David Bordwell asserts in his article, “Doing Film History” (2008), that “film history encompasses more than just films,”[[1]](#endnote-1) and that explanation in film history can be formed based on biographical, industrial/economic, aesthetic, technological, and social/cultural/political grounds.[[2]](#endnote-2) In fact, these explanations may cut across categorical boundaries as a necessity of their direct connection to societies that made and consumed the films.[[3]](#endnote-3) Bordwell also states that there is no “Big Story of Film History” and that a film history book will not attain the recognized status of being, “a distillation of all film history.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Gerald Mast affirmed Bordwell’s conclusions in his own essay, “Film History and Film Histories” (1976) by asserting that an encyclopedic history of film would in fact be an encyclopedia and not a history per se, and that film history is inherently pluralistic.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Bordwell & Thompson’s *Film History - An Introduction* (3rd Ed.)(hereafter B&T) and Mast & Kawin’s *A Short History of the Movies* (7th Ed.)(hereafter M&K) emphasize these aforementioned philosophies of the historians themselves by providing distinct historiographical methodologies for the same period in film history. M&K favour a methodological individualism that implements biographical, aesthetic and technological explanations to formulate the arguments of their research program. Furthermore, these historians have a ‘loose’ periodization toward organizing the chronology as well as a great emphasis on ‘influence’ in their attention to causality (largely biographically-based). Their history is comprehensive in those respects and extremely detailed, however they neglect “broader” recognition of the influence of regional ‘film culture’ as forming trends and stimulating change on the international film industry. The most potent connection formulated in their research program is that of biographical causes and their aesthetic and technological effects as well as positing the influence mitigated by this causal chain to a biographical basis (methodological individualism).

B&T develop a distinct research program from that of M&K and despite appearing completely inverted upon first reading, it would seem the two ’histories’ have some congruencies in their approach and methodology. B&T favour a methodological collectivism that forwards industrial/economic and social/cultural/political explanations as a basis for the arguments of their research program. They weave a ‘tight’ periodization within the chronological record as well as emphasizing group causes as creating powerful influence on causality (predominantly linking economic and political factors with social and cultural ones). Their history is not as detailed as that of M&K, however it is more all encompassing (comprehensive) in that B&T emphasize the influence of regional ‘film culture’ on the international film industry. The most potent connection formulated in their research program is that economic and social causes synergistically drive each other in a dialectical manner, effecting each other, and creating an influence on the entire film industry and the historical period being examined (methodological collectivism).

M&K develop a methodological individualism that focuses on biographical, aesthetic and technological explanations to form the arguments of their research program. Perhaps a statistical quantitative analysis of the two histories can provide evidence of this. In the second chapter of the M&K text, thirty-seven individual people associated with the “birth” and early development of the film industry are explicitly mentioned by name as opposed to only twenty-four in the B&T text (covering the same chronological period). A similar trend repeats itself in the subsequent chapter of each text. In addition, M&K provide many biographical details about the lives of these individuals (ie. a background history for the Edison actor, Ott, and digressions such as tales of the seedy lifestyle of the Latham sons)[[6]](#endnote-6). B&T often refer to individuals more generally (ie. “the scientists” who were developing optic toys)[[7]](#endnote-7) and they only reveal industry-related background information on individuals (ie. The Lumiere Bros. having worked in photography or Porter having been a cameraman)[[8]](#endnote-8). M&K also tread a fine line in formulating a “Great Man” theory of early film history. They attribute many “firsts” to individuals in the industry (ie. Dickson as the “first” filmmaker and Clark as the “first” editor)[[9]](#endnote-9). A passage from the text is most revealing as it regards the epic appraisal of the contribution of Georges Melies to cinema:

“Lumiere set the pattern for realism; Melies opened the door to the impossible. Melies gave

the cinema the tools of fantasy, illusion, and distortion, allowing the new art to address new

subject matter - notably the interior world of psychology, imagination, and dreams; the

theatrical world of magic, spectacle, and set design; and the narrative world of genres and

long, developing stories. (Mast & Kawin, pg.31)

In fact, M&K purport in a run-on alliteration that Melies was the “first” and master of mise-en-scene, montage, masking, and matting - and in what B&T might think of as unnecessary pomp - the former historians assert that these claims “are beyond challenge”[[10]](#endnote-10). Bordwell reminds us in his aforementioned online article that only 20% of early films have survived and that new discoveries of old films happen regularly and require a kind of restructuring of history[[11]](#endnote-11). B&T avoid the “Great Man” theory through a variety of methods, including implementing a substitution principle when contrasting the impact of individuals (ie. Lumiere Bros. vs. Edison, or Pathe vs. Gaumont). M&K also focus on aesthetic and technological explanations, best noted by the lengthy passages devoted to shot-by-shot analysis of Hepworth‘s Rescued by Rover (1905)[[12]](#endnote-12) and the lengthy mechanical descriptions of the construction and operation of the tinkerer’s early optic toys and the early cameras (the description of the internal mechanical workings of the camera with Latham loop come to mind)[[13]](#endnote-13).

B&T, on the other hand, forward a primacy on the economic/industrial explanations as well as the social/cultural/political explanations in the history of film. Their history demarcates the relationship between the vertically integrated sectors of the film industry (production, distribution and exhibition), and a prime example of the difference in emphasis in the two historical texts to this end comes when addressing R.W. Paul’s sale of an “illegal” camera to Melies.

For M&K, the technological aspect of the camera being ‘crank-reversible’[[14]](#endnote-14) was paramount whereas for B&T it was the industrial and economic factors of the camera being sold instead of leased that matters most, as it represents an important trend of policy fluctuation in the industry between rentals and sales that had the effect of jockeying different sectors of the vertically integrated industry into better or worse positions throughout the period. For example, Paul selling the camera to Melies when Lumiere would only lease to hand-picked individuals is then later mirrored when the growth of exhibition and distribution sectors bulge as prints begin going to film exchanges to be leased as opposed to sold to exhibitors[[15]](#endnote-15). Furthermore, B&T focus on the social factors that contributed to stimulating growth and decay in the three industrial sectors of the film industry. The politics of anti-trust law in the period, the drive for morality reformation and the ‘invention’ of leisure time are underscored as factors driving the film industry as well as those defining the modernist period, in general. The explanations in the research programs of the two historical texts are in fact quite inverted, as we can see, although both sets of historians touch upon explanations more important to the other (ie. B&T devote a distinct text box to profiling Melies and highlight aesthetic formal and stylistic developments in film across the historical period, while M&K recognize the importance of the vertically integrated sectors and the politics of anti-trust law).

M&K implement a ‘loose’ periodization in the chronology of their film history. A cursory, quantitative statistical analysis reveals that their text has no headings or subheadings that demarcate a distinct period in the chronology of the film history. B&T utilize periodization in a much more pronounced way. They periodize four headings in the relevant section of the text, including both chapter titles (and they provide a box insert for a text table periodizing the permeation of film into the international scene)[[16]](#endnote-16). B&T use periodization to organize their historical evidence into chronological groupings that can produce compelling arguments regarding the formulation of trends in film history. Both sets of historians move through the chronology in a linear manner, however the periodization of B&T emphasize their methodological collectivist approach. M&K posit that the individual has the greatest influence on causality (ie. Porter’s influence on Griffith using continuity systems, Lumiere’s influence on the French New Wave and Melies’s seemingly dominant influence on everyone, especially Ferdinand Zecca)[[17]](#endnote-17). M&K focus on aesthetic influence to such a degree that they continuously link early formal and stylistic cinematic innovations and trends to theater (conversely, B&T make a similar linkage but attribute it to social factors such as the need for cinema to borrow from theater in order to attract a higher socio-economic class of patrons and greater respectability for cinema as an art form)[[18]](#endnote-18). In addition, B&T link their ’respectability thesis’ to political events by moral reformers encroaching on the freedoms of early film industrialists and entrepreneurs, which is further integrated in with economic/industrial factors. For M&K causality is often a direct means-to-end process relying on the innovations and influence of individuals, whereas for B&T group causes act synergistically and dialectically to motivate a flurry of changes that influence all aspects of the film industry and society at large (and are reflected by it).

M&K provide a deeply detailed history clearly based on a plethora of primary research. This is evidenced through the historians providing exact addresses for nickelodeons, movie palaces and early studios, as well as providing English translations for the various Greek and Latin derived names of early inventions related to the movie camera and projector[[19]](#endnote-19). Further statistical quantitative analysis reveals that movie titles are mentioned at a ratio of approximately 2:1 between the two texts with M&K not only providing more titles, but also more description of scenes, actors, performances and even in some cases detailed shot-by-shot analysis. How best can this primacy on detail be explained? Firstly, the great amount of detail has a direct relation to the primacy of the individual in the M&K text. Secondly, Kawin in a review of a Mast anthology, The Movies in our Midst (1982) forwards that Mast’s emphasis on detail and primary research produces an effect of the history of film to be able “to write itself” and that this creates a sense of “accuracy and fairness”[[20]](#endnote-20). Kawin also states that the level of detail should not be criticized for possible inconsistency and incongruence and should instead be hailed for its impartiality[[21]](#endnote-21). B&T are the essence of impartiality in their brevity of detail and emphasis on the ‘bare’ essential. The B&T history is less detailed -congruent with their methodological collectivist approach. The relationship between sectors of the industry and between the explanations of their research program are paramount in their history. For B&T it is less important that all the films are named individually and more important that trends in film production are identified and connected back to other factors, such as the political, economic, social and technological. An example is when B&T gloss over Linder’s acting career and instead focus on the effect that his films had on bringing in a higher social class of audience, as opposed to M&K who go into detail about Linder’s acting style, appearance, salary, and influence on other actors that followed him[[22]](#endnote-22). In fact, the Linder passages point to certain blaring incongruence in emphasis between the two texts (ie. B&T claim that Linder films fostered a middle class audience by being films that both the middle and working class could relate to, while M&K claim that Linder’s roles were intentionally provocative against the higher socio-economic classes)[[23]](#endnote-23). It is worth noting this and acknowledging that to account for all subsequent discrepancies of this kind would provide enough discussion for a whole other paper.

Topically and chronologically, both sets of historians work in a linear pattern and address the relevant over-arching events that constitute the early cinema period - from the innovations and inventions of ‘tinkerers’ and ‘bricoleurs’, to the influential formal and stylistic contributions of Melies, to the economic influences of Edison, and finally the narrative developments in the age of Griffith. However, the logic of the history they are constructing is very different. M&K rely on a methodological individualism to form their history while B&T use methodological collectivism. This has a great impact, with M&K relying on biographical explanations (Bordwell overtly warns against it using the Porter example[[24]](#endnote-24)) while B&T turn to more sociologically based explanations that synergistically link with economic/industrial factors. The histories come out very differently as a result and a great example of this is in how B&T emphasize regional film cultures in the international film industry when they link multi-reel films and the beginning of ‘features’ to the historical epics of Italy and the naturalist cinematic dramas of Denmark in the pre-WW1 period[[25]](#endnote-25). M&K fail to make any significant note on these particular ’national’ cinemas and situate most influence and causality of progress in early cinema to the efforts of individuals hailing from the United States, France, England and Germany. Despite a possible inclination to condemn the seemingly culturally myopic scope of the M&K methodology, one can take some consolation in Gerald Mast’s own words, “[the only way] to recapture the totality of cinema history - will be with the total, the aggregate collection of cinema histories”[[26]](#endnote-26).

1. “Doing Film History,” (2008), http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/doing.php. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gerald Mast, “Film History and Film Histories,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1:3 (1976): 297-298. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.15, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pp.8, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.14, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.32-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Doing Film History,” (2008), http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/doing.php. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.42-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pg.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pg.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.35-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pp.10, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Bruce Kawin, “The Movies in our Midst,” *Film Quarterly* 36:4 (1983): 64 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), pg.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pg.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History - An Introduction, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pp.24-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Gerald Mast, “Film History and Film Histories,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1:3 (1976): 313.

    INI215 - Film Cultures

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    Assignment #1 - Comparative Reading (Comparative Analysis of Historiographical Methodology)

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