

Chapter 1

History on film

This shouldn't be a book. You need more than words on a page to understand how film presents the world of the past. You need moving images on a screen and music and sound effects as well. Words aren't fully up to the task of comprehending the film experience. But to agree to contribute to a series of books devoted to historical thought and practice in the early twentieth century is to confine oneself to the limitations of words on the page. And to read the book is to agree to share that limitation. But let us never forget, you and I, that somewhere outside the confining walls of these words lies a world of colour, movement, sound, light, and life, a world on the screen that points towards, refers to, represents – let us not worry the precise language right here, at the outset, we shall get to that in time – to a realm of the past, a vanished world in which people made wars and love, built things and tore them down, suffered trauma and felt joy, identified themselves as male or female (or both or something in between), engaged in personal or class struggle, hoped and dreamed, led revolutions or followed leaders, lynched other men, prayed to God, watched their children grow, buried their loved ones – did, in short, all the things you and I will do or see done or hear about during our own lifetimes.

It is not a real world, of course but then again, neither is that other historical world, the one conjured up for us in the textbooks we endured in grammar and high school and university. The world that came to us in lectures and lists of dates, in paragraphs memorized from founding documents, in papers we ourselves (at least those of us who went to graduate school) had to write on the origins of parliament, or the terror during the French Revolution, or the ideas of some Greek philosopher, or the exploits of this emperor or that king, or the discoveries of one intrepid voyager or another, or the growth of consciousness of some peasant woman in a Balkan village during early modern times. We take

this to be history, but let us never forget that these are only words on the page, words that got there because of certain rules for finding evidence and producing more words of our own and accepting the notion that they tell us about what is important in the vanished land of the past.

This opening section, then, clearly involves my thesis, one I will argue in the pages ahead – that the familiar, solid world of history on the page and the equally familiar but more ephemeral world history on the screen are similar in at least two ways: they refer to actual events, moments, and movements from the past, and at the same time they partake of the unreal and the fictional, since both are made out of sets of conventions we have developed for talking about where we human beings have come from (and also where we are and where we think we are going, though this is something most people concerned with the past don't always admit). My aim here is not only to get you to see the parallels, but also to show how that vanished world can be, and has been, represented in film to convince you that the world of history on the screen is one worth attending to, one that can render an important past, do a kind of history that is complex enough so that we must learn how to read it. The burden of this book will be just that – to begin to learn how to read and understand this (relatively) new, visual word of the past. (I am, of course, writing this introduction after the chapters have been completed, so for me the learning has already taken place.)

To accept film, especially the dramatic feature film, as being able to convey a kind of serious history (with a capital H), runs against just about everything we have learned since our earliest days in school. History is not just words on the page, but on pages which are for the most part contained in thick tomes whose weight and bulk help to underscore the solidity of the lessons they teach. And film, why that's just entertainment, a diversion from the serious business of life, one of the places we go in an attempt to escape the sorts of social and political problems which fill the pages of our newspapers and those same history books. Sure, films set stories in the past, but these are romances, simple-minded tales of good guys, bad guys, and beautiful heroines. They have nothing to do with the serious world of events and developments described in books. Motion pictures are all about making a reputation for the director and the stars and money for the production companies. For them, history is just another tool to sell tickets.

The 'we' I have been using here is meant in at least two different ways: as the 'we' of the history profession, those of us trained to research and report on our findings about the past, and the simpler 'we' of you and I, author and reader, who are rather more alike than different in our approaches to understanding the world. In the pages that follow I want to explain my ideas to you about why

and how the dramatic history film can relate to and even do something we might label 'history' (in truth, we need another word for how film handles the past, but alas we seem stuck with this one, and so throughout this book I will use the term 'history film' for works which consciously try to recreate the past) – at least if by that term we mean something that seriously attempts to make meaning out of the traces left to us from that vanished world. At the same time I wish to share with you part of the personal experiences that have become part of my arguments. This will not be (I trust) autobiographical musings simply to indulge my ego, but rather to help give some insight into the process of how a historian's ideas can develop and change. How I could go from my training as a *Dragnet* historian ('just the facts, m'am') to a person who has been labelled a 'post-modern' historian, one of those folk who, in the eyes of some critics, are involved in the apparently gleeful task of what one staunch traditionalist has called in the title of his book, *The Killing of History* (Windschuttle 1996).

We who are called 'post-modernist historians' certainly don't see ourselves as involved in a pursuit aimed at such dire consequences. Rather, we are (some of us) engaged in at attempt to bring the practice of history kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. We want our deep interest in and caring for the past to be expressed in forms congenial to both a contemporary sensibility and to intellectual systems consonant with our own era. Almost 40 years ago, the brilliant theorist, Hayden White, famously told us that the much vaunted 'art' of history consisted in books that were written in the style of the nineteenth-century British novel. Where, he lamented, were the works which matched the moods of twentieth-century life and sensibility, where were the examples of, say, 'surrealist, expressionist, or existentialist historiography' (White 1978: 43–49). Four decades later, a small but growing band of historians have begun to answer White's implicit call for different forms of historical narrative. Some of us – Richard Price, Greg Denning, James Goodman, Simon Schama, and yours truly, to name but a few – have published books that incorporate contemporary literary moves such as the self-reflexive, the mosaic, the pastiche, the multiple voices of the carnivalesque (Rosenstone 2001a). Many of these innovators have published books or printed essays in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, the only publication in the profession which encourages experimental forms of history writing.

The desire to express our relationship to the past by using contemporary forms of expression, as well as the desire to appeal to a contemporary sensibility, sooner or later has to point us in the direction of the visual media. First the motion picture, and then later its electronic offspring, television, became sometime during in the twentieth century the chief medium for carrying the stories our culture tells itself – be these set in the present or the past, be

they factual, fictional, or a combination of the two. Blockbuster history films, mini-series, documentaries, docu-dramas – all these genres are increasingly important in our relationship to the past and to our understanding of history. To leave them out of the equation when we think of the meaning of the past is to condemn ourselves to ignore the way a huge segment of the population has come to understand the events and people that comprise history.

One indication of the importance of the visual media are the huge public controversies that regularly erupt over history films. In the United States, Oliver Stone's *JFK* was bitterly attacked by the press and politicians even before it got to the screen, while a 2003 mini-series on Ronald Reagan aroused so much pre-airing opposition that it was moved from a network to a cable channel. In France, Marcel Ophüls' three-and-a-half-hour documentary about French collaboration with the Nazis, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, was kept off the government channel which funded it, and when the *The Battle for Algiers*, banned for two decades, finally opened in the 1980s, right-wing hoodlums trashed some movie theatres where it was playing. In Germany, *The Nazi Girl* was denounced for showing that a town's leaders were complicit with the Nazi régime; in Japan, major distributors refused to carry *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On* after a public controversy arose over its depiction of cannibalism among starving soldiers on Pacific Islands during World War II; and in Canada a huge debate among ex-military personnel and the general public followed the airing of a Canadian Broadcasting System documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*, over the behaviour of that country's military personnel in the Second World War (Bercuson and Wise 1994).

The importance of the media also shows in the way certain works are praised for their positive contributions. When screened in Germany, the American mini-series, *Holocaust* first caused an uproar, as if the nation's history was being stolen by foreigners. Yet soon enough, the work was being credited with opening a debate over the meaning and legacy of the Third Reich, leading to new scholarship on the period, and spurring the creation of films by directors of the New German Cinema, who explored and presented a variety of perspectives on the Nazi régime. In Argentina, the dramatic feature, *The Official Story*, publicized the case of *los desaparecidos*, those who had been 'disappeared' by the military régime, and provided support to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a movement of women seeking their vanished sons and daughters. In the United States, the controversy surrounding *JFK* led to the opening of a Congressional inquiry into the Warren Committee's Report on the assassination of the President.

These examples (and one could produce more of them) of controversies or contributions point to something more widespread and more deeply-seated

in our psyches – that history films, even when we know they are fanciful or ideological renditions of history, have an effect on the way we see the past. In most cases, a subtle effect, but an effect none the less. You can hear it in the voice of an African American undergraduate who, after seeing *Glory*, the story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, a much decorated Black unit in the Civil War, says to me with some emotion, 'I never realized we help to free ourselves'. Or from the Armenian student who, after being exposed to *Ararat*, Atom Egoyan's complex and convoluted rendition of the Turkish massacre of Armenians during World War I and its lingering effect on subsequent generations, seems to stand a little taller as he says, 'At last our story has been told'. Or even from the remaining band of Schindler's people, who joyfully endorsed Steven Spielberg's depiction of their lives during the Nazi period, at the moment when some critics were savaging the film for being sentimental and atypical of the Holocaust experience (on the grounds that few Jews had a Schindler to save them).

What I am getting at is this: something more is going on with the history film than those of us trained as historians and keepers of the flame are likely to admit. The kind of history we teach in our classrooms sets the norms for almost everyone else – film critics, reviewers for newspapers and magazines, politicians, pundits, TV talking heads, students of cinema studies, high-school teachers, students, and the general public (at least as sampled in 'Letters-to-the-editor' columns). We see history (with a capital) as a particular kind of practice, one that insists on a certain kind of historical truth and tends to exclude others. We may pay lip service to the oral tradition, to good historical museums or especially noteworthy exhibitions, even to the occasional film (usually a documentary). But we have little doubt that the truth of the past resides in an empirically-based discourse, one that developed over the last two centuries, was drummed into us in graduate school, and is constantly reinforced by the norms of the profession.

My aim in what follows is not at all to dispute the great strengths of traditional written history. Nor do I mean to ignore the gains of the history profession over the centuries and, more particularly, the creativity of the last fifty years, when revolutions in research methodologies have made for a broad and complex view of humanity, undreamed of by earlier generations of historians. One result of such endeavours is that now we can hear the voices of those who were for so long silent – women, subalterns, slaves, workers, farmers, country folk, commoners, sexual minorities. Now we also have a chance not just to hear these folk, but to see them as well. To say we can do so is to breach a long-time practice which has come to seem carved in stone – the notion that a truthful past can only be told in words on the page. It's a risky

business, for to change the medium of history is to change the message as well. Plato suggested this more than two millennia ago in saying that when the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake. The mode in this case, the past told in moving images, doesn't do away with the old forms of history – it adds to the language in which the past can speak. How to begin thinking about this, how to understand that language, how to see where history on film sits in relation to written history, how to understand what film adds to our understanding of the past – the posing of such questions, the problems of dealing with them, and some (very tentative) answers are what will fill the pages of the chapters to come.

Questions about the truths of history, or about in what sense history can at all be called 'true', and what that word means with regard to historical discourse, have been on my mind since the early 1990s. Such questions were raised in part by an involvement with projects in the visual media, in part by an encounter with the world of historical theory. They were certainly not with me in graduate school. We students in the 1960s were taught how to find those facts and then use them to create narratives about the past, narratives whose underlying truths we did not question. Never did we learn anything about what might creep into those stories because we were writing a literary form that had its own demands. Never did we learn that the kind of history we were doing was only one way of approaching the truth of the past. We knew that what we had been taught to write was the real history. Certainly we would have been shocked if anyone had said that truths about the past could be expressed on screen, in film or television.

My first involvement with film came when directors decided to make films on the topics of my first two scholarly books – *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (1969) and *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (1975) – and asked me to participate in the process. For the modest (\$250,000, largely funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities) feature-length documentary on the Lincoln Battalion, *The Good Fight* (1983), I both served as an adviser and wrote the narration. For the big budget (\$45 million, probably the most expensive movie made up till then), Academy Award winning drama, *Reds* (1982), I was unofficial historical consultant for seven years of pre-production and then on the payroll during the year of filming. The experiences working on those productions taught me a good deal about the difference between constructing a world in the visual media and on the page, yet my interest in the visual media as a way of conveying history predated these involvements. Something must have attuned me to the increasing role of the media in our culture, the fact that the world past and present more and more comes to us in the form of images, for I created

a history on film course in 1975, some time before my connection with either project.

My aim in teaching the course, as in my subsequent research, has been to try to understand where films are situated with regard to other kinds of historical discourse. To answer the question: just what, if anything, do history films convey about the past, and how do they convey it? Not that I would have phrased the issues that way when I began. My first essay on the topic resulted from an invitation by a historical journal to take a look at *Reds* from the dual perspective of both insider and outsider (Rosenstone 1982). The essay turned out to be both an appreciation and a critique, one based on the reactions of a (rather) traditional historian who focused on details and themes yet ignored what later became so obvious to me – that words and images work to express and explain the world in somewhat different ways. That a film will never be able to do precisely what a book can do, and vice versa. That history presented in these two different media would ultimately have to be judged by different criteria.

Such ideas developed over the course of a decade. During that period I wrote a number of essays in response to calls from conference organizers and journal editors. The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time when discussions about history and film began to surface in the profession. Most historians tended to approach the history film in the same simple-minded, *ad hoc* way as I did in my first essay – often trying to assess why a particular film did such violence to a topic without considering the nature of the medium or its possibilities. My own work turned slowly towards more theoretical concerns – in part because of my simultaneous involvement with another historical narrative, a work on the topic of American sojourners in nineteenth-century Japan. After I had narrowed my focus to three emblematic figures – a missionary, a scientist, and a writer – composition proved to be difficult, for the straightforward style used in my first two books was not letting me get close enough to my subjects to render their days, the powerful and jarring experiences and encounters, the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that had so affected their attitudes and lives (Rosenstone 1988). In my search for a new, more expressive way of writing the past, I for the first time encountered the post structuralist critique of historical practice one finds in the work of such critics as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. Their writings provided an intellectual underpinning for my studies of film, for they allowed me to see the limitations of traditional history and thus suggested the possibilities of representing the past in new and different ways – one of those being with the visual media.

It took more than a decade of thinking and writing about history film to work my way towards the simple insight that underlies the chapters of this

book: film makers can be and already are historians (some of them), but of necessity *the rules of engagement of their works with the stuff of the past are and must be different from those that govern written history*. The breakthrough for me came with *Walker* (1987), directed by Alex Cox, a little known film based on the life of William Walker, an American freebooter who in 1855 led a troop of 58 armed men into Nicaragua to support one side in an ongoing Civil War. A year later, Walker became president of the country, which he ruled for ten months, until the combined armies of Honduras and Guatemala defeated his men and led to his final gesture – torching Granada, then reputed to be the most beautiful city in the Americas. The film, *Walker*, told this story as a kind of absurdist, black comedy, full of overt anachronisms (computers, Mercedes automobiles and *Time* magazine all put in a brief appearance) and outrageous humour. And yet when I went back and read everything written on the topic since the 1850s in English, Spanish, and French (seven books and numerous chapters, essays and articles), it turned out that the film not only gave a stunningly believable portrait of the democrat as imperialist, but also provided a provocative interpretation of the man and his exploits that could stand among all the others. *Walker* clearly situated itself within and commented upon the ongoing discourse surrounding Walker (and American imperialism), and in its aesthetic, its notes of dark absurdity, added something to that tradition (Rosenstone 1995b).

Accepting the notion that film makers can be historians meant sloughing off lessons that were learned in graduate school and reinforced by the gatekeepers of the profession. Not that those rules are all that clear or fixed, but certain practices are. Film, particularly the dramatic film, makes special demands on the traditional historian in that it goes beyond (as theorists argue all historians do) *constituting* its facts, that is, creating facts by picking out certain traces of the past (people, events, moments) and highlighting them as important and worthy of inclusion in a narrative, and instead indulges in *inventing* facts, that is, making up traces of the past which are then highlighted as important and worthy of inclusion. Without dwelling at length on what I will explore in the chapters to come, let me only suggest here that ultimately I think there are two ways of looking at the inventions of characters, dialogue, and incidents that are an inevitable part of the dramatic history film and not unknown in the documentary. You may see the contribution of such works in terms not of the specific details they present but, rather, in the overall sense of the past they convey, the rich images and visual metaphors they provide to us for thinking historically. You may also see the history film as part of a separate realm of representation and discourse, one not meant to provide literal truths about the past (as if our written history can provide literal truths) but metaphoric truths

which work, to a large degree, as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse.

The notion of seeing the history film in relation to the larger discourse is central to the argument of the chapters that follow. Indeed, it is, I think, the unique contribution of this book. This approach is also why, though all of my examples come from motion pictures, the arguments made here are equally applicable to history made for television. Whether the screen is large or small, the central questions approached in this book are the same: How do you tell the past? How do you render that vanished world of events and people in the present? How can we (try to) understand the human generations who came before us? Such questions ensure that what you have here is different from a work on the history film by a scholar in cinema or cultural studies, or by a historical theorist. It accounts for the fact that while the argument utilizes both film theory and historical theory, it does so in a manner different from academics in those fields. In what follows you will find some detailed analyses of individual sequences, but only insofar as they work to illuminate a historical vision. Similarly, while certain ideas of historical theory underlie my argument, they remain in the background while I focus on not just how the stories of the past are told, but also on their contents.

In terms of both structure and contents, this book approaches its topics in a rather *ad hoc* way. So little has been written on the history film, that one has the burden (and liberty) of devising an approach to the topic. Since this is a field still in the making, my chapters are meant to be suggestive and provocative rather than definitive. After Chapter 2, an introduction to and brief overview of the development of the field and its issues, each subsequent chapter focuses on a particular topic and undertakes a detailed analysis of one or more films. Chapter 3 deals with the most common standard or mainstream historical drama (focus on *Glory*), and Chapter 4 with its opposite, the innovative or opposition drama (*October*). Chapter 5 is devoted to the documentary (focus on films about the Spanish Civil War, including *The Spanish Civil War*, *The Good Fight*, *Mourir à Madrid*, and *El Perro Negro*), and Chapter 6 to that most popular form, the biopic, or as I prefer to call it, the biofilm (three films about John Reed, *Reds*, *Red Bells*, and *Red - Insurgent Mexico*). Chapter 7 raises the issue of in what sense is the filmmaker a historian (Oliver Stone, especially his Vietnam films), and Chapter 8 exemplifies how a group of works devoted to a single topic can engage the larger discourse (eight films on the holocaust). Chapter 9 sums up my arguments and attempts to make a case for film as a new form of historical thinking.

Like historical narrative itself, my way of dealing with this topic also tends towards the *ad hoc*. What I have learned over the years is that to find the his-

torical meaning of a film (or a book), you must work at a certain distance from it. Getting in too close, falling in love with the endless details of an individual image or sequence, and you are likely to lose a sense of the larger historical picture or argument. Getting too far away, backing off into theoretical considerations, and the details that constitute the stuff of the past go out of focus. My method is to work at a kind of middle distance, occasionally moving in for a close-up or a detailed analysis, occasionally stepping back into the realm of theory, but always returning to a position from which one can see and understand that the work would not exist except for the traces of particular historical characters and events about which much is already known. This approach may seem a lack of method to those more theoretically trained, but in truth it is like history, itself, for ultimately no single agreed-upon method has ever been devised for rendering the past.

Chapter 2

To see the past

To see the past. To watch history unfold before our eyes. To have a machine that lets us view the deeds of our forebears and the major events that shaped our world. Such a desire no doubt precedes the invention by Louis and Auguste Lumière of that most elegant and revolutionary piece of equipment, the cinematograph. Just four years after the brothers held their first public screening of short, actuality films in the basement of a Paris café, George Melies was in 1900 staging recent historical scenes such as *The Dreyfus Affair* for the camera. Within a decade, films set in the past – long lost works we know today mostly by their titles, *The Assassination of the Duc of Guise* (1908) from France, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1908) and *The Capture of Rome* (1905) from Italy, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) from the United States – were being distributed around the world. In countries as diverse in culture and history as Japan, Russia, England and Denmark, some of the earliest dramatic films (often based upon stage plays) involved the depiction of historical events and characters. Long before cinema reached its twentieth birthday in the mid-teens of the twentieth century, the 'historical' was a regular part of screen fare.

Early on in the history of the new medium, a few people saw part of its promise as just this ability to make us see the past. A French drama critic in 1908 described the aspirations of film as not only the ability to reproduce the contemporary world, but also 'to animate the past, to reconstruct the great events of history through the performance of the actor and the evocation of atmosphere and milieu' (Tredell 2002: 15). D.W. Griffith, director of one of the first major and certainly the most controversial of history films, *Birth of a Nation*, was a virtual missionary on the topic. In 1915 he claimed that the greatest contribution of the motion picture had been 'the treating of historical

subjects', and he liked to quote 'educators' who had told him (or so he said) that a film 'can impress upon a people as much of the truth of history in an evening, as many months of study will accomplish' (Silva 1971: 98, 59).

More than a century after the birth of cinema, historians, critics, reviewers, and the general public still wonder if (indeed, most doubt that) this promise of film as history has been fulfilled. For those who care about the topic, the important questions raised by the telling of the past in the visual media have yet to be answered – or even really asked. Do such depictions really count as history? Do they add to or detract from our knowledge of the past? Can any depiction of the past on the screen be taken seriously? Does any film count as 'historical thinking' or contribute to something we might call 'historical understanding'? Can any such visual work be properly labelled with that capitalized term, History?

Attempts to answer such questions will occupy the rest of this book. At the outset, it is important to realize that this sort of question would not have been asked for most of the 100+ years that movies have existed. Yet now, early in the twenty-first century, answering them has become an issue of some importance. Each day it becomes clearer to even the most academic of historians that the visual media are the chief conveyor of public history in our culture. That for every person who reads a book on a historical topic about which a film has been made, especially a popular film such as *Schindler's List* (1993), many millions of people are likely to encounter that same past on the screen. Rather than dismissing such works – as many professional historians and journalists continue to do – as mere 'fiction' or 'entertainment', or lamenting their obvious 'inaccuracies', it seems more judicious to admit that we live in a world shaped, even in its historical consciousness, by the visual media, and to investigate exactly how films work to create a historical world. This means focusing on what we might call their rules of engagement with the traces of the past, and investigating the codes, conventions, and practices by which they bring history to the screen.

At the outset, some background is in order. So are a few analytical distinctions. The early dramatic 'historicals' were not meant as serious investigations into the meaning of past events. They were brief, often no more than theatrical tableaux, national moments of a sort that the audience was bound to recognize – Lincoln at Gettysburg, Dreyfuss on Devil's Island, Marat lying dead in the bath tub. But even as such works grew in length during the second decade of cinema, they failed to become serious about the kinds of questions that usually concern historians. Rather than attempting to understand or explain events or movements or people, they tended to be romances, 'costume dramas' which used (and misused) the past as a mere setting for tales of adventure and love.

Not only has this kind of 'historical' been a part of virtually every national cinema, it has become a tradition, or genre, that continues up to this day in such works as *Titanic* and *Gladiator*.

Popular as they are, such costume dramas are not the only kind of film set in the past. Since the late teens there has grown up another tradition of historical, one that does not hesitate to pose serious questions of, and make serious interpretations about, the meaning of the past. Without contesting questions of precedence or insisting on a precise lineage, let me suggest that among the first of these, certainly in the United States, was Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Today one must be cautious in lauding this film because it is so overtly racist, so overflowing with vicious stereotypes of African Americans as barbaric, uneducated, and uncultured. Yet its depiction of the American Civil War, its view of the South as suffering under the depredations of ex-slaves and carpetbaggers during reconstruction, its exaltation of the Ku Klux Klan as heroes in a racial conflict, and its (literally) dreadful stereotypes of African Americans were (alas) direct reflections of the major interpretations of the era in which it was produced – not just the beliefs of the citizen in the street but the wisdom of the most powerful school of American historians of that era. When the film was released, Woodrow Wilson, whose historical works are cited as one of its sources, was residing in the White House, and on 18 February 1915, the director screened *Birth of the Nation* in the presidential mansion. A Southerner by birth, Wilson was deeply moved by the film and his response to it – quoted second-hand but accepted by historians as more or less authentic – both suggests something about the prevailing historical wisdom and proved to be prophetic for the future role of the historical film: 'It's like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true' (Schickel 1984: 270).

A decade after this morally and politically regressive masterpiece, Russian film maker Sergei Eisenstein began to use film to provide the fledgling Soviet Union with its own history and foundation myths – the two notions being in Russia, as in all countries, closely intertwined. In an effort to create a new and revolutionary theory and practice of film for a new and revolutionary régime, Eisenstein created a kind of montage that helped him to construct epic works which promoted the twin-edged theme of the masses entering history and history entering the masses. His films of the 1920s feature no heroes or even individual characters, save for the few who (much the same as in a written narrative history) rise out of the crowd for a moment to articulate an idea or symbolize an event. The first of these, and his acknowledged masterpiece, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), leaned a long way towards myth as it took a minor incident from the revolution of 1905, a mutiny on a Black Sea battleship, and turned it

into a stunning metaphor meant to show how the proletariat can overturn oppression and make a revolution. Three years later, his film to honour the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, *October* (1928) – for all its invented interludes such as the storming of the Winter Palace – stayed close to the details of the so-called Ten Days That Shook the World, even as it downplayed the contribution of both Lenin and his party. Though labelled propaganda by many, and full of tropes that were (and are) unusual in a historical work – humour, repetition, visual metaphor, mini-essays, the poetry of movement – *October* manages to provide an overall interpretation of its subject that is not so different from those argued by major historians of the revolution (as I will show in some detail in Chapter 3).

The Bolshevik Revolution also provided the topic for what is probably the first of the important history documentaries, Esfir Shub's compilation film, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927). Desiring to depict the birth of the new régime in which she lived, Shub painstakingly exhumed and catalogued the extensive home movies of Czar Nicholas, then intercut sequences of royal boating parties, croquet matches, and religious rituals with actuality (news-reel) footage of farm labour, factories, politicians, cavalry on parade, soldiers marching, artillery firing, and revolutionary street demonstrations. Under-scoring these images were strong inter-titles – a close shot of a munitions assembly line followed by: 'The hands of workers preparing the death of their brothers' – a comment that can be interpreted as either propagandistic or historical, but is really both at the same time (Roberts 1999: 50–72).

Griffith, Eisenstein, and Shub may be considered the originators (or, to avoid arguments over precedence, at least very early practitioners) of the three types of arguably serious history films that have been produced ever since: the mainstream drama (and its longer sibling the television mini-series or documentary), the opposition or innovative history, and the compilation documentary. The American created what we might call the 'standard' work of history on film, the 'realistic' (melo) drama that depicts the plight of heroes, heroines and villains caught up in the sweep of huge historical events, men and women whose stories show both the impact of such events on individual lives and, through the figure we know as synecdoche, serve to exemplify larger historical themes – in this case, supposedly how Northern carpetbaggers manipulated ignorant ex-slaves to oppress and exploit the conquered South, which was happily saved from destruction by the bravery of the Ku Klux Klan. Shub is equally 'realistic' as she edits together footage of actual historical moments to create a sense of the past 'as it really was', or at least as some of its moments looked through the lens of a camera from a particular point of view. Eisenstein, by contrast, makes no attempt at anything we might wish to call 'realism'. His aesthetic and style make it impossible to see the screen as some sort of direct

window onto a past reality. Through a refusal to focus on individuals, radical editing techniques (four times as many cuts as in the standard film of the time), and overt visual metaphors (a screen full of raised sickles represents the peasantry; raised rifles stand in for the army; turning wheels mean a motorcycle brigade; a statue being torn down indicates the fall of the Czar; the same statue reassembling itself suggests the provisional government has taken over the role of Czar), a work like *October* clearly reveals that it is constructing rather than reflecting a particular vision of the past.

With their varying approaches to history on the screen, each of these types of film makes somewhat different assumptions about historical reality, about what is important for us to know of the past. These, along with the kind of world each form creates on the screen, will be elaborated upon and analyzed in later chapters. Here it should be enough to point out that the *historical assumptions* of such works do not change with later alterations or improvements in the technology of the medium itself. Adding spoken dialogue in the late nineteenth twenties, improving upon sound effects, moving from black and white to colour film, enlarging and widening the screen, introducing surround sound, digitalizing the image or shrinking it to fit the size of a television monitor in a living room – none of these changes does anything to alter the kind of historical thinking we encounter in the visual media. The real differences lie between the three kinds of history films. All insist, as they must, on the primacy of the image, but each utilizes images in a different way to create historical meaning.

The dramatic feature film, directed by the descendants of Griffith, has been and continues to be, in terms of audience and influence, the most important form of history in the visual media. Everywhere in the world, movies mean dramatic feature films, with the documentary consigned to a marginal status and the innovative film hardly recognized at all, except among small circles of devotees. This pattern certainly holds true for the 'historical'. Works such as *Gandhi* (1982), *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1983), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Underground* (1998) and *Frida* (2002) reach a wide audience and sometimes become the focus of public debate about history, a debate that often swirls around the issue of whether or not the film got the facts right. As I shall later argue, the accuracy of fact is hardly the first or even most important question to ask about the kind of historical thinking that takes place on the screen.

Whether the mainstream drama focuses on documented people or creates fictional characters and sets them amidst some important event or movement (most films contain both actual and invented characters), the historical thinking involved is much the same: individuals (one, two, or a small group) are at the centre of the historical process. Through their eyes and lives, adventures

and loves, we see strikes, invasions, revolutions, dictatorships, ethnic conflict, scientific experiments, legal battles, political movements, holocausts. But we do more than see: we feel as well. Using image, music, and sound effect along with the spoken (and shouted, whispered, hummed, and cooed) word, the dramatic film aims directly at the emotions. It does not simply provide an image of the past, it wants you to feel strongly about that image – specifically, about the characters involved in the historical situations that it depicts. Portraying the world in the present tense, the dramatic feature plunges you into the midst of history, attempting to destroy the distance between you and the past and to obliterate – at least while you are watching – your ability to think about what you are seeing. Film does more than want to teach the lesson that history hurts; it wants you, the viewer, to experience the hurt (and pleasures) of the past.

The major way we experience – or imagine we experience – the past on the screen is obviously through our eye. We see bodies, faces, landscapes, buildings, animals, tools, implements, weapons, clothing, furniture, all the material objects that belong to a culture at a given historical period, objects that are used and misused, ignored and cherished, objects that sometimes can help to define livelihoods, identities, and destinies. Such objects, which the camera demands in order to make a scene look 'real', and which written history can easily, and usually does, ignore, are part of the texture and the factuality of the world on film. What in written history Roland Barthes once called 'reality effects', and dismissed as mere notations, achieve on the screen a certain, important 'thingness' (Ankersmit 1994: 139–41b). Because they tell us much about the people, processes, and times, 'reality effects' in film become facts under description, important elements in the creation of historical meaning.

The ability to elicit strong, immediate emotion, the emphasis on the visual and aural, and the resulting embodied quality of the film experience in which we seem to live through events we witness on the screen – all these are no doubt the practices that most clearly distinguish the history film from history on the page, especially that produced by academics. By focusing on the experience of individuals or small groups, film situates itself closer to biography, micro-history, or popular narrative history than to the academic variety, and while each of these three genres has occasionally been criticized as not sufficiently 'historical' by some of the professoriat, each has also won enough supporters to qualify as an accepted form for rendering out relationship to, and increasing our understanding of, the past.

Other aspects of the dramatic film seem much closer to the common practice of historians. Like the academic, the film maker tells a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, one that includes a strong moral flavour. Like the academic, the film maker's story is almost always embedded in a progressive

view of the past, and this is true even with the such unlikely subjects as slavery, the Holocaust, or the mass atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. Like the academic, the film maker can maintain such a viewpoint only through the very act of telling the past: whatever humanity has lost – runs the implicit message – is now redeemed by the creation of this work, by the witnessing of the historical wrongs that this film allows us to share (Rosenstone 1995a: 54–61).

The documentary film, considered as a mode of historical understanding, shares a great deal with the dramatic feature: it tells a linear and moral story, often deals (especially in recent years) with large topics through the experience of a small group of participants, spends a good deal of time on the thugginess of objects, and aims to stir the emotions not only through the selection, framing, and juxtaposition of still and moving images, but also by employing a soundtrack overflowing with language, sound effects, and music of the era being depicted. Unlike the dramatic film, the majority of its images are not staged for the camera (though occasionally some are), but are gathered from museums and from photo and film archives – a major exception being the ‘talking heads’, contemporary interviews with participants in the historical events or experts, often professors of history, whose words are used to give shape to and create the broader meaning of the past.

The implicit claim of the documentary is that it gives us direct access to history. That its historical images, through their indexical relationship to actual people, landscapes, and objects, can provide a virtually unmediated experience of the past – certainly more direct than the created past of the feature film, which must stage scenes to film them. But this is no more than a kind of mystification. Except in its contemporary interviews, the documentary, unlike the dramatic feature, speaks with some regularity not in the present tense but in a specifically visual tense we might dub ‘nostalgia’, a tense whose emotional appeal can pull in a huge audience, such as that which followed Ken Burns’ series, *The Civil War*, which originally appeared on the Public Broadcast System, or that for his subsequent series on baseball and jazz. These works overflow with old photos, actuality footage, and clips from old feature films – all of which, by their original aesthetic, their deterioration over the years, and their reminder of what once was or wasn’t there, come bathed in a warm feeling about how times have changed, how much we have gained, how much we have lost. The people in those photos and film clips did not find – as we do – each other’s hair or clothing styles quaint, or the furniture they sit on, the buildings they front, the tools and weapons they hold, old fashioned or outmoded. Such images can never bring a direct experience of history, for the intervening years always intrude too much upon the viewer’s consciousness.

The opposition or innovative historical film constitutes a baggy category, one that contains a wide variety of theories, ideologies, and aesthetic approaches with both potential and real impact upon historical thought. These are largely works of opposition to what we may designate as ‘Hollywood’, works consciously created to contest the seamless stories of heroes and victims that make up the mainstream feature and the standard documentary. They are, at the same time, part of a search for a new vocabulary in which to render the past on the screen, an effort to make history (depending upon the film) more complex, interrogative, and self-conscious, a matter of tough, even unanswerable questions rather than of slick stories. The best of these films propose new strategies for dealing with the traces of the past, strategies that point towards new forms of historical thought, forms that need not be limited to the screen, but might, with necessary alterations due to the medium, be carried back to the printed page.

So diverse and hidden (since few are popular) are these kinds of films, that here I can do no more than point to a few and suggest how they attempt to rethink history on the screen. Eisenstein has had a few heirs, film makers (mostly from the Third World) who create dramatic features which place the collective or the masses rather than the individual at the centre of the historical process. Brazil’s Carlos Diegues does this and then something even more radical in *Quilombo* (1984), a history of Palmyra, a long-lived seventeenth-century runaway slave society, which is portrayed in song and dance (samba) by actors costumed as if partaking in Carnival. A similar attack on a ‘realistic’ portrayal of historical events has been pursued by other film makers – Ousmane Sembene in *Ceddo* (1977), a highly stylized story of religious and tribal upheaval in Senegal; Luis Valdez in *Zoot Suit* (1980), which uses song and dance and a mythical central character, El Pachuco, the spirit of the Barrio, to portray Anglo-Mexican tensions and conflict in World War II Los Angeles; Alex Cox, in his anachronism-laden (Mercedes automobiles, helicopters, and computer terminals in the 1850s) black comedy, *Walker* (1987). Other critiques of the ‘period look’ of film have come in documentaries – Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), a work on the Holocaust that contains no images from the 1940s, or Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, a Film from Germany* (1977), which uses puppets, sets, historical objects, actors, and back-projection to create the Third Reich on what is clearly shown to be a sound stage.

Such staples of film as the dramatic story and the heightening of emotion have also been called into question. In a series of consciously de-dramatized works – among them *The Age of Iron* (1964), *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966), and *The Age of the Medici* (1972) – Roberto Rossellini, probably the most prolific director of historical films in the history of the medium, uses non-actors to

halingly deliver lines which are far closer in form to lectures than dialogue, and lets the 'reality effect' of sumptuous costumes and settings carry the argument for his highly materialist interpretation of the past. History as a single story with a clear (moral) conclusion can also be contested. In *Far From Poland* (1984), a work that mixes documentary and drama, director Jill Godmilow presents a history of the Solidarity Movement through competing voices and images that refuse to coalesce into a single story or meaning. Using a similar mixture of genres, Trinh T. Minh-ha, in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) dispenses with linear story in favour of incident, pastiche, rumination; the very form of the film is historically unsettling, a kind of theme and variation that is signalled in the opening sequence, a dance in which a group of women combine and re-combine in patterns that repeat and vary in endless combinations.

Works by Godmilow, Trinh, and Syberberg (along with a number of other films I have examined elsewhere, see Rosenstone 1995a: 198–225) belong to a small body of films about the past which, more than almost anything done on the printed page, would properly fit into a category labeled post-modern history – at least as defined by theorists of the postmodern. These are histories which do some or all of the following: foreground their own construction; tell the past self-reflexively and from a multiplicity of viewpoints; forsake normal story development, or problematize the stories they recount; utilize humour, parody, and absurdism as modes of presenting the past; refuse to insist on a coherent or single meaning of events; indulge in fragmentary or poetic knowledge; and never forget that the present moment is the site of all past representation. By using such offbeat tropes and techniques, these works issue a sharp challenge to both the practices of the mainstream drama and documentary and the traditional claims of empirical history – a challenge paralleled to that issued by post-structuralist theorists, only here the challenge is embodied (or envisioned) in works which combine both a new theory and a practice of history.

Film-makers create films, not theories about film, let alone theories about history, which means it is to their finished productions rather than their stated intentions that we usually must go to understand the historical thinking we find on the screen. To this general rule, there are some exceptions. Eisenstein, a major theorist, does occasionally invoke the Marxist dialectic in reference to history, but only in passing; clearly more interested in notions of montage or what he called 'intellectual' cinema, the Russian never does any sustained explication of the relationship between his historical works and the past events they evoke or describe. Roberto Rossellini, whose more than a dozen films

about the past may be the most sustained historical oeuvre of any director, provided contradictory ideas about his portrayal of history without ever bothering to resolve them. On the one hand, he invokes notions of the didactic film, one which can objectively describe the past and create a direct, unmediated vision; on the other, he insists that his works are based upon a moral vision, without admitting that such a moral vision inevitably creates a point of view which cannot be objective. More recent directors concerned with history have overtly admitted its subjective components. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, director in the 1970s of several films dealing with the Third Reich and its legacy, did not hesitate to explain, 'We make a particular film about a particular time from our point of view'. Oliver Stone, who in half-a-dozen films has charted aspects of American society from the Vietnam war into the 1980s, initially claimed to be creating history, but then retreated under attacks from the press, particularly about *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1998), to an extreme subjectivist position, asking: 'What is history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire'. (Stone 2000: 47)

For any sustained thinking about history and film, one must turn to the work of a handful of professional historians, since all but a few academics have considered the topic outside the pale of their interests or duties. Most historians would probably like to turn Oliver Stone's words against historical films – and see them as a bunch of (mostly untrue) stories that directors put upon the screen. Such a distaste for film has been possible because for most of the twentieth-century historians saw their own work as a thoroughly empirical undertaking, a human science that properly made certain kinds of truth claims about the past, claims that could hardly be matched by the costume dramas, swashbucklers, and romances that were regularly turned out by studios around the world. So rarely did historians comment upon the topic that Peter Novick's book, *That Noble Dream* (1988: 194), a lengthy survey of American historical practice in the twentieth century, contains but a single reference to motion pictures. In a 1935 letter that is highly revealing about professional attitudes, Louis Gotschalk of the University of Chicago wrote to the president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: 'If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes to its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had a chance to criticize and revise it'.

Factors other than the quality of films kept historians from considering motion pictures a serious way of recounting the past. The visual media fell on the wrong side of the once enormous wall that separated high culture from low (or mass) culture, which meant that films could not be taken seriously until that wall collapsed – as it began to do in the 1960s. More importantly, for at

least the first half of the century academics were secure in the belief that their kind of knowledge of past politics, and economic, social and cultural life, was 'true' knowledge, and they were certain that the culture at large accepted the truths about the past that professional historians could provide. But after mid-century, as the claims of traditional history and its Euro-centred meta-narratives increasingly began to be called into question from a variety of disciplines and quarters – by feminists, ethnic minorities, post-colonial theorists, anthropologists, narratologists, philosophers of history, deconstructionists, and post-modernists – a climate developed that allowed academics to take popular culture more seriously and to begin looking more closely at the relationship between film and historical knowledge.

Not until the late 1960s did the number of historians interested in film reach a large enough mass to begin to create the meetings, essays, journals, and books that indicate a topic is on the scholarly map. A first conference, 'Film and the Historian', was hosted by University College, London, in April 1968, to be followed in the early and mid-1970s by similar gatherings at the universities in Utrecht and Göttingen, at Bielefeld's Centre for Inter-disciplinary Research, and at the Imperial War Museum in London. Attended mostly by scholars from the continent (France, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium) and the UK, with a couple of visitors from the United States, these gatherings focused largely on the production, reception, and value of the actuality (documentary) rather than the fictional film. Out of such conferences grew the International Association for Audiovisual Media and History, which since 1981 has published the *International Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* (Fledderus 2004).

The three books that emerged from these early meetings dealt for the most part with two questions: first, how actuality film could be used as a document for purposes of historical research and second, how it could be used as a teaching tool in the classroom. First to be published was *The Historian and Film* (1976), a collection of essays by (mostly) British historians which focused upon questions of newsreel, movies in the classroom, and how to evaluate films as historical evidence. Three years later, *History and the Audio-Visual Media*, divided its essays into three categories: Didactic Problems, Film and TV Materials as Source Material for Historians, and Content Analysis and Mass Communication. This was followed in 1981 by a volume entitled *Feature Films as History*, the first book to deal with dramatic works, and more particularly with the question of how clusters of films made in certain periods could serve as windows onto an exploration of particular ideologies or climates of opinion – antisemitism in Europe, the Popular Front of the 1930s, or national consciousness in Germany and France in the 1920s (Smith 1976; Short 1981).

A single essay in the volume tentatively edged in a radical new direction. In analysing Sergei Eisenstein's classic work, *Battleship Potemkin*, D.J. Wenden of Oxford considers the question of how a film, even though its content is largely fictionalized, might yet illuminate an historical event. After comparing the film's account of the ship's mutiny with written histories on the same topic, Wenden suggests that rather than creating a literal reality, Eisenstein makes 'brilliant use of the ship's revolt as a symbol for the whole revolutionary effort of the Russian people in 1905' (Wenden 1981: 40). This is the first instance (at least the first in print known to me) in which a historian makes a move towards suggesting that film might have its own specific way of telling the past, that the very nature of the medium and its practices of necessity create a particular kind of history (here dubbed symbolic history) that is different from what we normally expect to find upon the page.

Two historians in France during the 1970s also took steps towards a notion of film as what we might wish to call historical discourse. Marc Ferro, whose path-breaking essays were eventually collected in *Cinéma et histoire* (1977), focuses most of his effort on the notion that film (but not necessarily historical film) is a cultural artifact, one which not only reveals much about the time period in which it is made but that at its best provides what he calls a 'counter analysis' of society. Only in the last essay in the volume does he confront the more problematic (and interesting) issue: 'Does a filmic writing of history exist?' Ferro's initial response is 'No'. Film makers, he argues, blindly incorporate either a national or a leftist ideology into their renditions of the past, and their films thus end up being no more than transcriptions 'of a vision of history which has been conceived by others'. But – and here a radical new notion begins to emerge – Ferro then admits that there are exceptions to this rule. A few directors (he names Andrei Tarkovsky, of Russia; Ousmane Sembene, Senegal; Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Germany; Lucino Visconti, Italy, and a group of Polish film makers) possess such strong historical visions that they are able to transcend the ideological forces and traditions of their countries. Such film makers create independent interpretations of history and thereby make 'an original contribution to the understanding of past phenomena and their relation to the present' (Ferro 1988: 158–64).

Pierre Sorlin, who devotes all of *The Film in History* (1980) to the issue of how the dramatic feature 'restages the past', does not venture as far as Ferro. A certain ambivalence towards film as history runs through the volume, and the internal confusion of his chapter on Sergei Eisenstein's *October* mirrors the difficulties historians inevitably have in dealing with works about the past in a medium that can seem so elusive. Initially Sorlin dismisses *October* as no more than 'propaganda', but a long analysis leads him to contradict himself

and by the end of his chapter term it a view of the Russian Revolution that is independent of Bolshevik ideology – a judgement which at least tends toward Ferro's 'filmic writing of history'. The more general problem Sorlin raises about historical films is that they are ultimately 'all fictional'. Even those based on historical evidence 'reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show'. Nonetheless, he does demonstrate how, with regard to certain topics (the French Revolution, the Italian *Risorgimento*, the American Civil War), groups of historical films do relate to the larger realm of discourse generated by professionals in the field. In an argument too often ignored by historians (and journalists) today, Sorlin suggests that precisely like written histories, films must be judged not against our current knowledge or interpretations of a topic but with regard to historical understanding at the time they were made. This means that when, say, we are condemning the vicious racism of D. W. Griffith's classic, *Birth of a Nation*, we must keep in mind that the film was neither a bizarre personal nor a purely commercial interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction, but in fact a decent reflection of the best academic history of its own time, the early twentieth century (Sorlin 1980: 21, 159, 186).

In the quarter century since publication of *The Film in History*, an increasing number of historians have been willing to confront the challenge of the visual media. The first major move into the topic in the United States was a Forum entirely devoted to film in the December 1988 issue of that most conservative and traditional of journals, *The American Historical Review*. Here, my own opening essay, 'History in Images/History in words: reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film', which argued in favour of beginning to take film seriously as a way of thinking about the past, was answered by four historians, three of whom agreed to a greater or lesser extent (although not without some criticisms). A highlight of the forum came in the essay by Hayden White, who took the opportunity to coin an important and useful term, 'historiophoty', which he defined as 'the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse' (White 1988: 1193). Exploring that topic is precisely the burden of this book you are reading.

Since that initial forum, historians in America, Australia, and Europe have increasingly been drawn to the topic of the visual media. For the most part, this has been in the form of reviews of individual films, which – as a sign of changing times – are now carried by virtually every historical journal, as well as in essays, many of which have appeared as part of edited volumes. The usual tasks of such pieces is to set documentary and dramatic films in their historical context, or try to explain in an *ad hoc* sort of way how much of a particular film is 'true' and how much of it is mistaken or invented, or to deal with the reception or impact of a work. And while occasionally one of these essays by

historians, or the comparable works undertaken by scholars in film studies or communications, brush against the question of how and where film sits with regard to traditional historical discourse, attempts to deal directly and fully with the concept of historiophoty are non-existent. The closest attempt to write any sort of sustained, theoretically-informed work that faces the questions raised by Wenden, Ferro, Sorlin, and the AHR Forum is *Slaves on Screen* by Natalie Davis. Because she is a highly regarded scholar of early modern France, and someone who has served as a consultant on a film made on the same topic as her earlier book, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis' work is worth an extended look, in part because of its conscious attempt to broaden the discourse on film and move it in new directions.

Slaves on the Screen is not, it must be said at the outset, a broad or exhaustive examination of its topic. Growing out of a series of lectures delivered at the University of Toronto, the book consists of five short chapters that examine five films dealing with slavery, placing each work in both historical and historiographical contexts. Without using the word, Davis here ventures into the realm of 'historiophoty'. Her aim is to investigate 'what kind of historical inquiry' these films undertake and, in a sense, to elaborate on her idea of film as a kind of 'thought experiment' which were first voiced in conjunction with her work as historical consultant on *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Davis 2000: 121, xi).

The first question that has to be asked by anyone writing historiophoty is that posed by Ferro: can there be a filmic writing of history? Davis puts it in different language: 'What is film's potential for telling about the past in a meaningful and accurate way?' If the whole book is an attempt to provide an answer, the theoretical underpinnings of the argument are present in the first chapter, 'Film as Historical Narrative'. Not that her answer is crystal clear. Davis approaches the issue of 'whether we can arrive at a historical account faithful to the evidence if we leave the boundaries of professional prose for the sight, sound, and dramatic action of film' by invoking the change in ideas of how to tell the past from Homer to Herodotus to Thucydides; then going on to mention Aristotle's distinctions between poetry and history, between 'what happened (and) . . . what might happen', between the 'general truths' of the poet and the 'specific events' of the historian. These classical distinctions, she points out, 'were often blurred in practice' – the speeches recounted by the supposedly rigorous Thucydides were largely invented, and he, too, often resorted to the 'possible' rather than the actual in order to round out his historical accounts (Davis 2000: 4, 3).

The ancients are important to Davis as an oblique way of legitimating film. Implicit is the notion that because history has, over time, been practised

according to different rules, it is now legitimate to devote one's energy to a study of the practise of history in this (relatively) new medium. Or, to be specific, one kind of practise. For purposes of this work, Davis has chosen to analyze only dramatic features because she finds them 'a more difficult case than documentary films'. More difficult because although critics often like to create a sharp contrast between 'fiction films' as products of the 'imagination' and non-fictional documentaries as carriers of 'truth', it is precisely this dichotomy she wishes to question. Ostensibly more indexical and thus truer in its relationship to reality, the documentary also involves a 'play of invention', while the dramatic feature, despite fictive elements, 'can make cogent observations on historical events, relations, and processes' (Davis 2000: 5).

Such dramatic works communicate to us in a medium which has had but a century to develop its genres, a brief moment compared to 2,500 years in which Westerners have explored and discarded many different forms for written history. Davis distinguishes between two kinds of history films – those based on documentable events; and those with imagined plots, in which verifiable events are intrinsic to the action. She sees the normal feature film as recounting the past in one of two modes: the historical biography or the micro-history (which she herself has written). The former may address such questions as 'how and why political decisions are made in different historical régimes, and their consequences'. The latter, like good social history, can let us in on the dynamics of family life, or let us share the experience of 'people at work', medieval peasants sowing and harvesting, Chinese dyers staining cloth in great vats, women in twentieth-century factories bent over machines. This said, we still must beware of succumbing too much to their 'reality', for ultimately films do not quite show, but, rather, *speculate* on . . . how the past was experienced and acted out, how large forces and events were lived through locally and in detail? (Davis 2000: 7).

The note of caution in this statement marks the rest of the opening chapter – indeed, the rest of the book. On the one hand, Davis exults in what she calls the 'multiple techniques' with which film can narrate the past and make it coherent and exciting, the very visual and aural language that makes this such a powerful medium: image, acting, colour, editing, sound, location, design, costume. On the other, she insists on the importance of traditional requirements for telling the past as 'developed over the centuries'. These include following the obvious ideals (often violated in practice, as she knows) that are taught to students of history in graduate school: seeking evidence widely, keeping an open mind, telling readers the sources of the evidence, revealing one's own assumptions, not letting normative judgements get in the way of understanding, never falsifying evidence, and labelling our speculations.

Since the dramatic film, by its very nature, cannot fulfill most of these practices (something Davis can never quite get herself to admit directly), it seems to be relegated to a subsidiary role in telling the past. Bearing in mind 'the differences between film and professional prose', she says we can take film seriously 'as a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision'. We can even 'ask questions of historical films that are parallel to those we ask of historical books'. But we cannot wholly trust the answers, for ultimately film makers are not quite historians, but 'artists for whom history matters' (Davis 2000: 11, 15).

With such ideas in mind, Davis approaches five films made between 1960 and 1998, treating them chronologically and, in a general way, setting them against the historiographical context of post-war studies on slavery by such scholars as M.I. Finley, David Brion Davis, and Eugene Genovese. Each film is also loosely connected to a particular social mood. The classic spectacle, *Spartacus* (1960), based on the Howard Fast novel and directed by a young Stanley Kubrick, gets linked both to the Cold War and to scholarly concerns over the 'slave personality'. Two foreign films of the 1970s reflect the outbreak of revolution and independence movements in the Third World – *Burn!* (1969), directed by Italy's Gillo Pontecorvo (best-known for the anti-colonialist masterpiece, *The Battle for Algiers*), the story of a failed revolution on a fictional sugar-producing island; and *The Last Supper* (1976), by Cuba's Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, based on a prize-winning (from the American Historical Association) book by historian Morena Frugal, *The Sugar Mill*, which describes a 1790 revolt on a plantation. Two American productions from the 1990s belong to what Davis calls our growing concern with the horrors of victimization – Stephen Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), the story of the takeover of a slave ship by African slaves, and the subsequent trials of its leaders in Massachusetts, and *Beloved* (1998), the Jonathan Demme production (from the Toni Morrison novel) that explores the psychic scars left on ex-slaves after gaining their freedom, were produced, in Davis' words, 'under the shadow of the Holocaust' (Davis 2000: 70).

The strategy for analyzing each work consists of three parts. First the genesis – who got the idea for the film, what were its sources, how did various producers-writers-directors bring it to the screen and what were his/her/their intentions. Second, a synopsis, one that highlights the characters and events, and also points to the major deviations from the historical record. Third, the judgement(s) – why should we care about the film, what does it contain that makes us think seriously about the past, and how might it be changed to make it more valuable as a historical work? With *Spartacus*, for example, we learn how actor Kirk Douglas, writer Dalton Trumbo, and director Kubrick managed to bring the Howard Fast novel to the screen; and that Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton,

and Peter Ustinov changed their lines during the shoot. The film's historical successes – created not just with story and acting, but also with camera work, editing, colour, and music – include 'the portrayal of the gap between high and low', slave and freeman in Roman society; the depiction of the training in the school for gladiators; the final battle sequence with its chaotic fighting and close combat between slaves and legionnaires; and the portrait of illegal marriages and personal relationships among the slaves, taken as a fitting emblem of resistance. Among the shortcomings are an inaccurate picture of the makeup and functioning of the Roman Senate; a failure to mention the long tradition of slave revolts in the Roman Empire that preceded Spartacus; and the final speech of our hero, which exhibits an anachronistic universalism, born of ideas from the Enlightenment rather than the ancient world. Weighted against the historical record, Davis gives the film a 'mixed report – some successes, some missed opportunities, some failures' (Davis 2000: 36).

A similar mixed assessment holds for the other films, save that the two works made outside of Hollywood get much higher marks for complex historical consciousness. Part of this is visual, the unsentimental eye, risky camera movement, and offbeat editing choices of film makers (European and Third World) willing to stretch the experience of an audience used to the comfort of Hollywood film language, in which the location of places and people on the screen is always clearly demarcated. *Burnt*, based on events that took place in a dozen Caribbean and Latin American countries, but fictional in its central story, is a 'successful experiment' that evokes the rituals and ceremonies of a slave society, and manages to portray how events are experienced both by groups of people and individuals. Through the personal rivalry of two men – the native leader of the revolution and the British officer (Marlon Brando) sent to suppress it – the film provides a splendid example of 'the micro-historical potential of film'. The same is true of *The Last Supper*. 'Tightly linked to evidence from the Cuban past' and to its source, *The Sugar Mill*, the work is set during Holy Week 1790 on the plantation of the Count de Casa Bayona. This pious, elderly count who enjoys the humility of those 'rites of inversion' which have him washing the feet of his slaves, changes quickly into a bloody tyrant when these same slaves lead a revolt, one he suppresses with merciless efficiency and the execution of all its leaders. If the portrait of the count is not 'nuanced' enough for Davis, she applauds its representation of a gallery of social types – overseers, priests, technicians, slaves – and its gritty depiction of the daily working world of the plantation and mill (Davis 2000: 52, 62).

It is no doubt a measure of our (or her) current state of mind that makes Davis give by far the longest chapter to the films she sees as shadowed by the Holocaust. Like *Spartacus*, the report on *Amistad* is mixed. Viewers may

come away from the film 'with a general sense of the movement of events, the interests at stake, the arguments being offered and challenged, and the popular excitement and zeal stimulated' by the trials of the Africans and the question of whether they are to be set free or sent back into slavery, but the film is not, as promised by director Spielberg, the 'mirror . . . [of] actual events as they unfolded'. Like many (all?) historical films, this one, to increase suspense or add to character developments, indulges in fabrications. Davis is of two minds about such fictional moves – she has no objections to inventions seen to add depth to the story, only to those which appear to be arbitrary or unnecessary. Indeed, she occasionally makes suggestions for inventions, which to her would have been more plausible and apropos than those created by the director (Davis 2000: 79).

No inventions are called into question in *Beloved*, for as a film based upon a novel, the work is entirely an invention, thus doubly removed from the historical events of slavery. Worse yet from a traditional historian's point of view, one of the characters is a ghost of a baby girl, murdered by her mother to keep her from the slave-catchers. Yet such obvious fictions in no way prevent the film from providing a powerful, heart-rending account of the long-lasting trauma caused 'by the wounds of slavery, inflicted and then self-inflicted through resistance'. When describing *Beloved*, Davis' prose often moves from the scholarly towards the rhapsodic. Fictional they may be, but each of the characters provides us with 'historical insight' into traumatic events; each haunts us 'with the tragedies and hopes of the past' (Davis 2000: 108, 119).

What more, one might ask, can one expect of a historical film? Apparently no more than that it focus on 'Telling the Truth', the title of Davis' final chapter. But what truth? The factual truth, the narrative truth, the emotional truth, the psychological truth, the symbolic truth? For there is not a single historical truth – not on the page and certainly not on the screen. Knowing this, Davis in the final chapter has to come to grips with that topic which troubles all historians who deal with the dramatic film: the fact that such works always indulge in fabrication and invention – of characters, incidents, events, moments, dialogue, settings – and not just to make the stories more commercial or palatable to a large audience, but because both the medium and the genre insure that such invention is intimately involved in every moment on the screen. Partly this is due to time constraints, the need to compress large events into short sequences; partly to the greediness of the camera, which demands more specificity of detail than any historian could possibly know about a particular setting or incident in the past; partly to the fact that however good our actors (Davis particularly admires Anthony Hopkins as John Adams), they are impersonators who utilize a vocabulary of gestures, movements, and words to

create historical figures whose voices and movements are in most cases wholly lost to us and therefore have to be wholly invented.

Ignoring the extent to which fiction is deeply implicated in all such films, Davis instead focuses on the overt fabrications that seem unnecessary or, worse, derive from a wish to make the beliefs of a past era more closely resemble those of the present (e.g. Spartacus' universalist speech). She faults film-makers for 'too cavalier an attitude toward the evidence about lives and attitudes in the past', and for 'underestimating film audiences'. To be engaged by a historical film 'spectators do not need to have the past remade to seem exactly like the present'. She also wants directors to be more honest about their sources (list them in the credits), to admit to the uncertainties of the past by finding filmic equivalents for the 'perhapses' and 'may have beens' of prose. To do so, she suggests, a director could utilize devices such as a reporter looking for a story and finding more than one version to tell; or by filing the screen with witnesses and documents that contradict each other; or by adopting the kind of experimental, multi-perspective narration used in the Japanese classic, *Rashomon*, with its four accounts of the same event, or the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, with its parallel stories set both in present and past (Davis 2000: 130–31).

Even without such devices, the argument of the book is that these five films have much to tell us about various systems of slavery across the centuries. *Spartacus* lets us glimpse the political struggles of Rome and see the development of a major social revolt against Imperial power. *Burnt* and *The Last Supper* show us a colonial system of investment, labour, and politics in the context of the customs, tales, songs, and dances of African and Caribbean people. *Amistad* and *Beloved* involve us in the horrific psycho-social conditions of the Middle Passage and the Southern plantation system, and teach us that notions of freedom can stem not just from Western but also from African roots. Though all can be faulted on some counts, these films, taken together, engage with the larger historical discourse and even add, through the powers of the medium in which they are rendered, something to our understanding of the costs of slave systems for both masters and slaves.

Despite this argument, Davis at times betrays a certain uneasiness about historical film, a feeling that peeks through her balance sheets of what individual works do right and what they do wrong, her suggestions for better inventions (which often ignore the dramatic aspect of film, the fact that a screenplay is a kind of intricate machine which, if one part is pulled out, may no longer function properly), and her repeated insistence on the traditional standards of written history. At times it seems as if her answer to the shortcoming of films would be to make them more like books – or at least to follow

more closely the rules of traditional history. But we already have books, and a lengthy tradition of evaluating their evidence, arguments, and interpretations. What we don't yet have is a very good sense of historical film, and more precisely, its coordinates in the space time of our thoughts about the past; what we don't know is where history rendered in the visual media – with its movement, sound, and colour – is located with regard to traditional history.

'Historical films should let the past be the past', Davis says on the last page of the book (Davis 2000: 136). But this is certainly one thing we historians never do. It is our task precisely not to let the past be the past but to hold the past up for use (moral, political, contemplative) in the present. One is tempted to respond to Davis: 'Let historical films be films'. Which is to say that, rather than assuming that the world on film should somehow adhere to the standards of written history, why not let it create its own standards, appropriate to possibilities and practices of the medium. (Is this not what happens when one kind of history upstages another?) Better yet, why not admit that film makers have been working on such standards for a century and see it as the job of we, who do our history on the page, to investigate, explicate, and critique just what those standards are. As outsiders or theorists of historical film, we cannot prescribe the right and wrong way to tell the past, but need to derive theory from practice by analyzing how the past has been and is being told – in this case, on the screen. Davis begins to do this, and for that we are in her debt. But she doesn't take us far enough. Her judgements contain too much that derives from the standards of evidence of academic history. This puts as much a burden on film makers as one would put on historians if we were to judge their renderings of the past in filmic terms and then have to ask why are such works, compared to the colour, movement, and excitement of the screen, so slow, stuffy, measured, colourless, and silent?

In a sense, it is as if Davis has forgotten that history is not a natural process like eating, breathing, or sleeping – but a learned activity. We must be taught how to turn the past into history and how to read what we have done. A new medium like moving images on a screen with a sound accompaniment creates an enormous change in the way we tell and see the past – and think its meaning. When she calls film makers 'artists for whom history matters', Davis seems to ignore her own evidence that the best of them are something more than that. They already are (or can be) historians, if by that word we mean people who confront the traces of the past (rumours, documents, buildings, sites, legends, oral and written histories) and use them to tell stories that make meaning for us in the present. Of course the codes, conventions, rules, and practices which let them bring the past to the screen are different from those of written history. How could it be otherwise? Quite clearly, film uses data in a

much looser way than academic history. Just as clearly, the past on the screen is not meant to be literal (is history on the page?), but suggestive, symbolic, metaphorical. Yet the best of historical films, as Davis herself shows, can intersect with, comment upon, and add something to the larger discourse of history out of which they grow and to which they speak. That 'something' is what we who care about the past need to learn how to read. By studying what the best historical film makers have done, we can come to better know the rules of engagement of the dramatic feature film with the traces of the past – and begin to glimpse what that adds to our understanding of history. That task will be the burden of the remaining chapters in this book.