

FILM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY

EDITED BY
JENNIE M. CARLSTEN
FEARGHAL MCGARRY



Film, History and Memory

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Jennie M. Carlsten

and

Fearghal McGarry

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Introduction

Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry

This book explores the relationship between film and history by considering how the medium of film shapes, reinforces or subverts our understanding of the past. We do this by widening our focus from 'history', the study of past events, to encompass 'memory', the processes by which meaning is attached to the past. This approach acknowledges that film's impact lies less in its empirical qualities than in its powerful capacity to influence public consciousness, mould collective memory and retrieve suppressed or marginalised histories.

This collection contributes to the growing literature on the relationship between film and history through the breadth of its approach, both in disciplinary and geographical terms. Contributors are drawn not only from the discipline of history, but film studies, film practice, art history, languages and literature, and cultural studies. Drawing on South African, Chilean, Spanish, Portuguese, Irish, British, Italian, French and other European cinema, we explore a wide variety of ways and contexts in which film engages with history. The volume proceeds from broader essays relating to questions of visual representation to more focused case studies. The final essay by Robert Rosenstone, a pioneer of the field, returns us to consideration of the creative and historiographical implications of history on film.

Despite the burgeoning literature on the subject, studies of film and history often begin similarly, by taking historians to task for their failure to take historical films seriously, or by asserting the case for the importance of film as a form of historiographical discourse. Although the persistence of debates about the reliability of film alerts us to the particular challenges posed by the medium, challenges that we address in this introduction, this preoccupation with problems has resulted in the re-treading of debates about authenticity and accuracy that are now

over four decades old. This collection moves beyond these debates by starting from the assumption that historical films can embody historical thinking and, by so doing, contribute to understanding of the past. Although we address theoretical debates about the historiographical value of film, greater emphasis is placed on exploring how film shapes the way the past is perceived, and how our understanding of this might be enhanced by new approaches that draw on insights from a range of scholarly disciplines.

History on film

It may be useful to begin by considering why history on film provokes such concern, and how thinking about these concerns has developed since the 1970s when scholars such as Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin first sought to integrate film within mainstream historiography. It is important to emphasize at the outset the wide variety of ways in which film shapes our ideas about the past and about history: the narratives we construct to give meaning to the past. Among the most important of these are: the use of film to depict the past; film as a means of commenting on the discourse of history (for example, on historiographical debates or the nature of historical knowledge); film as an agent of history (for example, through its propagandistic or ideological qualities); and film as a source for studying the past.¹ Although public controversies about historical films usually relate to the first of these, each has now generated a substantial body of literature.² Although often inter-related, the radically different nature of these functions has contributed to confusion and disagreement about the medium's historical value.

This helps to explain also why attempts to define what constitutes a historical film (as anything other than a film set in the past relative to the time of its production) have proven elusive. That a film might prove valuable in thinking about the past in one context but not another calls into question the possibility or necessity for such a definition. *Carry on ... up the Khyber* (Thomas, 1968) or *From Russia with Love* (Young, 1963), for example, may not add greatly to our understanding of the British Raj or Cold War espionage but they reveal much about gender, class and sexual identities in post-war Britain.³ That the historical value of a film may lie in its assumptions or reception rather than its narrative elements, moreover, further problematizes attempts to define the criteria that lend historical significance to a film. Rosenstone's influential suggestion that the 'history film' is one which demonstrates 'its willingness to engage the discourse of history', rather than being simply set in the

past for entertainment purposes, inevitably calls for subjective value judgements.⁴ Axel Bangert, Paul Cooke and Rob Stone's essay on the 'heritage film' illustrates how even a genre often derided for its lack of historiographical engagement may prove significant in constructing or reflecting ideas about identity, nationhood and the ownership of history. The observation, by historian Marnie Hughes-Warrington, that a film's historical significance lies 'in the eye of the viewer' rather than 'the film itself' is a useful one, even if its practical consequence is little different from saying that historical films (like historical sources) cannot be delineated. Consequently, rather than seeking to define what constitutes a valuable history film, it may be more useful to consider (as Rosenstone does in this volume) what film does to history, and why film – whether as a source for, representation of, or commentary on the past – possesses value.

Popular and scholarly distrust of history on film is not merely a product of concerns about representation, but also stems from the nature of the medium itself: its accessibility, emotional power, unrivalled reach and disturbing capacity to depict plausibly an imagined past. Consequently, historians are often more discomfited by 'realistic' films, which can draw on the indexical power of the medium to offer the audience a window into the past, rather than those which openly play fast and loose with the facts, or those which seek to comment explicitly on historical discourse. It is not difficult, for example, to see why *12 Years a Slave* (McQueen, 2013) – described by the *Wall Street Journal* as a film 'certain to transcend the movie realm and become ... a defining vision of what slavery looked like, and felt like, in the US before the Civil War' – might prove more troubling than *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012).⁵ Imagining – or inventing – the past through the artifice of film can shape our understanding of it more profoundly than the rigorous reconstruction of its archival fragments in scholarly texts.

Medium and form

Although film provides an important source of historical knowledge, few believe it can represent the past with the accuracy, balance or sophistication expected of written scholarship. The limitations of the medium include the difficulty of conveying factual information; its tendency to confine narratives within established genres; to attribute causation to individual agency rather than broader historical forces; to privilege emotion and drama; and to eschew multiple perspectives.⁶ These problems are compounded by the narrative techniques (the

inevitable departures from the historical record described by Rosenstone as ‘condensation, alteration, combination and metaphor’) required to depict history on screen.⁷ In response to the criticism that the medium’s commercial and storytelling requirements preclude a complex depiction of the past, advocates of the history film point out that these restrictions are inherent to the form. Criticism of the narrative strategies that make possible dramatic representation of the past constitutes a limited approach to film’s potential, one that fails to address how film *does* engage with and shape understanding of the past, for good or ill.

It follows from this that understanding how film represents the past requires moving beyond analysis of its narrative elements to consideration of its techniques and form. As Vivian Bickford-Smith has argued, historians:

need to have some knowledge of the history of film, its changing technology, aesthetic concerns and how these are expressed in its multi-media language of sound, colour, camera work, editing, acting styles and *mise en scene*. It is through this language that history films use metaphor, argument, and drama to speak their truths about the past.⁸

A practical example of this proposition is provided in this volume by Nike Jung’s analysis of *NO* (21012) which demonstrates how film stock, editing, montage, music, aesthetics, narrative temporality and the subversion of genre expectations combine to provide a commentary on ‘our fragmented, contingent knowledge of history’.⁹ Similarly, Liz Greene’s essay demonstrates the narrative uses to which music and montage can be put. A similar point applies to the way in which film operates discursively on the emotional level. Jennie M. Carlsten’s essay considers how specific film techniques encourage the audience’s emotional engagement. While film is often routinely criticised for its nostalgic depictions of the past, James Ward – along with several other contributors to this volume – demonstrates how nostalgia can be used ‘to confront received versions of heritage and historical memory’.¹⁰ Andrew Hennlich, in his discussion of William Kentridge and his allegorical works, points to the way Kentridge’s films foreground the camera and the mechanics of telling in order to critique ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation within the historical narratives of South Africa.

Although calls for historians to consider how cinema’s visual language shapes the meaning of the cinematic text date back over four decades (as Gianluca Fantoni’s essay demonstrates), the reluctance

of many to do so was exemplified by the *American Historical Review's* 2006 decision to end its policy of reviewing individual films due to its reviewers' lack of expertise and interest in the medium. As the editor, Robert A. Schneider, noted: 'When historians review films, they usually write about what they know about – accuracy, verisimilitude and pedagogical usefulness. These are not inconsiderable as commentary, but it is a far cry from what we expect from them in a book review.'¹¹ This highlights the continuing need for approaches that will allow film to be assessed alongside written historical accounts rather than simply compared to them.¹² As scholars such as John E. O'Connor, Robert Brent Toplin, Hayden White, Marc Ferro, Richard White and Natalie Zemon Davis have concluded, the historiographical value of film should be determined by different standards to those applied to written history. As Rosenstone suggests in this volume:

rather than assuming that the world on film should somehow adhere to the standards of written history, why not see if it has created its own standards over the last century, techniques for turning the past into history which are appropriate to the possibilities and practices of the medium, including those of drama, which is the standard way in which film tells its stories, past or present.¹³

More contentious than the idea that history on film might be considered a distinctive form of historiographical discourse with its own 'rules of engagement' are some of the potential corollaries of this: that film should be seen not merely as a distinct but also as an equally valuable form of historical discourse; and that value judgements on the basis of the 'factual reliability' of historical films are, as Willem Hesling puts it, 'old fashioned'. Rather, Hesling suggests, historical films should be judged according to whether they lend 'some sort of meaning' to the past: to ask whether a film such as *Nixon* (1995) is 'real' history suggests furthermore 'that concepts like "historical truth" and "historical knowledge" are epistemologically unproblematic and that outside traditional academic historiography there exists no meaningful way of approaching the past'.¹⁴ Significantly, advocacy of the history film has often been combined with a rejection of the positivistic 'truth claims' attributed to historians. For example, the literary critic Hayden White, who coined the influential term 'historiophoty' to describe the 'representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse', suggested that 'film merely presents a different type of selective and creative use of facts' than that practised by historians.¹⁵

Although not calculated to appeal to historians – who are generally more attuned than most to the epistemological problems of their trade, and increasingly open to a wide range of imaginative ways of approaching the past – the most persuasive aspect of such arguments is the idea that historians share more in common with filmmakers than they care to concede. In choosing a subject to represent, deciding how to conceptualise it, identifying source materials to illustrate it, and foregrounding key themes to signify its historical significance to a contemporary audience, the historian follows similar methodologies to the filmmaker.¹⁶ History, as Hughes-Warrington observes:

is not solely about events; it is also about the relationships between those events, the order in which they are presented and the selection of emphases. Historians and historical filmmakers are thus stylists, whether or not they like or even recognise it: they shape their works according to conventional story forms or forms of ‘plotment’.¹⁷

Piotr Witek has drawn attention to similar methodological commonalities:

The selection of source documents, the ways by which historians interpret, juxtapose, and compare them, the ways of representing them, and the ways of creating a historical narrative are, from a technical point of view, not unlike what filmmakers describe as selection, editing, camera movement and perspective, close-ups, foreground, background, lighting, music, acting, and so on.¹⁸

Although most historians would recognise these parallels, the tendency of influential advocates of the history film to deprecate written history as a means of asserting the historiographical value of film, and to posit an equivalence between both forms of discourse, has done little to challenge the popular and academic assumptions that marginalise historical films within scholarly history.¹⁹ Consequently, advocates of the value of historical films often focus more on their potential to reflect on the nature of history, and to comment on historical discourse, rather than the medium’s ability to depict historical events, an idea explored in the next section.

Despite the scepticism of many scholars towards the medium, some historians – as Rosenstone reflects in the conclusion of this volume – have been drawn to engage with history on film as a result of their experience of practical engagement with the film industry. For example, Zemon Davis’ influential text, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, was a product of her ‘adventure with a different way of telling about the past’ while

serving as a historical consultant on Daniel Vigne's eponymous 1982 movie.²⁰ As she explains:

Writing for actors rather than readers raised new questions about the motivations of people in the sixteenth century – about, say, whether they cared as much about truth as about property ... I felt I had my own historical laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities. At the same time, the film was departing from the historical record ... Where was there room in this beautiful and compelling cinematographic recreation of a village for the uncertainties, the 'perhapses', the 'may-have-beens', to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing? ... The film thus posed the problem of invention to the historian as surely as it was posed to the wife of Martin Guerre.

Rosenstone has similarly observed how the attempt to represent the past in a different medium can bring with it new perspectives that may lead to their own insights:

To change the medium of history from the page to the screen, to add images, sound, colour, movement and drama, is to alter the way we read, see, perceive and think about the past ... The history film not only challenges traditional history, but helps return us to ... a sense that we can never really know the past, but can only continually play with, reconfigure, and try to make meaning out of the traces it has left behind.²¹

In short, preoccupation with the problems of history on film can obscure its potential to invite new ways of thinking about the past and how we frame our narratives about that past. Although discomfiting for some practitioners of a discipline that emerged from a nineteenth-century scientific empirical tradition, the parallels between history on screen and on the page suggest that the history film – because, as much as despite of, its limitations – offers rich historiographical potential, particularly as many of the criticisms levelled at history on film apply in different ways to written history.

Film and historiography

That many people derive much of their information about the past from films does not necessarily imply credulity on their part about what they

see on the screen. On the contrary, surveys indicate that ‘viewers have more sense of historical films as representations than other history media such as museums or books.’²² Audiences are thus more likely to challenge history on film – to question its evidential basis, its bias, ideological influences, or narrative strategies – because it is so clearly a construct. Film’s accessibility – the economy and clarity with which arguments about the significance of the past are expressed – also encourages audiences to engage with its interpretations in a way that (except for those with historical training and extensive knowledge of the subject matter) the scholarly monograph does not permit. In other words, it is precisely because of the liberties film takes with the past that it conveys to the public more successfully the central principle of historiography: that history is a process of interpretation, reflecting a dialogue between past and present.

Advocates of the historiographical potential of film identify its ability ‘to contest history, to interrogate either the meta-narratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received wisdoms, conventional images’ as potentially its most meaningful contribution to historical understanding.²³ For Rosenstone, it is film’s ability to engage on a historiographical level, with ‘the facts, the issues, and the arguments raised in other historical works’, which grants film its historical significance.²⁴ However, the fact that scholars often cite the same examples – art-house films such as Alex Cox’s *Walker* (1987), Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977) and Ousmane Sembène’s *Ceddo* (1977) – suggests that most historical films tend not to demonstrate such a sophisticated engagement with history. Such films, James Chapman notes, are ‘the work of directors with a highly self-conscious style who use historical signifiers and motifs in a symbolic rather than a literal way’. Through the deliberate use of anachronism, the rejection of linear narratives and other experimental techniques, they provide ‘an alternative to the verisimilitude of the classical narrative film, which typically represents the past according to accepted representational codes’.²⁵

In this respect, both film scholars and historians share a distrust of the mass-market films which adopt the classical Hollywood principle of invisibility, striving to conceal the artifice or apparatus of filmmaking. In contrast, by presenting history as ‘a representation that can and ought to be questioned’ rather than ‘a polished and complete story’,²⁶ films – such as Peter Greenaway’s *The Draughtman’s Contract* (1982), carefully analysed in this collection by James Ward – that seek to comment on the nature of history rather than depict it realistically tend to offer a richer engagement with the past. Such works challenge the idea that film has the capacity

only to shed light on historical thought at the time of its production, demanding a more generous view of the medium's possibilities.

The other aspect of the historical film to elicit extensive debate in terms of its historiographical potential is its use of re-enactment, arguably the genre's defining characteristic. Scholars of history and film suggest that the process of recreating history, of imagining the past from the perspective of the present, is central to its historiographical value, although there is disagreement as to how and why this is. Re-enactment, Robert Burgoyne has argued, facilitates 'the act of imaginative re-creation that allows the spectator to imagine they are "witnessing again" the events of the past'. The 'somatic intensity' of film provides not a direct window onto 'how things were', but rather a vivid and immersive guide into an unfamiliar past: 'The filmmaker and the spectator alike project themselves into a past world in order to reimagine it, to perform it, and to rethink it.'²⁷ Alison Landsberg has similarly argued that film enables individuals to assimilate as personal experience historical events in which they did not participate. However, she differs from Burgoyne in attributing this, not to the process of re-enactment, but to the ability of film to create empathy for the historical experiences of others, to fashion a 'prosthetic memory' that informs a collective narrative of the past.²⁸ As the next section suggests, this ability to shape memory – to create a shared understanding of the past – is central to film's historical significance.

Film and memory

Memory is a fundamental mechanism of social identity. Jay Winter goes so far as to describe memory as 'the central organizing concept of historical study, a position once occupied by the notions of class, race, and gender.'²⁹ David Lowenthal writes that 'the awareness of "I was" is a necessary component of "I am"': this is true not only of individuals, but of communities.³⁰ Like individuals, groups (nation-states as well as internal ethnic or political units) employ memory to sustain established identities. Social memory, the communal sense of continuity with the past, creates solidarity and cohesion by fashioning shared narratives of suffering and experience. This is central to a discussion of cinema given the medium's role in confirming, shaping or contesting these historical narratives. Film can legitimize the codified narratives told about history, or it can subvert these by providing a range of competing images, symbols and discourses. In this latter mode, film can create, transmit and maintain counter-memory, a set of narratives that challenge the transmission of exclusionary or oppressive history.