

# The History Film as a Mode of Historical Thought

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*History is probably our myth.*

Michel de Certeau (1988: 21)

*History is always selective, and discriminatory too, selecting from life only what society deems to be historical and scorning the rest, which is precisely where we might find the true explanation of facts, of things, or wretched reality itself.*

José Saramago (2010: 180)

*What experience and history teach is this – that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history.*

G. W. F. Hegel (1956: 6)

The present chapter situates itself in the tradition of the ideas expressed in the epigraphs, somewhere between the notions that, in our culture, history plays the role that myth does in others; that we, like any people, select certain aspects of the past as meaningful for that mode of thought we call “history” and bracket out much that might help us to explain and understand the human journey through time; that it’s not certain what is to be learned, if anything, from the study of the past. Our particular myth embraces a faith in what we might label “empirical analytical” history, a form of telling that prizes facts, objectivity, and the separation of the knower from the known and eschews any subjectivity, emotionalism, color, or drama. For us, the ideal “history” seems to be the history produced by scholars of the academy: one comprised of a soundless, colorless, motionless, and largely emotionless world of words on a page. One has to wonder: just whose history is this? Why do we so rigorously preclude all these affective elements that comprise our daily life?

Though this essay is written for a volume devoted to the historical film, its subject is what I call the “history film.” By this I mean the fictional drama which not only devotes itself consciously to constructing a world of the past on screen,

but in doing so manages to engage the discourse of history, the body of data and debates surrounding any historical topic. Distinguishing between the history film and the historical film is important to any argument about the possibility of film “historizing,” as theorist Alun Munslow has called the activity of turning the remains of the past into a narrative (Munslow 2010: 8–9). I draw a line between movies which engage in creating what Marc Ferro (1988) called “a cinematic writing of the past” and those which are considered “historical” because they are important to the development of either the medium or some particular genre. *Metropolis* is “historical” as the first great science-fiction epic, *The Great Train Robbery* as the first western, *The Jazz Singer* as the first talkie – but none of these is a history film.

The distinction is important because, during the past 25 years, there has been an enormous amount of scholarly work on the topic of history and film. Today we have a field that sprawls across a variety of approaches to, methods for, and ways of analyzing works that take the past as their locus and their subject matter – indeed, the very collection in which this essay appears provides ample evidence of the breadth of this fledgling field. That the phrase “history film” is not widely used, or what it designates recognized as a specific topic, is, I believe, largely due to two reasons: professional historians (with a few rare exceptions) refuse to accept the cinema as a serious way of thinking about the past; and the other disciplines involved in studying the visual media – literature, film, or cultural studies – don’t need the phrase, for they are more interested in why and how the past is created on screen than in the possible truth claims made by the history film.

For scholars in the latter fields, and for some historians as well, a major obstacle that seems to stand in the way of accepting the dramatic feature as a way of doing history is the widespread belief that such films are not about the past at all, but are really about the present. The notion is that history films do no more than reconfigure the past in terms of current beliefs, conflicts, and questions of war, social movements, individuals, and ideologies. What we call history, however, history written according to the rules of the academy, ostensibly does something very different, something that miraculously allows it to escape the inflection of the present and to create a past wholly innocent of our current concerns. This is, of course, but little more than a mystification by which traditional academic history lives and thrives. Everyone who creates works of history knows (or should know) that even the most rigorously scholarly books are always, in the words of historian Natalie Davis, “Janus faced,” inevitably looking toward both the past and the present.

How could it be otherwise? We always write or film in the present, which means that the mark of the contemporary is on every work historians produce – both in the questions they ask of the past and in the answers they give. In his celebrated survey of American historical scholarship, *That Noble Dream*, Peter Nozick puts it this way: “All historical writing [. . .] is the product of a particular moment in time, which shapes historians’ decisions about what needs to be explained” (Nozick 1988: 488). Or, as Finnish historian Hannu Salmi insists, “[t]he 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” (Salmi 1995: 50).

Why do so many scholars ignore the contents of history films and treat them as if they really were about the present? This is no doubt due to our schooling. From a very young age, we are taught that history comes to us in books we read solely for their content, for the lessons they bring us from the past, and not for the conditions of their creation. Never is there the slightest suggestion that we should consider, say, the biography of the author as something involved in the meaning of a work (though the great E. H. Carr suggested, in his renowned book of essays *What is History?* (Carr 1967: 26), that you would be wise to investigate the historian’s life and predilections before reading the history she or he writes). Nor are we taught to think about the social, political, or cultural context in which a history book is produced. The result is that we approach history films and history books in an oddly unparallel way, reading the first for knowledge about the past, watching the second for insights into the present. Yet, as people interested in history, we should treat both in the same way: looking for what they say both about the past they describe and about the present in which that past has been created.

My own lesson in the influence of the present on the past came when I was a teaching assistant (TA), more than four decades ago. The professor had assigned the then most popular history survey textbook in the United States: *The Growth of the American Republic* by Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, a work originally published in 1930 and subsequently revised. During my first year of teaching, in 1965, the book described the slave system of the antebellum South as immoral, but at the same time somehow progressive. Not only did the slaves – what the book terms “happy sambos” – get to indulge in the pleasures of song and dance, but they also enjoyed what the authors see as the benefits of residing in a country where they were over time being “Christianized” and “civilized” (Morison and Commager 1950: 537–539). My second year as a TA saw a new edition published. The dancing sambos vanished, their place being taken by oppressed people who had suffered the crime of having their African culture stripped away (Morison and Commager 1962: 524–527). This alteration in the text was hardly the result of some startling new evidence about slavery having suddenly been uncovered. Rather it reflected the contemporary actions of Martin Luther King and the larger activism of an entire Civil Rights Movement. Thus events in the present had created a new history for the South.

The effects of the present on the perception of past may be known to historians, but this is not part of the history they generally carry into the classroom or their books. Yet what scholars tell us about the past has a great influence on the culture and on a public whose notion of history is reinforced at all levels of education, as well as by journalists and popular writers, who are themselves dependent upon the research findings and narrative assertions of professional historians. Different interpretations of historical events can be taught in the classroom; debates over the

meaning of particular actions may be encouraged. But rare as the dodo is the historian who asks students, let alone public audiences, to raise questions, to think about the underlying procedures by which academic history comes into being, or to consider the choices, including the fictive ones, that play a major part in its construction. A first step toward having film accepted as a serious way of thinking about the past would be to have academics embrace such an idea – which is certainly one of the aims of this essay.

### History Film/Historical Thought

To consider the history film as a mode of historical thought, I will focus on a single film, the Oscar-winning *Reds*, a work I know as both author and participant. For, although it is not directly based upon my book *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (Rosenstone 1975), I did serve on the project as historical consultant for some eight years, seven of them in pre-production. This involvement turned out to have a strong influence on my academic career. My first essay on film, *Reds as History* (Rosenstone 1995), first published in 1982, was written in response to the request from the editor of *Reviews in American History*. That publication led directly to subsequent essays, lectures, conference and panel appearances, two anthologies, two books on the history film, and the very piece you are reading. Now, three decades later, I wish to use that essay as an example of a traditional academic confronted for the first time with the issues raised by the history film. By comparison, and as a way of broadening the study with the insights of someone from the other major discipline that deals with history and film, I will couple it with the work of Leger Grindon, a film studies scholar who devotes to *Reds* a chapter of his book *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Grindon 1994). Juxtaposing the arguments made in these two works will serve to highlight some of the problems and shortcomings of academic writing on the topic and help move us toward understanding how film engages in historical thought.

*Reds* (1981) is a 3-hour and 20-minute movie that hovers uneasily between the biopic genre and epic forms as it tells the story of the last five years (1915–1920) in the life of John Reed, the so-called “golden boy” of the pre-World War I American bohemia centered in Greenwich Village. Reed was an accomplished and energetic man – honored poet, short-story writer, journalist, contributing editor of *The Masses*, founding member of the Provincetown Players, anti-war activist, chronicler of the Russian Revolution, and organizer of the Communist Labor Party. The film was a highly personal project of its star and director, Warren Beatty, who labored for more than a decade to bring it to the screen. Nominated for 12 Academy Awards, it won three, including Best Director. *Reds* was a big-budget work, costing a reputed 33 million or more – one of the most expensive films made to that date. Not only was its leftist politics unusual for Hollywood; the film was also formally innovative, mixing documentary and fiction traditions, framing and intercutting its dramatic story with talking-head interviews with people who

were called “witnesses” – elderly folk who more than 60 years earlier had either known Reed or moved in the same cultural or political circles.

Like many of his friends in Greenwich Village, Reed was a kind of instinctive leftist; but, unlike most of the others, he was also a man of action. Keen journalistic instincts repeatedly led him to scenes of turmoil and social change. Reed wrote about labor strikes in Paterson, New Jersey, and Ludlow, Colorado; he rode in 1913 with Pancho Villa’s troops during an early phase of the Mexican Revolution; he covered both the Western and the Eastern Front of the World War; and he found his way to Petrograd in September 1917, just in time to witness the upheaval of the Russian Revolution. He returned home a few months later to write the classic account of its events, *Ten Days that Shook the World*. In one sense, Reed gave the Bolshevik Revolution its shape; for his depiction of its events as a ten-day, three-part drama has marked all subsequent versions, from Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* to later scholarship and to *Reds* itself.

So fired up was Reed by the reality and promise of the revolution that, after completing the book, he became deeply involved in the factional politics of the American left, first by joining the Socialist Party, then by leading a group of those who bolted it as too conservative, and finally by helping to found the Communist Labor Party of America – one of two organizations vying for recognition from the new Communist International headquartered in Moscow. He returned to Russia as a delegate to the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920; struggled with Soviet leadership over doctrinal issues surrounding American labor unions; temporarily resigned his position; then tore up his resignation and went on to the Congress of Peoples of the East in Baku, where he delivered speeches in favor of world revolution. Like millions of others in a country blockaded by the Allies and short of food and medical supplies, he contracted typhus and died within days. He was just past his thirty-third birthday.

The story of Reed’s last five years is not that of a man on his own, for that was the period when he encountered the love of his life, the aspiring journalist and writer Louise Bryant, who became his wife and was at his side when he passed away in Moscow. A few weeks after their meeting in his hometown of Portland, Oregon, she scandalized the middle classes of that city by abandoning her dentist husband to join Reed in Greenwich Village. Their years together were passionate and intense, full of acts of love and generosity, along with a good deal of professional rivalry, political differences, flings, and affairs with friends. So much real drama and emotionality did their life contain that even the writers of a Hollywood film had to invent almost nothing about their relationship to make it big and broad and stormy enough for the screen.

### ***Reds as History***

My article “*Reds as history*” is clearly the work of a historian who has never thought much about the difference between creating a world on the page and

creating one on the screen. How else to explain why its author dwells so much on the data of the past and says so little (almost nothing) about the visual aspects of the film? One knows he is a traditional historian when he claims that the director of *Reds* ignores “all known techniques of assessing evidence from the past, as well as the findings of previous research and scholarship,” as if Beatty had written an academic biography rather than directing a motion picture (Rosenstone 1995: 91). A good deal of that 1995 essay elaborates on historical characters and events in an effort to fill out parts of the history the author seems to feel are slighted in the film. Reading his words you can tell that Rosenstone has never much bothered to look at the writings of film scholars; for, even though he makes an occasional fleeting reference to the visual and aural aspects of the work, the essay essentially contains no discussion of images, sound, editing, design, costume, or acting – save for a couple of brief nods toward Beatty’s performance as Reed, which he finds to be too frivolous and lightweight. Most importantly, the essay seems completely innocent of the notion that the dramatic feature does not and cannot communicate in the same way as a book, but must use a visual and aural language that is of necessity more condensed, allusive, and metaphoric than that of traditional history in written form.

Rosenstone does have some good things to say about *Reds*. He calls it a highly worthy film, a brave and bold portrait of an American leftist and of the subculture in which he flourished, and he praises it as the first Hollywood movie about a communist that doesn’t hide his affiliation or pretend that he is just a kind of extreme liberal, a sort of Frank Capra, a man-of-the-people hero (as was done to the famed communist songster Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*), but presents him as a radical activist who embraced Bolshevism and became a leader in the struggle to found a communist party in the United States. Admitting that a great deal of it is “more or less historically accurate,” Rosenstone says that, despite many “liberties taken” with time and place and various other errors and omissions, “the film contains far more serious historical data than almost any other Hollywood effort” (93).

Yet this historian who is also Reed’s biographer is sophisticated enough to know that there is more to history than factual accuracy, that interpretation is a central and inextricable part of historying. Here is where Rosenstone locates many of the film’s shortcomings. For, while *Reds* “manages to capture the overall pattern of Reed’s life,” this is unfortunately no more than a “surface” pattern: “Underneath the events on screen, something is missing, something called motivation.” Nowhere, the historian complains, does the film “really come to grips with or satisfactorily explain just why this privileged Harvard graduate from a stuffy, upper class Portland background takes a journey so far along a radical path.” Knowing this, Rosenstone asserts, is “crucial” for understanding the history, both on screen and off (*ibid.*).

But, one has to wonder, is it really? Or is the author mistaking the project of the film for the project of his own biography of Reed? That book had as its core mission the explanation of how and why a young man from a wealthy



background, blessed with a Harvard education, ended up not only as an organizer of a communist party, but as enough of a revolutionary martyr to be given a state funeral by the Soviets and to be buried in front of the Kremlin wall. *Reds*, by contrast, has a distinctly different project at its core: it is not about how and why Reed became a radical, for he already is one when the film opens. The first sequence with Reed (other than a very brief shot of him during the Mexican Revolution) takes place at a formal dinner of the distinctly upper-class Liberal Club in Portland in 1915. As a reporter who has just returned from the trenches in Europe, he is asked by the main speaker to answer a question: what is the cause of the World War? Reed stands up and says a single word: "Profits." Underscoring this radical political stance is the long lecture he delivers later that evening to Louise Bryant, in which he emphasizes the notion that capitalism always needs, indeed thrives on war – an opinion that could have come directly out of a socialist party handbook. Unlike Rosenstone's biography, *Reds* takes Reed's radicalism as a given and then aims to depict the excitement, glamour, heroism, and cost of such idealistic leftism, which leads to political commitment, artistic difficulties, domestic conflict, confusion, suffering, pain, and death.

Rosenstone surely must have been savvy enough – after reading and commenting on (as his essay tells us) several versions of the script – to understand that the filmic Jack Reed would be different from his own. Yet he expresses dismay over several aspects of the production: that *Reds* inflates the historical importance of Louise Bryant in Reed's life; domesticates its radical hero by showing him in odd theatrical costumes, cavorting with a puppy, ineptly playing a chef who comically burns a dinner; fails to show that he was an artist as much as a journalist or activist; and depicts Greenwich Village in a way that flattens and reduces "a multi-dimensional, vibrant, creative, radical bohemian subculture." By focusing on the dances and hi-jinks of the bohemians, Rosenstone charges, the film ignores their serious concerns, the important art works they create, their political involvements, their strong commitment to social change (96).

Were this author more sensitive to the codes and conventions of motion pictures, more attuned to the fact that, due to time constraints, the feature film of necessity presents a highly condensed version of the past, he might have noticed that some of his criticisms are indeed answered on screen. If bohemia is depicted as light-hearted, this playfulness is punctuated with scenes of political debate involving Reed, Emma Goldman, Max Eastman, editor of *The Masses*, and an assortment of other Villagers. Here there is mention of anarchism, socialism, Eugene V. Debs, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the upcoming presidential election, along with references to Marx, Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche. Such moments are hardly attempts to explicate the theories of these thinkers, and even Reed's first lecture to Louise is jazzed up with an overlay of voices and a montage of images to make it a dramatic experience. What such sequences do is to strongly signal that the life of the mind with radical overtones and avant-garde notions is very much part of this milieu.

Reed, the poet and story writer, may not be much of a presence on screen, but this is in part due to the fact that in the increasingly serious years after 1915 he had little time for literary creativity. Yet the artist never completely vanishes from the film. You can hear him in Louise's continual refrain as she worries he may be sliding away from her and toward activism: "You're a writer, Jack." You can also see it in the repeated moments he spends staring at the words of a love poem he can't seem to complete, which is scrawled on the back of a placard advertising the IWW Pageant of the Paterson Strike; it is still with him in the midst of his 1920 struggles with Bolshevik party leaders. This is a filmic way of signaling that, as Rosenstone the biographer says, Reed never completely abandoned his artistic impulses for revolutionary activity.

Sometimes the author seems to forget that *Reds* is not a history of American bohemia or of the Russian Revolution, but a biopic in which the major focus is directly on the two principals, Reed and Bryant. Their love, journalistic differences, affairs, and the complications, the strikes, the anti-war rallies, the trenches, and the revolutionary incidents they witness are clearly meant to stand in for the activities of the larger community to which they belong. When Rosenstone claims that what the story *Reds* chooses to tell amounts to a "subtle restructuring of history," it would be more accurate of him to say, "of my biography" (105). But perhaps there is more to this remark. It may be that he is afraid to admit it, or perhaps he hasn't yet learned the lesson: there is no structure to the past until the historian gives it one. His biography creates a structure for Reed's life; for *Reds*, the job was done by Beatty and his screenwriters. Rosenstone's final complaint, that the real story of Reed is not, as the film would have it, a struggle between love and revolution, "but between the demands of an ambitious self and those of a market economy," may be interesting, even true. But one wonders if he yet knows that such a judgment is imposed upon the past by the author himself and is hardly inherent in, or demanded by, the traces of the past that constitute his research.

### Politics and History in Hollywood

Leger Grindon's take on *Reds* provides a startling contrast to that of Rosenstone, so much so that one can see them as virtually polar opposites. While the latter focuses primarily on the content and historical interpretation of the film, the former exhibits little interest in such matters. Yet Grindon's (1994) chapter, "Politics and history in contemporary Hollywood," does begin with a nod at history. Not, mind you, the history of John Reed as told in *Reds*, but instead the history of the making of the film. He begins by detailing the great number of problems encountered during the many years of pre-production – Beatty's difficulties in raising money to make a film on an American communist; his choice of, and then struggles with, British leftist playwright Trevor Griffiths over the screenplay; the significance of the roles he played in the interim in other films; and, most importantly, his attraction to



and involvement in the liberal/radical politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly his commitment to the unsuccessful presidential campaign of the anti-war candidate George McGovern. So heavily do these personal experiences of the filmmaker seem to weigh with Grindon that what most interests him about *Reds* is what he sees as its reflection of contemporary political and social struggles. This results in historical analogies that move from the banal and the strained to the strange: Greenwich Village and Provincetown as counter-cultural enclaves of the time (fair enough); the opposition to World War I as a phenomenon similar to the anti-Vietnam war movement (okay); the smooth running Democratic Convention of 1916, which renominated President Woodrow Wilson, as analogous to the violent upheaval and the police riot in the streets at the Democratic Convention in 1968 (nothing in common); the triumph of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd as a parallel to McGovern's nomination in 1972 (a stretch toward the absurd); and Reed's conflicts with Bolshevik leaders as a reflection of the factionalism of the American left in the 1970s (off the charts).

Never does Grindon refer to a work of written history or give any indication that he has confronted the discourse surrounding Reed and his times. There is nothing in the essay to suggest he has ever read any of the various biographies of Reed, or even peeked at the shelf of books devoted to Greenwich Village, the anti-war movement, World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, or the foundation of the American Communist Party. Knowing the verifiable details is clearly of no concern to his analysis, yet a certain amount of fact could well serve to alter or deepen his judgments about what happens on screen. For example, he makes much of how two characters, playwright Eugene O'Neill and anarchist leader Emma Goldman, represent the warring halves of Reed's soul – the artistic and the political, the desire to be a great writer and the impulse to rectify the ills of the world. Grindon is clearly right in seeing this as a dramatic technique, a traditional way of externalizing the internal conflicts of a character. But it is also a direct reflection of the situation in the past. O'Neill and Goldman were both close friends of Reed, and their lives and opinions did interconnect with and influence his in many ways. Both are important figures in all the biographies, playing roughly similar roles in his life on the page as they do in the film. As lengthy narratives, the biographies have plenty of space to dwell on other historical figures (e.g., Max Eastman, Bill Haywood, George Bellows, John Sloan), who serve to reinforce the positions of Goldman and O'Neill. On the page, the influence of those two on Reed may not seem as sharp as in the film, which heightens the drama by keeping the focus on a small number of characters. The major point is this: the role of these two is not determined solely by the needs of drama, it is also a reflection of the data of the past (as interpreted by the historian). Knowing this could add an important layer to Grindon's essay and at the same time underscore the technique of condensation – one of the elements of visual-dramatic language through which the history film speaks.

A similar lack of interest in the past marks Grindon's failure to distinguish between lines of dialogue taken directly from the historical record (such as Reed's

remark to Goldman, who fears that the Bolsheviks are betraying her dream of revolution: "It's not happening the way we wanted it to, but it's happening") and lines invented for the purpose of showing character development. Of the latter he can be quite critical, as he is with the words spoken by Reed during his final encounter with Gregori Zinoviev, head of the Comintern. On the train back from Baku, Jack discovers that the Soviet leader has altered the text of a speech he delivered to the largely Muslim audience, changing a call to revolution to one for jihad. He confronts Zinoviev, saying "You don't rewrite what I write" (the same words he used earlier with a commercial magazine editor), and in the ensuing quarrel Zinoviev accuses Reed of waffling between the revolution and his personal desires, insisting that the party rather than the individual defines Truth. Reed counters with a passionate speech that raises individualism to the rank of the highest political principles: "You separate a man from what he loves the most, you purge what is unique in him, and when you purge what is unique in him, you purge dissent. And when you purge dissent, you kill the revolution. The revolution is dissent" (Grindon 1994: 198). To make the point stronger, the explosion of an artillery shell at the outset of a White attack on the train ends the speech with an emphatic punctuation point by shattering the windows of the railroad car and hurling the characters to the floor.

Grindon finds these words invented by a screenwriter to be no more than "a pale creed." Revolution, he says, is not simply dissent, but "a radical transformation of the economic and political order." True enough. Which means that this speech "offers a limited and shallow understanding of Reed's politics" (199). But how exactly does Grindon know Reed's politics? Does he mean the politics he has learned in the movie, or the one he has found in some unspecified historical source? The biographies and histories, themselves, have differing views on Jack's mental state at this point in time. His behavior and his writing can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, he shows a slight dismay over some doctrinal aspects of the revolution, on the other, a strong desire to continue believing in Bolshevik leadership. If one takes a larger view and looks at the trajectory of Reed's life over the years, there is ample evidence that he is a man who, since college days, has had a narcissistic investment in the truth of his own words and has been committed to the kind of individualism that could easily lead to words that define revolution as dissent.

These judgments of character and dialogue are part of Grindon's larger critique of the film. Ultimately, the Reed portrayed in *Reds* is simply not radical enough for him. Both the character of Jack and the film itself are too much under the sway of a "liberal conception [...] [of] government and its attendant politics." The Reed on film may be torn between art, social change, and politics, but for Grindon he "does not embody the integration of personal and social recommended by [Georg] Lukacs, nor does the film respond cogently to the historical problems it poses" (201). This is due to the fact that the director fails "to gain a generalized social understanding of events, and his characters fail to comprehend the historical circumstances in which they find themselves" (210).

Apart from wondering exactly why the Marxist theoretics promoted by Georg Lukács in his classic study *The Historical Novel* should be applied to any particular work such as *Reds* (would we also use that philosopher's endorsement of Stalinism as a recommendation for its values?), it seems important to raise the following two questions: What exactly would be a cogent response to the "historical problems" raised? And what would it mean for characters to comprehend the historical circumstances in which they find themselves? Reed was living amidst fast-moving and chaotic events taking place in a vast country with poor communications. A civil war was raging over Russia as White armies, aided by European powers, tried to overthrow the new regime, which was itself struggling desperately to assert its authority across a fractious and far-flung land. The revolution might not be (and I stress the element of doubt) precisely the one about which Reed had dreamed, but it was the kind of major social change he had supported ever since witnessing the Mexican Revolution. The cogent response can be heard in the argument with Zinoviev. Reed was not giving up on revolution, but struggling, as an entire nation was at the time, to find its meaning. If the filmmaker leaves us in a state of doubt over Reed's exact beliefs at the time of his death, so do the biographers, because there are not enough historical data for us to form a definitive opinion.

As for the director's "failure" to understand events and his characters' "failure" to comprehend the historical circumstances in which they find themselves – these two issues go together. And yet exactly who in Russia in 1920, one might ask, fully understood what was going on? Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership were improvising a new regime day by day. Neither Reed nor anybody else, not even the Bolshevik leaders, fully comprehended the historical circumstances. Yet the speech that Grindon disdains suggests a certain kind of long-range comprehension, even if the character may not fully realize the consequences of what he is saying. The repeated use of the word "purge" in the argument between Reed and Zinoviev is hardly an accident, for this sequence looks ahead to the later terrors of the Soviet regime: the heady early days of revolution, in 1920, were only just beginning to give a hint of the purges to come – of artists, intellectuals, party members, and leaders. Ultimately one might see the speech as the "cogent" response of the director, who seems to be saying that, for all of Reed's commitment and heroism, he gave his life in support of a human project that would, like all such projects (?), fail to live up to its professed ideals. *Reds* may not endorse the collectivist response that Grindon seems to favor, but it offers instead a kind of existential lesson taken from the past. For a man of action like Reed, this can be a fitting moral: the individual precedes, and is more important than, the collective – even in a revolutionary situation.

### **Why Not Call It History?**

I have analyzed these essays by Rosenstone and Grindon because they provide extreme and opposite, yet not untypical, examples of the way the history film is

most often treated by scholars: either as a book that has been put on the screen and is yet subject to the same standards as an academic work of history, or as a visual work that imposes upon the past the director's concerns about contemporary issues. To see the history film as a work with its own integrity, its own way of making meaning of the past, its own sense of history, calls for a vision that involves the insights of both these essays.

The one element of *Reds* on which both scholars agree that it adds something to the history film is the way the drama is framed and intercut with the talking-head witnesses. Rosenstone finds the technique "brilliant," while Grindon terms it "a signal achievement," which "refreshes the generic conventions of the historical fiction film" (Rosenstone 1995: 90; Grindon 1994: 218). Yet both also judge its use in the film to be historically misleading. Rosenstone's charge is that this "apparently historical device" became in practice "profoundly ahistorical"; for it suggests that the filmmaker equates memory with history and, because the former is clearly faulty (the witnesses regularly contradict each other, themselves, and the historical record), history must be seen faulty as well. Ultimately the use of witnesses suggests that nobody can know the truth of Reed and Bryant: "Thus the filmmaker can tell us whatever story he wishes (and history be damned!)" (Rosenstone 1995: 91). Grindon's worries are similar; for he sees the uncertainty and contradictions of the witnesses not as a device for problematizing the past and suggesting that we can never know the truth, but rather as a way of emphasizing the truths of the dramatized story, of allowing it to resolve the issues and to provide answers to all the questions posed by the conflicts and confusion of the witnesses. And, while the mixture of points of view given by documentary and drama might excite "the viewer to further investigation," it is just as likely to falsely convince "the viewer that the film is indeed history" (Grindon 1994: 220).

What's wrong with that, might we ask? With labeling *Reds* a work of history? Surely such a judgment depends upon what exactly we mean by the word "history" and what we expect such a work to do. This returns us to a most basic question: What do we want from history? What is the good of studying the past? Certainly we want more than verifiable facts of the sort a chronicle could provide. Many different answers to those questions have been given over the last 2,500 years in the western tradition. Here is a fine summary of them from Donald L. Kelley's survey of western historical thought and practice from Herodotus to Herder, *Faces of History*:

- 1 History preserves and celebrates the memory of notable events and persons.
- 2 History is didactic, providing moral or political lessons, usually on the grounds that human nature, despite different customs, is at bottom the same.
- 3 History is a form of self-knowledge, or the search for self-knowledge.
- 4 History is a form of wisdom, a way of extending human horizons backward and forward in time, and beyond local experience and concerns. (Kelley 1991: 12)

As a viewing of the film or a reading of the essays by Rosenstone and Grindon suggests, *Reds* (like a great number of other history films that it would be easy to name) undertakes all of these tasks:

- 1 It celebrates the lives and achievements of Reed and Bryant, providing glimpses of the milieu in which they flourished and of the events and situations in which they participated – the counter-culture of Greenwich Village, the strikes of the IWW, the World War, and the Russian Revolution.
- 2 It suggests moral and political lessons about the virtues of commitment, both to other human beings (the two leading characters have a rocky time as lovers and spouses, until they end up as comrades) and to the cause of social justice.
- 3 It confronts the viewer with personal and social questions – questions about our relation to larger historical movements that, if taken seriously, could certainly lead to the questioning of one's own beliefs and actions.
- 4 It extends the viewer's horizons backward in time and to forgotten traditions and alternative cultures, values, and belief systems, the exposure to which could be seen as part of a journey leading to the kind of understanding we call wisdom.

I can hear the objections to calling *Reds* a work of history even before they are voiced: What about the facts? What about the fictional inventions? The dialogue, which is the work of screenwriters? The change of locale, which has Reed's arrest at the Paterson Strike take place in a barn, not on the streets? The scenes that are wholly invented, say the exhibition of nude photos of Louise in an art gallery? And how could she and Jack journey by train from the Western Front (in one of Rosenstone's critiques) to Petrograd, in 1917, without encountering German armies? One could go on and on, but what would be the point? Elsewhere I have settled (at least to my satisfaction) such questions by making the argument that we do not judge the contribution of works of scholarly history by the verifiability of individual data points, but rather we assess them in terms of how well the interpretation accounts for the traces of the past we do have, and how that interpretation engages with the larger discourse of history – that is, with the body of data and debates that already surrounds any historical topic.

As the two essays make clear, *Reds* is a piece of historying – a mode of thinking that uses traces of the past and turns them into a coherent and meaningful narrative. And what a colorful, alive, and engaging narrative it is on screen, full of action, passion, humor, music, and emotional conflict, feeling much closer to the texture of real life – heightened and intensified – than what can be produced on the page. We, who have written works of history or biographies of Reed (or anyone else), know that, however vivid and dramatic the language we try to employ, our prose can never come close to the capabilities of film in creating what we imagine the look, feel, and sound of the past to have been. Nor can we provide the powerful emotional impact of the film experience, which produces

what Alison Landsberg has called “prosthetic memories”: intense feelings for historic moments and events that happened not to us, but to figures we have met only on screen (Landsberg 2004: 32).

Does this encounter with the past, which includes such affective and visceral elements, of a sort difficult or impossible to attain on the page, count as a way of thinking “history”? Not in terms of current history practices. Yet, like the book, a film introduces us to people and movements from the past such as Jack Reed and Louise Bryant, it lets us peer into the subculture of which they were a part, and it suggests the social and political attitudes of bohemians and artists, the effect of the war upon one segment of American society, and something about a radical leftism at the end of that war and a repression of that impulse, which has largely been erased from all but the most specialized of historical writings. This may not be history if you think in terms of the assumptions which underlie our empirical–analytical tradition – that history is something from which we derive lessons that allow us to understand both the past and the present, and these let us better navigate the future as individuals and collectivities. But does such a notion contain any truth? Or is Hegel right in his skepticism about learning from the past?

To me, our idea of history as teacher may have us looking in the wrong place. Maybe the lessons that come from the past are far less specific; maybe they have more to do with a personal expansion of vision not of the nation, but of the individual. If we took such a view, this might allow us to see the history films as a kind of history with its own special language and (dare I say it?) its own truths. And maybe, tradition aside, we scholars can’t deal with the history film as a kind of history until we find a vocabulary or a language for talking about such films and for evaluating their contributions to our understanding of the past. Much of this chapter has been devoted to showing the limitations of two very different but equally characteristic scholarly approaches to such texts. But these approaches also have their strengths; and, by combining the best of the kinds of analysis that both utilize, we will reach the beginnings of an appropriate critical language for talking about, and validating, the history film as a mode of historical thought.

What I am saying is this: in order to understand the history done by the history film, we need to analyze it as a visual, aural, and dramatic presentation that engages – as any work of history does – with past, present, and future moments, events, people, beliefs, and ideologies. The history film cannot be judged through the current canons either of written history or of the genre analysis of film studies, but by combining the two. The mode of telling the past in a story with a dramatic arc, created so as to get and hold the viewer’s attention; the demand of drama for a plot that condenses a large number of characters into a few, in order to highlight certain political or social positions; the wholesale invention of dialogue, or the creation of symbolic figures or situations that bring together characters who never actually met in the past (intellectual historians do the same when they bring into debate the ideas of people who lived centuries apart) – all such moves



must be seen not as mistakes, as a falling away from the (supposedly) purer truths of written history – whose truths, as theorists from Hayden White on have been showing for some time now, are also shaped by the demands of literary form. They are, rather, a necessary part of the fictional structure that allows a film to put the world of the past on the screen in the form that has made sense to the West (perhaps to the whole world?) ever since the time of Herodotus: that is, as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

From the writing of a historian like Rosenstone one can learn that a great deal of data from the past are already contained in a film such as *Reds*. But it is important to see that these data will be configured and emphasized (or de-emphasized) in a manner consonant with the demands of the visual media and of the dramatic form. From the two authors we can see that it is important to understand that each work of history (including written ones) is a project with a particular aim in mind, with a particular story to tell, and with a particular moral to draw – and that a film must first of all be judged in terms of that project rather than in terms of the extent to which it matches a book on the same topic. Given the time constraints, it is rare that a biopic will tell a cradle-to-the-grave life story; it will instead, like *Reds*, take part of a life and make it stand as a metonym for the whole. One distinct benefit of this approach is that most biographical films begin with our character as an adult, thus allowing us to avoid encountering the often uninteresting deeds of generations of ancestors. With historical topics broader than a life span, this same pattern holds. A film cannot undertake the history of a war, a revolution, a political or social movement, or an entire nation in the way written history commonly does. Rather it will give you a few characters involved in a single battle or campaign, or living through a crucial moment in the history of a country, and it will let their story provide the audience with an insight into a larger movement.

The chapter by Grindon (which is full of fine readings of the visual elements of *Reds*, readings I have taken for granted here in order to concentrate on its – to me – more illuminating shortcomings) underscores at least two notions crucial to understanding the historical thinking in the history film. First: you cannot simply approach such works with the assumption that they do no more than reflect current concerns. It is important also to take into account the historical discourse out of which they spring and to which they inevitably refer, and then to integrate that knowledge within a reading of how and why that particular past is currently being evoked and read in this particular way. Second: we should be highly self-conscious of how we impose our own readings both on the works of history and on the topics in the past that they convey. At the same time, we should certainly be mindful about how we criticize historians and figures from the past for not fully understanding their own situation with regard to larger historical movements and phenomena. With the benefit of both hindsight and research, we always know more about the outcomes of actions than did the people who lived and acted in the past; but this doesn't mean our analyses or theories are any smarter than theirs.

The argument of this essay has been a simple one, which I summarize as follows:

- 1 There is a kind of visual work called the history film, which enacts a mode of historical thinking, one with its own rules of engagement with the past.
- 2 This form has not been taken seriously by academics (or by the culture at large) because of our tradition of history as a written discourse.
- 3 The attitudes underlying the rejection of the history film are largely reinforced by academics, including historians and scholars in film and cultural studies.
- 4 Getting such academics to see history film as a visual discourse about the past will trickle down to the larger public through schools and commentators.
- 5 The way to convince academics is to show the shortcomings of their current approaches to the history film.

What, the reader might ask, is to be gained from this? What benefit would derive from accepting the history film as a legitimate way of thinking historically? Difficult as it is to know if such a move would change our broad historical interpretations, at least it would inject image, sound, and color to our histories, connecting a sense of the past with the present, and providing us with a richer, more textured sense of human experience. Taking film seriously would also mean seriously engaging the work of certain directors who have been obsessed with the past across a number of films – Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Oliver Stone, Maria Luisa Bemberg, Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Masuhiro Shinoda, Carlos Saura, Bernardo Bertolucci, Roberto Rossellini, Theodoros Angelopoulos, Bertrand Tavernier, and Med Hondo, just for starters – and making their visions and insights part of our historiographic tradition. It has already been argued elsewhere that, in certain situations, for instance the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Balkan Wars of the late twentieth century, filmmakers were writing histories long before academics got around to doing so. We don't and can't understand precisely what bringing the history film into our tradition will do, for there is no way of knowing what alterations to our sense of the past might ensue and how these would influence the historicizing of future generations. One thing seems clear: to avoid dealing with the history film – and with the visual media in general – as serious purveyors of the past that we turn into history makes us akin to those folks (were there any? there must have been!) who thought that, by writing things down, Herodotus and Thucydides were despoilers of the truths and wisdom conveyed in the oral tradition.

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