

Enticknap, Leo, University of Leeds. "Film Restoration: The Implications of Film Scholars' Misunderstanding of the Science"

For almost three decades, film scholarship has traditionally struggled to understand the impact of technology on the creation, distribution and consumption of audiovisual media. This was the crux of Barry Salt's infamous 1992 critique of semiotics, psychoanalysis, structuralism and virtually every other approach to cultural theory and criticism that took as its central premise the notion that films can be regarded as self-contained 'texts', from which meaning can be decoded in isolation from the empirical context of their existence. Four years later, the successful peer review of Alan Sokal's widely publicised hoax article in *Social Text*, in which he argued that the law of gravity was a mere cultural convention that could be simply ignored by anyone who wished to, proved that humanities scholars' ignorance of science was alive and well.

In this paper I will argue that the rapid growth of computer-based technologies for representing and manipulating moving images, and specifically their use in archival media preservation and restoration, makes this an immediate professional and moral problem for the field. The catch-all adjective 'digital' is routinely applied indiscriminately and inaccurately by humanities scholars, who perpetuate damaging myths promoted by the IT and audio-visual industries (e.g. that data is able to be more reliably preserved than photochemical media, or that any copy of a digital media artefact is a lossless 'clone'), largely because they lack the engineering background needed to engage with such claims critically. Furthermore, unlike the scholarship of other cultural forms, notably fine art, music and literature, virtually no critical or historiographical method has emerged within film studies to define the object of restoration. Is it even possible to 'restore' audio-visual media at all, or can we only attempt to create an empirically informed reproduction of a past viewing or listening context? Drawing on the ongoing work in progress for my forthcoming book *Film Restoration: The Culture and Science of Audiovisual Heritage*, my paper will discuss some examples of prominent film scholars' misunderstanding of the technical issues in books, articles and media appearances in recent years. In conclusion, I will argue that the field has a responsibility to adopt a more empirically focused and scientifically informed approach to the study of a process which is likely to fundamental and irrevocable changes to the surviving corpus of what may come to be considered the defining recording medium of the last century.

Leo Enticknap is a university lecturer and former moving image archivist living in York, United Kingdom. Since 14 November 2006 I have worked for the Institute of Communications Studies as a lecturer in Cinema. My research and teaching interests focus on the political history of non-fiction film and television, the history of moving image technologies and the practice and ethics of archival film preservation and restoration.