

Review Essay

Historiography Meets Historiophoty: The Perils and Promise of Rendering the Past on Film

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PAST IMPERFECT: History According to the Movies. Mark C. Carnes, General Editor. New York: Henry Holt and Company. 1995.

VISIONS OF THE PAST: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History. By Robert A. Rosenstone. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1995.

REVISIONING HISTORY: Film and the Construction of a New Past. Edited by Robert A. Rosenstone. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1995.

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.

Robert A. Rosenstone—*Visions of the Past* (46)

The essays in these three volumes reflect the two ways by which historians have approached motion pictures that are historical in their subject matter (historical films). The first, and most common, has been to measure the accuracy of historical films by the standards which professional historians use to measure their work. The second, and still largely a new field of endeavor, has been to investigate how film, as a visual medium subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, has been (or might be) employed as a vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* represents the first approach, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* and *Revising History: Film and the Constraints of a New Past*, the second.

In *Past Imperfect*, for which historian Mark C. Carnes served as general editor, some sixty highly regarded historians examine the relationship between nearly 100 often classic films and the historical “reality” they portray. Alan Segal, Michael Grant, Gerda Lerner, James Axtell, Richard Slotkin, James McPherson, Leon Litwack, Alan Brinkley, Akira Iriye, Stephen Ambrose, and William Leuchtenburg critique *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *Joan of Arc* (1928, 1948, 1957), *Black Robe* (1991), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936, 1968), *Glory* (1989), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), *The Longest Day* (1962), and *All the President’s Men* (1972), to name just a few.

Past Imperfect is attractive and informative, including hundreds of sidebars on related historical topics and more than 400 photographs, film stills, maps, and historical illustrations. Moreover, the essayists review films produced in many different times and places. Most were made in Hollywood, but Australian, Japanese, German, French, Canadian, and British productions are included as well. Some were not regarded as historical when they were released, but, like *Dr. Stangelove* (1964), explore social or cultural themes of the times. Similarly, films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), although explicitly historical, are included less for their historical content than for what they say about the era in which they were made.

Perhaps the most interesting essay in *Past Imperfect* is not a review at all, but an interview with director John Sayles by historian Eric Foner, which encompasses a number of points related to the nature and production of historical films. Sayles explains, for example, that producers make historical films, rather than limiting themselves to pure fiction, because “the audience appreciates that something really happened” (17). Further, they are easier to use because the story already exists. “Somebody’s already done the living and the plot” and, if the story is old enough, it may have already become legend (11).

Sayles admits that often, when he has had the chance to see historical films as well as to read the related history, he has found the history a better, or more interesting, story. History, he suggests, has been more complex than films and therefore more satisfying. But, he continues, much as that kind of complexity has

only recently been incorporated into historical accounts, it has taken time to appear in historical films. Sayles explains:

You have to remember that things tend to show up in movies about third. First, historians start working on something and take a look at the record. Their work usually stimulates novelists, and then novelists often stimulate movie people. Finally, things end up on television (12).

Do filmmakers care what historians think of their films? Not much, Sayles reports. “Every filmmaker, like every historian, has an agenda. The difference is that historians read one another, and because of the academic world in which they live, there’s a little more . . . documentation” (23). For filmmakers history is “a story bin to be plundered, and depending on who you are and what your agenda is, it’s either useful or not” (16). Accuracy is important, he allows, but only insofar as the film remains true to the spirit of the story. Filmmakers use historians as consultants for details of the setting, props, and costumes, he allows, but not for “the big picture.” That is left to the filmmaker.

The most successful films, Sayles ventures, tend to be smaller, simpler stories. The filmmakers biggest difficulties include presenting more than one version of events and convincing the viewer that people’s thought processes were different at times in the past. “When you see a historical movie and it doesn’t quite jibe, it’s usually because the mindset is wrong.” The audience had not gotten “into the heads of the people living at the time” (26). Nevertheless, Sayles concludes, that is no reason to condescend to the people or to spoon-feed them. “Then you’re saying the people aren’t capable of complexity, [that] they’re not capable of reading two versions and making up their own minds about which one to believe. That can be a very dangerous point of view” (28).

Quite different are the two books by Robert A. Rosenstone, historian and past film review editor for *The American Historical Review*. In *Visions of the Past*, Rosenstone presents his own essays, most of which have already appeared in the *The American Historical Review*, *Cineaste*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, and elsewhere. In *Revisioning History* he has gathered the work of thirteen others—Geoff Eley, Nicholas Dirks, Thomas Keirstead, Deidre Lynch, Pierre Sorlin, Michael Roth, John Mraz, Min Soo Kang, Clayton Koppes, Denise Youngblood, Rudy Koshar, Dan Sipe, and Sumiko Higashi—on the same subject. Rosenstone’s essays are more theoretical, however, each of the essayists in *Revisioning History* critiques a specific film from what Rosenstone labels the New History Films—mostly dramatic, historical films of recent vintage from around the world, which have been “more serious about extracting meaning from the encounter with the past than with entertaining audiences or making a profit for investors” (*Revisioning*, 7). The essayists’ intent, Rosenstone explains, is not to consider how the popular media handle history, but to investigate the possibilities of creating history on film.

Two elements set Rosenstones's books apart from Carnes': (1) the assumption (never really made clear in Carnes' volume) that film can be a legitimate way of representing, interpreting, and thinking about the past; and (2) the insistence that historical film should not be judged in its recounting of the past by the rules of written history. In both books, instead of simply comparing the content of historical films to "the facts," what might be considered the specifics of historical episodes, Rosenstone and the other writers examine the relationship between the moving image and the written word in such manner as to consider what can be learned from watching history on the screen. By-and-large, they engage in what Hayden White has called historiophoty,¹ from which Rosenstone extracts and poses for his readers the following questions:

What exactly happens to history when words are translated into images? What happens when images transcend the information that can be conveyed in words? Why do we always judge film by how it measures up to written history? If it is true that the word can do so many things that images cannot, what about the reverse—don't images carry ideas and information that cannot be handled by the word? (*Visions*, 5).

Especially in *Visions of the Past*, but even in *Revisioning History*, Rosenstone and the other writers set out "less to critique than to chart the possibilities of the historical film: to understand from the inside how a filmmaker might go about rendering the past on film." Such an approach, Rosenstone admits, is dangerous for the historian because "it results in a kind of complicity, an identification that leads directly to a notion at once obvious and heretical: that the very nature of the visual media forces use to reconceptualize and/or broaden whatever mean by the word history" (*Visions*, 6). Few historians, Pierre Sorlin being the most notable exception, have even attempted such an approach.²

Either directly or indirectly, all of the essays reject the approach of measuring film by "the facts" as problematic and irrelevant. They see it as problematic because it assumes that written history is the only way to understand the past, and that written history mirrors the reality of the past. They insist that it is irrelevant because film is not a book, which is to say that an image is not a word. Therefore, a film cannot possibly do what a book does—but neither can a book replicate what a film has to offer. Perhaps the historian R. J. Raack, who has also been involved in the production of several documentaries, may have been right when he argued that despite its limitations in the traditional sense, film may be an even more appropriate medium for history than the written word. Written history, Raack suggests, is too linear and too narrow in focus to render the fullness of the complex, multidimensional world in which humans live. Only film, with its ability to juxtapose images and sounds, with its "quick cuts to new sequences, [and] slow motion can possibly hope to approximate real life: the daily experience

of ideas, words, images, preoccupations, distractions, sensory deceptions, conscious and unconscious motives and emotions.” Only films can provide an adequate “empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives. Only film can “recover all the past’s liveliness.”³

Film insists on its own truths, Rosenstone insists, truths which arise from its visual and aural realm. And although Rosenstone finds it difficult to explain exactly what those truths are—perhaps the most glaring weakness in his two books—he and the others who have joined him in *Revisioning History* at least provide a persuasive argument for the existence of such truths and point in the direction of their eventual discovery. It is not an easy task. As Rosenstone points out, this new historical past on film is potentially as much more complex than any written text, as written history was from the oral tradition it succeeded. It certainly requires as major a shift in consciousness about how we think about our past (*Visions*, 15).

In the end, then, Rosenstone’s essay in *Visions of the Past*, as well as those he has collected in *Revisioning History*, are provocative but incomplete, even fragmentary. By Rosenstone’s own admission, they are not meant to be seen as definitive statements, but as “forays, explorations . . . [and] insights” (12). They nevertheless advance the “search for a method of getting at these moving artifacts that always seem to escape our words, that overflow with more meaning than our discourse can contain,” and that historians reject or ignore at their peril (*Visions*, 13). As Rosenstone reminds us, not only has the visual media become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture, but also:

it is not farfetched to foresee a time (are we almost there?) when written history will be a kind of esoteric pursuit; when historians will be viewed much like the priests of a mysterious religion, commentators on sacred texts, and performers of rituals for a populace little interested in their meaning but indulgent enough (let us hope) to pay for them to continue (*Visions*, 23).

Notes

1. Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review* 93 (October 1988): 1193.
2. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film In History: Restaging the Past* (Totowas, NY: Barnes and Noble Imprints, 1980).
3. R. J. Raack, “Historiography as Cinematography: A Prolegomenon to Film Work for Historians,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18 (July 1983): 416, 418.