

How to Use the Digital History Reader

Evidence: Film

Moving pictures seem the most straightforward of source materials; they appear to show the past as it actually happened. Yet film evidence is perhaps the most complex. Unlike written sources, photographs, and other graphical sources, motion pictures are products of complex processes that usually involve a number of people and adhere to a logic particular to the medium. Film, however, does give viewers a sense of how things looked in the past, but film, like all other sources, must be viewed critically. Take a look, for example, at this [film clip from Paris in 1968](#). Read below for several suggestions on how to evaluate the film clip critically.

1. Most film, like other sources, has a point of view. This is true in two senses. First, the filmmaker or makers usually construct their films to convey their points of view through visual clues and dialogue. Second, film is always limited by the placement of the camera or cameras, which means viewers see only part of a larger story that the cameras can't capture or show simultaneously. In the Paris film, for example, the cameras tell the story of the protesters and not the police, since the camera people remain interspersed among the protesters. How would changing the point of view change the story told?
2. In addition, film usually follows a set of narrative conventions. Like fiction, film employs storytelling strategies that have become common currency over the past century. Conventions, then, circumscribe the ways in which camera people shoot, editors edit, and directors direct. Rather than simply capturing the past on film, filmmakers shape the past to fit certain generic conventions that meet audience expectations.
3. Film gives the appearance of following action in a linear fashion. Because of our expectations, film appears to be a chronological record of the past. Yet, as a medium, film is radically non-linear. Through editing, filmmakers can place clips in any order they wish without notifying the audience. Although we assume that the action in the Paris clip unfolds chronologically, we have no basis for that assumption. The filmmaker or editor could have fabricated a sequence of events to advance the story rather than reproduce the events in the order in which they occurred.
4. Film is, more than other sources, primarily a commercial activity. Film and television have traditionally been much more expensive to produce than

other media, which generally leads filmmakers to create stories that conform to audience expectations. Keep this in mind when you evaluate filmmakers' points of view and motivations.

Although film provides glimpses into the past, the medium does so in a complicated way. You should always approach film with skepticism and ask questions about the filmmakers' intentions and methods.