

## Film as Historical Narrative

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The Polish cinematographer Boleslaw Matuszewski who worked with the famous film pioneers, the Lumiere brothers during the 1890s published a little booklet *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (The New Source of History) in the year 1898. In this text, he suggested that film could offer not only a source for historical research but a suitable medium for historical narration as well.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginnings of dramatic film, narrativization of past events has been one of the most productive areas of film making. Historical films have been made since the first years of motion pictures. The Edison Manufacturing Company, for example, shot several historical tableaux vivants, including *Joan of Arc* (1895) and *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895).<sup>2</sup> We may even argue that historical narration has accompanied many of the essential turning points of film history. Italian ancient spectacles, such as *Quo vadis?* (1912) by Enrico Quazzoni and *Cabiria* (1914) by Giovanni Pastrone, assured film makers about the commercial possibilities of full-length feature films and meant a step further in the development of film narrative. In the society of the spectacle, to use Guy Debord's terms<sup>3</sup>, history has revived nationally important imagery and, simultaneously, offered a spectacular 'exit' from everyday life. When film spectacle has first used new techniques such as color, stereophonic sound or widescreen, historical film has been an important arena for these experiments. Let us only think e.g. the first CinemaScope film, *The Robe* (1953) by Henry Koster .

The professionals of historical writing, historians, have traditionally seen historical films as competitors, enemies that shape visions of history without any limits who have an enormous and unpredictable influence on the public. Between 1926 and 1934, historians often discussed film in the meetings of the International Congress of the Historical Sciences. This interest went so far that an International Iconographical Commission was established to deal with the problems of collecting film material for historical purposes. The commission made an effort to set up suitable conditions for the preservation of films. In the end this led to the establishment of film archives e.g. in Germany, France, Belgium, Canada and Great Britain. Naturally the Iconographical Commission had to define what kind of films required archival preservation. According to the Commission, historically interesting films were those "which record a person or period from the time after the invention of cinematography and without dramaturgical or 'artistic' purposes those films which present a visual record of a definite event, person or locality, and which presuppose a clearly recognizable historical interest inherent in the subject matter"<sup>4</sup> As we can see, the historians of those days were not in the least interested in the feature film -and not ready to talk about historical films which were, to their minds, only dramatized, untrue fictions

Not only the historians of the 20s or 30s but also their successors, even today, have deemed that the only films of serious historical interest are documentaries, actuality films, newsreels, and other, visual versions of newspapers. We can argue that these historians have seen the source-dimension of film through a too narrow scope. Film does not tell us only about the object of the cinematographer it can tell us about the narrator of the film as well. Feature films, such as historical films, can give us information about the opinions and mentalities, ideas and visions of that person -or of that culture- that has produced them. We can, as the French historian Marc Ferro has stated, regard every film as a documentary. The problem is only what is the reality they document? Could it not be, in the case of fiction films, the reality of our imagination, our mental universe?<sup>5</sup>

The division of films into fiction films and documentaries should not be a matter of judging them as true or untrue, nor a matter of dividing them into reliable or unreliable sources. Such divisions should be forgotten. There are no reliable or unreliable sources, everything depends on the question you are studying on which level is a specific source used as a source. Sergei Eisenstein's film, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), cannot be used as a source for the historical roots of the 1905 Odessa uprising. But if

we study the historiography of this uprising, and its perception in the Soviet Union, Eisenstein's film is of central importance. In this sense, the film is not 'untrue' even though most part of the narrative is pure fiction.

Fiction films, in short, can have validity for the historian's work. Audiovisual historical narratives are especially interesting because they are so much a part of our everyday historical environment history exists as both memories and fiction of course there can be different kinds of historical narratives, historical documentaries, historical films, and costume dramas In the following presentation I will concentrate on historical films.

To the question, what is a historical film? We may say that it is one of the categories of film making, a film genre. We are used to characterizing films with such labels. There are gangster movies, musicals, horror films, westerns, science fiction films -and historical films. These genres are, in a way, strategies of the cultural existence of cinema; they are patterns of production and reception. Film scholars have often stated that there are no common criteria for such genres. Every genre has criteria of its own. For example, western movies have a typical arsenal of iconographic elements: they need hats and revolvers, saloons and open prairie scenery to be westerns. Musicals, by contrast, do not need such iconography. A certain mode of speech, the cinematic discourse (style) and the centrality of music are enough. Historical films differ from other film genres because they do not necessarily need certain iconographic elements, narrative structures, or basic themes. It is enough that the film is located in the past and that it displays its historicity.

In her book, *British Genres. Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (1991), American film scholar Marcia Landy has pointed out that there actually can be some common themes in historical films. According to Landy, historical film has been a genre through which national film cultures have spoken to their national audiences. They have chosen their themes from national mythology, national identity, famous events of a nation's history, including the lives of great men and women, rulers and national heroes.<sup>6</sup> Many films have attempted to handle all of these national aspects, problems and even traumatic moments of national history. What else could we think about, say, *Kanal* by Andrzej Wajda? Such films, addressed to national audience, can be found in every country, *La Marseillaise* by Jean Renoir in France, *The Unknown Soldier* by Edvin Laine in Finland, *Heimat* by Edgar Reisz in Germany. There are, of course, a lot of films which use historical material only as a background, as a sort of necessary narrative stuff needed by an adventure, but in many cases film makers have turned to the past in order to deal with some relevant questions, to revive some important national moments for a certain audience.

Marcia Landy has made a distinction between historical film and costume drama. Historical film is bound to represent some real historical events or characters. Costume drama, however, shows fictitious characters in a vague and inaccurate historical context.<sup>7</sup> In his book, *The Film in History*, the French film scholar and sociologist Pierre Sorlin argues, like Landy, that historical costumes, props and settings are not enough to point out the historicity of a specific film. According to Sorlin, this historicity can be shown by giving exact dates, e.g. through introducing titles or through a narrative voice-over (for example in Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis?* there is a voice-over who tells us that the film takes place in the Roman Empire twenty years after the birth of Jesus Christ). In addition to this, historical films can show their historicity by referring to common historical knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In other words, they reconstruct such events or show such persons that are known by the public. This common cultural inheritance seems to be a typical method in those historical films which draw their essence from the national history.

Landy and Sorlin exclude costume drama from the category 'historical film'. Instead of this view, I prefer the division by the French film historian, Jean Gili, according to whom there are three types of historical films: 1) films that present real, historical persons in a real, historical context, 2) films that show fictitious characters in a certain precise historical context and 3) costume dramas that describe fictitious protagonists in an uncertain, imprecise historical context.<sup>9</sup> In the first two alternatives, the starting point is a concrete historical situation.

Sorlin has stated that it is typical of historical films that they only describe the past in a linear way: historical films do not pose questions.<sup>10</sup> This is not quite true. Historical film can formulate question even though it does not do that very often. For example, the film *1900* (1976), by Bernardo Bertolucci opens with a question -a visual question. Here we see the peasants chasing a man and a woman who are

escaping as fast as they can. Finally the couple are slaughtered by these blood-thirsty peasants. The question rises: What has this man and this woman done to earn their destiny? What is the reason for this act of violence?<sup>11</sup> During this scene the audience cannot know anything about the couple, who are later identified as Attila and Regina. The first event of this cinematic novecento is a present day without past, without history. The film itself seems to illustrate the old slogan that contemporary problems cannot be understood without knowledge of history. After this «pastless» beginning the film turns to history, to the year 1901, and begins to narrate events according to Bertolucci's socio-biographical vision of history.

Another question, this one verbal, can be found at the beginning of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) by Anthony Mann, one of the few historical films based on a historical monograph. The scenario was freely adapted from the English historiographical classic *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written by Edward Gibbon during the 18th century. The screen adaptation begins with an introductory voice-over sequence written by the famous historian, Will Durant: «Two of the greatest problems in history are how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall. We may come nearer to understanding the truth if we remember that the fall of Rome, like her rise, had not one cause but many and that it was not an event but a process...» After this setting up of a problem, the film starts to describe the process that led to the fall of Rome.<sup>12</sup>

Although the advertisement published in *Sunday Times* tried to assure the audience almost in Leopold von Ranke's words by characterizing the film as «history as it really happened»<sup>13</sup>, the interpretation is obviously much narrower than in Gibbon's comprehensive study. Here, the beginning of the fall of Rome is located between the deaths of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. According to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the end of Rome began when the ideals of Marcus Aurelius were displaced by the selfishness of Commodus. In the beginning of the film, Marcus Aurelius holds a speech where he characterizes his ideal Rome as a «family of equal nations». After the years of war, the peace could be reached only by giving the citizenship also to «Barbarians». This policy is continued by Livius who succeeds to win the confidence of the senate. An older senator puts the idea into sentimental words: «Let us grow ever bigger, ever greater, let us take them among us, let the heart of the empire grow with us. Honourable fathers, we have changed the world, can we not change ourselves?»

Ultimately, this change proves to be an impossibility and the ideals are corrupted by greed and ambition. After the death of Commodus, Rome falls into a chaos. During the last minutes of the film, the voice-over which opened the film by posing a historical question returns to give the final answer: «This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman empire. A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has been destroyed itself from within.»

Clearly, narrative structure that asks explicit is not question impossible in historical films: rare it might be, but not impossible as Sorlin claims. We should add that, obviously, media do not necessarily prescribe narrative forms. Books of history do not necessarily pose explicit questions about the past. Let us think only Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975)<sup>14</sup> or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Love, Death and Money in the Pays d'Oc* (1980).<sup>15</sup>

I have already argued that for a historical film it is essential to have certain signs of historicity which prove the audience that it is really a matter of a historical reconstruction. But the reception of historical films is not a simple process of decoding «signs of historicity».

It is easy to recognize a historical film when we deal with ancient spectacles and other epics. But how can we separate, for example, a historical film located in the 1940s from a film that is made during the 40s and tells a story of its own age? Is this not a problem? It might be possible to receive these films in the same way (although I doubt it), but there is an important difference between the two. Historical film is a historical narrative, a presentation of a certain past event or process. It is, therefore, a presentation of an object, to which the narrative itself does not belong. A film produced during the 40s can, perhaps, look like a historical narrative because it is a narrative from the past, but it is not a historical film in the same sense because it is an organic part of the history it is narrating. A historical film is a narrative presentation of past events, while a film from the past is only a source that tells us something of that past. We may say that both films tell us something but the nature of this telling is different.<sup>16</sup> This confusion between the source-dimension and the narrative dimension could perhaps be clarified by two heuristic concepts. The German historian, J.G. Droysen, wrote in his book, *Historik*, that sources can

always be divided into «Tradition» and «Überreste», into tradition and artefacts.<sup>17</sup> The film of the 40s is an artefact in its relationship to the 40s, and it should be used by historians as an artefact. The historical film located in the 40s, however, is a traditional source -if we want it to tell us something about the 40s, it is only a secondary source in its relationship to the 40s. We might, naturally, use it also as a primary source, in order to tell us something about how the 40s was seen later. Of course, a historical film is also an artefact. Whether this has meaning or not, depends on our perspective.

A multitude of examples can show that these notions are not always very clear. A film can represent the category 'historical film' but, at the same time, we can see it as a story dealing with some actual issues, themes of its own near past or present time. It should also be kept in mind that the ability to narrate past events and, simultaneously, to deal with actual issues is not a privilege of fictitious storytelling. It applies to scholarly historical works too, although historians themselves do usually not stress this point. J .G. Droysen thought that historical presentations could also be discussive presentations (die diskussive Darstellung) so that they direct the information given by the past to a certain question of the present. They offer an alternative for a current discussion in the society because for every new social and cultural phenomenon it is possible to find fixed points, objects of comparison from the past.<sup>18</sup> Droysen meant that historical knowledge could be consciously used for current social discussion, but there could be unconscious or metaphorical dealing with present issues as well.

This 'actuality' has been something that historicists have tried to deny. Historicism has spoken for the total denial of 'actuality' as if it really would be possible to be liberated from our modern conceptions of reality .The French linguist Emile Benveniste wrote during the 60s that the historian «doesn't say 'I' or 'You', 'here' or 'now'»<sup>19</sup>, The historian will not reveal the process of enunciation. If s/he would refer to present-day questions, s/he would reveal that the history does not narrate itself but that it is narrated by somebody for some actual purposes.

According to my understanding, current issues are always unavoidably there when history is narrated, irrespective of the question, whether it is a matter of fictitious imagination or scholarly work. Historical investigation is a process of dialogue in which our present-day concepts meet the concepts of the past. The present day cannot be denied or eliminated: while describing the past the author is simultaneously writing about his own world, consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly.

For many reasons, it might be easier to identify current issues in historical films than in academic works. First of all, in the case of film, this mixture has not been seen as something to be avoided. We can, for example, interpret that *Quo Vadis?*, 1949 directed by Mervyn LeRoy, which deals with the persecution of Christian people in the Roman empire, at the same time handled the discrimination against Jews in the Third Reich. Thus the film is enriched by two historical perspectives -one of ancient Rome, one of contemporary history .In the same way, *Danton* (1983) by Andrzej Wajda brings to light the destiny of one of the leading figures of the French 1789 Revolution while, simultaneously, it seems to describe political problems that were current in Poland when the film was made in 1983. In this case, past seems to be made present only to disguise the fact that the real interest lies in present events. *Danton* is both a historical narrative and a conscious allegory of the present-day (1983) reality.

A film can also be interpreted as an allegory although it may never be intended to have such an implication. Let us ponder the case of the Richard Attenborough film, *Gandhi*, shown in Prague in Spring 1988. This film deals with the Indian struggle against the British colonial empire. In Prague, Gandhi was very popular. The local audience interpreted the struggles of the Indians in terms of their own political experience: the events in *Gandhi* were seen as an allegory of the struggle of the Czechoslovaks against the socialist regime and the political control of the Soviet Union, although the director, Richard Attenborough, can scarcely have had such implications in mind. *Gandhi* may be located both temporally and spatially far away from Czechoslovakia, but an allegorical interpretation gave it immediate contemporary relevance. This example shows that the historical context of viewing should always be kept in mind.<sup>20</sup>

Contextual changes of this kind can lead to transmutations in the reception of meanings. For example, the Finnish historical film, *Activists (Aktivistit, 1938)*, directed by Risto Orko, has been viewed in several different ways. This film deals with the role of the 'activists' in the Finnish independence movement at the beginning of this century. At the time of its premiere, the achievement of independence

in 1917 was still a relatively recent event and still of current interest. The majority of the audience could remember the time the film dealt with. *Activists* was a great commercial success. It was praised for its «historical accuracy». Its ‘task’, therefore, was probably to strengthen Finnish cultural identity by creating a heroic past for the nation. After the Second World War, however, the showing of *Activists* was banned on the grounds of its risky political message. The film showed several incidents of hostilities against Russians, and since the new foreign policy adopted after the Second World War emphasized friendly relations with the East, the showing of *Activists* was regarded as too hazardous. Permission for the film to be shown was not restored until the 1980s. It is obvious that these historical changes during the intervening period created a totally new perspectives for the reception of the film. Whereas during the 1930s the film was approached in terms of the question «Does it describe history right?», by the 1940s this had been rephrased as «How does it describe history wrong?». By the 1980s, the question had altered again, and the central question of interpretation had now become: «Why was the film regarded as worth banning, and why in the late 1940s was its interpretation of history seen as unsuitable?»<sup>21</sup>

As we can see, the passage of time causes fundamental changes in the ways open for viewing a film, or in general, reading a text. How is it then possible to converse with old texts, old films, without making serious misinterpretations? This question remains essential to all historical research.

My intention here was actually not to discuss the problem of interpretation or the relationship between text and context. My main purpose has only been to point out how suggestive historical narrative films can be. One central theme, however, has been left untouched. What is the cultural meaning of these kinds of narratives? History, we must remember, is organized, constructed and reconstructed in cultural products. We produce history for ourselves, not only in the form of monographs and dissertations but also in novels and films, advertisements and TV series. History is so important that it cannot be wholly left to the control professional historians. Marc Ferro has stated: «When we think of Cardinal Richelieu or Cardinal Mazarin, are not the first memories that come to mind drawn from Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*? The same holds true of England where, as Peter Saccio has shown, everything Shakespeare says about Joan of Arc is invented and yet, despite the work of historians, it is Shakespeare's Joan of Arc that the English remember. The more time that passes, the less historians can change that.»<sup>22</sup> Literature has a longer tradition than cinema in the formation of historical imagery, but we can surely find similar examples from the history of film. We could, for example, easily remodify Ferro's words and ask: «When we think of John Reed, are not the first memories that come to mind drawn from Warren Beatty's *Reds*?»

It has sometimes been argued that academic historical research is superior to historical fiction because it does not only present some states of things in the past but can also assert something that makes it distinct from other historical interpretations. I find this argument absurd. Alexandre Dumas presented a character called Richelieu in his novel, and, at the same time, made an assertion about him. These assertions can be distinguished from each other when they become parts of tradition. There are at least 20 films having Emperor Nero as central character.<sup>23</sup> The characterizations differ much from film to film, from a misunderstood poet to a merciless tyrant, from a childlike lunatic to a sexual pervert. The films certainly make assertions -but the difference from scholarly writing lies in the fact that we, as recipients, cannot know for sure which statements are presentations of historical knowledge and which statements are assertions of the film makers. This problem confronts us always when we examine historical fiction: where is the boundary between knowledge based on research and that based on the film makers interpretation or, let me say, imagination?

In spite of these ‘buts’, we cannot deny that films as historical narratives can articulate meaningful historical interpretations, sometimes even such interpretations that have not yet been written by professional historians. Anton Kaes, for example, argues that such films as *Heimat* by Edgar Reitz precede the school of *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany: «For Reitz (as for Kluge, Fassbinder, and Sanders-Brahms), there is no such thing as the history of Germany -there is only a web of innumerable everyday stories.»<sup>24</sup>

Historians say sometimes that novelists and film makers have too much imagination to be able to write a correct work of history. We could, perhaps, put this vice versa: Historians do not always seem to have enough imagination to represent all those choices that went, into creating the flow of the past events.

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- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 267-270.
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- (16) To this problem see SALMI, pp. 213-220.
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