H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert A. Rosenstone, ed.** *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. vi + 255 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-02534-6.

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**Published on** H-Film (March, 1996)

Historians are not the only custodians of our collective past. While historians have long recognized that film is perhaps the chief carrier of historical messages in contemporary culture, there has been a long tendency to equate screen histories with costume dramas or documents which are belittled as bastardized history–as superficial, highly dramatized fictions that used the past as "stage set" for romance and adventure, like those books that crowd drug store shelves. In contrast, this anthology argues that a new kind of historical film offers "a legitimate way of doing history–of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning" (3). A genuine must read for anyone seriously interested in cultural history or media studies, it asks how the new historical film–such as "Memories of Underdevelopment" or "Hitler: A Film from Germany"–conveys facts, makes arguments, and brings the past to life.

Until recently, there was a widespread refusal by historians to treat cinematic versions of history as serious works of interpretation. Such films were generally interpreted as "sociological documents," reflecting the mood of a particular period; or as "ideological constructs," advancing particular political or moral values or myths. In recent years, anthropologists, literary critics, and sociologists have challenged the notion that historians have an exclusive claim on the past, rejecting the equation of history with archival research. Such scholars have argued that there are other, equally valid ways of conceiving of history. These include "indigenous history," the way that colonized peoples conceptualize their own historical experience; "popular memory," the repertoire of cultural scripts constructed by film, television, tourist sites, museums, and public ceremonies; and "social science history," the use of history to explain emergent conditions. This volume suggests another valid form of history: the effort by film makers, especially in post-colonial nations and in societies recovering from totalitarian regimes or war, to understand the legacy of the past, abandoning realism and adopting "postmodern" representational modes.

The anthology's basic premise is that history is not simply the collection of documented facts, but an effort to organize and give meaning to the past, a function that can be served by non-historians as well as by professional academics. Thus rather than dismissing film as "low-powered history" (as Claude Levi-Strauss termed biography), the contributors are interested in assessing the possibilities of creating history through film.

The anthology's first section shows how filmmakers have contested conventional interpretations of the past. The first essay, by Geof Eley, brilliantly situates *Distant Voices, Still Lives* in a context of earlier cinematic treatments of the British working class, from the depression and World War II era depiction of the working class as a repository of virtue, to the British New Wave with its stress on the erosion of working class institutions and infection by consumer materialism. Dramatizing the shifting terms of being working class in the late twentieth century, Eley shows, the film illuminates the changing meaning of gender, family, and class identification during a period of far reaching economic and political transformation.

Nicholas B. Dirks then insightfully examines how *The Home and the World* critically examines the consequences and costs of Indian efforts to modernize and reform the caste system and traditional customs by depicting how these processes infiltrate into the fabric of private life. By locating this film against a broader backdrop of Indian critiques of the modern and the West, he underscores what is distinctive about this film's vision. Thomas Keirstead and Deidre Lynch also offer an impressive examination of modernization. In their analysis of *Eijanaika*, set in Japan during the Meiji Restoration, they show how the film rejects a simplistic linear view of transformation from feudal to modern society, critiques standard historical accounts, which emphasize revolution from above or revolution from below, and instead offers a carnivalesque portrait that does not depict the historical process as conscious and purposeful. Pierre

Sorlin's compelling analysis of *The Night of the Shooting Stars* also suggests how film can serve as a powerful vehicle for historical revisionism, interrogating "the dominant vision of the past." Rejecting standard narratives of the Italian resistance to fascism, the film shows how the struggle to end foreign occupation could serve as a pretext for settling old scores.

The volume's second section deals with the way that individuals and societies represent history through film. Michael S. Roth insightfully shows how *Hiroshima Mon Amour* explores the issue of how individuals cope with the burden of traumatic, overwhelming, and unassimilated historical experience, in this case the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima. In a fascinating essay, John Mraz then shows how *Memories of Underdevelopment* recounts the story of Cuban Revolution, not simply through one privileged perspective, but through conflicting perspectives that promote reflexivity: an individualist, bourgeois mentality and a collective, revolutionary consciousness. Min Soo Kang insightfully analyzes how the film *The Moderns*, translates "modernism" into cinematic narrative, not through traditional realist representation, but by focusing on forgery and artistic hangers-on in 1920s Paris. Clayton R. Koppes draws on the documentary *Radio Bimini* to show how the federal government used film "to create approved nuclear meaning" (129), suppressing and distorting information, and downplaying the dangers of nuclear radiation.

The book's concluding section assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the postmodern historical film as a tool for advancing complex psychological and historical interpretations. In an insightful essay, Denise J. Youngblood shows how the film *Repentance* effectively uses surrealistic techniques to convey Stalinist terror and the mentality of terror. Rudy Koshar then brilliantly examines how the film *Hitler: A Film from Germany* contributes to historical understanding of Nazism, particularly by arraying multiple and contradictory interpretations, critiquing sources that historians rely upon, and explaining why there was mass receptivity to Hitler's message. Dan Sipe's analysis of *From the Pole to the Equator*, a film that reedits the silent "documentary" footage of an early Italian filmmaker, suggests how historians, like anthropologists, can use film and video to document the past, reveal bias, and dissect the illusions of realism.

The volume's final impressive essays, by Sumiko Higashi and Robert A. Rosenstone focus on the self-reflexive, ironical *Walker* (which Higashi insightfully contrasts with the more conventional, male bonding, social problem genre film *Mississippi Burning*). Rosenstone, noting that there has been no dispute over the facts of the filibusterer's life in over 140 years, is, like Higashi, interested in the film's success in engaging larger historiographical issues of motivation, meaning, explanation, and interpretation, and suggests that in some ways the film does a better job of dealing with such topics as Walker's sense of mission ("democratic imperialism"), the relationship between his sublimated sexuality and his will to dominate, and his stance on slavery, than much professional historical scholarship.

This volume raises questions that historians need to seriously ponder. Is it a mistake to make factual inaccuracy the chief criterion for judging the merits of a historical film? Is there a "symbolic historical truth" that can be conveyed as effectively through film (or novels) as through analytical works of historical scholarship?- Should we treat films as vehicles of historical representation equal in status to the monograph or historical synthesis? I hope that this exceptionally important book will provoke intense debate and discussion.

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**Citation**: Steven Mintz. Review of Rosenstone, Robert A., ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past.* H-Film, H-Net Reviews. March, 1996.
**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=310

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