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**HISTORY IN IMAGES / HISTORY IN WORDS**

**Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History on Film  
(or what a historian begins to think about when  
people start turning his books into movies)**

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## HISTORY IN IMAGES / HISTORY IN WORDS

### Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History on Film (or what a historian begins to think about when people start turning his books into movies)

This was supposed to be easy. A chance to bring together all my thoughts on film and history. To make my inchoate notions coherent. To force myself to see what it is I have been thinking. But it has not been easy--more like attempting to pick up water and hold it in your hand. The ideas will not cohere. They change between the thinking and the writing of them. They slip away. They refuse to blend into a whole. Is it me? Is it the subject? I won't even bother with that one. The point is to say only what I can. Which means refusing to make artificial sense of ideas that will not make sense. Which means refusing to bridge the gaps in my knowledge. Which means refusing to make connections where connections do not yet (in my mind) exist. Which means abandoning the idea of an essay and doing no more than sharing some of my reflections and the ideas I have wrestled with during the months I have been attempting to write this piece. Which means there will be no linear development, no attempt at closure, no final answers to the questions posed by the elusive problem of can we represent history on film.

#### I: A Historian in Filmland

(1) For an academic historian to become involved in the world of motion pictures is at once an exhilarating and disturbing experience. Exhilarating for all the obvious reasons: the sex appeal of the visual media in modern culture; the rare opportunity to emerge from the lonely depths of the library to join together with other human beings in a common enterprise; the delicious thought of possible popularity, of large numbers of people actually getting to experience the fruits of one's labor, the results of one's research, analysis, and writing. Disturbing for what should be equally obvious reasons: no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (though it might possibly satisfy the historian as film goer). Inevitably, something happens on the way from the printed page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work in words.

(2) For me--as no doubt for other historians--the disturbance caused by working on a film lingers long after the exhilaration has vanished. Like all such disturbances, this one creates an arena for wonder and thought, and can provoke a search for ideas to help restore one's sense of intellectual equilibrium. Perhaps for me this search has been particularly

intense because I have had a double dose of this experience. The subjects of two of my major written works have been put onto film, and both times I have been involved in the process which brought them to the screen. That one was a dramatic film and the other a documentary, one a fifty million dollar Hollywood project and the other a two-hundred and fifty thousand dollar work funded with public money, one pitched at the largest of mass audiences and the other at a smaller, more elite audience of public television and university classrooms, has had at least one special effect: I now find it impossible to blame what happened between page and screen on either the evils of Hollywood or the problems of low budgets, on the dramatic genre or the documentary format. Working on two such different films has forced me to face the fact that the problems the historian has with the past rendered on the screen grow out of the nature of the visual medium itself.

(3) The two major films that I have worked on are "Reds," the story of the last five years in the life of American poet, journalist, and revolutionary, John Reed, and "The Good Fight," a chronicle of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, that unit of American volunteers who took part in the Spanish Civil War. Each is a well-made, emotion-filled work that has exposed a vast number of people to an important but long-buried historical subject, one previously known only to specialists or to radicals with an interest in the roots of their own beliefs. Each brings to the screen a great deal of authentic historical detail and yet humanizes the past, turning long-suspect radicals into admirable human beings. Each proposes--if a bit indirectly--an interpretation of its subject, seeing political commitment as both a personal and historical category, and each connects past to present by suggesting that the health of the body politic and, indeed, the world depends upon such recurrent commitments.

Despite their very real virtues and accomplishments, their evocations of the past through powerful images, characters, and words, neither of these motion pictures can satisfy the demands that a professional historian (or at least this professional historian) makes upon the past. "Reds," for example, indulges in overt fiction by--to give just a couple of examples--putting John Reed in places where he never was or collapsing several historical figures into a single individual. "The Good Fight" too often equates memory with history by allowing veterans of the Spanish war to speak of events forty-five years in the past without calling their mistakes or fabrications into question. And yet neither fictionalization nor unmediated testimony are the entire reason that these films violate my notions of history. More important is the way that each tends to compress the past to a single, linear story with, essentially, a single interpretation. More dismaying is the fact that alternative possibilities, that complexity, subtlety, and criticism--all these staples of scholarly discourse are sorely missing from the historical world of these two motion pictures.

(4) Is it an exaggeration to say History is dead in the way God is dead? Or is alive only to believers--that's us. But what about those we teach? What about the population at large? What do they know or care of history, the kind of history that we do? And how does our history, scholarly, scientific, measured, relate to that larger History, that relationship to the past that holds a culture together, tells us not only where we have been but also suggests

where we are going, or at least what we are taking with us? History as something about both our past and our future. History as our relationship to ourselves and others, our source of meaning, our understanding of what it is to be human.

In the mid nineteen sixties, Hayden White insisted that History was dead not to the public, but to the intellectual world. As part of the active life of the mind of the culture. His claim was that it could qualify as neither a modern art or a modern science, despite its claims to be both. His argument was that the historian's notion of both art and science was hopelessly nineteenth century. His hope was that history would become more scientific and/or artistic within the contemporary meanings of the terms.

Has history revived since then? Surely the profession seems to be flourishing. The influence of the *Annales*, the new social history, quantification, women's history, psychohistory, anthropological history, even the first tentative inroads of continental theory--surely all these developments say we are alive and well. And surely with all the new kinds of research, we do know more and more about the past. But--and it is a big BUT: I fear we know less and less how to tell stories that matter to people outside our profession. Even the much talked of revival of narrative debate has not issued in a new kind of historical writing that incorporates the innovations of the great twentieth century writers. And even if people were writing such modernist history, would that achieve an audience?

(5) We live in an world deluged with images, one in which people increasingly receive their ideas from motion pictures and television, from feature films, docudramas, miniseries, and network documentaries. Today the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population--outside of the much despised textbook--must surely be the visual media, a set of institutions which lie wholly outside the control of those of us who devote our lives to history. By all indications, this situation will grow more extreme. Certainly it is not farfetched to extrapolate to a time--or are we already there?--when written history will be a kind of esoteric pursuit and when the intellectual descendants of those of us who write it today will have become like priests of a mysterious religion, commentators on sacred texts and performers of rituals for a populace little interested in their meaning but indulgent enough to pay for them to continue.

Enter film: the great temptation; the great seductress. Might it be a way of making history popular, of touching large numbers of people once again? And if so, what must we historians give up? Can one really put history on film, history which will satisfy those of us who devote our lives to understanding, analyzing, and recreating the past in words? Or are we--and then how much?--willing to change what we mean by history? (And if we are not so willing, might someone change it for us anyway?) The issue before us comes down to this: can we tell historical stories in films and not lose our professional or intellectual souls.

(6) To raise the issue of history on film is not to insist that historians should suddenly desert the library to take classes in cinematography, or stop writing books and begin to turn out screenplays. What it does suggest is that the time has come to investigate seriously the visual media as a possible way of representing the past that will satisfy we historians rather than filmmakers. For all the recent activity concerning history and the visual media--the

articles and monographs, the panels at major historical conventions, the symposia sponsored by the AHA, New York University, California Historical Society, and International House of Philadelphia--virtually nothing has been written about the issue of how to do history on film. Yet this is the most challenging aspect of the topic. To study the history of motion pictures as art and industry is to pursue the past as usual, to do no more than extend our concerns and methodologies to an area of the culture previously ignored. But to take up the question of how to portray the past on film is a more complex issue, one that raises the whole question of what it is to represent the past at all.

## II: Can History Really Be Put Onto Film?

(7) Can history really be put onto film? Can a written discourse be turned into a visual one? In all the recent flurry of scholarly activity surrounding motion pictures, almost nobody has bothered to address these questions. Thirty years ago Siegfried Kracauer, a theoretician of both film and history, simply dismissed the historical feature film as stagy and theatrical, in part because modern actors looked unconvincing in period costumes, but in larger measure because everyone knows--he argued--that that is not really the past on the screen but only an imitation of it. More recently, French historian Pierre Sorlin, has faulted such films for never asking questions of historical topics but simply presenting a "superficial view" of the past. Such comments are rare. Evidently partisans of film assume you can make the transition from the page to the screen without any problem, while those who find the idea distasteful or absurd don't bother to say so.

(8) Can history really be put onto film? Most definitely, says R. J. Raack, a California State University historian who himself has been involved in the production of several documentaries. "Traditional written history" is too linear and too narrow in focus to capture the complex, multi-dimensional world in which humans live. Only film, with its ability to juxtapose images and sounds, with its "quick cuts to new sequences, dissolves, fades, speed-ups, slow motion" and other techniques can hope of approximating the daily human experience of "ideas, words, images, preoccupations, distractions, sensory deceptions, conscious and unconscious motives and emotions." Only film can give the proper "empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives." Only film can "recover all the past's liveliness."

Can history really be put onto film? Absolutely not, says philosopher Ian Jarvie of York University, the author of two books on motion pictures and society. The moving image carries such a "poor information load" and suffers from such "discursive weakness" that there is no way to really do history on film. Besides, to think that history consists primarily of "a descriptive narrative of what actually happened" is to be "naive." The discipline, in fact, consists mostly of "debates between historians about just what exactly did happen, why it happened, and what would be an adequate account of its significance." While it is true that a "historian could *embody* his view in a film, just as he could embody it in a play," the real question is this: "How could he defend it, footnote it, rebut objections and criticize the opposition?"

(9) Can history really be put onto film? Raack and Jarvie seem to divide the world between them and drive one towards the much larger question: what is history? Clearly it is a different creature for each of these two scholars. Raack sees history as a way of gaining personal knowledge. Through the experience of people's lives in other times and places, one can achieve a kind of "psychological prophylaxis"--history lets us feel less peculiar and isolated; by showing that there are others like us, it helps to relieve our "loneliness and alienation." Perhaps only a Californian--a category in which I must place myself--could suggest such an intimate role for the study of the past. Yet if one adopts this view, if one can accept history as a kind of touch me, feel me, validate me endeavor, then Raack's arguments make sense. Certainly he is right that, far more easily than the written word, the motion picture can bring the past alive. The huge screen images and wraparound sounds tend to overwhelm us, swamp our senses and destroy all attempts to remain aloof, distanced, even critical. In the movie theater we become, for a time, prisoners of history.

That, for Jarvie, is just the problem: a world that moves at an unrelenting twenty-four frames a second provides no time or space for reflection, verification, or debate. Yes, you may be able to tell "interesting, enlightening, and plausible" historical stories on the screen, but you cannot provide the all important critical elements of historical discourse--you cannot evaluate sources, make logical arguments, or systematically weigh evidence. With those elements missing, you have history that is "no more serious than Shakespeare's Tudor-inspired travesties." No wonder virtually all filmed history has been "a joke," and a dangerous one at that. Motion pictures like "Madame Curie," or "Freud," or "Charge of the Light Brigade" may provide a "vivid portrayal" of the past, but their inaccuracies and simplifications are practically impossible for the serious scholar "to correct."

(10) Is Jarvie correct? Is the "information load" of film impoverished? That depends upon what one means by "information," for in its own way film carries a very rich load of data. Some scholars argue that not only does a film image of a scene carry much more information than the written description of the same scene, but that this information has a much higher degree of detail and specificity. Of course one does not need experts to discover this. To test the idea, all one need do is attempt to render into words everything that might appear in a single shot from a movie like "Reds." Such an assignment could easily fill several pages, and if this is the case with a single shot, how much more space would be needed to describe what goes on in a sequence of images? The real question thus becomes not whether film can carry enough information, but whether that information (a) can be absorbed from quickly-moving images, and (b) is really worth knowing? A corollary question could be stated as follows: can we think of a kind of history that would privilege the sort of data that images (can) carry?

(11) Is Jarvie correct? Is history mainly "debates between historians"? Certainly scholars are perpetually involved in disagreements over how to understand and interpret the data of the past, and these debates are important for the progress of the discipline--one might even say that they help to set the agenda for research by raising new issues, defining

fields, refining questions, and forcing historians to check each other's accuracy and logic. Ultimately, each and every work of history does take its place in a discourse that consists of pre-existing debates, and the very meaning of any new work is in part created by those debates even if they are not acknowledged within the work itself.

The question for history on film, however, is not whether historians always, or usually, or even sometimes debate issues, or whether works take their place in a context of ongoing debates; the question is whether each individual work of history is, or must be, involved in such debates, and involved so overtly that the debate becomes part of the substance of the historical work? To this question the answer must surely be "No." Any historian can think of works which represent the past without ever pointing to the field of debates in which they are situated. Indeed, many excellent narrative histories and biographies mute (or even moot) debates by ignoring them, or relegating them to appendices, or burying them deep within the story line.

(12) My own way of writing history has been to bury debates. In two books I have for aesthetic reasons pursued a strategy of creating a seamless narrative that does not halt to debate issues with other scholars in the field. One of these works, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*, did investigate various vexing questions that have always surrounded the units of the International Brigades, including the very knotty one of whether or not the terrorism of Stalin's anti-Trotsky purges spilled into the ranks of the Communist-led volunteers. To keep from breaking the flow of my story, I relegated the discussion of this and other controversial issues to appendices, and simply incorporated the result of my research into the narrative. Not a single reviewer of *Crusade of the Left* thought it worth-while to mention the details located in those appendices; not a single reviewer, in other words, bothered to mention my contributions to the most important of debates in which I was involved.

There is a further irony here. My findings on "terrorism"--actually published as an article in a scholarly journal long before the book appeared--have almost never been referred to by scholars who write on the Spanish Civil War. This experience may help to underscore one of Jarvie's limitations; he tends to posit a kind of ideal model for history, one that does not fully square with the habits of those who research, write, and review works of history. If findings crucial to a debate can be ignored by the profession--and surely I am not the only one to whom this has happened--then what could be wrong with an individual work of history that refused to debate? The issue, after all, is hardly whether all history will be on film, but only if any history can be put onto film.

### III: Genre and Narrative

(13) What comes to mind when we think of history on film? Surely our primary notion derives from what we might call the Hollywood historical drama (like "Reds"), or its European counterpart ("Martin Guerre")--the big-budget production in which costumes, "authentic" locations, and stars tend to take precedence over attempts at historical accuracy. Such works fall into a genre that one might label "historical romance." Like all genres, this one locks

both filmmaker and audience into a series of conventions whose demands--for a love interest, physical action, personal confrontation, movement towards a climax and denouement--are almost guaranteed to leave the historian of the period crying foul.

The other major type of history on film comes under the label of documentary, with its Rankean claim to show things exactly as they were. Yet whether it is the film compiled of old footage and narrated by an omniscient voice (the voice of history); or a film that centers on Talking Heads, survivors remembering events and experts analyzing them; or some combination of the two; the historical documentary also makes sense of its material in terms of a story that moves from a beginning through a conflict to a dramatic resolution. This is a point worth pausing over. Too often historians who scorn dramatizations of the history are willing to accept the documentary film as a more accurate way of representing the past, as if somehow the images appear on the screen unmediated, and have not been consciously shaped into a narrative which creates the meaning of the material being conveyed.

(14) Some limits of documentary are highlighted by my experience with "The Good Fight," a feature-length work that has been well received by both the popular press and scholars. While writing the narration for this film, I was frustrated by the directors in my attempt to include the issue of possible Stalinist terrorism or repression in the ranks. Their reasons were as follows: (a) They could find no visual images to illustrate the issue and were adamant that the film not become static with too much talk, and (b) the topic was too complex to handle quickly, and the film--as all films--had so much good footage that it was already in danger of running too long. This decision to sacrifice complexity to action, one that virtually every documentarist would applaud, underlines a convention of the genre: the documentary bows to a double tyranny--which is to say, an ideology--of the necessary image and perpetual movement. And woe be to those elements of history which can neither be illustrated nor quickly summarized.

(15) Historians can easily see how such film conventions shape and distort the past because we have written work by which the piece of visual history can be judged. What we too easily ignore, however, is the extent to which written history is also shaped by conventions of genre and language. This needs to be mentioned if only to dispel the simple notions of history in which many of us have been trained. A number of scholars, most notably Hayden White, have dealt so well with questions of narrative that here I will only call to mind a few of their important findings: (a) Neither people nor nations live historical "stories"; narratives, that is, coherent stories with beginnings, middles, and endings, are constructed by historians as part of their attempts to make sense of the past. (b) The narratives that historians write are in fact "verbal fictions;" written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself. (c) The nature of the historical world in a narrative is in part governed by the genre or mode (shared with forms of fiction) in which the historian has decided to cast his story--ironic, tragic, heroic, or romantic. (d) Language is not transparent and cannot mirror the past as it really was; rather than reflecting it, language creates and structures history and imbues it with meaning.

(16) The argument that written history is a kind of verbal fiction--which I find so persuasive--leads to a parallel argument that accepts history on film as a kind of visual fiction. This is not to argue that history and fiction are the same thing, nor to excuse the kind of outright fabrication that has marked too many Hollywood historical features. It is simply to admit that both kinds of history contain fictive elements. Clearly, history on film, if it is to satisfy historians, must be held accountable to certain standards. But--and this is the important point--these standards must be consonant with the possibilities of the medium. To attempt to judge history on film, as some people do, by simply comparing it to written history may be to relegate it to the realm of complete fancy. At the simplest level, for example, written history has no way of dealing with the way an actor takes the part of a historical character. "That's not John Reed, that's Warren Beatty," we are liable to say, forgetting that my words in *Romantic Revolutionary* are also not John Reed, but only an agreed-upon convention for representing Reed.

(17) To begin to think about history on film not just in comparison with written history but in terms of its own is not an easy task. Film theory--structuralist, semiologist, feminist, or Marxist--all seem, at least to this historian, too self-contained, hermetic, and basically uninterested in the flesh and blood stuff of the past, the lives and struggles of individual human beings caught in situations they can neither fully understand nor control. Yet the insights of theoreticians can point up some of the important differences between screen and written versions of "reality," differences which underline the idea that history on film must of necessity be a different creature from written history.

(18) In representing the world--contemporary, historical, or fanciful--the written word and the screened image work in quite opposite manners. Though this idea can be phrased in different vocabularies, the idea--crudely put--is that language begins inside of consciousness and works outward to structure a world, while film begins with the objects (including people as objects) of the world and works inward to infer psychic realities. Film theorist Dudley Andrews puts it this way: "Generally film is found to work from perception towards signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness of a world to the meanings of a story cut out of that world." With the word it is just the opposite: "As a product of human language it naturally treats human motivation and values, seeking to throw them out into the external world, elaborating a world out of a story."

(19) Roland Barthes points out in *Writing Degree Zero* that history is a story always written in the preterit, a tense which expresses a sense of order, a belief in the stability of a past world that is fixed and complete. Indeed, the preterit "is the very act by which society affirms its possession of its past and its very possibility." What change must overtake our notion of history, then, as it is represented in the medium of film, which has no preterit and always renders it world in the present tense? (Lest this seem a minor issue, I have a very personal example of how important tense can be to our sense of history. Just last year I completed a manuscript set in the nineteenth century but written in the present tense. Senior editors at two major trade publishers have liked everything in the work but the tense in

which it is written. One said he could only publish it if it were written in the past tense, for in the present tense people might mistake it for something other than history.)

(20) It is easier to accept the idea that the written word and the screen image create their--and recreate our--worlds differently than to accept all the experiments in historical representation that appear upon the screen. What is called for, especially when viewing some initially offputting experimental or Third World films, is a kind of willed open-mindedness, and something like the following assumption: (a) History on film will of necessity include all sorts of elements unknown to written history, (b) but we must never excuse it from adhering honestly to verifiable historical data, (c) no matter how differently from traditional written narrative it constructs a world of the past.

#### IV: Forms of Historical Films

(21) In principle there is no reason why one cannot make a dramatic feature set in the past about such topics as an individual life (John Reed), a community conflict (the Salem witch hysteria), a social movement (immigration or labor), the rise of a king to power (Louis XIV), a revolution (Russia), or confrontations between representative figures (Robespierre and Danton) that will stay within the bounds of historical accuracy and have no need to resort to invented characters or incidents. (One of my complaints about "Reds," in fact, was that the writer/director had, by adhering to certain Hollywood conventions, not simply done violence to the historic John Reed, but had sentimentalized, and thereby trivialized, the real drama of his life.) By its very nature, the dramatic film will include human conflict and will shape its material in accordance with some conventions of story-telling, but this does not differentiate it from written history. In truth, film tends to highlight individuals rather than groups or the impersonal processes that are the subject of much written history. Yet we must not forget that it is possible to make films that avoid the glorification of the individual. The best known of such works, Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" and "October," may be--for political reasons--skewed as history, but they provide splendid models of ways to present collective movements.

(22) To represent history in a dramatic feature rather than a written text does involve some important tradeoffs. Certainly the amount of traditional data that can be presented on the screen in a two-hour film (or even an eight-hour miniseries) will always be so skimpy compared to a written version that covers the same ground that a professional historian may feel intellectually starved. At the same time, the screen can easily capture elements of life--which we also might designate as "data"--such as landscapes, natural sounds, strongly expressed emotions, and physical conflict that will elude all but the finest of writers. Certainly it is film that can best render the look and feel of farmworkers dwarfed by immense Western landscapes, or miners struggling in the darkness of their pits, or mill workers moving to the rhythms of their machines; or civilians sitting hopelessly in the bombed out streets of cities. Certainly it is film that can best capture the drama of the courtroom or legislature; the simultaneous, overlapping realities of revolution; the intense

confusion of men in battle. Yet in doing so, in privileging this sort of visual and emotional data, the motion picture may be subtly, and in ways we don't know how to measure, altering our very sense of the past.

(23) To attempt a film of Jean-Denis Bredin's recent and lengthy history of the Dreyfus Affair would be to confront all the possibilities and problems of dramatic history on film. The case that tore France apart at the turn of the century has all the elements of drama--a miscarriage of justice, courtroom confrontations, heroes and villains, high government officials, political intrigue, an attempted coup d'etat, problems of national security, beautiful females, homosexual lovers, forgery, suicide, the fall of governments, and the ultimate triumph of the truth and the redemption of an innocent victim. So rich in detail and so complicated in plot is *The Affair* that any attempt to render the story onto the screen--be it a two-hour feature film or an eight-hour miniseries--would have to be highly selective. The author's lengthy arguments with previous historians would no doubt be excised, but for most viewers this would be no great problem; indeed, as a non-specialist in this field, I found myself skimming the intricacies of the scholarly debates for lack of enough background to evaluate them. (My premise is that virtually all such arguments by historians seem reasonable unless one knows the topic with some intimacy.) Many individuals and plot details would also have to be dropped, but there is no doubt that on the screen one film could portray the major characters and give a sense of the social ramifications of *The Affair*. My point here is this: the thinning of data that would necessarily occur in a screen version would not of itself make for poor history. Some years ago I read a fine account of the case (*Captain Dreyfus* by Nicholas Halasz) that was half the length of Bredin's book. Presumably one could convey the sense of the case in an still shorter version--perhaps even as an article. Which is only to say that the amount of detail used in an historical argument is always rather arbitrary, or dependent upon one's aims. This will hold true no matter what the medium of representation.

(24) The glory of the documentary, or non-fiction film is that it can sometimes open a direct window onto the past, allowing us to see the cities, factories, landscapes, battlefields, and leaders of an earlier time. But this ability also constitutes its chief danger. However much film utilizes footage (or still photos, or artifacts) from a particular time and place to create a "realistic" sense of the historical moment, we must remember on the screen we see not the events themselves, not the events as experienced by participants, but selected images carefully arranged into sequences to tell a particular story. Like the dramatic feature, the documentary often tends towards the sentimental by focusing on the plights of individuals who are often oppressed. Like the dramatic feature, the documentary does not really deliver a great deal of historical data, but provides images to illustrate data delivered orally. Such visual facts are always highly specific, for film cannot generalize. It takes a narrator to say that during the Great Depression twenty million people were out of work. But the camera can only show you particular scenes illustrating the behavior of some of those twenty million.

(25) The historical documentary can only make its argument through words, which means some sort of narration, either direct or indirect. Both forms present problems. The direct narrator, perhaps a historian, may appear to speak with the voice of impartial history, but the history conveyed tends to be controlled by what visuals are available to the filmmaker. Indirect narrators, often witnesses of or participants in historical events--those Talking Heads who fought in the Korean War or the Battle of the Bulge--provide us with an interpretive framework that consists of memory, not history. If their words are not supplemented with any narration, we become wholly enclosed in a world view suffused with nostalgia and lacking in the critical elements of historical discourse.

(26) The truth of historical images in a documentary is not a reflected truth by a created one. Let me give an easy example from John Houston's famed "Battle of San Pietro," shot during the Italian campaign in 1944 with a single camera. In this film, as in any war documentary, when we see an image of an artillery piece firing followed by a shell exploding, we are viewing a reality created only by a film editor. That is not to say that the shell we saw being fired did not explode somewhere, and look perhaps pretty much like the image that we saw on screen. But in fact what we see are images of two different events spliced together to make a kind of spurious historical truth. If this happens with such a simple image, how much more so for complex historical events shown to us in actuality footage.

(27) It is a mistake to think of the big Hollywood feature or the standard documentary as the only possible models for doing history on film. In recent years, directors from a variety of countries have begun to make movies that convey some of the intellectual density that we associate with the word. Works such as Chris Marker's "Sans Soleil," Raul Ruiz's "Great Events, Ordinary People," and Jill Godmilow's "Far From Poland" propose imaginative new ways of dealing with historical material. Resisting traditional genres, these filmmakers create new forms to explore serious issues on film--the self-reflexive investigation, the essay, the calculated mixture of fact and fiction. The best of such films present the possibility of more than one interpretation of events--they render the world as multiple, complex, and indeterminate, rather than as a series of self-enclosed, neat, linear stories. And though the subjects of many such films are recent history (Marker juxtaposes images of the underdeveloped Cape Verde Islands with similar ones from Japan in his verbal and visual essay on the meaning of contemporary history; Ruiz deals with the meaning of "democracy" for voters in late nineteenth century France; Godmilow chronicles the rise of "Solidarity") their modes also stand as important models for new ways of ways representing--and therefore thinking--about the past.

(28) "Far From Poland" is a good example of a new sort of historical complexity rendered on film. Godmilow, an American who had spent some time in Poland, was unable to get a visa to go there to make a "standard" documentary on Solidarity just as the movement got under way. Staying in New York, she made a film anyway, a self-reflexive, multi-level work, one that utilizes a variety of visual sources to create a highly unusual "history" of

Solidarity--actuality footage smuggled out of Poland; images from American television newscasts; "acted" interviews from original texts that appeared in the Polish press; "real" interviews with Polish exiles in the United States; a domestic drama in which the filmmaker (read "historian") raises the issue of what it means to make a film about events in a distant land; and voice-over dialogues of the filmmaker with fictional Fidel Castro, who speaks for the possibility of contemporary revolution and the problems of the artist within the socialist state. Visually, verbally, historically, and intellectually provocative, "Far From Poland" tells a good deal about Solidarity and even more, perhaps, about how Americans reacted to and used the news from Poland for their own purposes. (By implication, the work is applicable to the way we treat other foreign situations.) Not only does the film raise the issue of how to represent history on film, it also provides a variety of perspectives on the events it covers, thus both reflecting and entering the arena of debates surrounding the meaning of Solidarity.

(29) The need to resist the closed empathic story told in Hollywood films, with its "romantic" approach to all stories and its satisfying sense of emotional closure, may be the same for historians as it has been for radical and third-world filmmakers, who have had to struggle against Western codes of representation in order to depict their own social and historical realities. In some third-world historical films, one can find parallels to Bertold Brecht's "epic" theater. Brecht's notion was that by refusing to create characters that anyone could sympathize with, and by using a variety of distancing devices (such as direct speeches or chapter headings for each section of a work) he could make the audience and think about rather than feel the social problems and human relationships in a piece of theater. Though the filmmakers are no doubt working from a native sense of history and aesthetics, this is exactly what happens in such works as Osman Sembene's film, "Ceddo," which depicts the struggle in Senegal between the original native religion and a militant Islam, and the recent Brazilian film, "Quilombo."

(30) The title, "Quilombo" comes from the word for colony of runaway slaves, of which there were many in the centuries of colonial Brazil. In depicting the rise and fall Palmares, the most famous and long-lasting of these settlements, the film provides a history that is less one of "facts" than of feelings and attitudes. These are emphasized by a highly-stylized use of body paint, bright costumes, colorful rituals, song and dance and formal recitations that create a way of representing the past which has little in common with our nineteenth century (and current) sense of historical realism. Yet it is just this stylization that keeps one from identifying with any specific character and pushes you towards thinking about what is depicted on the screen--the historical problems, the human relationships (master-slave, black-white, European-native, Catholic-pagan, male-female), the nature of exploitation, and the deeply felt need of people for self-definition. One might ask: would "Quilombo" be more "historical" if it specified the number of people who lived in Palmares, the number of Portuguese expeditions against it, the number of weeks and months the final battles took--if it were, in short, more dense with traditional historical detail? The issue, I think, comes down to this: one must decide what is the point of the history and fashion a work that both

stays true to that data and makes that point. Which means that "Quilombo" may be judged a kind of history even if it is not a "realistic" representation of its subject.

#### V: Visions of Future History on Film

(31) Film presents an opportunity for us to break out of traditional narrative modes based on naive notions that language is a transparent reflection of reality. It does this because of the nature of the medium, the way it must tell stories, the way it can juxtapose images from different times and places, provide startling and contrastive mixtures of sight and sound. Film makes us self-conscious about the issue of how to represent the past, about how we create the worlds of history. It suggests that we need to capture and absorb the newest forms, the twentieth century forms of narrative for our historical tales, rather than continuing with the nineteenth century forms in which history continues to be written. Which is to say history needs to recapture the power of fiction. Its narrative moves. Its imagination. Hayden White has explicitly argued that history has lost touch with its base in literary imagination. Film should let us broaden that word imagination to include the resources of another medium, and in so doing provide a greater opportunities for history.

(32) Film presents the same challenge to history that it has to anthropology, the only scholarly discipline to make regular use of the visual media. The ethnographic film was originally a way of illustrating the "scientific" findings of written anthropology. Possibly because some of the classic ethnographic films (say "The Hunters") were clearly fictional constructs (the hunt in that film, made to look like one series of events, was shot over a period of four years), and possibly because of a growing feeling of independence among visual anthropologists, there is now a debate going on over whether the ethnographic film "may require a new paradigm, a new way of seeing, not necessarily incompatible with written anthropology but at least governed by a distinct set of criteria." One anthropologist claims that traditionalists have tried to keep film in a subordinate (record-making and didactic) role because the use of the medium "entails a shift in perspective which raises major problems for scientific conceptualization." These same problems of "seeing" and thinking a field anew should apply to history as well.

(33) By raising the issue of what it is to represent the past, film opens us to new notions of the past. It makes us ask questions about what history could or could not be. About what history is for. About why we want to know about the past and what will we do with that knowledge. About why we do history at all. Film lets us see that the ghost of positivism still lingers in the way we think of history--it raises before our eyes the building block theory of historical knowledge. It makes us wonder if anyone still believes that we will someday know everything? That it is possible to represent the past objectively, outside of any value-laden discourse, without a present agenda to guide our research? Film makes us wonder if in the future the past will be seen very differently. If the privileging of visual data will change our notions of history. If the whole notion of an historical argument may change from something verbal to something visual. Film suggests new ways that history

could be: history as essay, as self-reflexive inquiry, as epic, as a mixed form of drama, analysis, and presentational modes that have nothing to do with the tradition of realism.

(34) Changes are coming in the visual media. The hardware--cameras, recorders, projectors--in video are getting cheaper and cheaper. Combine this development with other notions of how to represent the past, not in big dramatic films but in various mixed-media ventures that integrate various kinds of elements, and then perhaps the film and history future may be closer than we think. The visionary may see a new academic field of history on film. How many years from now will it be until someone does a doctoral dissertation using film? How many decades (centuries?) until history on film will be taught in separate, distinct departments, will be a discipline with its own journals, fields of specialization, and annual meetings? And film is hardly the newest of technologies. More interesting may be the notion of history on laser disks that can include an incredible variety of data: written material, actuality film, acted film, musical, reproductions of art works, statistical data bases, charts, graphs, and maps. A work of history on laser could contain instructions saying Turn Me Off, or Go Back, or Discuss What You Have Seen. It could be interactive--like a book, the way a laser disk is used would be determined by person using it, only unlike a book, it would contain a variety of forms of historical representation.

(35) The challenge of film to history, of the visual culture to the written culture, may be like challenge of written history to the oral tradition, of Herodotus and Thucydides to the tellers of historical tales. Or perhaps it is like challenge of the post-Gutenberg world to the preceding world when manuscripts and writing were in the hands of the few. Before Herodotus there was myth, which was a perfectly adequate way of dealing with the past of a tribe, city, or people, adequate in terms of providing a meaningful world in which to live and relate to one's past. In a post-literate world, it is possible that visual culture will once again change the nature of our relationship to the past. This does not mean giving up on attempts at truth, but somehow recognizing that there is more than one sort of truth, or that visual truth may be different from, but not necessarily in conflict with, verbal truth.

(36) History does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values. Our kind of rigorous, "scientific" history is in fact a product of history, our special history which includes a particular relationship to the written word, a rationalized economy, notions of individual rights, and the nation state, and many cultures have done quite well without it. In other words, there are many ways to represent and relate to the past. Film, with its unique powers of representation and great popularity, presents an enormous challenge to a tradition which has longed privileged the written word. What will become of that challenge is something for a futurologist, not a historian, to speak about. Yet perhaps it is worth remembering that Plato, who believed in the power of the musical arts, said that when the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake. Perhaps it is given to our time to wonder this: if the mode of representation changes, what then may begin to shake?