

The Politics of Cine-Memory

Signifying Slavery in the History Film

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There is no straightforward and unmediated access to the past. History is articulated in multiple ways, through various media, and it comes to us as a set of narrative constructs – whether via the written word, the television drama, the staged musical, the oral narrative, the documentary, or the cinematic feature. However, to accept that all history is mediated is by no means to accept that all histories or historical perspectives are therefore equally valid and equally credible. For we know as well that any kind of fundamentalist relativism is an indefensible position for thoughtful and intelligent critics. Indeed, to accept the wholly mediated nature of our access to the past is, in fact, to underscore and further emphasize the crucial importance of reaching for as accurate an understanding of that past as possible. To do otherwise is to allow free rein to those who deny the Holocaust. However, a broad ideological investment in a realism that equates accuracy with truth has meant that, all too frequently, the qualitative standard of historical cinema has been reduced to a film's ability to carefully mimic the material world of the historical period being represented on screen.

While a concern with verisimilitude is not unimportant, an obsessive demand for accuracy in the “wigs and the wallpaper” can easily become an end in itself. As Marcia Landy puts it: “The insistence on the part of traditional historians and film critics for ‘accuracy’ is a major obstacle inhibiting a proper assessment of the uses of the past in cinema” (Landy 2001: 2). At the same time, it would appear necessary at least to make a convincing effort to establish and maintain an historical landscape that is visually convincing. To see Thomas Jefferson wearing a digital watch or television aerials on the rooftops of Edwardian London disrupts our sense of narrative and time through the collapse of historical *telos* (end, purpose) and the collision of historical moments that we know could never be coterminous. Because films are imperfect, there are many such instances – and indeed countless websites dedicated now to their identification and logging. They

briefly (and often humorously) remind us of the deeply serious point that film is a canvas and not a window. But what happens when the historical inaccuracies go beyond the wigs and the wallpaper and the misplaced television aerials? This, we contend, is a profoundly important question, and one that speaks to the equally significant question of what criteria might reasonably be invoked to assess the history film. Taken together, they form the central focus of much of the examination of history in film. But there is another consideration – connected, and similarly profound – that we wish to address in this chapter: How does a “politics of memory” function as a trope within the historical film?

Over the last fifteen years or so a veritable mini-industry of scholarship has emerged, to wrestle with the troubled and troubling relationship between history and film. The distinction between written and filmed history seems to be more problematic and vexing for historians than for film studies scholars. Indeed, as Marnie Hughes-Warrington points out, the *American Historical Review* suspended the inclusion of film reviews because they did not “contribute to an analytical, sophisticated understanding of history” consistently or adequately enough (Hughes-Warrington 2009: 2). Though, as she says, film studies scholars may “have long been torn between the imperatives of recognizing film as a distinctive form of art and questioning its ability to inform, educate and even empower viewers” (ibid.), these concerns are by no means related solely to history or to the historical film. But how, then, do we deal with history film within this context?

An early and profoundly significant example of history film that draws all of these issues together, and one that shall lead us to the principal focus of this essay – cinematic representations of slavery – is that *ur-text* of American mainstream cinema, D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). When *Birth* was first released, it was described by the then-president of the US, Woodrow Wilson, as “history writ with lightning.” It was quite an endorsement from a man who was himself an historian, with a doctorate from Johns Hopkins University and a magisterial five-volume *History of the American People* (1902) to his name. *Birth* makes a constant and committed effort to offer itself up as factual history as well as dramatic enactment and epic entertainment. Periodic intertitles invoke the allegedly objective sources of the events portrayed; and these range from Wilson’s own history to other historical accounts and to newspaper articles. It is perhaps stating the obvious to point out that the film, notwithstanding its claims to reality and truth, is an egregious distortion of history whose purpose is not to offer an objective view of the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction but to socially, culturally, ideologically, and historically legitimize and valorize a racial hierarchy rooted in the presumption of white superiority.

Its ideological claims are so obvious and glaring – its labor so labored, as it were – it serves as an instructive text as to the way all history film – indeed all film – works ideologically (though rarely perhaps quite as blatantly). But, as well as being an example of bad history, *Birth* is fundamentally a film about memory. Indeed it relies upon the nature and function of memory to perform its emotive and

seductive work. Released in 1915, when the Civil War was still in the living memory of millions of Americans, *Birth* – or rather its false history – lays claim to a kind of racial memory intended to provide a shared, yet wholly personal experience of whiteness, one that would be immediately and intimately familiar and recognizable to its intended audiences. In its strategic employment of character, narrative, and plot (with the complicated interweaving of the Stoneman and Cameron families caught up in the forces of war beyond their control), the film labors to provide a collective memory, rooted not in nationality or region but in race.

As much of the work on collective memory over the last few years demonstrates, the connections between memory and history are complicated.¹ History and memory are clearly – and intimately – related categories of both apprehension and disjuncture, which raise two key related questions: First, how do films work as vehicles of both memory and history? And, second, how is memory strategically embedded and deployed in film? Though history film is inevitably drawn into that wider system of knowledge that we understand as the discipline of “history,” memory occupies a much more fluid category or state of being. There is no broader formalized system of knowledge, or disciplinary authority, to which a qualitative set of criteria of what constitutes memory might be applied or judged in the same way as history. In view of this critical distinction between articulations of the past, we are interested in the ways in which what might be termed the “fluid dynamics” of memory intersects with – or is articulated through – the genre of the history film. And, just as the history film functions politically, so we want to understand memory as a political project parsed through the history film as a form of political critique that we refer to as *cine-memory*.

This question of cine-memory works to complement and buttress those other key general questions regarding the relationship between veracity and verisimilitude; the ability or otherwise of film to successfully portray the complexities, ironies, and contradictions that inhere in traditional (written) historical analysis; and the meaning of “history” when situated in the context of cinematic representation. But it also directs us to more specific questions, such as: What does a film that does not distort the history of slavery look like? How might a film work to allow for critical and counter-readings of itself as part of the process of a progressive articulation of both the past and the present iterations of slavery? How does film work to rupture the ideological assumptions of its audience by offering a vision of history that is rooted in the present as well as the past? What is the distinction between a picture of lived reality and a claim to truth? And, crucially, what part is played by the tropes of memory in this process?

The two films that form the center of our discussion, Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Burn! (Queimada!, 1969)* and Euzhan Palcy’s *Sugar Cane Alley (La Rue Cases-Nègres, 1982)*, speak in interesting and diverse ways to these questions. Their significance is that they each locate slavery as a social formation within an historical framework that speaks simultaneously to the past and to the present. Considering the categorical distinction made by Robert Rosenstone between fiction and history, that “both

tell stories, but the latter is a true story” (Rosenstone 1995: 69), we consider how the texts work ideologically and politically not to make some overarching claim to “truth,” but to point to the historical reality of the lived experience of slavery as it existed in the nineteenth century – but also as it exists today. We are not seeking to offer a “presentist” re-reading of the films – how could Gillo Pontecorvo in 1969 have known about Nike’s sweatshop labor in Indonesia in 1999? – but a way of understanding that the visions of slavery articulated in these two films (and others) contain political critiques that are crucially relevant to the present day.

While occupying distinctive and different political, geographical, and historical positions, Pontecorvo and Palcy speak to the continuing presence and consequences of global capitalism and to the imperial project, as the traces of empire rhizomatically spread through various forms of cultural, economic, and racial domination. This, of course, is a singularly crucial feature of Third Cinema and, we might argue, an ever-present element (implicit or otherwise) in Third World cinema. But we are choosing to place these two films in conversation, as it were, in order to underscore that slavery (as a consequence of empire-building) within the historical film is a consistently useful trope through which to understand contemporary global politics. It is our contention that they deliberately and self-consciously employ a politics of memory in order to illuminate – in a variety of (often) contradictory ways – the realities of the lived experience of slavery and, as they do so, they articulate a compelling critique of North/South relations and racial domination that we might choose as frameworks through which to understand continuing manifestations of slavery in the contemporary period.

To this end, we suggest that the historical film has an important relationship to history in three distinct and inextricably related ways: first, history film attempts to “document” the past in that it purports to show us a vision/version of history – that is, of things, events, people, and places as they actually were in the past; second, the films are themselves documents of history in that they are the products of the historical and cultural moment from which they emerge; and, third, they are engines of history in that they have – acknowledged or otherwise – a political function that is in contention with the broader social and cultural discourses that surround them. It is in the acknowledgment of films as documents, both *in* and *of* history, that we can understand them most clearly as ideological constructions.

The three distinct ways outlined above in which film relates to history are further mirrored by three categories of cine-memory that employ memory as a constitutive element of history in film. The cinematic deployment and mediation of cine-memory comprises a formulation and working model through which we can further articulate its properties as a political formation:

CLASS 1 CINE-MEMORY serves to affirm received assumptions and discourses about the past. It confirms the ideological certainties of the implied viewer, valorizes the beliefs, and conforms to the expectations of the audience. In doing so it functions to portray the hegemonic order as being a consequence of nature rather than

one of culture. Yet the past it represents hides ideological assumptions and values that normalize the “reality” it claims to express. Events appear to be fixed in time, discrete, simplistically framed, and analytically wanting. Hollywood has pioneered this form of historical reconstruction, de-historicizing events both in relation to the period in which they occurred and in relation to the present. Films of this ilk and their stock of memories attempt to bring closure to historical trauma. They are also committed to a wholly personalized vision of history, in which trajectories of class and race are elided through the personalization of cultural narratives within the individual. This removes the individual from the processes of history, thus making him/her entirely responsible for his/her personalized circumstances rather than the product or consequence of historical forces ranged both beyond and before the individual.

CLASS 2 CINE-MEMORY, corresponding to Mark Ferro’s fourth stratum of visions of history, privileges counter-historical readings that contest dominant discourses (Ferro 1988: 148–151). This class of cine-memory critiques accounts of the past, infers comparisons between historical struggles, and includes previous omissions in the historical record. As such, films employing Class 2 cine-memory work in the service of a project of recovery and renewal (dealing for instance with the problematic of identity, culture, history, and nation). Put differently, Class 2 cine-memory attempts to reconstitute the narratives of historical struggles and transform the way history is read by audiences. A corrective to prevailing accounts and bourgeois historiography, films and written texts of this class serve, as the late Cuban filmmaker Tomas Gutiérrez Alea contends, “to deepen the understanding of our past and re-vindicate the best traditions of struggle” (Chijona 1979: 29). And, professing an imminently practical purpose, Alea adds, “For us, the significance of such a cinema is directly related to the impact that it can have on the present.” In this regard, cine-memory of this class contributes to creating new identities and articulates and foregrounds the link and utility between the past and the present as a fundamental distinction – one that Class 1 cine-memory does not acknowledge.

CLASS 3 CINE-MEMORY is largely unexamined and prescriptive. It is also the most complex of the three categories we attempt here to demarcate because – unlike in the first two classes, which affirm prevailing discourses or re-vindicate the historical subject – this class serves to inspire activism in real time in the real world. Cine-memory of this kind works in a film’s narration to transform consciousness and, in the best tradition of Third Cinema, it invites audiences to consider their own outcomes for historical struggles. In this sense, such cine-memory contributes to the project of world-making. Further, the use of Class 3 cine-memory projects alternative modes of human conduct, alludes to both pre-existing and potential social formations, suggests new and alternative social and political concepts, and foregrounds the future as indeterminate. Accordingly, in theory, Class 3 cine-memory is transformative and emancipatory. It proffers an enlightened and optimistic view of the human condition, illuminating a path

towards the future. Its employment, not unlike that of myth, possesses traces of a peoples' renewal in solidarity, what the Burkinabe filmmaker Gaston Kaboré calls for Africans' "destiny."

We would suggest that memory, in its particularized recuperation of the past, constitutes an organizing principle of film narration and is both a principal feature and a strategy of political film practice and, most especially, of the history film. This is no less true for Hollywood than it is for independent film, though, for each, cine-memory performs cultural labor of a different kind. We have already briefly mentioned memory in relation to *Birth of a Nation*, but there are a myriad of more recent Hollywood productions about slavery that gesture to the immorality of slavery while deploying memory in the service of whiteness. *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Glory* (1989), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and *Amistad* (1997), each works to excoriate the institution of slavery and yet plays with memory in ways that situates whiteness, black protagonists notwithstanding, as the key organizing experience within the history of slavery. Simplistic, entertaining, picturesque, and personalized, films of this type choose a facile moralization rather than any deep or critically engaged response to social injustice as a consequence of much larger systems of domination.

In considering the representation and function of memory in film narratives, its distinctive features and mediations are sometimes difficult to discern. The category of memory itself, as noted earlier, is nebulous and slippery, something recognized, acknowledged, and lived in, but often resistant to clear and easy definition. For our purposes, we are choosing to think about memory straightforwardly, as an active and dynamic process of recalling the past. Constituting a form of repository or archive, memory recuperates, documents, and parses experience. It comprises images, sounds, meanings, gestures, and aural utterances. When employed self-consciously within film, as a critical tool designed to preserve, retrieve, and occasion the past, it can simultaneously illuminate the present and prompt political consciousness. It bears repeating that history and memory occupy wholly different, though often shared and complementary, categories or states of being. But the inchoate fluid dynamics of memory can be structured within the history film in a way that allows not only for the regressive politics of *Birth of a Nation* but also for a potentially liberating, perhaps even revolutionary, progressive intervention in the social world, however imprecise, ephemeral, immaterial, and contingent that might be.

It is important also to keep in mind that we are thinking of memory as a collective experience articulated through a mass-mediated form. This points to the profound complexity of memory as a repository for both personal and social experience. Memory – famously unreliable as it is – permutes in time and space through the particular medium of its expression. But, as with history, an acknowledgment of its unreliability should in no way undermine its utility as an avenue to the past, or indeed to the present and (we argue) to the future as well. In an immediate and personal way, as we go about our days, the messiness of memory, unlike

the disciplinary, formal, and systematically linear ordering of history, is a constant and conscious driver of our sense of the present. Memory, then, occupies a peculiarly powerful site of recognition and rendition – we are nothing if not our memories. If we shift this statement from the personal to the social realm, we can begin to locate memory as an equally powerful instrument in the invention and reinvention of the collective past manifest in multiple cultural forms, from allegory to testimony, to ritual, to myth – and, to return to our principal focus, to film. Memory in its collective sense and as it is articulated through film becomes evidence of knowledge that can both confirm and alter social and political imaginaries.

Class 1 cine-memory accounts for the legitimizing functioning of memory in mainstream cinema. The investment of the Hollywood slavery film in the dominant hegemonic conditions of its own production means that this kind of film can only ever affirm the ideological expectations of its audience. It demands that we see history almost entirely through the lens of wholly personal experiences. However, we are more concerned here with films that go beyond story-telling modes of narration and that signify and illustrate some kind of revolutionary praxis. Further, we would suggest that Class 2 and Class 3 cine-memory are more concerned with the immaterial contingencies of everyday life such as anecdotes, unspoken gestures, or oral utterances than with the desire for an expert rendering of the material artifacts associated with slavery (such as chains, slave-quarters, cane fields, and the depredations we associate with bondage) that characterizes Class 1 cine-memory. Class 1 is wholly invested in the underpinning ideological assumptions of realism that link “accuracy” in the rendering of the material world to a privileged a priori claim to historical truth. For Class 2 and 3, however, it is those quotidian expressions of human interaction that evoke meanings that, as the Senegalese filmmaker Joseph Gaï Ramaka puts it, might actually enable people “to grasp their reality and act.”²

Slavery’s Temporal, Spatial, and Cultural Iterations: *Sugar Cane Alley*

Among the two films selected and illustrative of our concerns is Euzhan Palcy’s first and most original feature, *Sugar Cane Alley*. A compelling dramatization of plantation life around the 1930s, the film pivots around the lived encounters and meditations of José, an Afro-Martinique youth under the care of an indomitable grandmother. By exquisitely nuanced character renderings, detailed set designs of the period, and sepia toned footage, the film interrogates the color caste and peonage system in French colonial Martinique, while affirming communal solidarity and African cultural retentions and practices in the new world.

The first scene we address (see Figure 22.1) occurs halfway through the film, when José’s mentor Medouze (a cane cutter and an old, frail, and deeply spiritual man, who has endured a life-time of cane fields) impassionedly recalls and laments his father’s own recalling of the violent struggle against slavery and memories of



Figure 22.1 *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983). Producer: Jean-Luc Ormières. Director: Euzhan Palcy

peonage. Medouze's fervent uttering, as if to himself and not to José, is dramatic and poignant.

Damn cane field . . . All the blacks came down from the hills with sticks, machetes, guns, and torches. They burned all the homes . . . that was how slavery ended . . . I saw [post-emancipation] I was back in Black Shack Alley again [. . .] It was back to the cane fields. We were free, but our bellies were empty. The Master had become the Boss. So I stayed on, like all the other blacks in this cursed country [. . .] Nothing has changed, son, the whites own all the land.

In Medouze's autobiographical testimonial, two historical modes of production – slavery and peonage – cohere and, in doing so, illuminate the commonalities of distinctive forms of economic exploitation. In this expansive view, slavery equates to a trans-historical and contingent category of domination, determined less by the specificities of the labor process than by a racialized and gendered class system (a view, coincidentally, that refutes Marxist orthodoxy, privileging other factors that determine social inequality.) And the presence of José in the frame is not arbitrary (see Figure 22.2). Together, they signify time elapsed and generational differences, but also similar experiences, as Palcy strategically foregrounds through memory the commonality between historical forms of domination – past and present.

A short time later, Medouze is found dead among the cane fields where he has labored his entire life, having finally succumbed to its unsparing demands. As the gathered cane cutters celebrate his life and mourn his death, the community's griot – in the memorial call and response of African oral tradition – chronicles the tragedy that is Medouze's and, by inference, the fate of *all* cane cutters – past, present, and future.

Ladies and gentlemen [. . .] the cane fields ate Mister Medouze's life. So, he went to die in the cane fields. He laid down on his hide and his old possum's bones. May his soul rest in peace in all the days to come. Always, for time in memoriam. Amen!

Ladies and gentlemen. Mister Medouze is dead, but don't let it pain your hearts. For guess why, ladies and gentlemen . . . why Medouze laid his old body in the cane to die? If he hid his body to die in the cane fields, he did it so that we, his brothers would not inherit his old sleeping board smoothed by his old bones and the pipe that never left him [. . .] night or day. Mister Medouze didn't want his old brothers to inherit his bantam, defeated in all its fights, or his barrels of gold and silver that Whitey gave him with a kick in the ass, saying, "go on, old nigger smelling of piss," saying, "go on old nigger, last generation after the toads!"

Among much else, this scene (see Figure 22.3) is deployed to signify the retention of African cultural practices in the new world – such as the respect accorded to elders and the solidarity among cane cutters, their families, and the community.

By connecting Martinique with Africa in this way – and thus by connecting identity and experience in the West Indies with those in the “homeland” – Palcy evokes a history of slavery. But it is not a documentary recitation of fact and



Figure 22.2 *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983). Producer: Jean-Luc Ormières. Director: Euzhan Palcy



Figure 22.3 *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983). Producer: Jean-Luc Ormières. Director: Euzhan Palcy

statistics. It is the invocation of the memory (and memorializing) of shared experience that recalls the reality of enslavement. Further, by emphasizing community above wealth and social class, the plantation setting, however brutal, becomes the counterpoint to life in Fort-de-France. And Palcy's critique of modernity in the recognition of its underside and social cost is unmistakable. The griot locates the meaning of Medouze's life – indeed he memorializes it – through an appeal to the daily ordinariness of that life. What Medouze wants to leave behind is not a collection of objects – his pipe, or his sleeping board, or his bantam cock – but the memory of his presence, which should serve as a reminder of the political and social injustice of slavery and of the importance of the community, and – for Palcy – to allow for her audience to empathize, indeed identify, with the community of cane cutters and the cultural memory of a past in Africa.

In the second half of the film, Leopold – José's friend and classmate and the progeny of the black concubine of a [white] French colonial who managed a sugar plantation on behalf of owners in France – is bed-ridden: he has a ruptured spleen and is facing imminent death. Leopold embraces his mother, who asks: "What will become of us?" Despondent, she implores the father to recognize Leopold as his legal heir (see Figure 22.4).

MOTHER: Please recognize him. Having your name would be the most lasting inheritance.

FATHER: De Thorail. That name was borne by generations of whites. It's not for Leopold.

MOTHER: But he's your son!

FATHER: It's not a mulatto's name. It's a white man's.

This scene works to give us factual historical information, albeit adumbrated by the implied warning in the cane cutters' emotive chanting protest; and it



Figure 22.4 *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983). Producer: Jean-Luc Ormières. Director: Euzhan Palcy

evokes Class 2 cine-memory by foregrounding several constituents of colonial society in Martinique. First, the male progeny of interracial unions had, at best, a problematic legal status in the colonial order. Second, in such liaisons the black women presumably had no legal claim or right to the men's property upon their death. And, third, the surname of men in such liaisons marked their racial status and position of privilege in colonial society and in metropolitan France. However, as the scene works to critically represent the racial caste system as a feature of the socio-political landscape, in its invocation of the notion of "naming" it draws us back simultaneously to the functioning of memory itself – that the act of naming works as a vehicle through which memory can be structured. The possessing of a name allows identity to be structured, confirmed, and reconstituted, and thus is a crucial element of personal, familial, and social memory. Further, the identity of the person who has legitimate access to the past and its myriad constitutive documents – songs, letters, photographs, wills, mementos, language, idioms – is frequently determined by the legitimacy of naming. Those who own the names own the memories. Thus, when Leopold's mother entreats De Thorail to grant him his name, she is asking him to grant him not only social validation, but also a legitimate claim to that memory.

As the film nears its conclusion, Leopold is arrested by the police for illegally entering the building where the records of the administration of the plantation are maintained. Seeking to obtain the ledger – that official archive of history/memory – that would prove that the cane cutters were exploited and underpaid for their labor, Leopold is taken away in shackles (an image that not only gestures toward imprisonment, but also evokes the condition of slavery). The crowd of cane cutters gathers in despair; in their collective chant, the cutters deplore the ruling political and economic class and compare the material conditions of their lives to those of cane cutters on other islands of the Caribbean (see Figure 22.5).

Martinique you suffer.
Life is fading away.
Young folk are regressing.
The men and the women are desperate.
Yet we all live simply.
What we lack is money.
And, as for justice, don't even mention it!
I crossed over the sea to go and see what was happening in Guadeloupe.
Their suffering is like ours.
This deep rooted misery in our guts.
Who among us can tear it out?
How terrible it is!
The people cry famine.
Life has become impossible in this land.
Yet life could be easy.
Money and justice are what's needed to end our suffering.



Figure 22.5 *Sugar Cane Alley* (1983). Producer: Jean-Luc Ormières. Director: Euzhan Palcy

Cine-Memory in the Project of World-Making: *Burn!*

Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!* is a far more complex film. A meditation on the North/South antinomy, it foregrounds the transition from slavery and colonialism to neo-colonialism on a fictional Caribbean island.³ The protagonists – José Dolores, a free black, and Sir William Walker, an English agent provocateur in the service of the British admiralty – tentatively collaborate to prosecute a popular revolt against Portuguese rule. A decade later they oppose each other in an insurrection led by Dolores against British rule and foreign capital. The Dolores/Walker binary personifies the global struggle between capital and labor, upon which North/South relations pivot and the indeterminate future of humanity's dispossessed is to unfold. At the time of its release, *Burn!* served as Pontecorvo's critique of the American military intervention in the long history of colonial wars in Indochina. Eclipsed by his masterwork *The Battle of Algiers* (*La Battaglia di Algeri*, 1966) and promoted with little fanfare by United Artists, on account of its anti-Vietnam War stance, *Burn!* has recently become the subject of renewed interest, largely because of the Anglo-American war in Iraq. The film contains instructive examples of both Class 2 and Class 3 cine-memory, as it strives to offer a counter-historical reading as well as an ethical and ideological primer for revolution.

At the beginning of the film Walker arrives on the island of Queimada, where an insurrection against Portuguese rule has abruptly stalled, after the capture and imprisonment of its leader. Soon afterwards Walker witnesses the leader's execution by garrote (see Figure 22.6).

Unable to contact and engage with other rebels in order to resume the insurrection, Walker prepares to return to England against the entreaties of Teddy Sanchez, a mulatto and fellow conspirator who becomes Queimada's first president only to be executed, a decade later, by that same government. Having exclaimed



Figure 22.6 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo



Figure 22.7 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

“What is needed here is someone with courage, someone who knows he has nothing to lose,” Walker observes Dolores assist a slave woman and her infant child (see Figure 22.7).

Knocked to the ground by a Portuguese slaver, Dolores grasps a stone. The camera zooms in and freeze-frames his face and hand (see Figure 22.8).

The arc of his forearm suggests a retaliatory, *not* a defensive stance. The trajectory of his movement and gaze is nothing less than a primal utterance against the underlying structures and edifice of domination. As a Class 3 cine-memory, this scene memorializes the “act” of self-defense through a primordial gesture of defiance that escapes reason – an instinctive reaction of moral outrage against injustice. Hitched to Pontecorvo’s intended revolutionary praxis, Dolores’ gesture



Figure 22.8 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

of retaliatory defiance – fueled by an all-consuming fear and hatred – strikes suddenly and unexpectedly, and in circumstances where retribution is almost certainly against the “someone who knows he has nothing to lose.”

A little later Dolores and Walker, while in a church, conspire with others to rob the Bank of Queimada. The deed accomplished, they escape to a village, set it ablaze, and intoxicate the inhabitants. As they withdraw from the burning village, a Portuguese soldier confronts them and discovers the stolen gold bullion hidden among sacks on a pack mule; whereupon Dolores impales the soldier on the bayonet of his rifle (see Figure 22.9).



Figure 22.9 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

Upon his death, Walker solemnly and sonorously intones: “Well, Portuguese die too.” In this fateful and revelatory moment two significations correlate in the one act. First, the impulse and the consequence of acting against the soldier obliterate the myth of the master’s invincibility, as they simultaneously allow Dolores to comprehend himself as the source of the master’s mortality. The act of murder is not only liberatory in itself; in having Dolores kill the soldier with his own weapon, Pontecorvo is alluding to the revolutionary unfolding of the dialectic. However rudimentary this might be, self-consciousness and agency are obtained in the soldier’s death – an emancipatory moment that embodies Fanon’s famous declaration: “He who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me. In a savage struggle I am willing to accept convulsions of death, invincible dissolution, but also the possibility of the impossible” (Fanon 1967: 218).

Second, a particularly violent challenge and mode of resistance is sanctioned by the soldier’s death. Through this mode and moment of resistance, the act itself is memorialized as a point of liberation. The cine-memory, and its symbolism and relevance to human conduct, are an expression and articulation of a revolutionary consciousness meeting its historical moment. For Pontecorvo at the end of the 1960s, this is designed to invoke a collective memory of anti-colonial struggles throughout history, as it speaks to the revolutionary struggles of the film’s own historical moment. Cinematically and within the narrative, the soldier’s death enables Dolores’ politicization. And, for audiences, it provokes consideration of the legitimacy of armed struggle. Third, as a Class 3 cine-memory, the scene marks the irreconcilable rupture of the master/slave dialectic rendered in Dolores’ act and awakening, which we contend is Pontecorvo’s no less emblematic call for the self-determination of the Third World.

The full awakening of Dolores’ political consciousness is demonstrated when he and Walker appear in a coastal village, where a ship supposedly awaits to take them to safety. As a troop of Portuguese cavalry approaches the destitute village in pursuit, Dolores addresses the villagers, in an effort to organize armed resistance. Off camera, the soldiers are dispatched and then a jump-cut takes us to the villagers celebrating their triumph. Dolores’ address to the villagers, however patronizing and sexist to contemporary viewers, is instructive for our purposes because it evokes the collective and repressed hatred for the Portuguese “masters”:

DOLORES: I am sorry friends, but the Portuguese are coming [. . .] Better to hide the old ones, the women, and the babies. But, if there are any of you who are not old, not women, and are really men [-] someone in life, at least once, have thought of killing his Portuguese master [-] then now is the time to act. Portuguese can be killed. I will prove it to you.

What follows in the aftermath of the death of the soldiers marks Dolores’ transition from the personal to the political and constitutes a defining moment in the film



Figure 22.10 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

and in Dolores' maturation. While the villagers celebrate the annihilation of the Portuguese soldiers, Walker tests Dolores' resolve (see Figure 22.10).

- WALKER: As soon as they realize those soldiers are not coming back, they'll send others. [. . .] Why did we steal the gold?
- DOLORES: To be rich and free . . . [pause] If we go, they [the villagers] will all die. [Gazing upon the chanting villagers, he says] *Adiós Inglés*. You will go alone. I will stay here.

Dolores' decision to remain signifies his recognition and responsibility for others, a responsibility personified by the villagers who have struggled both on his behalf and on their own. The exchange between Walker and Dolores foregrounds and challenges accepted notions of freedom as something more than merely the possession of material wealth, or capacity to realize individual choices. In this regard, cine-memory of this kind invites audiences to ponder counter-readings of such moral and organizing principles for human conduct and society. As a feature of his deliberate explanatory interventions in the film, Pontecorvo inserts a scene intended to account for the resumption of insurgency on the island. A decade has elapsed and, with the approval of the British admiralty, Walker returns to the island in his capacity as military advisor, now commissioned by the government of Queimada and by the Antilles Royal Sugar Company to negotiate with Dolores, who had resumed leadership of the insurrection. Before military officers and officials of the government and Antilles Royal Sugar Company, Walker summarizes the most salient events of the past decade (see Figure 22.11).

- WALKER: I now would like to summarize the important facts: May 3, 1845, José Dolores agrees to dissolve the rebel army. Queimada is proclaimed a republic, Teddy Sanchez is its first president. March 7, 1847, the Republic

of Queimada cedes to the Antilles Royal Sugar Company the right of exploitation of the sugar plantation for 93 years, renewable [...] What is important is that the Antilles Royal Sugar Company controls in practice the entire economy of Queimada, while the government of Queimada in practice no longer controls anything [...] Without these policies there wouldn't be any revolution Mr. President [...] Very often between one historical period and another, ten years suddenly might be enough to reveal the contradictions of a whole century.

It is clear that, through Walker's summation and critique, Pontecorvo is alluding to the broad political and historical context of the film's own production, most obviously the US involvement in Vietnam. There is an analogy being drawn here, namely with the British occupation of Queimada (including Walker's role as military advisor to Queimada's government), which speaks to Pontecorvo's belief that the US presence in Southeast Asia was an imperialist venture. Further, the complicity of local elites conforms to Fanon's take on the native bourgeoisie's role in the neo-colonial project, which he elaborates in "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness."⁴ And the analog of the Antilles Royal Sugar Company portends the ascendance of the multinational corporation (MNC) under "late" capitalism. As an example of Class 2 cine-memory, this scene is designed to historicize the causes of the renewal of the insurgency and, perhaps more importantly, to signify both the transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism and the similarity of developments in Pontecorvo's own historical period.

During the second half of the film, as the British occupation army systematically routs Dolores' band of revolutionaries by occupying villages and by terrorizing the inhabitants who supported them, there is a sequence of shots that combine what we would see as Pontecorvo's articulation of both Class 2 and Class 3 cine-memory. As one village is put to fire and its inhabitants are killed or forcedly



Figure 22.11 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo



Figure 22.12 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

relocated to “secure” hamlets (in a clear reference to “Vietnamization”), Monsino, an insurgent, is rescued from the firing squad by Walker. During the subsequent interrogation Monsino recites Dolores’ teachings as a manifesto of the revolution (see Figure 22.12).

- MONSINO: Now José Dolores says: “That if what we have in our country is civilization – civilization of white men, then, we are better uncivilized because it is better to know where to go and not know how, than it is to know how to go and not know where.”
- WALKER: And then?
- MONSINO: If a man works for another, even if he is called a worker, he remains a slave. And it will always be the same, since there are those who own the plantation and those who own the machete to cut cane for the owners.
- WALKER: And then?
- MONSINO: And then José Dolores says that “we must cut heads instead of cane.”

This exchange between Walker and Dolores via Monsino is in our view the most prophetic, illuminating, and prescriptive in the film. Here Pontecorvo rejects with finality all manner of western discourses about freedom, democracy, and progress. More importantly, he rejects western civilization itself. And the physical appearance of Monsino is not unimportant. Indigenous to the island and region (Caribbean), he is likely of Indian heritage, which suggests that aboriginal and African alike were enslaved by the Portuguese. Hence Monsino’s complicity in the insurgency can be read as Pontecorvo’s challenge to essentialist views about revolutionary practice. Further, Monsino delivers Pontecorvo’s most trenchant and poetic rejection of modernity and its attendant civilization through his recall of Dolores’ proclamation that “it is better to know where to go and not know how, than it is to know how to go and not know where.” For Dolores, western civilization is morally bankrupt and indefensible. He sees it as solely designed to establish and maintain

a power that is rooted in the brutal exploitation of resources (both natural and human), while hypocritically proclaiming itself superior through the enslavement of broad swathes of humanity. What Dolores calls for is an alternative, albeit undefined, worldview without which – it is inferred – humanity cannot advance. All else, including the utility and deployment of technologies and economy, must defer to and work in the service of an overarching humanistic conception of social organization. In the absence of a humanistic, just, and compassionate vision, any corresponding material foundation for progress is arrested – indeed is impossible.

As the film nears its conclusion, Dolores further enunciates the historical project of humanity. At the base of the occupation army where he is held captive, he articulates a dialectic of liberation, at once deeply personal and collective–universal (see Figure 22.13).

DOLORES: No it is not true that fire destroys everything . . . Someone of us will always remain . . . And others too will begin to understand. And the whites in the end will be [. . .] madder than a wild beast becomes when he finds he is closed in [. . .] and pursued and hunted all over the island till he falls into one of the great fires that he himself has made. And the groans from this dying beast will become the first cry of freedom. One that will be heard far, far beyond this island [. . .] sooner or later, they are going to kill me.

LITTLE SOLDIER: Maybe not General.

DOLORES: If they let me live it means it is convenient for them. And if it's convenient for them it is convenient for me to die.

LITTLE SOLDIER: But then after a while, maybe they will free you?

DOLORES: If a man gives you freedom it is not freedom. Freedom is something you, you alone, must take. Do you understand?

A Class 3 cine-memory, this scene articulates the meaning and impulse of humanity to be “free,” invoking the memory and universality of past historical struggles



Figure 22.13 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo



Figure 22.14 *Burn!* (1969). Producer: Alberto Grimaldi. Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

and the processes they presuppose. The deployment of signifying metaphors in this passage is especially iconic and poignant: The simultaneously destructive and creative life-giving significance of “fire”; the entrapment by and dependency on the “hawk”; and the idea that “freedom” is neither illusory nor material, but it exists first in the minds and wills of individuals, and from there it is brought into the world only at great risk and expense.

Burn! concludes with the imprisoned Dolores being offered safe passage off the island by his captors. By rejecting their offer, he seals his fate – his forthcoming execution. The scene that follows shows the guilt-ridden Walker exiting the camp, having been unable to persuade Dolores to accept safe passage or his promise to enable him to escape. Contemptibly, Dolores shouts out at Walker: *Inglés. Remember what you said? Civilization belongs to the whites. But what civilization, and until when?* (see Figure 22.14).

Through Dolores’ final words, Pontecorvo is making an unapologetic call for self-determination and portending the collapse of capitalism and the civilization that spawned it. His call is no less than a reconstitution of the Third World; and the means proffered to achieve it is armed struggle. This is rendered unequivocal when Monsino recites Dolores’ dictum – “we must cut heads instead of cane.”

This final moment of *Burn!* is a determinedly prescriptive statement and warning that illustrates clearly Class 3 cine-memory as a function of narrative that speaks to the ideological positioning of the film as well as to the political landscape of the audience, which makes a deliberate call for armed struggle as a mode of resistance and revolution.

Conclusion

As we have elaborated throughout this paper, Euzhan Palcy and Gillo Pontecorvo are invoking the memory of past struggles in order to speak to their contemporary

moments. But neither *Sugar Cane Alley* nor *Burn!* are invoking history as an ordered, rational, and systematized version of events to lay out their arguments against slavery. Indeed, both films are rooted in the messiness of memory in all its febrile and inchoate formulations. Both demonstrate a self-conscious awareness of the ideological functioning of the cinematic text as part of a deliberate attempt to intervene politically in the debate about the North/South divide. They underscore the fact that film is never merely a discrete and unconnected document. It is always – in one way or another – connected to larger social processes and to broader ideological and political projects. In understanding film as playing a critical role in the process of world-making – and in a process engaged in purposefully (albeit in very different ways) by the filmmakers we study – we seek, similarly, to underscore film’s political function as an agent of history and historical change. As the films take on the historical circumstances of slavery, they engage with other moments and historical incidents, where different iterations of enslavement are practiced. Both filmmakers, then, depict slavery as an historical fact and deploy it as a cinematic trope in order to address the presence of slavery and enslavement in its myriad forms.

However, while both films deploy Class 2 and 3 cine-memory variously, in order to prompt, explain, compare, counter, and correct familiar visions of slavery, their prescriptions are quite different. *Sugar Cane Alley* offers a much more self-contained and personalized take on plantation life. The story and problems of inequality and economic exploitation resolve at the individual level. For Pontecorvo in *Burn!*, however, the engagement, as this localized story is framed within the context of a world-system, is on a global scale. The programmatic and prescriptive nature of Class 3 cine-memory – through which the utopian possibilities of revolution are expressed – is most clearly delineated in *Burn!* It is worth repeating that this Class 3 cine-memory is one in which memory serves to transcend the specificities of historical time in which it is embedded. In this process, the memorializing “act” itself – for instance Dolores’ moment of resistance discussed above – becomes the memory, and not the specificities of the circumstances that provoke it. In this sense, the memory – the cine-memory – is not of the event itself; it is rather an archetype, symbolic and relevant to reconceptualizing humanity. In short, the cine-memory is the expression/ articulation of a revolutionary consciousness finding its historical moment and, for Pontecorvo, this is a collective memory of resistance that must have its corollary for a contemporary audience. That is, Pontecorvo endeavors to transcend the specificities of the act and to speak to universal themes of humanity and dignity. Like Dolores, when he decides to remain on the island and fight rather than to accept Walker’s entreaties that he escape with the gold to “freedom,” these acts constitute a call for the recognition of our fundamental self-worth, dignity, identity, and agency.

We can think, then, of the classes of cine-memory, taken together, as the politics of memory at work. Memory – as we understand it categorically (or as a category of being) – is an entirely personal event, even as we are constructed by, and locked into, broader social and cultural memories. What we have tried to elaborate in

this essay is the way in which cine-memory relocates memory very explicitly within ideological and political boundaries. For Palcy as well as for Pontecorvo, memory can be employed as a narrative trope that allows for the expression of the whole range of human reflection, aspiration, and longing. For Pontecorvo, memory, as the invocation of a collective experience inseparable from the politics of revolution, is always ideological.

Although for the purposes of this essay we have chosen to concentrate on *Sugar Cane Alley* and *Burn!*, it should come as no surprise that Class 2 and Class 3 cine-memory have a significant presence and function in cinema outside of the hegemonic parameters of Hollywood. There is a consistency to Third Cinema's and Third World cinema's iteration of a kind of slavery that speaks to the political project of revision, resistance, and – on occasion – revolution, although such iterations come in multiple forms. Films such as Sergio Giral's *El otro Francisco* (1975), Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993), and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena* (1976) all employ the material conditions of enslavement not only as their narrative subject, but also as the critical trope through which to address concerns contemporaneous with their own historical moments; in Sergio Giral's *Maluala* (1979) and Carlos Diegues' *Quilombo* (1984) the historical facts of escaped slaves' communities of self-governance provide a framework through which an historical memory of self-determination is articulated; and this theme is extended through Diegues' *Xica* (1976), a comedy about the life of the legendary black slave Xica, who presides over Brazil and her former masters. Taken together, these films – among many others – demonstrate the presence and utility of cine-memory to the project of advancing a radical agenda that goes beyond the effort to construct an accurate and credible vision of the past, moving toward a kind of cinema that encourages viewers to understand themselves not as mere consumers but as political agents in their own history.

Notes

- 1 See, for good introductions and overviews, Cubitt (2008); the sections on “Subjectivity and the Social” and “Public Memory” in Radstone and Schwarz (2010); and Zerubavel (2004).
- 2 With this remark Ramaka challenges the utility of such terms as “globalization” and “postcolonialism,” but his point is clear: whatever term is deployed, it must “help the masses of Africans understand what is happening to them.” See Martin 2009a: 206.
- 3 For an elaboration of the issues we take up about this film, see Martin 2009b.
- 4 For Fanon (1963: 153), the national bourgeoisie is in actuality a “national middle class” unable to “fulfill its historic role of bourgeoisie.”

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