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The Historical Film as a Field, a Mode of Thought (Historying) and a Pack of Tricks We Play Upon the Dead

History is . . . a pack of tricks which we play upon the dead" – Voltaire

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Some forty years ago I wrote my first essay on historical (history) film. At the time, the field of history almost totally ignored the visual media. In the early eighties of the last century, the few historians who wrote about film did so as part of a traditional topic -- such as the history, or economics, or cultural impact of the motion picture industry. Historical journals did not review history films, and any historian who considered a dramatic feature as a possible way of understanding the past would have been considered not to be a serious member of the profession.

My first essay on the topic, published in 1982, was written at the request of the editor of the journal, *Reviews in American History*, who knew I had served as historical consultant on the film *Reds*, directed by the huge Hollywood Star, Warren Beatty. The film was one of those historical epics regularly turned out by Hollywood and usually released during the Christmas Holiday season. But this film was far outside the tradition, for its hero was a Communist named John Reed (the first actual Communist that ever appeared in an American film; others like folk-singer Woody Guthrie, were called "progressives," or "idealists" in their film portrayals. Reed was the famed American journalist who witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, embraced it as a world changing event, and wrote the classic account of the revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. This work that includes the personal and the historical is considered as one of the most important works of journalism in the 20th century.

My first essay, "Reds as History," was not, however, unique. Five years earlier, French Historian Marc Ferro, who taught at the pinnacle of the nation's elite social science schools, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, had published an important, if then little known essay, on film and history in a volume titled *Cinema et histoire*: "Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?" Two years later, another French historian, Pierre Sorlin of the Sorbonne, produced a book titled *The Film in History*. These two works mark the serious beginnings of the field of film and history – at least as seen from the viewpoint of the historical profession.

How the scholarly world has changed since then! In the last four decades, writing on the history film has become a minor industry. When compiling the bibliography for my book, *History on Film / Film on History* (first published in 2006, and republished twice since), I located some eighty books that dealt with the historical film – in English, French, Spanish, Italian, Korean, and German, along with a number of issues of scholarly journals devoted to the history film in such fields as Film Studies, History, Literature, Legal Studies, and Cultural Studies. In the sixteen years since then, a steady stream of new works has appeared in those languages as well as in others which I am unable to read -- Czech, Polish, Portuguese, Turkish, and Hebrew. No doubt there are also books on the topic in other languages as well.

Rarely does a month go by that a new monograph or anthology, or a proposal for a book on history and film come to my attention. Essays on the topic now appear regularly in serious journals, and conferences devoted to history films have been held in many countries. I, myself, have attended such meetings in the United States, Spain, Italy, England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Belgium, Finland, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa, and I suspect there have been many such scholarly meetings in other countries as well. I take all this activity as a sign of a world-wide scholarly hunger to explore questions of the range, meaning, validity, and contributions of the history film to our knowledge and understanding of the past.

The topic is hardly limited to the field of history. Five years ago, a young historian from Romania, Constantin Parvulescu, and I edited a huge volume titled *A Blackwell Companion to Historical Film*. It included 25 original essays written by scholars from five continents. Our initial aim in the volume was to chart the breadth, width, depth, and health of this growing (sub) field, but as we began to work on the project, it became apparent than even such a large volume would have difficulty covering a field which has become increasingly broad and diverse. Our initial call for papers was answered by close to 100 scholars from twelve countries, and the range of proposals was astonishing. To impose some order, we editors used the following broad categories in our Table of Contents – nations and regions, events and periods, the biopic, the colonial world, the filmmaker as historian, and the marketing of history.

Of the contributors to the volume, only one third are historians, with the rest coming from other disciplines. This reflects the current state of film and history as a field -- people from a variety of disciplines are now studying the history film: these include literature, political science, cultural studies, film studies, memory studies, classics, medieval studies, and law, and no doubt others I have missed. This scholarship includes a wide variety of approaches and methodologies --studies of individual films, of genres, and of groups of films on a single topic (eg World War Two, the Holocaust, Revolution, the Ancient World, the Medieval World, Latin America, Joan of Arc). To oversimplify, and to give some sense of the shape of the field, I place these essays on a broad spectrum: at one end are those works which care about how such films relate to written history and our common past; at the other, those which don't. Let me emphasize this point by putting it another way: the study of the historical film runs from scholars who are interested in whether there can be what Marc Ferro called "a cinematic writing of the past," to those for whom the writing of the past is less of an issue than what history films say about the development of a genre; or how they reflect and comment upon the times in which they were produced; or to what extent they embody national or cultural myths, beliefs, and ideologies.

These different approaches are rooted in the ongoing discourses of different fields. At one end of the spectrum, you find narrative historians (and this is my own background), scholars who are likely to ask questions about the past similar to those asked by professional historians; questions about what happened, and why, and where, and how, and to whom, and then finally, what did this happening mean? At the other end of the spectrum (including, for the most part, Film and Cultural Studies), the history film is taken as a self-contained and less referential object. For these scholars, the data of the past count for less; the themes embodied in the characters, stories, and genres, cinematography, production design, editing, color, music, and acting, count for more. Thus, we have works devoted (some of them in the *Blackwell Companion*) devoted to such topics as Petroleum History, Slavery, The Legacies of Colonialism, evolution, or the history of a particular nation – essays which make no reference at all to the scholarship of academic historians. Even when unpacking the meaning of a single film, there is often a tendency to explore what the work shows about the "consciousness of a nation" or of a culture during the period in which the film was produced. This is the approach that once we might once have called intellectual history – that is, the attempt to read cultural artifacts as indicators of some larger historical mood, or what in German is labeled the *Zeitgeist*.

Such essays can be highly illuminating about the cultural conditions of the time and place in which they are produced. Among the best examples of this sort of analysis, let me mention the works of Robert Burgoyne, whose books *Film Nation* and *The Hollywood Historical Film* are models of meticulous scholarship, full of brilliant and deep readings of a variety of films that mostly deal with American history. But they are far different from the kind of reading a historian, particularly a narrative historian, would do on the same works. Burgoyne's essay on *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, is a rich analysis of the potential, multiple meaning(s) of that film. Yet Burgoyne is not concerned about the "history" conveyed in the film. Instead, he focuses on what the film says about America's changing relationship to its own history and national identity. He reads *Private Ryan* as part of a larger cultural project which he calls the "reillusioning of America" after the disillusionment of the Vietnam era. The film, he says, is "a corrective action, a call to the community to return to its foundational principles." Ultimately, he sees *Saving Private Ryan* as serving a dual function: "It both acknowledges the crisis brought on by Vietnam and the dissolution of the covenant between a state and its people, while offering audiences a 'way home' to mythic America, reaffirming American national identity after the crisis of Vietnam".

As insightful and important as is this essay, it does not ask the questions of *Private Ryan* that I, as a traditional narrative historian, would ask. Questions such as what the film tells us about

American participation in the invasion of Europe by the Allies in June 1944 -- what it says about the experience of war, the horrors of the Normandy invasion, the attitudes and morale of soldiers under fire, their histories and hopes. Nor is the essay interested in how this telling not only allows us to experience the chaos, confusion, and bloodiness of battle, but to what extent the film's depiction of the past intersects with, comments upon, and / or revises what we call the discourse of history, the already existing body of data and debates over the Allied invasion of the continent.

So far, I have been dealing with the first part of my title, the Historical Film as a Field – its development, its range, and some of the issues and questions it raises and must face. To deal with my second theme, the historical film as a mode of thought, I want look at *Reds*, a film I know well, for it was based in part upon my research and depictions in *Romantic Revolutionary*, my 1975 biography of John Reed[1]. I must also mention that worked as Historical Consultant on the film for some eight years in preproduction and during the shoot.

Reed was, in the second decade of the 20th Century, famous in the United States as a poet, short story writer, and political activist. He became the highest paid journalist in the country after he scooped the newspaper world by riding with and writing about Pancho Villa's troops during the Mexican Revolution. He was, like many intellectuals and artists of his time, a leftist and strongly anti-war. When the World War started in 1914, he saw it as no more than a capitalist struggle between European nations. After reporting trips to both Western and Eastern Fronts, and after being denied his normal journalistic outlets because American publishers thought he was too radical (i.e., against the war), he ended up in as a correspondent for a tiny socialist publican in Petrograd just a couple of weeks before the Bolshevik takeover.

Reed not only covered the events of what he called in his famous book, the *Ten Days That Shook the World* (indeed, his depiction invented the revolution as a ten-day event), he also took a minor role in the process, spending a few weeks in the new regime's propaganda office. Returning to the US, he wrote his book on the revolution, and then spent a year helping to form the American Communist Party. He returned secretly to Russia as a delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist Internationale in 1920. Following that, he attending the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, where he contracted typhus and died in Moscow at the age of 33.

[1] There is a spanish translation of my biography. *John Reed: Un revolucionario romántico: México*, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1979.

Like most Biopics and unlike most traditional biographies, Reds covers not the whole but only part of its hero's life -- in this case Reed's last five years (1915-1920). This was, from his meeting with Louise Bryant, who would become his lover, companion, and finally his wife, to his death in Moscow, where she was by his side. Along with the dramatized story in which Warren Beatty plays Reed and Diane Keaton is Bryant, one extremely unusual feature of *Reds*, is the way frames the drama with a documentary technique. The dramatized parts of the film are often interrupted with talking head Witnesses, people who had known Reed or Bryant, or had been part of the artistic, social, or political circles in which they moved.

As with any cultural text, there are many ways of reading *Reds*, many sorts of discourses into which it could fit. It could be used, for example, as part of an essay on how Hollywood has flirted and dealt with radicals and radicalism. A thesis for such a work could be how Hollywood tames radicals by ultimately treating them as good Americans whose idealistic impulses lead them to temporarily embrace radical movements. Such an essay might include *Bound for Glory*, the biopic on Woody Guthrie, the 1930s dustbowl poet and folksinger whose Communist newspaper writings are never mentioned; *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which Tom Joad's speech about helping the little guy echoes leftist sentiments of the thirties; *Viva Zapata*, which turns the revolutionary Mexican leader into someone doing no more tyhan defending land stolen from his family; and *The Strawberry Statement*, a 60's film about a student uprising at a university whose hero becomes a radical largely to stay close to his girlfriend.

The film could be analyzed in other ways as well: as part of a comparative study about how revolution has been treated in world cinema, bringing in films from Sergei Eisenstein to some of the products of Latin American and African cinema. As an epic film dealing with world shaking events. As a traditional love story, a man and women separated by historic movements beyond their control, and yet who are able to overcome all obstacles to reunite. As a feminist tale in which the hero remains the same from beginning to end, but the female character grows in personal and moral stature until she is not just a "wife" but a "comrade." Or as a product of the vanity of its director, one of those personal projects in which a Hollywood star wants to be taken seriously. Knowing that Oscars often go to long historical films, you could argue that Beatty decided to make one that may not make money but would bring him the reward he sought: after *Reds*, he was no longer just a pretty face, but an Academy Award winning director.

The point is this: we scholars utilize these cultural texts as part of our own intellectual projects. We analyze them as part of whatever arguments we are interested in making about

film, or history, or the connection between the two. For *Reds*, a most frequent interpretation, is that the film is not really about John Reed, Louise Bryant, and the radical bohemian culture of Greenwich Village in the teens of the century, but is actually a belated picture of the radicalism of the Sixties, flavored by Beatty's stormy relationships with both Julie Christie, the actress who was originally to play the role of Louise, and Diane Keaton, the one who finally did. In such a reading, the liberated behavior of Louise becomes an example of women taking charge of their own lives, as early Seventies feminism urged. The overt eroticism and the mixture of politics and playfulness in Greenwich Village is a portrait of the Sixties counter-culture of sex, drugs, rock and roll. When Reed gets arrested for protesting the war, it parallels the way young people were arrested at sit-ins and anti-war demonstrations. His opposition to American entry into the World War is not about Europe, but Vietnam. Finally, the ending, in which Reed begins to lose faith in some aspects of the revolution and then dies, signals the disillusionment with, and the end of, Sixties radicalism.

The truths of these interpretations are partial truths. Yet this sort of reading is one of the most common approaches to the historical film -- to see such works as if they are not about what happened in the past, but what is happening in the present. The unstated implication here is that historical films do no more than reconfigure the past in terms of current conflicts and questions about wars, social movements, individuals, and ideologies. And that traditional history, history written by academics, does something different. That professional history somehow escapes the inflection of the present and focus only on the past.

But this distinction, let me emphasize, is untrue. It is based upon what one might call the great mystification by which academic history lives and thrives. Every historian knows, or should know, that even the most scholarly historical writing is, in the words of a leading historian of early modern Europe, Natalie Davis: always "Janus faced" – that all historical works simultaneously look both towards both past and present. History, let us remember, is always written or filmed in the now, and this means that the mark of the contemporary is on every work we produce. It is there in the questions we ask of the past and the answers we find. As Peter Nozick says in his volume, *That Noble Dream*: "all historical writing... is the product of a particular moment in time, which shapes historians' decisions about what needs to be explained...". To quote Finnish historian Hannu Salmi: "The present day cannot be denied or eliminated: while describing the past the author is simultaneously writing about his own world, consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly".

This being true, one wonders at this tendency to analyze historical films as if they are only about the present and works of written history as if they are only about the past. The main

reason is surely that from our earliest school days we are taught to read works of history solely for their content, and never for the context of their production. Were we to do the latter, we would see written history as also contingent upon the time in which it is produced. This suggests that we must begin to read and think about all works dealing with the history, whatever the medium, for both what they say about the past and also about the present in which they are created.

My own an early lesson on this came when I was a teaching assistant at UCLA more than five decades ago. The professor had assigned the then most popular history survey in the US: Morison and Commager *The Growth of the American Republic*, which had been initially published in the thirties and then updated many times. My first year of teaching, 1965, had us reading about slavery as an immoral situation but in a way "progressive." Why? Because this world of slavery, the book explained, was full of "happy Sambos" (a longtime racist terms for Blacks) who were enjoying the benefits of being Christianized and raised to a higher level of civilization. Yet a new edition issued the very next year, 1966, contained no happy Sambos and no words about any benefits to Africans from slavery. Now it talked about overworked and exploited slaves who suffered the great crime of having had their native culture stripped from them. No new evidence about slavery had suddenly been uncovered – the change was clearly no more than a reflection of the movement, led by Martin Luther King, of Black Americans in the streets and politics. I suspect you can find similar revisions in the books of many other countries.

I turn now to the historical film as a mode of thought, or in the word used by theorist Alun Munslow, a way of *historying*, a word which means doing history, that is turning the traces of the past into a discourse we call History. Like written history, the history film is (whatever it may reflect of the present) also a way of thinking about events and people in the past and trying to make sense of them in the present. Scholars and journalists object to it being considered "history" because of the fictional and invented elements such works contain, and because of the overly seductive elements of the medium, the color, movement, sound, drama -- that in fact make it a film. All these are meant to induce us to feel something about the past, but the fear of academics is usually that these same elements also prevent us from thinking or reflecting about what is happening on screen. Other worries are that the medium has no footnotes, no bibliography, and there is no way of checking on its assertions. Let us leave aside the fact that these paratactical devices are of relatively recent origin (150 years), and that history was written for many centuries without notes or references. Yet it is still possible to feel sympathy for the historical profession's fears about using the term, history, for a film like *Reds*. If a movie star such as Warren Beatty can be seen as a historian, then what is the use of traditional historical training?

In dealing with the past, the historical film utilizes many of the same elements as traditional history (something I have argued in numerous essays and several books). It takes its basic data from the past and uses it to create a narrative which provides an interpretation of its subject (e.g., *Reds* portrays how under pressure of war and repression, a good American could embrace the values of a foreign revolution). I want to insist that the resulting films are a kind of history. Perhaps we need a different word for what happens on screen, but nobody has created a good one yet, and it seems more accurate to expand the meaning of the word, history, to encompass film. We already use the word for popular written works which lack the rigor of academic history. We understand that history consists of a spectrum of works about the past, some closer to, some farther from traditional history, rather than denoting a cut and dried differentiation between two different kinds of creatures.

The historical film certainly involves historying, that is, representing and explaining what the details of the past mean. It is mode of thought, a way of thinking and raising issues from the past. Due to the medium and the traditions of storytelling, it is necessarily different from written history. It can never be as true as scholarship to the factual details of the past. As I have argued for years, this is due to the demands of the camera for specificity of detail beyond what any historian could reasonably know, as well as to the demands of the dramatic arts that a story has a beginning, middle, and end, and an arc of development that has characters or situations changing over time. Yet we should remember that academic history, too, is largely a kind of storytelling, and that even genres like quantitative or social scientific history only make sense if they are embedded in a story about the past. On screen, body movement, language, action, and metaphor are necessarily different from those of the written word. What pulls page and screen closer together is that both involve using data to think about past people and events, and drawing meaning from it – in short, both are historying, that is, creating works of history.

Many scholars who criticize historical film focus on what films can't do that the written word can. (eg, generalize). But why not turn the issue around? Why not look at the things film does for the past which remain impossible for written history? I refer to color, sound, movement, settings, textures, and emotions -- using these, its constituent elements, film delivers a world which is more like the world we encounter daily than the one created by words on a page. There is a verisimilitude to the historying done on the screen which eludes the written word. Film not only provides a mode of thought about the past, it's a complex mode, one made more so precisely because some of its strategies include invention. In an era in which the visual media have become the chief we way communicate to each other and our culture about the world -- past, present, and future -- the historical film already plays a serious and

important role. To make certain we historians and academics don't go out of business, it is clearly up to us to be evaluators of that world, intermediaries between it and the public – but historians cannot do that if they refuse to take that realm of visual history seriously and on its own terms.

From my point of view, what we need today is more scholarly study of historical films as works of history. Imagine if the historical film was incorporated into our historiography? How differently would we view the past if the history of Poland were told by Andrjez Wajda, or United States by Oliver Stone, or Greece by Theo Angelopoulos. We need more studies of individual films to see what they tell us about the past which may be different from what we learn in books. We need studies of individual filmmakers as historians, for this would not only give us better insight into the historical film as works of history, it would begin to allow us to evaluate the modes of historical thinking that take place on screen. It might allow us to develop theories of visual history, to see how our notions of history would change if film were part of our discourse. We need studies that analyze periods of the past in terms of film. If someone analyzed, for example, ten or fifteen films on the Middle Ages, how would what they show us add to our sense of the period; how would it change what we have learned from books? Such studies of historical films could help revolutionize our notion of the past, of historying, of history. (I have done this with ten random holocaust films whose origins span half a century. Even though many are fictionalized, someone who knows nothing about Holocaust would have a good sense, if not all the details were accurate, about what happened to Jews during the Third Reich.

In the early days of movies, some visionaries expressed hope for film as a conveyer of history. A French critic in 1908 saw one of the major tasks of this new medium as being "to animate the past, to reconstruct the great events of history." In 1915 the great American director, D.W. Griffith, predicted: -"The time will come when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly, they will never be obliged to read history again." People would not, in order to learn about Napoleon, have to wade "laboriously through a host of books, and ending up bewildered, confused at every point by conflicting opinions about what did happen . . . "Through film, a reader would receive "a vivid and complete expression" of the past, they would be "present at the making of history." More recently the great French critic, Roland Barthes, wrote that watching a film like *Battleship Potemkin* was "sitting at the balcony of history," watching the past unfold.

Most historians think that films destroy the past rather than letting us see it. But might it be possible that the promise has been and is being fulfilled, if not necessarily in the way that

pleases professional historians. Maybe these visionaries dimly foresaw that the new medium would change what we mean when we use the word, "history." Maybe they foresaw a new kind of history for an age when images would become more important to how we understand our world than do words. A world in which we have a vision of the past, in which we see the stories, live them, attach our emotions to the people and causes long gone. Maybe in such a world the factual details are less important than the emotions of immediacy and identification with our forebears – all the powerful elements, the kinesthetic feeling (knowledge?) created by color, movement, and sound which are not part of the world we historians create on the page. We take our form of history for granted. We forget that when we write the past, we are always are translating a bright and noisy world into the black and white of the silent page.

The portrait of John Reed created in *Reds* is that of a man struggling towards ever more radical positions, pushed by life experiences, and beginning to have doubts about some aspects of the revolution at the time of his death in Moscow at the age of thirty-three. The film certainly expresses the painful pull between self and the collective in terms of the relationship between Jack and Louise, the storms, betrayals, and commitments in their personal lives mirroring the storms in the political and social world. If my own biography depicts Louise Bryant, his wife, as less important to Reed's consciousness and development than does the film, this has nothing to do with fiction, but with interpretation, with different ways of making sense of the data about the man. I may not fully agree with the portrait of Reed given in *Reds*, not because particular historical details are wrong or invented (as some are), but because my overall sense of the man and the events he lived through is different from that of Warren Beatty and his screenwriters.

A major oddity of historical writing that relates to film has to do with length. My biography of Reed runs to about 140,000 words, but I have also, for various anthologies, written Reed biographies in 10,000 words, and even in 1500 words. This can make you wonder: which is the real Reed? Or is there such a thing as a "real" historical figure that lies beyond our interpretation? Each rendering of Reed of creates a portrait of the man and his era, and it is this portrait which we call history. Condensation, displacement, alteration, and overt invention may fill in that portrait, as one could fill it in with more facts drawn from documents, but the result would be the same. With the historical film, with written history itself, it is the portrait, the feeling, the mood, the sense of time and place and individual that is conveyed rather than the specific data which the historical form delivers. History is never The Truth about the past written in capital letters.

Reds, which I criticized for its historical lapses and fictions shortly after it was released, I have now rethought as an important history film. One which provides an insightful, interesting, and perfectly good portrait of John Reed and his times -- as well as suggesting much about the era in which it was made. But it, like all history, is -- and now I finally get to the great Voltaire – is really a pack of tricks we play on the dead. We historians create a world on the page or screen which our subjects would hardly recognize as their own. This leads to the question of just why historians don't take Voltaire's famed comment more seriously. Why can't we admit that a great deal of what we do to the past involves creativity. Who knows better than we who write the past that we essentially draw from a vast (almost infinite?) reservoir of data to put together the narrative that makes sense to us, the narrative we choose to tell? Who better knows than we who write history that this telling, filtered through a consciousness of everything we know about what has occurred since the events we set out to describe, and that our interpretations are inflected by theories of social change, economics, and psychology which have arisen since the era we are describing and would mystify the people in the past who are the subject of our descriptions? We, after all, reduce the enormous complexity of the world, its multifarious elements of things, events, movements, people, governments, records, beliefs (and I could go on) into a narrative trickle of words on a page or images on a screen. The issue is not really whether telling the past necessarily involve tricks. Of course, it does. Any description of the world in language is essentially a kind of trick, a reaching for some sort of truth that can ultimately never be reached by words alone. There is no past. There are only the traces of a vanished world that manage to remain. The real question is just what sort of tricks we wish to play on our ancestors, and how we understand the meanings that those tricks create.