those things that go to make up what we call 'life'. So in the

'Underground' is set our story of ordinary work-a-day people whose names are just Nell, Bill, Kate and Bert.

The opening title makes much of the supposed mixture of characters and events on the Underground, which was partly achieved because there was one standard low fare for all passengers.

The first sequence of the film is set during a morning rush-hour commute. Nell and Bert meet in an Underground train, but the film also gives ample attention to the other 'types' in the carriage, such as the stern female police officer and the young sailor and soldier who try to impress a girl by offering their seats. In this first scene Bert, the 'rogue' tries to flirt with Nell. The tightly packed communal carriage space forces her to endure his advances against her will as she's physically unable to put distance between herself and Bert.

The rest of the film plays out the courtship between Nell and Bill, who works in the Underground station; and Bert's attempts to break up this budding relationship, for which he calls on the help of his put-upon girlfriend Kate. By the end of the film, Nell and Bill are secure and happy in their relationship.

In the film's closing scene, again in an Underground carriage, we see an older man who persuades the young man sitting next to him to give up his seat for a young woman. As soon as the woman sits down the older man starts flirting with her. When she does not reciprocate, the man turns his attention to the man sitting on his other side, and tries to get him to give up his seat to Nell, who is standing with her back to them. Nell politely refuses the offer of a seat, as she is travelling with Bill and is happy to stand. The old man is lecherous and he uses the pretence of politeness to get young women to sit close to him. The only reason Nell can escape this fate is that she is already married and has a male companion to travel with; if she had been alone, politeness would have required her to accept the offered seat. The Underground trains in *Underground* are presented as spaces where all classes of people mix, but also as spaces where women are frequently annoyed and imposed upon.

Although the film is keen to promote the space of the Underground as one that is democratic and allows people from all backgrounds to share an experience, it also singles out the experience of women as potentially unpleasant. Almost despite itself, the film is not able to fully depict the Underground carriage as the level playing field that it claims it to be. In line with the real-life experiences of female travellers, set out earlier, Nell comes repeatedly under threat of harassment in the Underground carriage.

Conclusion

Films of the interwar period, then, largely present public transport as a utopian space where people from all backgrounds can mingle. Newspapers did their best to underplay the potential dangers of using public transport. Both media in tandem worked to reassure their audiences that using public transport was safe and desirable. Neither medium challenged the structural underpinnings of the public transport system, or questioned whether people should be using it at all in light of some of its shortcomings. Rather, the media worked to normalise the use of public transport at a time when it increasingly became a standard part of Londoner's daily lives.

Considering representations of public transport in films and newspapers alongside one another has revealed this interplay between the two media. It has shown that whilst newspapers did

report on transport crashes and failings, films did not choose to represent the same, but instead ascribed more positive features to public transport. In both media, however, female passengers are shown to be under siege from their male counterparts, who use the transport space to harass or attack them. That this shows up in films as well demonstrates that this element of public transport use was not questioned or considered undesirable.

Analysing newspaper reports and fiction films alongside one another can provide new and valuable insights into how topics or events were presented and consumed by historical audiences. The representation of a specific topic or event can be markedly different in both media. As audiences for both media would be consuming both newspapers and films, they would be subject to both depictions, and their own experience of the world would be formed by both. Considering both in conjunction allows for an exploration of gaps and overlaps between both media.

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