A History of What Has Not Yet Happened

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Theory and History:

History is today more than contested ground. It is a discipline under siege from armies both inside and outside the profession. Inside (if that's the right location), the besiegers are theorists. Outside (ditto), they are filmmakers. The allies in this siege have at least one thing in common: both attack the notion of fact as the solitary or even the most important building block for History.

The theorists' assault on traditional historical writing is by now far too familiar to everyone for me to do more here than point to the word, "poststructuralism," or whisper names like Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. By now we all should know that "facts" are traces or remains of the past that we have selected from a vast number of such traces and constituted into an argument or discourse. That it is, in short, historians who choose what are to be facts and weave them into stories which are marked both by unprovable notions of cause and effect and moral positions that precede the facts and indeed help to constitute them.

Not that all theorists make the same argument or agree about the nature of history. The most extreme position has been taken by Keith Jenkins, who, in the pages of this journal, has suggested that "we can now plausibly forget history and the past and live amidst the ample and agreeable imaginaries provided by postmodern-type theorists." (Jenkins 1999: 10) Here he means the usual suspects: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Elizabeth Ermarth. But exactly who comprises this "we" which finds these imaginaries so "ample and agreeable" is not certain. I, for one, opt out. For faced with the possibility of living in a world created by theorists, I (and others too?) would flee back towards traditional History. Not that Jenkins' idea that we are going to give up stories for theory seems at all in danger of coming true. It is far more likely that in this new century we will live, as we have in the past, by the visions of story tellers. Story tellers who put the past onto the screen - large or small.

Theorist F.R. Ankersmit disagrees with Jenkins. He thinks we should not give on history or the past , though he wants us to look at them in new and different ways. Ankersmit argues that the metaphorical dimension in historiography is more powerful than the literal or factual dimensions. In the future, he suggests, our relationship to the past will (should?) focus less on past itself than on the language we use for speaking about the past (Ankersmit 1994: 180) Since Ankersmit, himself, doesn't bother to say it, I will: one of the languages for speaking about the past is obviously the language of film.

Ankersmit carries his argument all the way back to the narrative epics of the Greek: "The stories they told one another about the deeds of their ancestors were not mutually exclusive, despite their contradicting each other, because they inspired above all ethical and aesthetic contemplation."(Ankersmit 1994: 181) Contradiction is less likely in the modern discipline of history because the fixed, written text has less tolerance for divergent traditions than the spoken word. Written history tends towards the uniform; indeed, towards the grand narrative meant, ultimately, to explain everything.

Like the oral tradition, film -- and this is my argument -- works against such uniformity and opens up the discourse once again. Its brevity tends to create multiple, fragmented pasts, a series of discontinuous stories that never fit together into a metanarrative (though they may assume one). A realm in which the visual media tell the past is like a realm made up of micro histories, where there will always be more than one sort of historical truth. Perhaps out of this visual historical world will arise new sorts of ways of viewing the past. New truths to be found. Or perhaps there will be a return to the past not as explanation of the present but once again as an object of ethical and aesthetic contemplation.

Ankersmit's advocacy of new kinds of history is not, he insists, a rejection of scientific historiography -- only a way of drawing attention to its limitations, its implicit claim that nothing of the past exists outside historical texts. Yet outside the texts of history lies the most important part of the past: "the whole domain of historical purpose and meaning."(Ankersmit 1994: 181)

Let me capitalize this phrase: Historical Purpose and Meaning. A realm that does not so much deny facts as cut loose from

them. Surround them. Exist before and after them. This is the precise realm into which the historical film can and does enter, not by ignoring data but by using facts or playing with them in a manner different from the written text. Which is to say: the historical film engages much of the same stuff that scientific history engages, but does so on its own, filmic and dramatic, terms.

Among many reasons for this are the fact that filmmakers are not burdened with the knowledge of historical theory. They may know something about it instinctively and have no doubt imbibed some traditional notions of history in school. Yet in their own way, they undertake the traditional task of historians -- recounting, explaining, and interpreting the past. Yet if not burdened by theory, it is clear that certain filmmakers -- Oliver Stone in the United States, Carlos Diegues in Brazil, Ousmane Sembene in Senegal, Andrzej Wajda in Poland, and the late Rainier Maria Fassbinder in Germany, Roberto Rossellini in Italy, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea in Cuba -- have been heavily burdened by the legacy of the past -- a past whose issues they feel compelled to engage, explicate, recount, and moralize.

Film and History

If theory is an internal threat to History, film is the external one, largely because it has the public audience for stories set in the past. From the viewpoint of traditional historians, dramatic films deny hard won historical truths by casually inserting large doses of fiction or invention into their telling of the past. A typical response of a historian to film can be found in an essay by the late David Herlihy, onetime President of the American Historical Association. Writing in a Forum in the American Historical Review in 1988, he argued that film cannot do proper history because it cannot present alternative views. Cannot list sources. Cannot provide criticism or show broad contexts Worse yet: film cannot be combated. What you see on the screen is what you get and what you get is what you believe. For Herlihy viewers are always victims of what they see on the screen. He allows no space in which a film can be "read." By contrast, books -- he implicitly argues -- are different: the truth of a book is in the text, not the reading.(Herlihy 1994)

This argument ignores several important questions: Must every historical work undertake all the tasks he mentions? Are there no

other ways of dealing with our past? Cannot there be different historical worlds constructed by different rules? Aren't there always already such worlds? Both on the page, in the museum, and on the screen?

Frank Ankersmit has made the sensible suggestion that philosophers of history should derive theory from practice. He thinks their task should not be to prescribe to historians the right and wrong way to write History, but instead to analyze the development of how the past has been and is written. The same, I would ague, should apply to historical film. Rather than theorizing about what film should do to or for the past, we should study what historical filmmakers have been doing in order to understand the rules of engagement for history as it is rendered on the big screen.

My own studies of historical film in recent years have attempted to do this. To answer the question: how do certain films work as history? How do they make meaning of the past? My focus has been films that are based on verifiable incidents, events, or texts that themselves deal with the past. Films such as Glory, Born on the Fourth of July, October, Walker. Such works recount, explain, interpret the past by selecting trace elements, turning therm into "facts," and using them -- along with other material -- to comment on social, political, moral, and personal issues of both the past and present. (Rosenstone 1995) Historical writing does the same thing -- except perhaps for that "other material."

The "other material" in film comprises the inevitable inventions that are mixed in with the verifiable facts / events / moments / actions of the past. Invented elements which are used to fill up the frame, or to condense, symbolize, displace things too complex or lengthy to fit into the dramatic structure or the standard two-hour time frame of the film. But these inventions do not constitute the entire difference between written and screen history. There are also the important elements of telling that inhere in the visual and aural medium. Elements of color, sound, and movement; of drama that heightens emotional states, and creates an intense and intimate relationship with characters; of spectacle, bodies, faces, costumes, and landscape splashing across our retinas.

It is important to see that the "facts" delivered in films are not just the events in which characters participate, they are also

the visual surfaces of the past that film creates -- the settings, landscapes, sounds, costumes - everything that comes under the heading of what Roland Barthes once called "reality effects." For Barthes, these effects were mere notations and not part of the meaning of History. But in film they achieve a certain kind of "thingness," a sense of being facts under description, an integral part of the world of the past and thus important elements of meaning. In film "reality effects" can often tell us much about the people, processes, and times.

Let me give but one example from Roberto Rossellini's Age of the Medici, where we are taken into a room to see a few humble assistants working on walls of an unfinished Brancacci Chapel, where we can the familiar Masaccio figures only in outline. By our own time, this room has disappeared behind a (literal and figurative) wall of enormous proportions and expectations. A wall which proclaims: Here begins the Heroic Renaissance and the way we view the world will never be the same again. But what we see in the film is something that recaptures a lost moment. The images take us back in a way no book can, into that chapel long before anyone could know what this work would come to symbolize. All we see are a bunch of guys working slowly on some unfinished walls while their efforts are subject to blistering commentary by a British visitor, who is certain what they are doing is certainly not good art. One might ask: how to read this scene, and answer that the reading will certainly depend upon what we already know of Renaissance Florence. If we know nothing of the Brancacci Chapel, the sequence will have little meaning. And this is the way it is with all films, constructions which ultimately will be read in different ways by different people. But is this not the same for our written histories? Historians (like Herlihy) may argue that the meaning can be and is fixed in the text. In plain language. Immutable. Verifiable or refutable. But the history of historiography refutes this. One can see this argument is part of a much larger struggle: one between those who believe words mean what they say and those who know that words always mean much more than what they say.

The way we read History on the page or on the screen depends in part upon our expectations. Historians want to read films (and books) as if they are supposed to be direct reflections of a past. There is much evidence that the general public is much more savvy. How often does one hear (especially from students

in History on Film classes): "Its not history, its only a film." Those who study reception theory have come up with much the same conclusion. Certain this is a healthier attitude than that of historians. Yet as a response, this too is less than adequate. For a good historical is never just a film. It is also an intervention into an ongoing discourse.

Robert Berkhofer explains that written Histories are "more structures of interpretation than the structures of factuality they purport to be." Indeed, the literary job of historical realism, the only mode of writing Historians recognize as legitimate -- and one to which most filmmakers slavishly adhere -- is to "make the structure of interpretation appear to be (the same as) the structure of factuality." (Berkhofer 1995: 57, 60) Works of history, novels, and films all invoke authenticity that comes from facts and then go on to employ devices of interpretation to flesh out documentary evidence.

Given its dramatic roots, the historical film could not possibly be only about facts. Yet it must be about them to some extent, at least to the extent that facts, too, are an integral part of the larger discourse of history. A film., to be considered a "historical" rather than a "costume drama," must -- I would argue -- in some way engage the ongoing discourse surrounding the topic with which it deals. That is, the body of data along with the arguments, writings, memories, images, and moral positions that the topic has called forth.

Ultimately, the historical film raises basic question: what do we want from the past? Why do we want to know it? What else might we want to know? To learn by example? To feel (or think we feel) what others (may have) felt in given situations? To experience, if only distantly, what others experienced in war, revolution, political crisis, times of troubles and times of plenty? Or, like the Greeks, to be inspired into ethical or aesthetic contemplation of the human condition?

Before the Rain

Before the Rain is a film that has no obligation to a specific set of facts, to specific details about persons and places. Call it fiction as history, yet every frame is suffused with a sense of the past, and history inheres in every one of its fictional moments. This inhering makes it into a history, or at least a commentary upon history, as it insists in sequence after sequence that the

past is a burden from which we cannot escape. One that implicates us all, anywhere in the world, at every moment: in London, Florence, or Los Angeles as well as Macedonia.

Before the Rain creates its world by utilizing elements, themes, facts, factoids, events, characters to point to events and comment upon them, to moralize them, tell us what they mean. Its highly innovative structure results in an unusual argument about the nature of historical time. The film speaks at once of the uniqueness of individuals and events and also of their recurringness. It proposes that certain moments are at once historical and transhistorical. It suggests the Eternal Return as a new model for History.

Confronted with this film about a region I have never visited nor studied, I do what a good historian does: turn to historical writing. The film sends me to the library to find books about Macedonia. I start with an old friend whose biography I wrote almost a quarter century ago: John Reed. Before chronicling the Russian Revolution, this American journalist, poet, and activist spent some months in 1915 covering the Balkan Front of the World War. Macedonia, he wrote, "is the most frightful mix-up of races ever imagined. Turks, Albanians, Serbs, Rumanians, Greek and Bulgarians live there side by side without mingling . . . . " (Reed 1995: 551) Eighty years later, another American journalist, Robert Kaplan, uses Reed as a major guide as he tours the former Yugoslavia. Like Reed, Kaplan is an outsider, a touring writer who can do no more than skillfully skim the surface of this regions whose languages he does not speak. And yet something in his experience there seems to push him towards a new view of the past: "In the Balkans, history is not viewed as tracing a chronological progression as it is in the West. Instead, history jumps around and moves in circles . . ." (Kaplan 1994: 58) As in the circle, I am forced to wonder, that does not close of Before the Rain?

To outsiders such as Reed, Kaplan, and yours truly; perhaps even to the people who live there, the complications of Macedonian history can seem baffling. I know. I struggled through parts of some standard histories, books that contain the names of too many people and movements, the details of endless and apparently similar events. Reading them I begin to realize: too much has happened in Macedonia for too many centuries for me to absorb the outlines of its history. Sitting in

the library, my eyes grow heavy and I want to snooze. But Before the Rain has no trouble keeping me awake as it cuts through those complications to give me some sort of past in the present, to make me feel something for the (perceived) problems of the region precisely where books have left me swimming in a sea of details.

Works of history are usually stuffed full of the details we call facts, but they don't in this (in any?) case add up to a single, coherent picture of Macedonia's past. For they are not "objective" accounts that complement or build on each other, but positioned, ideologized, biased works of history that contradict each other time and again. No more, no less than the film itself.

And yet Before the Rain does something the books don't do. It can make an outsider suddenly care about a place called Macedonia; it can create a kind of historical caring that is a prerequisite to historical understanding. Not that it can bring Macedonia and its past into clear focus, but what single work can? That task would take a shelf. A library. And then there would still be too many parties, too many dates, to many uprisings, leaders and martyrs for all but the most dedicated scholar to absorb. One virtue of the film is its ability to use a few details to make sense of a situation. By making it alive. Dramatic. By giving us a metaphorical past. The film says: Wake Up! Take Notice! This is Important!

Ultimately the moral, the message of Before the Rain has to be a problem for traditional historians. For the film constitutes its data to create stories that seem to argue that nothing can be done. The hatreds in Macedonia are too old. Living there has become a tragedy. Standing outside events is impossible. For Macedonians it seems there can be no solving of problems. Missing from the film as a work of history is any sense of control. How, we have to wonder, did things get this way? What is the lesson other than that there is no lesson? What is the lesson except this: the recounting of the past is the lesson. By speaking, by crying for help, by telling the tale, maybe the filmmaker historian can change the future.

Let me put it this way: in Before the Rain there is no traditional metanarrative, no story of progress. Instead, the film gives us regress. Could this be a hint towards a new metanarrative, one perhaps more suitable for the new century?
Alex, our Macedonian hero who has lived in Western Europe for

years and now has returned home, keeps saying: "My eyes have changed." What has changed them? His years abroad. His adoption of the belief, shared with the in his village, in the Enlightenment project -- in the very meaning of history. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say he is a man caught between and yet part of two notions of history that coexist and struggle in the modern world, history as an inclusive and history as an exclusive story. History as all of us or history as us and them. Living in two histories blinds Alex to what is happening before his eyes: the fact that old hatreds are, for whatever reason -- and the film provides no reasons -- are alive again. For years Alex accepted a metanarrative of progress. News photography was part of that metanarrative, and yet it, ultimately, led him to commit a crime. Now he has come home to embrace the counter narrative of an Eden. But he learns you can't go home again. Learns that if you are not careful, a metanarrative can kill you. The only way out of his dilemma is death, a meaningful death based upon an act of love: saving the daughter of his former girlfriend. Alex sacrifices himself and welcomes death, a way into and out of history. "Shoot me cousin," he says, knowing, even wanting the bullets to come.

The study of History is rooted in the belief that there is always a way of understanding, learning, making things right - at least in retrospect on the page. But the lesson of the film is that History is not progress. The past is recurrence and you can neither master it nor escape it. You can only serve as a witness, call attention in the hope that the knowing of what not yet has happened but has already happened too many times may not happen again.

The circle may not close. It can only be escaped into the telling of the tale. Is not the task of telling history the task of forgetting the past by mastering it? We study, we ponder, we write we explain. We tell the past in order to think we understand what happened and why. So we think we know. We have worked it through. Now we can forget the past. But our perpetual argument over the Holocaust has given the lie to such a role for History. No amount of telling (and with the Holocaust we have drowned in the telling on the page and on the screen) can work it through, let us master it, or let us forget. We can only continue to tell.

Film as History

The historical film has a history. Such films can be traced from a certain kind of costume drama as entertainment to, largely in years since World War II, a new seriousness about the past. These new historicals often emerge from countries living through times of crisis as filmmakers, faced in their own lives and times with flashpoints of danger, attempt to understand via representations of the past how the present has come to be. Sometimes these films are innovative in style, as if the search for form is part of a search for a new connection to the past. Examples are Eisenstein's constructivism during the formative years of the Soviet Union, Rossellini's neo-realismo for Italy during its postwar troubles, or the mythic, magic realist, post colonial works of Ousmane Sembene from Senegal, Carlos Diegues of Brazil, or Tomas Gutierrez Alea of Cuba. More traditional historicals have come from more stable countries: Fassbinder for Germany after its discovery of the Holocaust, Oliver Stone for the American trauma of Vietnam.

Many of these filmmakers deal with contemporary, even instant history. History under the pressure of time, the flash of danger, the period just before or even when the film itself is made: Rossellini in Open City and Paisan, Diegues in Goodbye Brazil, Stone in Platoon, JFK, Born on the Fourth of July and Salvador. You may call these instant histories created by participants. Histories that erase the difference between past and present.

With Before the Rain, Manchevski creates a new category: the History of what has not yet happened. The history of the future created to warn against that future in order to prevent it from happening. This is a new kind of work for a new situation. A history that uses elements of the past to argue for or against a certain kind of future. In this, it is a history whose aims are consonant with traditional History.

The film also seems to want to teach us how to read its new form of History. I take this to be the burden of the chapter headings of the three sections. Can we image a future in which history is written in terms of these titles: Words. Faces. Pictures.

Words: which create history in the oral tradition, then on the page; words which lead to disagreement and conflict. Silence alone, the film tells us, can speak the language of love.

Faces: how we look out at the world and the way the world, in an age of visual media, remembers us. Faces, which in London or Macedonia or anywhere can mean quick judgment and death.

Pictures: the way we increasingly come to know what it outside ourselves We picture the world (represent it) but at the same time we are the object of the (historical) pictures of others. Pictures are the way we see ourselves in time.

Perhaps this is the historical meaning of Before the Rain. We are all pictures. All implicated. All unable to escape. Our task is to get out the message. The practice of History is a matter of being a witness and, perhaps, having faith. At least faith in the act of witnessing . Faith as a way of writing History.

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