

Introduction

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This *Blackwell Companion to the Historical Film* aims to provide a worldwide perspective on the flourishing field of history and film. The topics, approaches, and categories of the original essays in this book were not determined in advance, or even suggested by the editors – as happens with some collections. They are, rather, the result of proposals made by scholars who work in a number of disciplines: history, film studies, anthropology, and cultural and literary studies. A major task for us was to select, from a large number of fascinating and often unusual suggestions, those that would best show the great variety of work currently being done. The result is a volume that includes analyses of films produced all over the world; analyses written by academics with very diverse scholarly backgrounds, residing on six continents. Taken together, they provide the most comprehensive view of the field ever contained in one single publication – a view that clearly shows the vitality of the historical film and of the research it generates.

At the outset one might well want to ask: But what is the meaning of “historical” in this context? How do we define it? Does it create a genre? An intellectual project? In the broadest sense, and in what would seem to be the common assumption of scholars, the term seems to apply to any film consciously set in a past, some time before the production of the specific work itself (of course, all films, like other cultural artifacts, eventually become historical documents; but this book is devoted to films that deliberately set out to depict a past.) Oddly enough, for all the scholarship on the topic, attempts to define the historical film have been few and far between. Natalie Davis considers it to be a genre composed of dramatic feature films in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events, or in which an imagined plot utilizes historical events, making them central to the story (Davis 2000: 5). Robert A. Rosenstone has distinguished the historical film from the costume drama by insisting that the former intersects with, comments upon, and adds something to the larger discourse of history (Rosenstone 2006: 45–46).

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In dealing with American historical films, Robert Burgoyne suggests that the historical film is a genre in which stories center on documentable historical events that serve as its mainspring – as opposed to films in which the past simply serves as a scenic backdrop or as a nostalgic setting (Burgoyne 2008: 3–4). He sees the genre as having five sub-divisions: the war film, the epic, the biopic, the metahistorical film, and the topical historical film.

Whichever of these definitions one favors, it must be pointed out that, in asking authors to contribute to this volume, we, as editors, did not establish with precision what we meant by “the historical film.” We deliberately provided our contributors only with a minimal definition, leaving them to assume or wrestle with their own meaning of this phrase – a struggle that, in itself, opens the possibility of the enlargement of the field.

Scholarly focus on cinematic representations of the past grew out of the larger interest in the visual media that began to pervade many academic fields after the 1960s, an era in which the once unbreachable wall between high and low culture collapsed. As best we can tell, the origins of history and film as a field can be traced to a number of conferences attended by European and American historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s at universities in London, Utrecht, Göttingen, and Bielefeld. These meetings, three of which resulted in collections of essays, focused largely on issues such as the production, reception, and value of the historical documentary; the question of how to evaluate actuality film as a historical source; or the thorny problems surrounding the use of films as a pedagogical tool in the classroom.

One of the first book-length works to investigate the potential of the dramatic historical film, *Feature Films as History*, edited by K. R. M. Short, dealt largely with how films made in certain periods might serve as a means of exploring particular ideologies or climates of opinion – the Popular Front of the 1930s, anti-semitism, or national consciousness in France and Germany in the period between the World Wars (Short 1981). A single essay in that volume took the historical film seriously as a way of talking about the past. An analysis of Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* by D. J. Wenden proclaimed it a work that, though full of invented moments, still managed to provide a kind of symbolic history of the actions of the Russian people during the 1905 Revolution.

A broad claim for the study and valuation of the historical film was made around the same time in two works by French historians: *Cinéma et histoire* (1977) by Marc Ferro (Ferro 1988), and *The Film in History* (1980) by Pierre Sorlin (Sorlin 1980). In the final essay of his collection, Ferro posed a question that some scholars have been trying to answer ever since: “Does a filmic writing of the past exist?” (Ferro 1988: 158). His own answer was a very tentative and qualified “yes,” as he argued that some directors (Luchino Visconti, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and Andrei Tarkovsky, for example) have been able sometimes to make an original contribution to our understanding of the past.

Pierre Sorlin disagreed with Ferro’s thesis and gave a boost to another part of this nascent field – which has developed ever since along the Ferro–Sorlin debate.

Sorlin analyzed films on the Italian Risorgimento, on the American Civil War, and on the French and Russian Revolutions and argued that historical films were more a reflection of the period in which they were made than a serious or useful depiction of the past (Sorlin 1980).

In the English-speaking world the historical film was put on the map in December 1988, when the discipline's oldest and most august professional journal, *The American Historical Review (AHR)*, devoted more than half of the space in its quarterly issue to a "Forum on film and history." Here Robert A. Rosenstone's leading essay – "History in images/History in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history on film," which argued the case for the historical film as an alternative history – was responded to by four senior historians, including David Herlihy, the former president of the American Historical Association, and Hayden White, arguably the most influential theorist of history in the world. The latter took the opportunity to coin the term "historiophoty," which he defined as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and written discourse" (Forum on film and history 1988; White 1988: 1193).

In the next decade a number of respected historians – such as Robert Sklar, Natalie Davis, and Robert Toplin – helped to legitimate the topic of the historical film both through essays and in books, while many historical journals began to review films and the *AHR* introduced an annual section on film. At about the same time the discipline of literary studies took a historical and a cultural studies turn, starting to show an interest in film. Scholars such as Tony Kaes, Thomas Elsaesser, Leger Grindon, Robert Burgoyne, Marsha Kinder, and Vivian Sobchack began to produce well-received essays, collections, and single-author works on the historical film. In several other countries, notably Spain, France, and Australia, similar developments took place, if on a somewhat lesser scale than in the US and the UK.

Before the turn of the century, the trickle of works on history and film turned into a minor flood that has continued growing, broadening out from those largely dealing with modern European and American history into ones that focus on the early modern, the medieval, and the ancient world, as well on the pre- and post-colonial worlds of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Nowadays it is possible to list well over a hundred books on the topic – not only in English, French, and Spanish, but also in Italian, German, Czech, Polish, Portuguese, Korean, and Hebrew (and no doubt in other languages we have missed). Rarely does a month go by without a new monograph or anthology on the topic coming out, while essays on the historical film are regularly published in history, film, and cultural studies journals and conferences have been held in the US, the UK, France, Spain, Belgium, Finland, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Germany, South Africa, and Ireland.

The broader question is: What do all these activities tell us about the larger field, its approaches, dimensions, boundaries, and possibilities? Is the historical film a legitimate form of telling the past? If so, how does it relate to the traditional world of written history? Or is it less about the past than about the present, a key to the zeitgeist of the period in which a film was produced? Can fiction, or

overt invention, provide historical knowledge and insights? What is the difference between historicals made in countries with a democratic tradition and those made in others, which live (or have lived until recently) under authoritarian regimes? Answering questions such as these is the task of the present book; but one must not expect them to be answered directly. We believe it is too early to define the field, too early to be comprehensive. Yet we think that buried within the essays presented in this *Companion* lie the seeds, the possibilities, and the outlines of what will be a flourishing field for some time to come.

None of the chapters in this collection aims to define (or limit) the historical film, and none claims to be a strictly theoretical piece. Dennis Bingham's contribution reveals the impossibility of providing an accurate definition of the biopic, and his insights can be extrapolated to the entire historical film. Yet, when looking at the way in which the *Companion's* various essays engage their object of study, one can easily acquire a sense of what the historical film is and why it is studied – stylistically, narratively, thematically, commercially, socially, and politically. With one exception – Robert Rosenstone's self-reflexive take on the academic reception of historical film – all the contributions in this *Companion* are film analyses, some focusing on one film (Hesling, Landsberg, and Pramaggiore), some contrasting two or three (Martin and Wall, Shachar, and Smyth), and some surveying entire groups (Bickford-Smith, Dwyer, and Portuges). The object of these analyses is the historical *feature* film, but we have also encouraged contributors to compare the feature film with other historicizing formats and media. While the comparison with the written (scholarly) historical text has been the starting point in most efforts to capture and define the specificity of history on celluloid (Ranalletti, Rosenstone, Witek), various contributors regard film as a palimpsest (Banita) or as a representation dialoguing with others, in other media: the early modern written chronicle (McAuley), autobiographical writing (Smyth), literary biography (Youngblood), painting and literary fiction (Pramaggiore), the tabloid press, pulp fiction, newsreels, and TV series (Rabinowitz), documentary film (Westwell), the "making of" bonus material (Ramsay), and television news and internet sites (Parvulescu).

In most chapters the feature film is treated as a text expected to produce an attentive, sympathetic, and active spectatorship and to raise political awareness about imperative historical issues such as genocide (Landsberg), the crimes of dictatorships (Ranalletti), and the falsification of history by illegitimate political regimes (Witek); to inquire about revolutionary mythology (Parvulescu), wars (Burgoyne), slavery (Martin and Wall), and colonialism (McAuley); to critically depict presidents (Hesling), oil barons (Banita), cultural icons (Shachar), migration, and ethnic and racial hybridity (Portuges); and to reflect on the writing of history itself (Pramaggiore). Most films discussed here are regarded as ethically and politically progressive, and their directors – Oliver Stone, Andrzej Wajda, Fred Zinnemann et al. – are treated as historians. Yet some contributions gesture toward problematic examples of history on screen and reveal how the feature film has been used to produce rationalized or politically subservient

visions of the past (Youngblood); how its representations have easily turned from promoting national values to serving fascist self-glorification (Landy), Nazi mythology (Bildhauer), discourses of supremacy of the white race (Martin and Wall), spectacularizations of war (Ramsay), and rationalizations of contemporary neo-imperialist military ambitions (Westwell).

Most chapters show how the historical film functions semantically in a national context (Keirstead, Rabinowitz, Hillman), but some extricate it from such contexts, tracing the way in which it addresses regional or global audiences (Bingham, Dwyer, Landsberg, Portuges). Some chapters reveal how the social role of history differs from one region of the world to another (Dwyer), from one social class to another (Rabinowitz), across different generations (Burgoyne), and across different political regimes (Bildhauer). Our contributors also monitor the development of the sub-genres of history film: the biopic (Bingham), the heroic epic (Landy), the war film (Westwell), the oil film (Banita), the literary biopic (Shachar), the medieval film (Bildhauer), the genocide film (Landsberg), the samurai film (Keirstead). The historical film is tackled, however, with regard not only to its themes, but also to its form. Our contributions analyze the historicizing role played by film music (Hillman), by cinematography (Parvulescu), by the screenplay (Smyth), by pace and editing (Westwell), by temporality (Bildhauer), by the film's reception (Rosenstone), and by marketing (Ramsay).

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Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, D. W. Griffith, the author of the first well-articulated historical film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), expressed a prophecy as to how men and women of the next generation will have access to history:

Imagine a public library of the near future, for instance. There will be long rows of boxes or pillars, properly classified and indexed, of course. At each box a push button and for each box a seat. Suppose you wish to "read up" on a certain episode in Napoleon's life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through a host of books, and ending bewildered, without a clear idea of exactly what did happen and confused at every point by conflicting opinions about what did happen, you will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button, and actually see what happened. There will be no opinions expressed. You will be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression. (Griffith 2005: 100)

Consumers and promoters of history on film can react in various ways to Griffith's prophecy, just as they respond to his films in conflicting ways, too. On the positive side, one can notice that Griffith correctly anticipates audiovisual media developments and viewing practices. The twentieth and the twenty-first century proved to be more and more inclined to leave audiovisual traces.

Nowadays there are numerous history films on the shelves of public libraries in the affluent world, and teachers use increasingly more audiovisual historical material in classrooms. The Internet has brought us closer to practices of “reading up”/looking up information such as those described by Griffith. All this makes the past seem more accessible, just a push of the button away. The storage capacity of the Internet cloud suggests that everything that ever happened can be remembered, and mega-collaborative sites such as the Wikipedia turn out a body of knowledge that seems to correspond to “the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing” envisioned by Griffith. Both major and minor film industries continue to produce historicals, and the biopic or the serious historical drama are still among the best recipes for winning an Oscar. Specialized television channels such as Discovery, National Geographic, and History offer, on a 24/7 basis, researched insights into the past, while various other television franchises, from CNN (Cable News Network) to VH1 (Video Home One) and ESPN (Entertainment and Sport Programming Network), broadcast historical materials on a regular basis. Miniaturized digital recording suggests that nothing important will happen nowadays without leaving audiovisual traces, and huge archives like YouTube enable their unrestricted dissemination.

A critical engagement with Griffith’s prophecy would gesture toward his concealed promotion of the movie industry, with its famous research departments, as ultimate producers of truth. It would emphasize that the film industry, a commercial enterprise, aims to replace public institutions such as the library, by administering collective memory and legitimizing historical facts. Griffith’s statements also spur one to reflect on how the extensive expert work of making history visible tends to produce a passive and unskilled spectatorship – just as, in Griffith’s own times, the rise in complexity of the industrial machinery has created the unskilled laborer of modernity: a predicament confirmed in our times by the audiovisual saturation generated by digital television and the cult of the Internet search algorithm. The act of just *looking at history* referred to by Griffith, of *just seeing it* – beyond any debate or controversy as to how else it might have looked – can make one suspicious of the immediacy of contact promised by film. The bracketing of “conflicting opinions about what did happen” qualifies Griffith’s library not so much as a site of memory, as one mainly of forgetting. Its promise to offer, through a kinoscope window, direct access to facts implies also the shutting off, behind this window, of the dialogue about “what happened,” which is the main source of historical truth.

It is evident that Griffith’s library cannot become the goal of even the most arduous supporter of historical film. The scholarship on historical film has never aimed to impose the hegemony of filmic representations over historical texts. The essays included in the *Companion* show that history film scholars have different agendas from Griffith. Even if they advocate the merits of filmic representations of the past, they do not regard films as closing the debates, but as reopening them in a different context, created by the specific signifying means of film – iconic

and indexical, visual and aural. Film doesn't even play the leading part in these disputes. It competes not only with institutionalized written accounts (still the most prestigious form of history), but also with other media, such as museum exhibits, monuments, memorial sites, reenactments, photography, painting, television shows, and other audiovisual formats.

The *Companion* shows that film scholars want to keep film in this secondary position, as a challenger of hegemonic representations of the past. This is a result not only of a democratic impulse, but also of the hybrid social function of film itself. Historical film is at the same time education and entertainment, document and fiction, an address of reason and emotion, scholarship and art, a public and a commercial enterprise. It is precisely this hybridity, or the multiple teleology of film, that prevents it from ever occupying a hegemonic discursive position and thus preserves its counter-hegemonic effect. Scholars who promoted history on film in the 1980s aimed to show how films with an intellectual project participated in a progressive deconstruction of the Gutenberg Galaxy. They started the sub-discipline of historical film studies not only because, content-wise, film told a competing story of the past, but especially because it told it with competing means – audiovisually, metonymically, dramatically, emotionally, and by administering temporality differently. From this point of view, Griffith's prophecy, emphasizing the need for alternative libraries, needs to be appreciated, even in its excessive utopian articulation.

Almost one hundred years after Griffith's prediction, the feature film is no longer in its days of ascension. The Lumiere Galaxy is slowly left behind, and other audiovisual "new" media are on the rise, crafting their independent language and claiming hegemony. In this context, the dramatic, 100-minute-long feature format plays not only the role of the challenger of the book, but also that of its ally in the fight for promoting intellectually committed historical representations of the past. As a medium of the last century (one obsessed by history and utopia), it also becomes a locus of preservation, archiving not only content, but also insightful practices of making sense of the past. In this collection the feature film is studied from this perspective; and, since film no longer belongs in the avant-garde of historical representation, a certain cinephilic nostalgia informs several essays. What they seem to long for is a certain way of "looking up" the past, specific for the movie/theater experience, considered more complex than the one taking place in front of television, laptop, or iPod screens.

Many historians and theorists claim that the twenty-first century, the century of digital screens, is posthistorical, lacking interest in the past and consequently doomed to repeat its mistakes.¹ The study of historical film gains its full relevance in this context, as we expect it to show how the libraries of the twenty-first century, or their substitutes, anaesthetize our interest in the past. Research on film can be useful in revealing how the themes, tropes, syntax, and spectatorship of the "new media" turn the libraries of the new millennium into sites of forgetting, just as film, the new media of Griffith's era, did.

Note

- 1 A convincing plea in this sense can be found in the Introduction to Tony Judt's *Reappraisals* (Judt 2009: 1–22).

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