
The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age

Historians and Film

Let's be blunt and admit it: historical films trouble and disturb professional historians—have troubled and disturbed historians for a long time. Listen to Louis Gottschalk of the University of Chicago, writing in 1935 to the president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: "If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes it to its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it."¹

How can we think of this letter today? As touching? Naive? A window onto a simpler age that could actually conceive of Hollywood as having "higher ideals"? All of these? But if the attitude seems dated, the sentiments surely are not. Most historians today would be capable of saying, or thinking, the same thing. Give reputable scholars the chance to criticize and revise scripts, and we will surely have better history on the screen.

Question: Why do historians distrust the historical film? The overt answers: Films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize people, events, and movements. They falsify history.

The covert answers: Film is out of the control of historians. Film shows we do not own the past. Film creates a historical world with which books cannot compete, at least for popularity. Film is a disturbing symbol of an increasingly postliterate world (in which people can read but won't).

Impolite question: How many professional historians, when it comes to fields outside their areas of expertise, learn about the past from film? How many Americanists know the great Indian leader primarily from *Gandhi*? Or Europeanists the American Civil War from *Glory*, or—horrors!—*Gone with the Wind*? Or Asianists early modern France from *The Return of Martin Guerre*?

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Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, edited by Marcia Landy, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 50-66.

Dislike (or fear) of the visual media has not prevented historians from becoming increasingly involved with film in recent years: film has invaded the classroom, though it is difficult to specify if this is due to the "laziness" of teachers, the postliteracy of students, or the realization that film can do something written words cannot. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of historians have become peripherally involved in the process of making films: some as advisers on film projects, dramatic and documentary, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (which requires that filmmakers create panels of advisers but—to disappoint Gottschalk—makes no provision that the advice actually be taken); others as talking heads in historical documentaries. Sessions on history and film have become a routine part of academic conferences, as well as annual conventions of major professional groups like the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association. Reviews of historical films have become features of such academic journals as the *American Historical Review*, *Journal of American History*, *Radical History Review*, *Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin*, and *Latin American Research Review*.²

All this activity has hardly led to a consensus on how to evaluate the contribution of the "historical" film to "historical understanding." Nobody has yet begun to think systematically about what Hayden White has dubbed *historiophoty*—"the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse."³ In essays, books, and reviews, the historical film is dealt with piecemeal. Yet it is fair to say that two major approaches predominate.

The explicit approach takes motion pictures to be reflections of the social and political concerns of the era in which they were made. Typical is the anthology *American History/American Film*, which finds "history" in such works as *Rocky* (problems of blue-collar workers), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (conspiracy and conformity in the fifties), *Viva Zapata* (the cold war), and *Drums along the Mohawk* (persistence of American ideals).⁴ This strategy insists that any film can be situated "historically." As indeed it can. But it also provides no specific role for the film that wants to talk about historical issues. Nor does it distinguish such a film from any other kind of film. Which leads to this question: Why not treat written works of history in the same way? They, too, reflect the concerns of the era in which they were made, yet we historians take their contents at face value and not simply as a reflection of something else. Why consider history books in terms of contents and historical films in terms of reflections? Is it that the screen itself only reflects images? That the analogy to Plato's cave is too close to allow us to trust what messages the shadows deliver?

The implicit approach essentially sees the motion picture as a book transferred to the screen, subject to the same sorts of judgments about data, verifiability, argument, evidence, and logic that we use for written history. Involved here are two problematic assumptions: first, that the current practice of written history is the only possible way of understanding the relationship of past to present; and, second, that written history mirrors "reality." If the first of these assumptions is arguable, the second is not. Certainly by now we all know that

history is never a mirror but a construction, congeries of data pulled together or "constituted" by some larger project or vision or theory that may not be articulated but is nonetheless embedded in the particular way history is practiced.

Let me put it another way: historians tend to use written works of history to critique visual history as if that written history were itself something solid and unproblematic. They have not treated written history as a mode of thought, a process, a particular way of using the traces of the past to make that past meaningful in the present.

The notion of history as constituted and problematic is hardly news to anyone familiar with current debates in criticism, but it needs to be stressed. For to talk about the failures and triumphs, strengths and weaknesses and possibilities of history on film, it is necessary to pull back the camera from a two-shot in which we see history on film and history on the page square off against each other, and to include in our new frame the larger realm of past and present in which both sorts of history are located and to which both refer. Seen this way, the question cannot be, Does the historical film convey facts or make arguments as well as written history? Rather, the appropriate questions are: What sort of historical world does each film construct and how does it construct that world? How can we make judgments about that construction? How and what does that historical construction mean to us? After these three questions are answered, we may wish to ask a fourth: How does the historical world on the screen relate to written history?

Varieties of Historical Film

We cannot talk about the historical "film" in the singular because the term covers a variety of ways of rendering the past on the screen. (Written history, too, comes in different subcategories—narrative, analytic, quantitative—but we have the notion that they all are part of some larger story about the past. Film seems more fragmented, perhaps because there exist no broad film histories of nations, eras, or civilizations that provide a historical framework for specific films.) It is possible to put history on film into a number of categories—history as drama, history as antidrama, history without heroes, history as spectacle, history as essay, personal history, oral history, postmodern history—but for heuristic purposes this essay will collapse all of these into three broad categories: history as drama, history as document, and history as experiment. Most of what follows will focus on history as drama, the most common form of historical film.

If you say "historical film," history as drama is probably what comes to mind. A staple of the screen ever since motion pictures began to tell stories, this form of film has been regularly produced all over the world in the United States, France, Italy, Japan, China, Russia, India—wherever films are made. Some of the most beloved motion pictures have been dramatized history, or at least dramas set in the past. Among them are the kind of works that have given the historical film such a bad reputation—*Gone with the Wind*, *Cleopatra*, and *The Private Life of*

Henry VIII. It has been suggested by Natalie Davis that history as drama can be divided into two broad categories: films based on documentable persons or events or movements (*The Last Emperor*, *Gandhi*, *JFK*) and those whose central plot and characters are fictional, but whose historical setting is intrinsic to the story and meaning of the work (*Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Molly Maguires*, *Black Robe*).⁵ But this distinction does not in fact have much explanatory power, for the categories quickly break down. A recent film, *Glory*, which I will analyze later in this essay, follows the common strategy of placing fictional characters next to historical characters in settings alternately documentable and wholly invented.

History as document is a more recent form than history as drama. Growing—at least in the United States—out of the social problem documentary of the thirties (*The Plow that Broke the Plains*), it was given a boost by the post-World War II patriotic retrospective (*Victory at Sea*), and an even bigger boost by public money, which has been funneled by the National Endowment for the Humanities into historical films in the past two decades. In the most common form, a narrator (and/or historical witnesses or experts) speaks while we see recent footage of historical sites intercut with older footage, often from newsreels, along with photos, artifacts, paintings, graphics, newspaper and magazine clippings.

Professional historians trust history as document rather more than history as drama because it seems closer in spirit and practice to written history—seems both to deliver "facts" and to make some sort of traditional historical argument, whether as a feature (*The Wobblies*, *Huey Long*, *Statue of Liberty*) or as a series (*The Civil War*, *Eyes on the Prize*). But a major problem for documentary lies precisely in the promise of its most obviously "historical" materials. All those old photographs and all that newsreel footage are saturated with a prepackaged emotion: nostalgia. The claim is that we can see (and, presumably, feel) what people in the past saw and felt. But that is hardly the case. For we can always see and feel much that the people in the photos and newsreels could not see: that their clothing and automobiles were old-fashioned, that their landscape lacked skyscrapers and other contemporary buildings, that their world was black and white (and haunting) and gone.

History as experiment is an awkward term for a variety of filmic forms, both dramatic and documentary and sometimes a combination of the two. Included here are works made by avant-garde and independent filmmakers in the United States and Europe as well as in former communist countries and the Third World. Some of these films have become well known, even beloved (Sergei Eisenstein's *Oktober* and *Battleship Potemkin*, Roberto Rossellini's *The Rise of Louis XIV*. Some have achieved local or regional fame (*Ceddo* by Senegal's Ousmane Sembène, *Quilombo* by Brazil's Carlos Diegues). Others remain intellectual and cinematic cult films, more written about by theorists than seen by audiences (Alexander Kluge's *Die Patriotin*, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, Alex Cox's *Walker*, Jill Godmilow's *Far from Poland*).

What these films have in common (apart from lack of exposure) is that all are made in opposition to the mainstream Hollywood film. Not just to the subject matter of Hollywood but to its way of constructing a world on the screen. All struggle in one or more ways against the codes of representation of the standard film. All refuse to see the screen as a transparent "window" onto a "realistic" world.

Why, you may ask, discuss such films? Why take time for works few people want to or can see? Because, as I have argued elsewhere, such works provide the possibility of what might be called a "serious" historical film, a historical film that parallels—but is very different from—the "serious" or scholarly written history, just as the standard Hollywood film parallels more popular, uncritical forms of written history, the kind history "buffs" like. At its best, history as experiment promises a revisioning of what we mean by the word *history*.

How Mainstream Films Construct a Historical World

The world that the standard or mainstream film constructs is, like the world we live in and the air we breathe, so familiar that we rarely think about how it is put together. That, of course, is the point. Films want to make us think they are reality. Yet the reality we see on the screen is neither inevitable nor somehow natural to the camera, but a vision creatively constructed out of bits and pieces of images taken from the surface of a world. Even if we know this already, we conveniently forget it in order to participate in the experience that cinema provides.

Less obvious is the fact that these bits and pieces are stuck together according to certain codes of representation, conventions of film that have been developed to create what may be called "cinematic realism"—a realism made up of certain kinds of shots in certain kinds of sequences seamlessly edited together and underscored by a sound track to give the viewer a sense that nothing (rather than everything) is being manipulated to create a world on screen in which we can all feel at home.

The reason to point to the codes of cinema (which have a vast literature of their own) is to emphasize the fundamental fiction that underlies the standard historical film—the notion that we can somehow look through the window of the screen directly at a "real" world, present or past. This "fiction" parallels a major convention of written history: its documentary or empirical element, which insists on the "reality" of the world it creates and analyzes. The written work of history, particularly the grand narrative, also attempts to put us into the world of the past, but our presence in a past created by words never seems as immediate as our presence in a past created on the screen.

History as drama and history as document are, in their standard forms, linked by this notion of the screen as a window onto a realistic world. It is true that the documentary—with its mixture of materials in different time zones, with its images of the past and its talking heads speaking in the present—often provides a window into two (or more) worlds. But those worlds share, both with

each other and with history as drama, an identical structure and identical notions of document, chronology, cause, effect, and consequence. Which means that in talking about how the mainstream film creates its world, it is possible to make six points that apply equally to the dramatic film and the documentary.

1. The mainstream film tells history as a story, a tale with a beginning, middle, and an end. A tale that leaves you with a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift. A tale embedded in a larger view of history that is always progressive, if sometimes Marxist (another form of progress).

To put it bluntly, no matter what the historical film, be the subject matter slavery, the Holocaust, or the Khmer Rouge, the message delivered on the screen is almost always that things are getting better or have gotten better or both. This is true of dramatic films (*Glory*, *Reds*, *The Last Emperor*) and true of documentaries like *The Wobblies*, *Seeing Red*, *The Good Fight*, and other hymns of praise to lost causes.

Often the message is not direct. A film about the horrors of the Holocaust or the failure of certain idealistic or radical movements may in fact seem to be a counterexample. But such works are always structured to leave us feeling: Aren't we lucky we did not live in those benighted times? Isn't it nice that certain people kept the flag of hope alive? Aren't we much better off today? Among those few films that leave a message of doubt about meaningful change or human progress, one might point to *Radio Bikini*, with its lingering questions about the possibility of controlling atomic energy or regaining an innocent faith in government, the military, or the scientific establishment. Or to *JFK*, with its worries about the future of American democracy, though the very fact that a big star like Kevin Costner, playing New Orleans attorney Jim Garrison, expresses these doubts tends to reassure us that the problems of the security state will be exposed.

2. Film insists on history as the story of individuals, either men or women (but usually men) who are already renowned, or men and women who are made to seem important because they have been singled out by the camera and appear before us in such a large image on the screen. Those not already famous are common people who have done heroic or admirable things, or who have suffered unusually bad circumstances of exploitation and oppression. The point: both dramatic features and documentaries put individuals in the forefront of the historical process. Which means that the solution of their personal problems tends to substitute itself for the solution of historical problems. More accurately, the personal becomes a way of avoiding the often difficult or insoluble social problems pointed out by the film. In *The Last Emperor* the happiness of a single "re-educated" man stands for the entire Chinese people. In *Reds*, the final resolution of a stormy love affair between two Americans becomes a way of avoiding the contradictions of the Bolshevik Revolution. In *Radio Bikini*, the fate of a single sailor stands for all of those who were tainted with radiation from the atomic bomb tests of Operation Crossroads.

3. Film offers us history as the story of a closed, completed, and simple past. It provides no alternative possibilities to what we see happening on the screen,

admits of no doubts, and promotes each historical assertion with the same degree of confidence. A subtle film like *The Return of Martin Guerre* may hint at hidden historical alternatives, at data not mentioned and stories untold, but such possibilities are never openly explored on the screen.

This confidence of the screen in its own assertions can trouble even historians who are sympathetic to the visual media. Natalie Davis, the historical consultant on the film, worries about the cost of the "powerful simplicity" of *Martin Guerre*: "Where was there room in this beautiful and compelling cinematographic re-creation of a [sixteenth-century] village for the uncertainties, the 'perhapses,' the 'mayhavebeens' to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing?"⁶ Davis followed her work on the film by writing a book (with the same title) in order to restore this important dimension to the story of Martin Guerre. But anyone other than an expert viewing a historical film is confronted with a linear story that is unproblematic and uncontested in its view of what happened and why.

This is equally true of the documentary, despite the fact that it may call on various witnesses and experts who express alternative or opposing points of view. Through editing, these differences are never allowed to get out of hand or call into question the main theme of the work. The effect is much like that of dissenting minor characters in a drama, people whose opposing positions heighten the meaning of whatever tasks the heroes undertake. Ultimately, these alternative viewpoints make no real impact. They only serve to underline the truth and solidity of the main world or argument.

4. Film emotionalizes, personalizes, and dramatizes history. Through actors and historical witnesses, it gives us history as triumph, anguish, joy, despair, adventure, suffering, and heroism. Both dramatized works and documentaries use the special capabilities of the medium—the closeup of the human face, the quick juxtaposition of disparate images, the power of music and sound effect—to heighten and intensify the feelings of the audience about the events depicted on the screen. (Written history is, of course, not devoid of emotion, but usually it points to emotion rather than inviting us to experience it. A historian has to be a very good writer to make us feel emotion while the poorest of filmmakers can easily touch our feelings.) Film thus raises the following issues: To what extent do we wish emotion to become a historical category? Part of historical understanding? Does history gain something by becoming empathic? Does film, in short, add to our understanding of the past by making us feel immediately and deeply about particular historical people, events, and situations?

5. Film so obviously gives us the "look" of the past—of buildings, landscapes, and artifacts—that we may not see what this does to our sense of history. So it is important to stress that more than simply the "look" of things, film provides a sense of how common objects appeared when they were in use. In film, period clothing does not hang limply on a dummy in a glass case, as it does in a museum; rather, it confines, emphasizes, and expresses the moving body. In film, tools, utensils, weapons, and furniture are not items on display or images reproduced on the pages of books, but objects that people use and misuse, objects they depend

upon and cherish, objects that can help to define their livelihoods, identities, lives, and destinies. This capability of film slides into what might be called false historicity. Or the myth of facticity, a mode on which Hollywood has long depended. This is the mistaken notion that mimesis is all, that history is in fact no more than a "period look," that things themselves *are* history rather than *become* history because of what they mean to people of a particular time and place. The baleful Hollywood corollary: as long as you get the look right, you may freely invent characters and incidents and do whatever you want to the past to make it more interesting.

6. Film shows history as process. The world on the screen brings together things that, for analytic or structural purposes, written history often has to split apart. Economics, politics, race, class, and gender all come together in the lives and moments of individuals, groups, and nations. This characteristic of film throws into relief a certain convention—one might call it a "fiction"—of written history: the strategy that fractures the past into distinct chapters, topics, and categories; that treats gender in one chapter, race in another, economy in a third. Daniel Walkowitz points out that written history often compartmentalizes "the study of politics, family life, or social mobility." Film, by contrast, "provides an integrative image. History in film becomes what it most centrally is: a process of changing social relationships where political and social questions—indeed, all aspects of the past, including the language used—are interwoven."⁷ A character like Bertrande de Rols in *Martin Guerre* is at once a peasant, a woman, a wife, a property owner, a mother, a Catholic (but possibly a Protestant), a lover, a resident of Languedoc, a subject of Francis I of France.

How Experimental Films Construct a Historical World

The only collective way to characterize history as experiment is as films of opposition: opposition to mainstream practice, to Hollywood codes of "realism" and storytelling, to the kind of film described above. Certainly most experimental films will include some of the six characteristics of the standard film, but each will also attack or violate more than one of the mainstream conventions. Among films defined as history as experiment, it is possible to find the following: works that are analytic, unemotional, distanced, multicausal; historical worlds that are expressionist, surrealist, disjunctive, postmodern; histories that do not just show the past but also talk about how and what it means to the filmmaker (or to us) today.

How does history as experiment contest the characteristics of mainstream film? Here are some examples:

1. History as a story set in the framework of (moral) progress: the director Claude Lanzmann suggests in *Shoah* that the Holocaust was a product not of madness but of modernization, rationality, efficiency—that evil comes from progress. Alex Cox, in *Walker*, highlights the interpenetration of past and present and points to Manifest Destiny (with its assumptions of political and moral

superiority and uplift) not as an impulse confined to pre-Civil War America but as a continuing part of our relationships with Central America.

2. History as a story of individuals: Soviet directors in the twenties, particularly Eisenstein in *Potemkin* and *Oktober*, created "collectivist" histories in which the mass is center stage and individuals emerge only briefly as momentary exemplars of larger trends (much as they do in written history). The same strategy has been pursued more recently by Latin American filmmakers (Jorge Sanjinés in *Power of the People*, Carlos Diegues in *Quilombo*).

3. History as a closed, uncontested story: Jill Godmilow in *Far from Poland* presents a "history" of the Solidarity movement through competing voices and images that refuse to resolve into a single story with a single meaning. Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil* and Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* both dispense with story in favor of historical incident, pastiche, rumination, essay.

4. History as emotional, personal, dramatic: Roberto Rossellini made a series of sumptuously mounted but wholly dedramatized films, including *The Rise of Louis XIV* and *The Age of the Medici*, in which amateur actors mouth lines rather than act them. The Brazilian Glauber Rocha achieves a similar Brechtian, distanced, unemotional past in such works as *Antonio das Mortes* and *Black God, White Devil*.

5. History with a "period look": Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* tells a history of the Holocaust without a single historical image from the thirties or forties; everything was shot in the eighties, when the film was made. The same is largely true of Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, a Film from Germany*, which re-creates the world of the Third Reich on a soundstage with puppets, parts of sets, props, actors, and random historical objects, all illuminated by back-projected images.

6. History as process: the director Alexander Kluge in *Die Patriotin* creates history as a series of disjunctive images and data, a kind of collage or postmodern pastiche. Juan Downey in *Hard Times and Culture* uses a similar approach in a study of fin de siècle Vienna. Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil* envisions the past as made up of disconnected, synchronous, and erasable events.

History as experiment does not make the same claim on us as does the realist film. Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past. The aim is not to tell everything, but to point to past events, or to converse about history, or to show why history should be meaningful to people in the present. Experimental films rarely sanitize, nationalize, or reify the past, though they often ideologize it. They tend to make bits and pieces of our historical experience accessible, sometimes in all its confusion. Such films rarely claim to be the only or the last word on their subject; many hope to make us think about the importance of a subject ignored by written history.

Experimental films may help to re-vision what we mean by history. Not tied to "realism," they bypass the demands for veracity, evidence, and argument that

are a normal component of written history and go on to explore new and original ways of thinking about the past. Although such films are not popular, and although "reading" them can at first seem difficult for those who expect realism, their breakthroughs often are incorporated into the vocabulary of the mainstream film. The revolutionary montage effects of Eisenstein were long ago swallowed up by Hollywood. More recently, a German film, *The Nasty Girl*, uses a variety of avant-garde techniques (back projection rather than sets, composite shots, overtly absurdist elements) to portray the continuing desire of middle-class Germans to deny local complicity with the horrors of the Third Reich.

Reading and Judging the Historical Film

Our sense of the past is shaped and limited by the possibilities and practices of the medium in which that past is conveyed, be it the printed page, the spoken word, the painting, the photograph, or the moving image. Which means that whatever historical understanding the mainstream film can provide will be shaped and limited by the conventions of the closed story, the notion of progress, the emphasis on individuals, the single interpretation, the heightening of emotional states, and the focus on surfaces.

These conventions mean that history on film will create a past different from the one provided by written history; indeed, they mean that history on film will always violate the norms of written history. To obtain the full benefits of the motion picture—dramatic story, character, look, emotional intensity, process—that is, to use film's power to the fullest, is to ensure alterations in the way we think of the past. The question then becomes: Do we learn anything worth learning by approaching the past through the conventions of the mainstream film (conventions that are, through the global influence of Hollywood, understood virtually everywhere in the world)?

A slight detour: it must always be remembered that history on film is not a discipline in which historians participate (to any great extent). It is a field whose standards historians may police but, with rare exceptions, only as onlookers. When we historians explore the historical film, it is history as practiced by others, which raises the ominous question: By what right do filmmakers speak of the past, by what right do they do history? The answer is liberating or frightening, depending on your point of view. Filmmakers speak of the past because, for whatever reasons—personal, artistic, political, monetary—they choose to speak. They speak the way historians did before the era of professional training in history, before history was a discipline. Today the historian speaks by virtue of this discipline, by virtue of special training and the standards of a profession. Filmmakers have no such standard training, and no common approach to history. Few, if any, devote more than a minor part of their careers to history; it is more likely that they are moved over the years to make one or two historical statements on film. (Though some major directors have devoted major parts of

their careers to history, including Roberto Rossellini, Akira Kurosawa, Masahiro Shinoda, Carlos Diegues, Ousmane Sembène, and Oliver Stone.) One result: history on film will always be a more personal and quirky reflection on the meaning of the past than is the work of written history.

The haphazard nature of history on film and the lack of professional control make it all the more necessary that historians who care about public history learn how to "read" and "judge" film, learn how to mediate between the historical world of the filmmaker and that of the historian. This means that historians will have to reconsider the standards for history. Or learn to negotiate between our standards and those of filmmakers. We will have to adapt to film practice in order to criticize, to judge what is good and bad, to specify what can be learned from film about our relationship to the past. The film world will not do this, for it has no ongoing stake in history (though some individual filmmakers do). The best we historians can hope for is that individual filmmakers will continue to create meaningful historical films that contribute to our understanding of the past. For only by studying how these films work can we begin to learn how to judge the historical film.

Among the many issues to face in learning how to judge the historical film, none is more important than the issue of invention. Central to understanding history as drama, this is the key issue. The most controversial. The one that sets history on film most apart from written history, which in principle eschews fiction (beyond the basic fiction that people, movements, and nations all live stories that are linear and moral). If we can find a way to accept and judge the inventions involved in any dramatic film, then we can accept lesser alterations—the omissions, the conflation—that make history on film so different from written history.

History as drama is shot through with fiction and invention from the smallest details to largest events. Take something simple, like the furnishings in a room where a historical personage sits—say Robert Gould Shaw, the chief character in *Glory*, a colonel and leader of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment of black troops in the American Civil War. Or take some process, such as the training of the black volunteers who served under Shaw, or the reconstruction of the battles they fought. The room and the sequences are approximate rather than literal representations. They say this is more or less the way a room looked in 1862; these are the sorts of artifacts that might have been in such a room. This is more or less the way such soldiers trained, and the battles they fought must have looked something like this. The point: the camera's need to fill out the specifics of a particular historical scene, or to create a coherent (and moving) visual sequence, will always ensure large doses of invention in the historical film.

The same is true of character: all films will include fictional people or invented elements of character. The very use of an actor to "be" someone will always be a kind of fiction. If the person is "historical," the realistic film says what cannot truly be said: that this is how this person looked, moved, and sounded. If the individual has been created to exemplify a group of historical people (a

worker during a strike, a shopkeeper during a revolution, a common soldier on a battlefield) a double fiction is involved: this is how this sort of person (whom we have created) looked, moved, and sounded. Both can obviously be no more than approximations of particular historical individuals, approximations that carry out some sense that we already have about how such people acted, moved, sounded, and behaved.

The same is true of incident: here invention is inevitable for a variety of reasons—to keep the story moving, to maintain intensity of feeling, to simplify complexity of events into plausible dramatic structure that will fit within filmic time constraints. Different kinds of fictional moves are involved here, moves we can label *Compression*, *Condensation*, *Alteration*, and *Metaphor*.

Consider this example: when Robert Gould Shaw was offered command of the Fifty-fourth, he was in the field in Maryland, and he turned down the offer by letter. A couple of days later, urged by his abolitionist father, he changed his mind and accepted the position. To show the internal conflict expressed in this change within a dramatic context, *Glory* compresses Shaw's hesitation into a single scene at a party in Boston. The actor, Matthew Broderick, uses facial expression and body language to show Shaw's inner conflict. When he is offered the command by the governor of Massachusetts, he says something noncommittal and asks to be excused. There follows a scene with another officer, a kind of alter ego, an officer who voices Shaw's own unspoken doubts about the costs of taking such a command. These doubts register on Broderick's face, and we literally watch Shaw make this difficult decision, see that accepting the commission is a matter of conviction triumphing over fear. All of this scene, including the fellow officer, is invented, yet it is an invention that does no more than alter and compress the spirit of the documentable events into a particular dramatic form. In such a scene, film clearly does not reflect a truth—it creates one.

The difference between fiction and history is this: both tell stories, but the latter is a true story. Question: Need this be a "literal" truth, an exact copy of what took place in the past? Answer: In film, it can never be. And how about the printed page, is literal truth possible there? No. A description of a battle or a strike or a revolution is hardly a literal rendering of that series of events. Some sort of "fiction" or convention is involved here, one that allows a selection of evidence to stand for a larger historical experience, one that allows a small sampling of reports to represent the collective experience of thousands, tens of thousands, even millions who took part in or were affected by documentable events. One may call this convention *Condensation* too.

But isn't there a difference between *Condensation* and invention? Isn't creating character and incident different from condensing events? Is it not destructive of "history"? Not history on film. On the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true!

Why? Because filmic "literalism" is impossible. Yes, film may show us the world, or the surface of part of the world, but it can never provide a literal rendition of events that took place in the past. Can never be an exact replica of what happened (as if we knew exactly what happened). Of course, historical

recounting has to be based on what literally happened, but the recounting itself can never be literal. Not on the screen and not, in fact, in the written word.

The word works differently from the image. The word can provide vast amounts of data in a small space. The word can generalize, talk of great abstractions like revolution, evolution, and progress, and make us believe that these things exist. (They do not, at least not as things, except upon the page.) To talk of such things is not to talk literally, but to talk in a symbolic or general way about the past. Film, with its need for a specific image, cannot make general statements about revolution or progress. Instead, film must summarize, synthesize, generalize, symbolize—in images. The best we can hope for is that historical data on film will be summarized with inventions and images that are apposite. Filmic generalizations will have to come through various techniques of condensation, synthesis, and symbolization. It is the historian's task to learn how to "read" this filmic historical vocabulary.

Clearly, we must read by new standards. What should they be? At the outset, we must accept that film cannot be seen as a window onto the past. What happens on screen can never be more than an approximation of what was said and done in the past; what happens on screen does not depict, but rather points to, the events of the past. This means that it is necessary for us to learn to judge the ways in which, through invention, film summarizes vast amounts of data or symbolizes complexities that otherwise could not be shown. We must recognize that film will always include images that are at once invented and true; true in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they impart an overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued.

And how do we know what can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued? From the ongoing discourse of history; from the existing body of historical texts; from their data and arguments. Which is only to say that any "historical" film, like any work of written, graphic, or oral history, enters a body of preexisting knowledge and debate. To be considered "historical," rather than simply a costume drama that uses the past as an exotic setting for romance and adventure, a film must engage, directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history. Like the book, the historical film cannot exist in a state of historical innocence, cannot indulge in capricious invention, cannot ignore the findings and assertions and arguments of what we already know from other sources. Like any work of history, a film must be judged in terms of the knowledge of the past that we already possess. Like any work of history, it must situate itself within a body of other works, the ongoing (multi-media) debate over the importance of events and the meaning of the past.

False Invention/True Invention

Let me compare two films that invent freely as they depict historical events—*Mississippi Burning*, which uses "false" invention (ignores the discourse

of history), and *Glory*, which uses "true" invention (engages the discourse of history).

Mississippi Burning (directed by Alan Parker, 1988) purports to depict the Freedom Summer of 1964, in the aftermath of the killing of three civil rights workers, two white and one black. Taking for its heroes two FBI men, the film marginalizes blacks and insists that though they are victims of racism, they in fact had little to do with their own voting rights drive. The resulting message is that the government protected African-Americans and played a major role in the voter registration drive of Freedom Summer. Yet this is palpably untrue. This story simply excludes too much of what we already know about Mississippi Freedom Summer and the rather belated actions of the FBI to solve the murder of the three civil rights workers.⁸ The central message of that summer, as responsible historians have shown, was not simply that blacks were oppressed, but that they worked as a community to alleviate their own oppression. This is the theme that the film chooses to ignore. By focusing on the actions of fictional FBI agents, the film engages in "false" invention and must be judged as bad history. Indeed, by marginalizing African-Americans in the story of their own struggle, the film seems to reinforce the racism it ostensibly combats.

Glory (directed by Edward Zwick, 1989) is as inventive as *Mississippi Burning*, but its inventions engage the historical discourse surrounding the film's subject: the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment commanded by Robert Gould Shaw, and, by implication, the larger story of African-American volunteers in the American Civil War. Here are examples of how specific strategies of invention work in *Glory*.

Alteration. Most of the soldiers in the Fifty-fourth were not, as the film implies, ex-slaves, but in fact had been freemen before the war. One can justify this alteration by suggesting that it serves to bring the particular experience of this unit into line with the larger experience of African-Americans in the Civil War, to generalize from the Fifty-fourth to what happened elsewhere in the Union to slaves who were freed.

Compression. Rather than creating characters from regimental histories, the film focuses on four main African-American characters, each of whom is a stereotype—the country boy, the wise older man, the angry black nationalist, the Northern intellectual. The filmic reason is obviously dramatic: such diverse individuals create a range of possibilities for tension and conflict that will reveal character and change. The historical reason is that these four men stand for the various possible positions that blacks could take toward the Civil War and the larger issues of racism and black-white relations, topics that are not solely "historical" or that, like all historical topics, involve an interpenetration of past and present.

Invention. Although there is no record of this happening, in the film the quartermaster of the division to which the Fifty-fourth belongs refuses to give boots to the black troops. His ostensible reason is that the regiment will not be used in battle, but the real reason is that he does not like African-Americans

or think them capable of fighting. Clearly, this incident is one of many ways the film points to the kinds of Northern racism that black soldiers faced. Another way of showing the racism might have been by cutting to the antiblack draft riots in New York, but such a strategy could vitiate the intensity of the film and the experience of our main characters. This incident is an invention of something that could well have happened; it is the invention of a truth.

Metaphor. Robert Gould Shaw is shown practicing cavalry charges by slicing off the tops of watermelons affixed to poles. Did the historical Shaw practice this way? Does it matter? The meaning of the metaphor is obvious and apropos.

Question: Does using a white officer as a main character violate the historical experience of these African-American volunteers? Answer: No, it provides a different experience, a broader experience. Even if the decision to have a white main character was in part made for box office reasons (as it surely must have been), the film provides another explanation. Throughout *Glory* we see and hear Robert Gould Shaw saying (in voiceover extracts from actual letters) that though he admires them, he cannot comprehend the culture of these men he leads. The clear implication is that we too will never fully understand their life. We viewers, in other words, stand outside the experience we are viewing just as Shaw does. Which suggests that film itself can only approximate that lost historical life. We do not understand the life of the soldiers because we are always distant spectators of the experience of the past, which we may glimpse but never fully understand.

For all its inventions, *Glory* does not violate the discourse of history, what we know about the overall experience of the men of the Fifty-fourth Regiment—their military activities, their attitudes, and those of others toward them.⁹ At the same time, the film clearly adds to our understanding of the Fifty-fourth Regiment through a sense of immediacy and intimacy, through empathic feelings and that special quality of shared experience that the film conveys so well. To share the up-close danger of Civil War battles as rendered on the screen, for example, is to appreciate and understand the possibilities of bravery in a new way.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the film simplifies, generalizes, even stereotypes. But it proposes nothing that clashes with the "truth" of the Fifty-fourth Regiment or the other black military units that fought for the Union—that men volunteered, trained under difficult conditions, and gave their lives in part to achieve a certain sense of manhood for themselves and pride for their people. Only the moral may be suspect: when the bodies of the white officer and one of his black men (the angriest, the one most suspicious of whites, the one who refuses to carry the flag, the one who has been whipped by this same officer) are pitched into a ditch and fall almost into an embrace, the implication seems to be that the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment and the Civil War solved the problem of race in America. How much more interesting, how much truer, might have been an image that suggested that the problems of race were to continue to be central to the national experience.

A New Kind of History

Of all the elements that make up a historical film, fiction, or invention, has to be the most problematic (for historians). To accept invention is, of course, to change significantly the way we think about history. It is to alter one of written history's basic elements: its documentary or empirical aspect. To take history on film seriously is to accept the notion that the empirical is but one way of thinking about the meaning of the past.

Accepting the changes in history that mainstream film proposes is not to collapse all standards of historical truth, but to accept another way of understanding our relationship to the past, another way of pursuing that conversation about where we came from, where we are going, and who we are. Film neither replaces written history nor supplements it. Film stands adjacent to written history, as it does to other forms of dealing with the past such as memory and the oral tradition.

What, after all, are the alternatives? To try to enforce Gottschalk's dicta? To insist that historians begin to make films that are absolutely accurate, absolutely true (as if this were possible) to the reality of the past? Not only is this impossible for financial reasons, but when historians do make "accurate" films (witness *The Adams Chronicles*), they tend to be dull as both film and history, for they do not make use of the full visual and dramatic power of the medium. A second alternative: history as experiment. But whatever new insights into the past experimental films provide, they tend to give up large audiences. A final alternative: to wish film away, to ignore film as history. But this would be to surrender the larger sense of history to others, many of whom may only wish to profit from the past. Worse yet, it would be to deny ourselves the potential of this powerful medium to express the meaning of the past.

It is time for the historian to accept the mainstream historical film as a new kind of history that, like all history, operates within certain limited boundaries. As a different endeavor from written history, film certainly cannot be judged by the same standards. Film creates a world of history that stands adjacent to written and oral history; the exact location of the understanding and meaning it provides cannot yet be specified.

We must begin to think of history on film as closer to past forms of history, as a way of dealing with the past that is more like oral history, or history told by bards, or *griots* in Africa, or history contained in classic epics. Perhaps film is a postliterate equivalent of the preliterate way of dealing with the past, of those forms of history in which scientific, documentary accuracy was not yet a consideration, forms in which any notion of fact was of less importance than the sound of a voice, the rhythm of a line, the magic of words. One can have similar aesthetic moments in film, when objects or scenes are included simply for their look, the sheer visual pleasure they impart. Such elements may well detract from the documentary aspect, yet they add something as well, even if we do not yet know how to evaluate that "something."

The major difference between the present and the preliterate world, however obvious, must be underscored: literacy has intervened. This means that however poetic or expressive it may be, history on film enters into a world where "scientific" and documentary history have long been pursued and are still undertaken, where accuracy of event and detail has its own lengthy tradition. This tradition, in a sense, raises history on film to a new level, for it provides a check on what can be invented and expressed. To be taken seriously, the historical film must not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past. All changes and inventions must be apposite to the truths of that discourse, and judgment must emerge from the accumulated knowledge of the world of historical texts into which the film enters.

NOTES

This essay began as a presentation to a conference on the broad theme of "How We Learn History in America," held at the University of North Carolina. While others wrestled with major issues of the profession—the historical canon, Western civilization courses, textbooks, how to teach race and gender—I used the occasion to explore the question of how film creates a world of the past that must be judged on its own terms. Here for the first time I attempted to specify just what those terms are and how we can use them to distinguish between good and bad works of history on film.

1. Quoted in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 194.
2. There is no single book that satisfactorily covers the topic of history and film. The broadest discussion takes place in a forum in *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), 1173–1227, which includes the following articles: Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film"; David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Film and History"; Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty"; John J. O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past"; Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian."
3. White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," in *ibid.*, 1193.
4. John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Ungar, 1979).
5. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead?: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Yale Review* 76 (1987), 457–82.
6. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), viii.
7. Daniel J. Walkowitz, "Visual History: The Craft of the Historian—Filmmaker," *Public Historian* 7 (Winter 1985), 57.
8. Books on the Mississippi Freedom Summer include Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and Mary A. Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964–1965* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982). For an older account that remains useful, see Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End* (New York: Morrow, 1965).
9. For a history of the Fifty-fourth Regiment, see Peter Burchard, *One Gallant Rush: Robert Gould Shaw and His Brave Black Regiment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).
10. James McPherson, "The Glory Story," *New Republic* 202 (January 8, 1990), 22–27.