

Film and History

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How many vague descriptions we will abandon the day a class can watch, projected on precise and moving images, the calm or troubled faces of a deliberating assembly, the meeting of chiefs of state ready to sign an alliance, the departure of troops and squadrons, or even the mobile and changing physiognomy of cities. (Matuszewski, 1997:1)

The enthusiasm evinced by Boleslas Matuszewski about moving pictures as the basis for a vast historical image archive, dates back to the very early years of film's history. Although as an unemployed cameraman Matuszewski may have had self-interested reasons for promoting film, his 1898 description anticipates what has become a common-place notion about the power of film. Rather than the vague descriptions fostered by the written word, film would show rather than tell. Underlying this attitude is a naive faith that photographic images are somehow less ambiguous and more direct than words because they are indexical and thus bear a literal trace of a person or object that was present in the world. In that way, photography and film are thought not to represent but to bear witness. As a result, they fulfill the dream of every historian – to somehow be present in the past. The last hundred years have also produced much discussion aimed at unsettling just such easy notions about the “directness” of the photographic image. This perspective, by contrast, suggests that showing can be just as ambiguous as telling.

Few forms of narrative and documentation have simultaneously stirred as much utopian fantasy and eye-rolling dismissal as history on film. There are so many dimensions to any consideration of the connection between Film and History that to attempt to analyze this vexed relation is, in the end, to discuss several different and not always over-lapping issues. Yet where film and history themselves overlap, it is because of an ontological similarity between them. After all, both film and history claim to bear a reference or relation to the real world in somewhat literal ways; both are also fundamentally concerned with issues of temporality. History and film can be thought to share the common project of presenting us, as Phil Rosen put it, with “an absence, namely that of the represented past” (Rosen, 1984: 31). But if there is an ontological relation, such questions have largely escaped the majority of historians who are more interested in the stories they tell than in the ways they tell stories.

But rather than stress the disciplinary divisions as the fundamental divide in considerations of film and history, this essay maps four areas of intersection between film and history that transcend mere distinction in field of study. Just as this essay suggests it is time to move the discussion away from who has the “right” to adjudicate representations of the past, it also suggests that anyone interested in the intersection

of film and history is wasting their time by concentrating on the divergence between scholars trained in film and those in history. This position disrespects the conventions in film studies that separate fiction from non-fiction film and those approaches to history that separate the study of the past and historiography. Instead, this essay begins from the presumption that cinehistorians have hybrid methods and questions that thus cross traditional boundaries within and between fields. It lays out several areas of inquiry: film as an historical object, film as an archival record, historical story-telling on film and finally, cinehistory, the cinematic representation of the past and the simultaneous thought about it in films. By outlining the different aspects of the connection between film and history, the essay is meant to ready scholars to pose one of the most fundamental and unasked questions at their intersection: How have our notions of the past and its representation been influenced by filmmaking over the last hundred years? How have historical method and practice been shaped by film? While it is a commonplace assumption that political events and the political climate shape the methods, questions and problems of the historian and produce a certain optic on the past, there has been almost no consideration of the influence of mass culture and its media such as film on historians, historicity and the development of historical representation over the course of the cinematic century. This essay cannot answer these questions but rather lays out the intersection between film and history in such a way as to make clear why these are the important questions to ask next.

Film as Historical Object

The intersection of film and history by definition needs to account for a history *of* film and its institutions. The history of image making itself stands as a fundamental part of the cultural history of many times and places. The modern period, however, can be defined by image-making and mechanical reproducibility in a way that perhaps makes photographs, film, and, more recently, video a central characteristic of modern cultural production in the way that chronicles and epic poems were for scholars concerned with the cultural history of earlier periods. Film is also a source for narrating the history of other aspects of life in the past.

From Robert Sklar's early and still valuable, *Movie-Made America* (originally published in 1975), academic film history began to develop along a social-historical and then a cultural-historical path and thus towards an intersection and overlap with the discipline of History. By moving beyond earlier internalist accounts that focused on either transformations in film narrative and style (a sort of history modeled after the formal histories in the fields of Art History and Literature perhaps best defined by the work of David Bordwell) or on the development of Hollywood and the studio system mostly as a mode of industrial production (as typified by the work of such scholars as Tino Balio) film history has become part of a broader historical context.¹

¹ See Robert Sklar. *Movie Made America* (New York: Vintage, 1975); David Bordwell. *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Tino Balio. *United Artists: The Company That Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

Early cinema provided a particularly rich site for historians interested in working-class culture in turn-of-the century America, where film fit into a story about industrialization, leisure and Americanization. Studies such as Lauren Rabinovitz's *For the Love of Pleasure* (1998) and Steve Ross' *Working Class Hollywood* (1999) offer excellent examples of work steeped in social history and its questions of class and gender as reflected in and instantiated by practices of leisure culture and through which film played a central role. More recently, Shelly Stamp's *Movie Struck Girls* (2000) and Lee Grieveson's *Policing Cinema* (2004) demonstrate the ways that studying film history and controversies around films and film screenings are vital ways of understanding broad social anxieties and transformations at the dawn of the new century.

Rabinovitz also tied early cinema to changes in urban culture in the service of what has been called (in derogative terms by Bordwell) the "modernity thesis." That argument located early films and their exhibition in a broader history of visual culture in which questions of changes in perception (notions of time and space, especially), ideas about the real, and notions of spectatorship have been studied as historical practices. This literature, from its more theoretical historicist position (Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (1992) and Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping* (1993)) to its articulation in cultural histories (Tom Gunning's many essays on modernity to Giuliana Bruno's *Street-Walking on a Ruined Map* (1992); the essays in Charney and Schwartz, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (1995)) led the way in situating film as part of cultural history. It should come as no surprise that this work concentrated on early film and society, as it is much easier to integrate the study of film into a broader story when there is smaller body of films and a less developed institutional culture.

Since then, however, scholars have moved past the silent era and have successfully shown that by studying the history "of" film culture we can better understand film in the context of both political and cultural life. Put otherwise, one might think of this as the study of film culture's influence "on" history. Antoine de Baecque's *La Nouvelle Vague : portrait d'une jeunesse* (1998) and his more recent *La cinéphilie : Invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture* (2003), Saverio Giovacchini's *Hollywood Modernism* (2001) Peter Decherney's *Hollywood and the Culture Elite* (2005) and Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies* (2005) in different ways suggest how film is a privileged arena through which to understand relatively recent history. What these works share is their commitment to a history "of" film in which both the medium and the institutions that constitute what we might think of as "film culture" are connected to broader contexts such as visual culture, the nation, international trade and the like. In effect, this history "of film" is methodologically indistinguishable at times from cultural and social history although at its best it connects an interest in the specificity of film as a form with these contexts.

“Canned Archives”

Wasson's book describes the establishment of the MoMA Film Library in 1935 (simultaneously paralleled in France by Henri Langlois and his cinémathèque), which

“preserved” films and inscribed them into history in unprecedented ways since film was then experienced as an entirely ephemeral form. The establishment of the Film Library is also proof of the recognition of the potential archival value of films. The Library attempted to assemble a record of everyday life that would have been otherwise lost. More than twenty years earlier, Albert Kahn, French banker and utopian internationalist, had already begun a project that sought to assemble an Atlas of the world in images: the Archives de la planète. This non-fiction film image archive constituted one of the first projects to recognize that film would stand as historical documentation for future generations. Kahn’s ambition suggests a positivist enthusiasm for the photographic image that positioned film as a conscious as opposed to incidental archival record.

As Kahn knew, everyday life since the advent of moving pictures in 1895 could be captured from that moment forward on film. On the surface, few would dispute that films, both fiction and non-fiction, offer the historian of the twentieth century an entirely idiosyncratic but nevertheless photographic record of the past. We have no systematic archive as Kahn had hoped we would but we do have much more information than we have the ability to use. At its most mundane and incidental, historians of material culture and such fields as urban culture and geography (when location shooting took place, for example) can use any films, regardless of their status as fiction or non-fiction, for the information they can convey about dress, such objects as cars, buildings that were changed or razed.

Historians have also begun to examine the photographed and filmed record of the past as evidence of something else. For example, they can see how people dressed on the Lower East Side, what San Francisco looked like after the 1906 earthquake, what the streets of Paris looked like with Nazi soldiers marching through them. As in every use of film, the image is necessary but not sufficient since the more the researcher knows, the better he or she is able to determine where location shots are fabricated; when and whether cars were built or bought.

But scholars have rightly argued that the presence of the cameras and surely the knowledge of the presence of the camera altered what is shown and how people behave. In the end, films represent a filmed or photographed encounter as much as they succeed in representing the event photographed as a record of the past. This troubling scenario led to hand-wringing about how world events would be misunderstood in the future because only filmed or photographed events would be remembered. Daniel Boorstin, in his now classic text, *The Image* (1961), called such visualized happenings “pseudo-events.” There is a rich history of the mediation of political events by movie and television cameras; from the staging of events in Nazi Germany such as the Nuremberg Nazi Party rallies to the Olympic Games, self-consciously organized and orchestrated as “history” that had become historical not only because it was filmed but also because it *was* a film. ²

Although fears that films offer “canned” history abound, films have nevertheless played a role in serving as evidence and as a visual form of testimony, especially in

² See *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, DVD, directed by Ray Muller (1993; New York, NY: Kino Video, 1994).

trials. In *La Vérité par l'image. De Nuremberg au procès Milosevic* (2006), Christian Delage recounts how at the trial of Nuremberg, the American judge and lead prosecutor, Robert H. Jackson gave film a doubly starring role.³ On the one hand, the trial was filmed in order to provide a lasting historical record of the event. On the other hand, the court charged the famous Hollywood director, John Ford, who had directed the American film unit during the war, to edit the Allied footage of the concentration camps and make a film of the atrocities to be shown at Nuremberg. Not only were the films meant to prove the barbarity of the Nazi crimes, but the court also wanted the accused to watch the films for how and whether they would react to the charges through the visual evidence presented. Of course, it was not just the Allies who knew how important a role film would play in the re-telling of what happened during the war. The Soviets presented a film mostly of Majdanek and Auschwitz and the prosecution also assembled a compilation film called *The Nazi Plan* made out of Nazi newsreel footage. The tribunal, however, lacked films of the camps taken by the Nazis themselves. Not that they had never existed. The Allies immediately set out to find them during the Liberation. The Nazis knew to destroy the evidence and the Soviet troops in the advance found only cans of burned films. Thus, for all the limits on the transparent use of films as evidence that we grasp with clarity today, the history of the value of photographed and filmed images as evidence, the power they have, from the heights of a world tribunal to their most personal uses in everyday life, has only just begun to be written.

The explosion of image making in the nineteenth century through lithography, photography and, eventually, film made visual experience and visual literacy an important part of many aspects of life. For any historian working today on problems and questions of modernity, the perils and promises of photographic reproduction are increasingly a central part of the historian's craft. Just as historians of earlier eras have always required sophisticated tools for decoding and understanding the meaning of documents, so too do historians today require additional methods for making sense of the profusion of images that are so essential to the record of modern life.

Anyone considering the relation between film and history is also faced with the question of whether some topics and problems such as evidence in trials lend themselves to certain modes of representation and not others. Is there a peculiarly "cinematic" film(ed) history? Let me simply suggest certain examples. Any history of a place such as a city or an object (the Eiffel Tower) is more amenable to illustration than the history of a concept. Nevertheless, such constructs as "the family" are instantiated through home movies or "The Republic" concretized through newsreels of crowds gathered at a political event. But more significantly, some stories can make great movies precisely because of the filmed "historical footage" available. For example, it should come as no surprise that the history of mass visual entertainment

³ See *The Nazi Plan*, directed by George Stevens (1945: U.S. Council for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality for the Nuremberg Trials); Christian Delage, *La Vérité par l'Image : De Nuremberg au Procès Milosevic* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2006).

has often been told through the use of footage such as films and filmed interviews.⁴ Finding footage for such films becomes the research equivalent to unearthing rare written documents. Three recent historical documentaries are particularly striking in this way and suggest how historians working on the twentieth century might privilege the intersections of politics and culture because of the record from filmed archives. *Morning Sun* (2003) treats the very touchy subject of the Cultural Revolution in China and opens with a visually compelling clip from a filmed version of the Chinese operatic spectacle, *The East is Red* made in 1964 to commemorate fifteen years of Communism in China. The film also includes clips from Soviet films such as *The Gadfly* (1955) that were popular in China and television newscasts of various events during the Cultural Revolution. The footage suggests how central a role film played in the projects of Communist China.

If political programs can be understood better by looking at their relation to film, the seemingly ephemeral performing arts dance and theater have been given a different kind of historical archive as filmed performances become unearthed. One of the most well-researched recent documentaries to take advantage of “found footage” is *Ballets Russes* (2005), a gripping history of the birth of modern ballet and its transatlantic tale in the fulcrum of two wars (first the Russian Revolution and then World War II). The filmmakers did the usual scouring of existing archival collections. But, because they interviewed many of the aging dancers, they also discovered that many of them had old films of their performances. Aware that this is one of the film’s major accomplishments, the narration begins with a conceit framing the problem of the study of dance: “It is the nature of dance to exist but for a moment” as if to underscore what the film itself is about to accomplish: to make dance exist for all time through film. Although it is inevitable that the footage functions as entertainment, it also instructs and offers a remarkable archive of the development of dance and its production.

Finally, the history of material culture has served as an excellent domain for historical documentaries, as a recent film *Tupperware!* (2004), about the history of Tupperware suggests. Using corporate archives, collections at the National Museum of American History and home movies taken by “Tupperware ladies” themselves, the director is able to paint a rich social portrait of women in the workforce and technological and material developments that led to revolutionary changes in everyday life.

Filmmakers are doing more than “finding” footage, they are also creating “archives” in ways that oral historians have. For example, the many interviews they conduct with “witnesses” of the past for their documentary projects and the paper archives of the film production must be considered as part of the historical record. The rise of DVDs has encouraged the packaging of fiction films as historical objects of cultural patrimony and multiple DVD sets are often rich with materials relating to production histories. For example, “Collector’s Editions” act as a kind of production archive and

⁴ See *American Masters*, Television Series, directed by Susan Steinberg, *et al.* (1983, Public Broadcasting Service). Another documentary that manages to breathe new interpretive life into familiar images is *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows*, TV, directed by Robert Allan Ackerman (2001; New York, NY: American Broadcasting Company).

often include a vast array of “Bonus Features” including audio commentary by participants and scholars, original trailers, re-release trailers, retrospective “Making of...” documentaries, contemporary publicity materials such as short promotional films that were made at the time of the film’s release; cut scenes and screen tests. A remarkable 3 DVD set of *The Battle of Algiers* (film 1966, DVD 2006) by Criterion combines the history of the Algerian liberation movement (including interviews with scholars and French military officers discussing their use of torture) with the production history of Pontecorvo’s docudrama about it which was itself often mistaken for a documentary. The lines between history and its visual and scholarly representation in blurred in such DVD packages in interesting and important ways. Anyone who has written about the moving image knows that it is far more satisfying to show than to describe a segment of film before you analyze it. Whether the increased use of filmed images as archives will motivate historians to use visual media as the mode through which to deliver their historical narratives is still an open question. Surely the development of multi-media publication is bound to facilitate a transition beyond the book. While works of history designed for a popular audience are increasingly delivered via visual media in such places as museums and in films (both fiction and documentary) there is no reason that scholarship aimed at a smaller audience of specialists would not benefit from visual narration.

Clio at the Multiplex⁵

Cinema has to consider the viewer. There has to be a dimension that goes beyond historical context to dive into the human heart, to reach out to what moves us all, beyond our differences.⁶

The focus on “canned history” has thus far only addressed how the filmed present becomes the record of the past for future generations. While the use of visual sources (whether photographed or filmed, documentary or fictional films) should be the most fundamental arena of overlap between the fields of Film (which has a strongly developed method of reading the language of film and a rich body of knowledge about the social and institutional history of filmmaking) and History (a field which can use images as evidence for something else or can embed a history of image production in a broad cultural historical narrative), this discussion has remained underdeveloped while a very public battle about historical films – that is films that take the past as the subject of their narratives – has raged. The tension and division between filmmakers and historians needs to be reconciled in order to get beyond the habitual turf battles that erupt when “Clio” makes her appearance at the multiplex.

If D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) serves as a milestone in the rise of narrative film, it is significant that cinema’s first big leap forward in terms of storytelling represents a tale about the past. The same can be said for such innovative films

⁵ See Simon Schama, “Clio at the Multiplex,” *New Yorker*, January 1998, 38-42.

⁶ Press materials provided by Weinstein Company, “Days of Glory.” Rachid Bouchareb: Director’s statement.

as Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) or Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925). The past has, after all, provided the present with many of its most compelling and gripping stories. Filmmakers are driven as much by the power of the narrative as they are by the idea that they are advancing greater historical understanding. But because most historical films (whether fictional or documentary) aspire to capture a large audience, they are, by definition, "popular" stories. Academic historians have difficulty with such "popular" stories as they have particular historiographic and problem-oriented reasons for selecting the stories they tell. Yet, when pressed, one would rarely find an historian that does not also believe his/her work might also merit great public interest – as either a story or as an analysis of the past. But for better and worse, academic historians direct their work to a different audience and its value is generally judged by an accordingly small group of people. This must not be an either/or proposition. Mostly historians need to go off to archives and discover or reinterpret the past as a matter of contributing to research and scholarship. But where and if they can, they might partner with film-makers to "write" in a different idiom – so long as they do not presume to impose their own way of doing things on filmmakers, suggesting that they are the true guardians of the past. But we are a long way from seeing much fruit of such imagined partnerships.

Instead, historians spend too much time criticizing filmmakers who seek identification rather than distance when they make films. For example, even Rachid Bouchareb, whose film, *Indigènes*, caused the French government to restore the pensions of World War II veterans from the colonies, describes in the epigraph above, that he sought identification between the past and the present when he made his film. As a result of this conflation of "their mission" with "our mission," the release of almost every historical film becomes an occasion in which to unloose a turf battle in which academics assert themselves as the true keepers of history. The enthusiasm for this sort of gate keeping also reveals an unconscious design on the part of academics to wrest hold of the audience that has already been captured by Hollywood. The filmmakers and studios, on the other hand, set out to persuade the audience that they have been diligent and responsible guardians of the past and portray historians as an unwelcomed tribunal. The cases are too numerous to name here but there has yet to be any systematic collection or interpretation of these controversies. In this struggle, professional historians often simply end up defending an outmoded erudition.

Yet historians have become invested in commercial films because they recognize that film and television offer the largest audience for historical narratives. As people who grew up watching films and television, they have naturally turned to all sorts of visual and material objects themselves for both research and instructional purposes. Volumes such as the entertaining but predictable *Past Imperfect* (1996) and *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film* (2004) pit the professors against the producers in order to set the record straight or applaud the few instances of laudable historical re-presentation in commercial film. Oliver Stone's historical films have prompted historians to engage in a discussion of true versus false history on film.⁷ The sub-title of one of Robert Brent Toplin's books, *History by Hollywood*

⁷ See Robert Brent Toplin, *Oliver Stone's USA* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

(1996), “the use and the abuse of the American past” encapsulates the attitude of most historians toward popular film since it assumes that the historian is in a position to assess whether the past is being abused. Brent Toplin himself has urged historians to consider what he calls “cinematic history” on its own terms but he does a better job of outlining the persistent limits of historical films than he does making the case for their value beyond the now-familiar notions about emotion, landscape, and communicating a feeling of the past.

Yet, like all narratives of history, Hollywood histories can tell us a great deal about the moment in which they were made. Fiction films are social documents that are especially articulate as they function to make what is hidden in a society speak. Siegfried Kracauer articulated that notion in *From Caligari to Hitler*. In that study, written in 1947, (although some portions published earlier as a MoMA pamphlet in 1942), he suggested that the films of the Weimar era both embodied and even helped shape the emergence of authoritarian leadership that led to the rise of Hitler. Films also function as a kind of latter-day folklore, he showed, and thus they have contributed to national identity-formation. Although ideas about collective fantasy and the audience unconscious have fallen out of favor, films do continue to be read as purveyors of a national identity and ideology.⁸

Historical films are especially interesting because they are often explicit as reinterpretations of the past as seen through the present in ways that academic histories rarely acknowledge. We all study the past through our own moment and while anachronism may thus hover as a constant danger, “presentism” can also make history matter. Filmmakers, on the other hand, are perhaps a bit more shameless in their presentism. For example, despite using Antonia Fraser’s book about Marie Antoinette, Sophia Coppola, it appears, had no prior commitment to deepening our knowledge of the past when she made *Marie Antoinette* (2006), a beautiful confection of a film that cleverly latches on to the detachment of life at the court and its wild material indulgence in order to speak about Hollywood today. Historians working in whatever medium must somehow manage to strike a balance between letting the past be the past and connecting it to the present.

The “uses” of history are genuinely different for historians and filmmakers. Natalie Davis has underscored this contrast: “the historian wants first and foremost to let the past be the past. Strange before it is familiar, particular before it is universal...” Davis has been an advocate for cinematic history, suggesting ways that filmmakers could better adapt their films to reflect several key elements valued by academic historians such as the multiple points of view of different sources and historical actors. Of course, *Roshamon* (1950) did this as well as any written history and possibly before academic historians thought that way. She also urges filmmakers to find a way for viewers to gain knowledge of the evidentiary basis of their screen history. These suggestions, however, focus on applying the “conventions” of written scholarly history to the production of visual history. After all, as Anthony Grafton has shown in

⁸ The literature of this kind is vast. A good introductory volume is Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, eds. *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters. Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

The Footnote: A Curious History (1999), even such fundamental aspects of “good history” as footnotes are merely conventions.⁹ How and why what we take to be the “standards” of good history are themselves an historical effect and it seems hard to enforce such elements as the footnote as a “golden” one.

Robert Rosenstone has taken a different approach to visual history. He argues that it is a mistake for historians to use the rules of written history to critique visual history (Rosenstone, 1995: 49).¹⁰ He also suggests that film history neither replaces written history nor supplements it but rather stands adjacent to history like memory and the oral tradition also do (Rosenstone, 2006: 65). Yet he shares with most historians a lack of appreciation for history by Hollywood. Instead, he identifies other filmmaking modes, which he calls post-modern, as models for cinematic history. These films share a mode of distancing the viewer from the narrative to reveal the notion of the partiality of historical interpretation. Rosenstone suggests that experimental films such as *Walker* (1992) and *Sans Soleil* (1983) are better because they are not tied to the “realism” that has pre-occupied historians and filmmaker-historians both of whom are indebted to nineteenth century narrative structures.¹¹ Yet the problem with this perspective is that it replaces the simplicity of unambiguous traditional historical narratives with a preference for a meta-critical approach to the past. Avant-garde films are better simply because they are more self-conscious about their status as constructed narratives. Rosenstone distinguishes between film as a window onto the past and film as a medium through which to consider a way of thinking about the past and “past-ness,” (Rosenstone, 2006: 54) but that window can and should act as both view and provocation to thought simultaneously. Learning about the past, with the understanding that to study history is to interpret it, is at the heart of every history and we should not abandon that practice (which is as old as Thucydides) and which also transcends the issue of written versus visual history. History cannot simply be about the construction of history nor can good histories avoid the fact that they are, indeed, narrative representations.

Simon Schama, in both word and deed, has taken up the idea that the future of historical “writing” will be in visual form. Schama was already a very well respected scholar when he became something of a household name because of his appearance on fifteen episodes of the BBC’s *A History of Britain* (2000), a series that he also wrote. In it, Schama takes us to monuments, tombs, archives to look at documents and inside palaces, prisons, and caves. The immediacy of the past and its sources are beautifully orchestrated in this history. The series itself and what Schama has also written in several articles dedicated to discussing film and history, argues for the role that imagination has always played in our understanding of the past and suggests that cinematic history, aside from the immediacy it offers, can emphasize issues of

⁹ See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) as noted in Justin Champion, “Simon Schama’s *A History of Britain* and Public History” *History Workshop Journal* 56 (1) (2003): 153-174.

¹⁰ See Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49.

¹¹ Rosenstone draws on Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975).

empathy between viewer and film. In addition, he points to film as possibly providing a form of moral engagement with the past by asking both why and what it means to us. Finally, he endorses the stirring of a sort of poetic connection between the present and the past that films provide for today's audiences.¹² By consciously contemplating fiction films, in fact, we might develop a better purchase on the imagination and so, he suggests, become better historians since without imagination it is, indeed, hard to invoke the past. Despite its material traces, the past is no longer here, but elsewhere, and has to be invoked by the power of the human imagination.

Genre and Cinematic History

When academic historians take up visual story-telling themselves, they might begin to practice the poetry Schama preaches by virtue of the demands placed on them by filmmaking. At that point they might also begin to reflect upon the extent to which their own sense of history and even scholarly historiography has already been shaped by the popular cinematic history of the last century. For example, we might look at works of history such as James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* (1995) (which self-consciously sought the Rashomon effect) and Richard Fox's *Trials of Intimacy* (1999) with its reverse chronology and multiple perspectives, and consider how these works of scholarship testify to a scholarly history that, consciously or not, is being written under the influence of cinema.

For now, however, the study of the relation between most historians and fiction film is stuck in the face of our realization that history in fiction film is neither better nor worse than the work of professional historians and instead is simply a different matter altogether. Robert Brent Toplin, for example, has asked whether there are visual conventions of history film story-telling that are archetypal. He notes that films about the Roman Empire "often feature imposing classical buildings with huge columns and chambers." (Toplin, 2002: 12-13). But, of course, many years before this observation, Roland Barthes' very clever essay, "*The Romans in Films*," contemplated the way that a sign as incidental as the "fringe" of the hair could somehow have the power to denote "Romanness."¹³ Brent Toplin appears to consider genre a safety valve that filmmakers employ in order to minimize the risk of their large-scale investments with a public that demands familiarity. Barthes, however, understood that such signs and symbols functioned as fundamental elements in the process of meaning-making, even if, as Vivian Sobchack has rightly noted, he dismissed their complicity in bourgeois culture as "mythology" too quickly.¹⁴ In other

¹² See *A History of Britain*, DVD, directed by Clare Beavan, et al (2000; A&E Home Video, 2002). See also Simon Schama, *Clio at the Multiplex*, *New Yorker*, January 1998, 38-43, and quite interesting essay by Justin Champion, "Simon Schama's A History of Britain and Public History" *History Workshop Journal* 56 (1) (2003): p. 153-174.

¹³ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. Originally 1957. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997) and Vivian Sobchack, "The Insistent Fringe: Moving Images and the Palimpsest of Historical Consciousness," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 36:4 (1997): 4-20.

¹⁴ See also Vivian Sobchack, "'Happy New Year'/'Auld Lang Syne': On Televisual Montage and Historical Consciousness," *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 92-116. "What is film history?, or the Riddle of the

words, there is no story-telling without reference to convention or genre. What needs better understanding is how visual symbols, objects, and “signs” work in relation to broader conventions of verbal story-telling since film integrates symbols and narrative structures and more so in historical films where the physical environment can show the power of a political regime rather than having it “told.”

The focus on genre shows that historical films are not only reinterpreting the past, but they are also reinterpreting other visual narratives. One avenue for research would be to ask how and why certain aspects of visual historical story-telling become conventionalized. Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975) is an historical film based on the mid-nineteenth century novel by William Thackeray. It seems “authentic” because it refers to what have become iconic period visual representations such as paintings by Gainsborough and drawings by Hogarth. But how and why those images and not others are iconic may tell us about both the original period of their production and its on-going reinterpretation. In other words, as images from a moment become images “of” a moment to later generations, we never entirely lose the original images. They are not, however, all the possible images from the past. So, those images, in their iconic reinterpretation allow us to trace a long history of what becomes a legend most.

If academic historians might develop a greater interest in visual historical story-telling, film scholars have long specialized in this issue. Yet, beginning famously with Siegfried Kracauer, they too have ridiculed and dismissed historical films as invariably stagey and unrealistic because the camera’s realism always reveals the reality of actors dressed in costume rather than a genuine representation of the past no matter how the level of directorial skill and production values (Kracauer, 1960: 77-81). Yet, from early silent films to widescreen epics, historical films have also been imagined as quality films because of their educational aspirations and their debuts have often served as occasions in which to foreground cinematic virtuosity and to celebrate the potentials of cinematic production wrought on a grand scale. Such scholars as George Custen, Sue Harper, Leger Grindon and Andrew Higson have approached the history film through genre by attempting to describe the conventions of the historical film into sub-genres such as the biopic, the costume drama and heritage film. Most often, these studies show the way that popular history functions within the national context to contribute to memory and serve the ends of national heritage.¹⁵

sphinxes,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold Press, 2000): 300-315.

‘Lounge Time’: Post-War Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,” *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 129-170. “Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Cinematic Historical Epic,” *Representations*, 29 (Winter 1990): 24-49.

¹⁵ See Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. George Custen *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), Andrew Higson, *Film Europe and Film America: Cinema, Commerce, and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

Vivian Sobchack's work on historical films stands apart from other considerations of the historical film genre as she has attempted to understand the way historical films embody historicity phenomenologically through the viewer's experience. In particular, her essay on epic is a bold departure from mere genre analysis because it asks about the connection between the epic and the phenomenological problem of comprehending ourselves in time. The effect, she suggests, that the scale and length of the epic (almost always a three-to four-hour film) is to make viewers feel the passage of time. Sobchack has also argued that mainstream historical films (and not simply recent self-consciously post-modern ones) never claimed to offer a naive and transparent history. Instead, she argues that they are rife with stylization, opacity, and star power in order to deliver their message about history's magnitude and importance. She argues, thus, that epics function as stimulants for the desire for history and that their complex production histories and their scale simulate the "bigness" of history (Sobchack, 1990: 24).

From both fields, history and film studies, scholars have failed to interrogate the relation between a moment's scholarly historiography and its cinematic history. For example, one could try to understand the connection between a film such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* made in 1971 and the simultaneous rise of social history. The film is a demythologization of the West in which the hero is an everyman typical of the characters that peopled the accounts of social histories.¹⁶ The film's landscape of wet rot, nights of card-playing and drink designed to fend off boredom; the simple-minded and physically unappealing prostitutes (made bearable to viewers by offering a beautiful Julie Christie as their madame) may or may not accurately represent the development of a Western mining-town around the turn of the century. Its view of the past, however, is decidedly from the bottom up and would have been quite familiar to scholars grappling to re-write history in the wake of the social changes of the 1960s. If we try to understand how and whether historical films, despite their structural repetition associated with generic convention, relate to the historiographic fashions and think through the changing generic conventions of scholarly historiography, we may observe more of a relation between filmmakers and historians than we have previously grasped.

Cinehistory

By bringing film and history into relation with one another, we can imagine a field called "cinehistory." Hayden White has tried to name this connection in identifying "historiophoty" – that is the cinematic representation of the past and the thought about it. "Historiophoty" results from two intersecting forces. On the one hand, White sees history on film as emerging from a long lineage of historical story-telling and conventions, many of which he described in *Metahistory* (1975). On the other hand, he is aware that visual sources themselves have their own ways of making meaning and we have been made aware (again) of the many visual sources for history precisely

¹⁶ See Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1995).

because of the influence of photography and film. To grasp the purpose of defining such a thing as “historiophoty,” we need to consider film’s value-added qualities that have shaped our ideas about how to think about the past and imagine the past whether in visual or written form. Films rather easily encode multiple points of view (the Rashomon effect). Landscape and space not only evoke but make arguments about the past (think about the uses of the desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) or even Salzburg in *The Sound of Music* (1965) to depict a “golden age”). The flashback gives film the power to narrate multiple temporalities in ways far more difficult to achieve in written histories (perhaps *The Godfather, II* (1974) is the quintessential example). The materiality of depictions of the past (consider the importance of cars and music in *American Graffiti* (1973)) suggests both the importance of visual style in all historical eras and also privilege the history of material culture in ways that written histories have not. This incomplete list of what we might consider cinematic “time-effects” has never been studied in a systematic way nor has their development been considered over the course of the history of film.

Cinehistory also returns us to a deeper reconsideration of the epistemological bases of history, especially concerning how and whether film reframes historicity and temporality. While it may seem commonplace now to imagine the past as a series of re-presentations and images, this is the result of historically specific transformations, at once social, cultural and technological that define modernity, which for Walter Benjamin was equivalent to the era of mechanical reproduction. Temporality and subjectivity have a particular shape in modernity and analyzing the changes in historical thinking wrought by modernity’s visual culture must be part of the agenda in thinking about film and history. As Benjamin observed, “the photograph inaugurates history itself and what takes place in this history is the emergence of the image.”¹⁷ Benjamin argued that the indexical technologies of representation would forever change our notions of the past and our access to it. At stake in this understanding of representation is the difference in narrative quality and mode of a medium that seems to be fundamentally about an insistent presence — both of objects that are represented (the iconic figuration of a car is achieved through filming a real car) and a perceptual presence that seems resistant to the passage of time itself. Film, it has been argued by Benjamin and others, has transformed our notions of time and space, showed us life as the naked eye cannot perceive it, creating an unconscious optics. Early critics of film such as Georges Duhamel complained about the overwhelming sense of the epistemological transformations wrought by film: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.”¹⁸ Early on Benjamin identified the way cinema would come to dominate the modern imagination in which people began to speak of certain experiences “as if they were a movie.”¹⁹

¹⁷ See Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1998): 63.

¹⁸ See Georges Duhamel’s comment in Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken, 1969): 238.

¹⁹ See Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, (New York: Vintage, 2000) and Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York: Vintage, 1992, originally 1961).

If the question of the image is essential to Benjamin's thoughts about modernity, it later became the core of his avant-garde notions for the foundations of a materialist history. His idea of history was shaped, most of all, by the cinematic, and he insisted on thinking about "the materialist presentation of history as imagistic in a higher sense than in the traditional presentation."²⁰ Benjamin's cinematic history was achieved through the decomposition of cinema into its elements — particularly as still photographs and through the seemingly exclusively cinematic means of narration which had recently been extensively discussed in avant-garde aesthetic circles: montage. "History decays into images, not stories" he pronounced, offering the means to recompose it through the technique of montage: "the first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history."²¹

Extending the Benjaminian approach, and working hard to distinguish between photography and film, Mary Ann Doane, in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002), has argued that such technologies are fundamentally concerned with temporality itself. In film, she suggests, time itself is conceptualized as what is storable and representable. The cinema, she argues, is at once about the illusion of continuous time but also a medium that would, by recording images, "appear impervious to the passage of time" as opposed to photography's assertion of pastness. (Doane, 2002, 103). As one late nineteenth century newspaper announced in relation to the invention of film: "Death will have ceased to be absolute." (Doane, 2002: 62) By logical extension, historical thinking, which feeds off the finality of death and the pastness of the past, will either be eradicated or transformed into an eternal present as many post-modernists have pondered.

In *Change Mummified* (2001), Phil Rosen has taken up the problem of temporality, in which he identifies André Bazin's mummy complex as a meditation on the ways in which moving images preserve and stop concrete reality in time (Rosen, 2001:27). Others have suggested the ways that film might help us re-think the philosophy of history, replacing chronology and narratives of origins, causes and conclusions with "becoming" as Deleuze and Ricoeur suggest.²² I would like to propose that films themselves are articulate instances of cinehistory rather than texts that can suggest an external theory or philosophy of either film or history. Not all films are equally articulate on this matter, just as not all philosophers are equally interesting. I want to turn to a brief example of how one might use a rather canonical Film Studies fiction film not previously considered an "historical film" (outside its status as a "Hollywood" film) to think about film as cinehistory.

Sunset Boulevard (1950) is a revealing text of cinehistory. Like its later shinier musical cousin, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *Sunset Boulevard* looks at the transition

²⁰ See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002): N3,3,463.

²¹ Benjamin quote from *The Arcades Project*, (N 2, 6), 461.

²² For Paul Ricoeur, see "Histoire et mémoire" in Delage and de Baecque, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 17-28. See Gilles Deleuze's, *Cinema I: Movement-Image*, Translated by Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), see also D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) and Gregory Flaxman, *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 34. For more on cinehistory, see also Delage and Guigueno, *op. cit.*, (2004).

from silent to sound film, surely one of the greatest historical transformations in the industry's by then approximately fifty year history. But Norma Desmond is not Lina Lamont. We see no actual reason why she failed to make the transition in terms of a voice problem, an over-acting problem etc. Norma has not failed to make the transition and keep up with the times: she, like every star, is actually evidence of Hollywood's strange relationship to history and the passage of time. Norma, a symbol of Hollywood film culture itself, is emblematic of a cinematic construction of time in which the past is figured as an eternalized present. *Sunset Boulevard*, rather than simply the straightforward narrative of the history of the transition from silent to sound is also a film about Hollywood's relationship to history, its construction of the past and the passage of time.

Like many an historical film, *Sunset Boulevard* begins with a voice-over narration verbally establishing the time and place that the camera's establishing shot visually narrates. The film opens with a curb sign reading "Sunset Boulevard" and the voice of a man, engaging our identification of the place — "yes, this is *SUNSET BOULEVARD*," with added information about time — "it is about 5:00 am, a murder has been reported." We see a dead body floating in the pool. It is the narrator's but that is not entirely clear until the flashback sequence that follows the scene. He then promises the historical film's conceit that "Maybe you'd like to hear the facts, the whole truth." Again, he manages our temporal awareness — "Let's go back, six months... I was living..." We transition to flashback and understand that the narrator is not a neutral omniscient "voice of history" but rather is a part of the story. He is, of course, Joe Gillis, who impossibly narrates the scene of his own death and its investigation and who serves as the film's guardian of time and reality.

Rather than understand Joe as the representative of contemporary Hollywood — he is washed up and headed back to Ohio -- Norma, Max, and Cecil B. De Mille represent Hollywood's bizarre and delusional resistance to the passage of time. For example, C.B. de Mille is introduced in the film to perpetuate Norma's fantasy about the eternal present. When they reunite, De Mille indulges in a nostalgic discussion with her about the time they shared the celebration of Lindbergh landing in Paris. But, he warns, pictures have changed since then as if to remind her they are not living in those good ol' days. If De Mille thus seems to not suffer from Norma's delusions, the setting suggests otherwise. He is, after all, on the set of *Samson and Delilah* making one of his usual epic costume films and is wearing his director's jodhpurs — both of which went out of fashion at the same time as Norma Desmond did. The film's other "Hollywood" identified character in the film is Norma's fancy Italian car, the Isotta-Franschini, whose 1932 license plate reassured Joe early in the film that the house on Sunset Boulevard must be unoccupied. They begin riding around town in a twenty year-old car without Norma having any sense of its datedness. Of course, it is the car, not Norma that Paramount wants for a film — presumably one set in the 30s. Film's realism necessitates the use of contemporaneous objects in a way that highlights the temporal consistency needed to create a believable present, even of a moment in the past. Often films set in the past use real objects like the car. But the logic of using real past objects is also repeated by the film's casting -- of Swanson the aging film star as

the aging film star, directors De Mille and Von Stroheim, even Buster Keaton as one of her friends, referred to by Joe as the waxworks.

Joe and Norma's relationship anchors the film. In it, the distant, detached and ironic Joe constantly summons the past and remarks on the passage of time. His acute awareness of temporality corresponds, I would suggest, to his failure in Hollywood. He simply does not grasp that history, Hollywood-style, resists the passage of time and is figured, as is Norma, in an enduring present. Joe's interaction with Norma is riddled with his insistence about the passage of time coupled with her denial of its pastness. For example, when he realizes who she is, he says in the past tense, "You used to be big." She responds with the present tense: "I am big." He later tells her that the audience left twenty years ago and that "there is nothing tragic about being fifty unless you try to be twenty-five" suggesting that neither the passage of time nor history are tragic — only their denial is. Norma does not seem to agree.

From the start, the film suggests that Norma's present is somewhere in the past. From her house, replete with a pipe organ that can only be associated in this context with silent film, she is, as Joe complains, a "sleepwalker" and her friends are the "waxworks." What these both share is a sense of being frozen in a moment without the possibility of historical transition. Her New Year's Eve party even resists the passage from one year to the next as she invited no guests to witness the passage and she attempts to kill herself before the band plays "Auld Lang Syne." When she is not screening her old films, she performs her old roles live, what Joe sarcastically calls "the Norma Desmond Follies." She acts the bathing beauty and coquettishly twirls an umbrella, repeating her role as a Mack Sennett bathing beauty, exclaiming, "I can still see myself in the line." Rather than have a vivid memory, Norma instead seems to be running a film in her mind.

Norma, I would like to suggest, is not simply mad because she is living in the past. The film suggests that technologies of photographic reproduction and film as a medium rather than Hollywood, as an institution, perpetuate Norma's status as trapped in the past with no sense that it is anything but a present. We grasp this early in the film when we see the living room littered with pictures of Norma Desmond, all as a young star. This notion is graphically highlighted in the scene of Norma watching her old films. Norma rises to her feet and is caught in the projector's light as if to be re-framed as part of the image on the screen, creating an illusion of continuity of the past and the present, which is precisely the delusion she is playing out. There she sits in the dark, watching herself as if it were live. I would suggest that film's realism only underscored the presentness of the reproduced image, arrested and endlessly repeated in the past as if it were the present as in Norma's nocturnal screenings.

The film's final confrontation between Joe and Norma reiterates the film's gloss on cinematic notions of historicity as the eternal present. Joe attempts to jolt Norma out of her delusional state: he tells her the audience left twenty years ago, reveals that Max writes her fan mail (to which he replies, in the present tense, "Madame is the greatest star of them all"); and explains that Paramount wanted to use her car. Her vengeful tirade that ends in a shooting spree begins with a rearticulation her sense of temporality: "No one ever leaves a star." This statement is both a plea to affirm she is in charge but also reveals her temporal thinking. If no one leaves then a narrative

sequence cannot unfold and instead the players become frozen in time. After she shoots Joe, she says, "The stars are ageless." The film emphasizes Norma's perspective here by re-introducing Joe's voice-over which we now know is the corpse talking, re-situating us in time, "This is where you came in." In a final rush to counter Norma's temporality, newsreel cameras arrive (what better time machine is there?) but their historical function is trumped by Max's appropriation of the setting to mock direct Norma and thus return her (and us) to Norma's eternal present. Joe rushes to reassert his sense of history by anticipating the headlines about his death, all with adjectives that suggest the passage of time: "forgotten star of yesteryear, aging actress, yesterday's glamour queen." Yet Norma has the final word because the viewer loses the frame of the film, *Sunset Boulevard*, and is confronted instead with a different Norma Desmond film, one directed by Max. Without Joe's framing (he is dead) the viewer is now trapped in Norma's sense of time and space. She enlists us and reaches out to us with her version of temporality, "This is my life and it always will be," she insists. The blurring and disintegration of this final image suggests that Norma is somehow entering the camera and becoming part of the film itself. The film ends in an unrealistic blur into Norma's eternal present.

Not all films, of course, offer the same quality of reflection concerning cinematic historicity and time as *Sunset Boulevard*. But by reading what a particular film might tell us about such basic elements as temporality, we can begin to explore how and whether film as a form but also individual films have shaped ideas about history and historicity in ways that far transcend debates about true and false history up on the screen. By thinking more systematically about the accumulation of filmed images as the record of the past, we will better understand our own notions of temporality and historicity.

Film is like history, is the archive of history since 1895 and helps us think about history. But even more suggestive, history is best imagined as an image, which is what Walter Benjamin famously described. With that in mind, I end with a final citation not from the well-known German philosopher but from a Hollywood royal: Liza Minnelli in the 1974 documentary, *That's Entertainment!* That compilation documentary, made in celebration of MGM's fiftieth anniversary, was the last film shot on the back lot at MGM's Culver City Studio and is an important text for cinehistory. Minnelli appears in order to discuss her mother, Judy Garland, but makes a wonderfully telling comment after the segment that celebrates the career of Garland at MGM. After a medley of clips that summarizes Garland's career in reverse, beginning and ending with "Get Happy" from *Summer Stock*, her last MGM film, the frame first freezes and then fades completely to black. Seated on a dilapidated lot, Minnelli utters, "Thank God for film. It can capture a performance and hold it right there forever. And if anyone says to you, 'Who was he or who was she and what made them so good?' I think a piece of film answers that question better than any words I know of." As this essay has suggested in multiple ways: me too.

Film's hold on the twentieth century has changed the kind of documents historians have at their disposal, has enriched historiography, and has redefined such elemental historical notions as temporality. Whatever the twenty-first century may have in

store, film and its allied new media, will be essential to its history and to our historical imaginations.

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