

History on Film/Film on History

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The subject of 'film and history' has come a long way since the publication of the pioneering *The Historian and Film* in 1976. In the 1970s historians were preoccupied with the value of film as a primary source for the study of contemporary history, for which reason much of the early work focused on newsreels and documentary films. In the 1980s attention shifted to the feature film and the extent to which it 'reflected' historical conditions and societies such as France during the years of the Popular Front, Depression-era America and Britain during the Second World War. US and British scholars pioneered what came to be called 'contextual film history' as they used archival sources to document the production and reception histories of films. Richard Taylor and David Welch produced groundbreaking studies of the role of film as a medium of propaganda (1). The nature of historical representation in film has been the focus of much scholarly work over the last two decades. The historical film has been analysed for its mobilisation of the past for propaganda, for its role in the emergence of national cinemas, and for its contested place in 'taste wars' between the views of middle-brow critics on the one hand and the popular preferences of cinema audiences on the other (2). Another tradition, arising initially from France and subsequently taken up by US scholars in the 1990s, has focused less on context and more on the structural and ideological features of film. Writers such as Marcia Landy, Vivian Sobchack and, pre-eminently, Robert A. Rosenstone are interested in the way in which film constructs its own historical world – or, to put it another way, how film writes history (3).

This historiographical context is worth sketching in, not least because Rosenstone makes the somewhat contentious claim that film and history remains a field 'in search of a methodology' (p. 164). I will return to this question later in the review. *History on Film/Film on History* is Rosenstone's fullest and most wide-ranging contribution to a field that has engaged his attention since the early 1980s when he was employed as

historical consultant for two vastly different films: *The Good Fight* (1983), a low-budget documentary about the Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War, and *Reds* (1982), Warren Beatty's \$45 million Academy Award-winning film of John Reed and the Russian Revolution. It was his experiences on these films that led Rosenstone to look for a way of engaging with historical film that went beyond the standard critique of the professional historian that films either took liberties with the past or simply got it wrong due to the ignorance of those who made them. Rosenstone explains his approach thus:

It took more than a decade of thinking and writing about history film to work my way towards the simple insight that underlies the chapters of this book: film makers can be and already are historians (some of them), but of necessity *the rules of engagement of their works with the stuff of the past are and must be different from those that govern written history* (pp. 7–8).

Rosenstone acknowledges the influence on his work of 'the post structuralist critique of historical practice one finds in the works of such critics as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit' (p. 7). From this perspective he developed an interest in what he termed 'the New History film'. The New History film is one that 'finds the space to *contest* history, to interrogate either the metanarratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received notions, conventional images' (4). The collection *Revisioning History* (1995), which Rosenstone edited, featured case studies of films that could be included in this category such as *Hiroshima, mon amour* (dir. Alain Resnais, 1959), *Memories of Underdevelopment* (dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), *Hitler: a Film from Germany* (dir. Hans-Jürgen Syderberg, 1977) and *Walker* (dir. Alex Cox, 1987). These films exist outside the mainstream, tend to be the work of directors with a self-conscious, highly formalist style and use historical motifs and signifiers in a symbolic, allegorical way. *Hiroshima, mon amour*, for example, explores the subjectivity of memory by collapsing distinctions between past and present, while *Walker*, based on the little-known career of an American adventurer who led a revolution in Nicaragua in 1855, is replete with deliberate anachronisms including motor vehicles and computers. Such films as these are easily labelled 'postmodernist' and this was the term that came to be applied to Rosenstone's work.

So does *History on Film/Film on History* represent a postmodernist approach to the subject? Rosenstone describes himself as 'a person who has been labelled a "post-modern" historian' (p. 3) and repeatedly insists that the label has been applied by others. However, his intellectual influences – Hayden White, Alun Munslow (to whom the book is dedicated), Marc Ferro – give a clear indication of Rosenstone's theoretical position. His argument is that film can, and should, be regarded as a form of history in its own right with its own codes and conventions that are different from, not inferior to, those of academic history. To Rosenstone the film-maker is as much a historian as the university academic: he or she is merely telling a different kind of history in a different kind of way. This would seem to me the very definition of a postmodernist approach.

The proof of any theory, of course, is in its application. I have no ideological aversion to postmodern history per se; but like all epistemologies it only really stands up if it can be demonstrably applied to the business of actually doing history. In fact Rosenstone sets out a good case. He provides a useful summary of how different modes of film practice – dramatic feature films, documentaries, and oppositional or experimental films – adopt different filmic conventions for representing history. I was particularly fascinated by his account of *El Perro Negro* (dir. Peter Forgac, 2004), which uses amateur film (home movies) to reconstruct people's experiences of the Spanish Civil War 'from below'. This results in a rather different history being told than that revealed by the 'official' archive sources for the same subject in *Mourir à Madrid* (dir. Frederic Rossif, 1963). His discussion of feature films covers more familiar ground, though his choice of case study – *Glory* (dir. Edward Zwick, 1989), focusing on the experiences of a black regiment during the American Civil War – is a less obvious example than the usual suspects such as *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. D. W. Griffith, 1915) or *Schindler's List* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993). Rosenstone casts his net wide to include examples of films from Hollywood (both mainstream and independent), Latin America, Europe and the former Soviet Union. While this inevitably means there is a tendency towards generalisation and overview, it is to be welcomed, nevertheless, for reaching beyond the narrow national focus of most film

histories. And he has some pertinent observations on the role of the film-maker as historian, examining the controversial films of Oliver Stone – *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (1995) and others – which he claims have ‘created a powerful interpretation of contemporary history’ (p. 131). This is not a new argument in itself – the collection *Oliver Stone’s USA* has been there before – but Rosenstone offers a more positive assessment of Stone’s work than most critics (5).

Rosenstone’s analysis of the formal components and ideological structures of films is always illuminating: he is particularly sensitive to how aspects of form and style create meaning as well as narrative and characterisation. But this is only part of the story. As a (non-postmodernist) film historian the most interesting questions, to me, are how and why did a film take the form it did and how far were the intentions of the film-makers understood by audiences? This is where the limitations of the postmodern approach, which apparently shuns the idea of going into the archives, are demonstrated. What is missing from the book is any real nuts-and-bolts production history. To what extent did the films reflect the intentions of those who made them and how far was their style and content influenced, even determined, by other factors such as budgetary constraints, the interventions of censors or the conflicting aims of a director with artistic ambitions and a producer with eyes solely on box-office receipts? I would like to know, for example, how far the blatant anachronisms of *Walker* were a conscious choice by its director Alex Cox or whether they were forced on him by the problems of shooting on what seems to have been a very limited budget. (No money for replicas of period transport? Well, the producer has a Mercedes on set ...) This is where Rosenstone’s reluctance to engage with more ‘traditional’ historical approaches is a blind spot. In recent years British and American film historians have developed what has come to be known as ‘the New Film History’: an approach that combines contextual and textual analysis in order to understand how the finished film is the outcome of the various decisions taken and compromises made during its production. The finished film is, if you like, the residue of the production process. This approach is typified by the work of British historians such as Sue Harper, Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate – all of whom are absent from Rosenstone’s bibliography. Harper’s *Picturing the Past: the Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (1994), for example, demonstrates a great deal of methodological sophistication in its linking of production context to aspects of form, especially visual style. If the discipline is in search of methodology, then I would suggest this is where it is to be found.

These limitations are exemplified by Rosenstone’s discussion of *October* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1928). He has some original insights into this well-known film and, as ever, offers a nuanced assessment of its textual properties and ideological mechanisms. He suggests that previous commentators have been too concerned with the film’s status as propaganda, offering an ideologically acceptable narrative of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and that consequently they have overlooked its status as history. Here, he suggests, is a rare example of a film that represents history as process rather than as the outcome of individual agency:

Everything in *October* points toward, and becomes part of, an argument that might be summed up this way: October was the result of the criminality and stupidity of the Provisional Government, a great dramatic movement in which masses of common people spontaneously participated. Yes, the final seizure of power was planned by a small group of Bolshevik leaders meeting in a tiny room. And yes, it is clear that Lenin is the mind behind the Revolution. But the film, in its overall argument, counters any party line notion that the Bolsheviks were the revolutionary vanguard. For Eisenstein shows October as the time when the masses entered into history and history entered into the masses (pp. 58–9).

What Rosenstone neglects, however, is the extent to which this narrative was the outcome of production determinants and political constraints. Richard Taylor has shown how the history represented in *October* was hampered by political expediency. The film writes out Trotsky from the official history and promotes the cult of Stalin. Lenin is represented ‘as an embodiment of the elemental power of the mass, of the collective will’ because that was how the Party wanted him portrayed (6). Moreover, it must be remembered that *October’s* representation of history-as-process and its extreme symbolism were much criticised at the

time and contributed to Soviet cinema turning its back on high formalism in favour of the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism' with its individualised peasant heroes and heroines.

In conclusion, then, I am not persuaded that *History on Film/Film on History* offers quite the radical new way of thinking about historical cinema that it sets out to do. It makes for an intellectually stimulating and even provocative read: Rosenstone is much to be admired for challenging prevailing views and received wisdoms. But received wisdoms are not always wrong. A decade ago, when the postmodernist critique of history was at its height, this book would probably have been accorded more currency than it will now. I cannot help but feel, however, that methodologically it re-treads old ground (much of it trodden by Rosenstone himself) rather than offering a genuinely new 'take' on the subject.

Notes

1. *The Historian and Film*, ed. P. Smith (Cambridge, 1976); A. Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1979); *Feature Films as History*, ed. K. R. M. Short (London, 1981); *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. J. E. O'Connor and M. Jackson (New York, 1979); *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, ed. P. C. Rollins (Lexington, Ky., 1983); J. Richards and A. Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-70* (Oxford, 1983); R. Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London, 1979); D. Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-45* (Oxford, 1983). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, e.g., *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, ed. T. Barta (Westport, Conn., 1998); S. Harper, *Picturing the Past: the Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London, 1994); *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. M. Landy (London, 2001); J. Richards, *Films and British National Identity: from Dickens to 'Dad's Army'* (Manchester, 1997); R. B. Toplin, *History by Hollywood: the Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana, Ill., 1996); M. Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London, 1997). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See M. Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. N. Greene (Detroit, Mich., 1988); P. Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford, 1980); M. Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1996); V. Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York, 1997); R. A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. R. A. Rosenstone (Princeton, NJ, 1995). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rosenstone, 'Introduction', *Revisioning History*, p.8. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Oliver Stone's USA*, ed. R. B. Toplin (Lawrence, Kan., 2000). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. Taylor, *October* (London, 2002), p. 28. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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