

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 twenty-first 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 an 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: 43–43). 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's 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 Nasty 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 Native 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 *Reed – 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

of historical and biographical data used by all biographers of Reed, and all are valid ways of drawing meaning out of his life, and carrying that meaning to a new generation. None could be called definitive, but then again no biographical interpretation ever is. If we learn how to read them, each of these films has much to tell us about John Reed, the man, and about his personal struggles, and each suggests something about the larger issues of the times in which he lived. What more can one ask of a biofilm – or for that matter, of a written biography?

Chapter 7

Film maker/Historian

For anyone who lived through the 1960s on a campus, there has to be a shock of recognition on seeing the anti-war demonstration in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), Oliver Stone's film based on the life of Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. A feeling that you were once present at this very scene, saw these very students on the steps of a university hall, with their long hair, Afros, beards, levis, bandannas; witnessed these very gestures, the raised arms and clenched fists; heard this very speechifying by Blacks and Whites, the denunciations of war, the shouted words *Nixon, On strike, Shut it down, Right on*. Even that middle aged figure on the steps, wearing a dashiki and calling for a March on Washington, looks strangely familiar – but at the same time somehow too old and out of place. Before the tear-gas bombs explode and the cops descend with swinging clubs we (who were around in the Sixties) may realize: that is Abbie Hoffman, King of the Yippies, saying precisely the kind of things he had said at such demonstrations 20-some years before the film was made.

The sequence is based upon a real event. The film lets us know that this is Syracuse University shortly after the Cambodia 'incursion' and the killings at Kent State, that moment in early May 1970 when hundreds, thousands, of college and high school campuses went on strike. Syracuse was among them, but the demonstration there was far different from the one we see on the screen. At Syracuse the words might have been violent, but the afternoon was peaceful; the police did not shoot off tear-gas and they did not wade into the crowd with clubs. Nor was the demonstration there attended by Ron Kovic, the hero of the film, and author of the book on which it is based. Nor by his girlfriend, for he did not have a girlfriend. Nor was it addressed by Abbie Hoffman.

A creation of director Oliver Stone, this sequence is not exactly a complete fabrication but, rather, a cunning mixture of diverse visual elements – fact,

near fact, displaced fact, invention. It refers to the past, it prods the memory, but can we call it history? Surely not history as we usually use the word, not history that attempts to accurately reproduce a specific, documentable moment of the past. Yet one might see it as a generic historical moment, a moment that claims its truth by standing in for many such moments. The truth that such demonstrations were common in the late 1960s. The truth of the chaos, confusion, and violence of many such encounters between students and police. The truth of the historical questions the sequence forces viewers to confront: Why are these students gathered here? Why are they protesting? Why are they so critical of our national leaders? Why do the police break up the rally with such gusto? What is at stake on the screen for our understanding of the 1960s? Of recent America? Of the United States today?

No American film maker in the last half-century has been more obsessed with historical questions or has raised more public controversy than director Oliver Stone. And it is precisely because he deals with history that his films have been so controversial. Except perhaps for his first Vietnam film, *Platoon*, each of the six works that, taken together, can be seen as charting, or at least suggesting, a history of the United States from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 to the involvement in the civil war in Salvador in 1980, has been attacked as a violation of its subject, with the chorus growing from the vigorous debates over *Born on the Fourth of July* to the denunciations and vilification of the director which were part of the response to the two films about presidents, *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995) (*Salvador*, 1986, and *Heaven and Earth*, 1993, are the other two of the six films). Some small portion of the criticism has been of the film-making itself, with words like 'bombastic' or 'simplistic' used to describe Stone's plot lines, characters, and aesthetic. But the overwhelming majority of the attacks have had to do with his supposed misrepresentation not only of history but of himself: how dare Stone, some critics say, call himself a 'historian' or 'cinematic historian', when he is nothing but a Hollywood film maker.

The question of whether Stone can or cannot, should or should not be considered a 'historian' also haunts the pages of a volume entitled *Oliver Stone's USA*, a collection of essays written mostly by scholars and edited by historian Robert Brent Toplin. (I have a contribution in it entitled 'Oliver Stone as Historian'.) Almost every piece in the book at least considers the question and most try to answer it, though many of these answers are somewhat equivocal. The issue is complicated by Stone's own statements and writings, both in this volume and prior to its appearance. Although everyone seems to think the director has claimed the title 'historian' or 'cinematic historian', he denies the charge and points to a single 1991 interview with journalist Stephen Talbot in

Mother Jones magazine as the source of the allegations. In that article, he is quoted as calling himself a 'cinematic historian'. But, according to Stone, the journalist did not actually quote him but simply made up the term. Either way, from that single remark, picked up by the *Washington Post* and spread throughout the media, seems to stem all the allegations about Stone's desire for membership in the history community, and the denunciations of that claim. Now he wishes to make himself absolutely clear: *I do not think of myself as a cinematic historian now or ever...* (italics in original) (Stone 2000: 40).

Too bad. Because I do. It's a claim I want to make not only for Stone but also for a number of other film makers – though to do so we will have to broaden our definition of the genre. That is something all the authors of essays in *Oliver Stone's USA* refuse to do. Admittedly, each essay (other than my own) focuses on a single film rather than a larger body of the director's work. In each, the issue is not whether the author likes or dislikes the films, but what are the proper rules and procedures for historians. Whether it's the charge that he 'blurs almost beyond distinction fact and fiction, historian and subject', or that he 'fails to maintain the spirit of objectivity that historians must respect', or that he has 'crossed the line between artist and scholar by combining film with history, by projecting onto the silver screen his highly subjective version of actual persons and events and enlivening them with colourful imagery, concocted dialogue, and imaginary people', or that he obliterates 'what most historians think is necessary for good, bias-free history writing – a critical distance between the historian and his or her subject', or that he 'wants to participate in the historical debate on the character of Richard Nixon without conforming to the canons of history', the consensus among admirer and critic alike is that whatever Stone is doing on screen, it's certainly not history (Farr 2000: 165; Kurtz 2000: 164–6, 171; Ambrose 2000: 202).

To these generally negative feelings there are at least two exceptions – the essay by diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber on the history and politics expressed in *Salvador*, who says that in this work Stone realized his (apparently unclaimed) ambition of becoming a 'cinematic historian' (LaFeber 2000: 109). And the analysis by Jack E. Davis that terms *Born on the Fourth of July* a work of 'revisionist history', and revisionist in two ways – of the normal Hollywood view of American combat and in the sense of allying itself with the work of the New Left historians, who saw the past 'from the bottom up'. Davis is also clear that this history arises out of the unique qualities of the medium: 'Aided by the visual power of film, Stone's non-traditional theme carries an emotional force not enjoyed by the scholar historian, who typically has only the dubious aid of academic prose and sometimes a small selection of grainy photographs' (Davis 2000: 139).

This furore over Stone may be unique in the annals of film history. Certainly it has no real parallels in the United States, and while there have been controversies over individual historical films in France, the UK, Spain, Argentina, and Japan (and no doubt elsewhere), none seems to have centred around the question of whether a film-maker could claim the title 'historian'. It's true that the 'history' in films is regularly debated by the press, as in the 2004 controversy over *The Passion of the Christ* or the earlier journalistic and scholarly flap over whether or not *Schindler's List* did justice to the experience of the Holocaust, but the question of Mel Gibson or Stephen Spielberg as 'historians' was not the issue. Indeed, it is the rare director who has wished to seize that title. Among Americans, you have to return to D. W. Griffith to find someone making such a claim – and for him it was not just personal, but part of a larger theory that saw film replacing books in the future as the primary medium for conveying knowledge of the past.

One film-maker who did come to think of himself a historian was Roberto Rossellini. An originator of the influential *Neo-realismo* movement of the mid-forties, the Italian director during the last years of his life, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, made more than a dozen historical films (mostly for television). Believing that 'film should be a means like any other, perhaps more valuable than any other, of writing history . . .', his late contributions included some multi-part series, such as the twelve-hour *Man's Struggle for Survival* (1964–70), which carried the human story from pre-civilization to modern times; the three-chapter work, *The Age of the Medici* (1972); and a number of individual films that were often based around the life of a 'representative figure' of an era in which Rossellini found a major shift in human consciousness (Brunette 1987: 255). Among the latter was the best-known of his historical works, one considered by many critics to be among the director's major accomplishments, *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966); as well as works centering on Blaise Pascal, St Augustine, Socrates, René Descartes, and the Apostles.

Earlier in his career, Rossellini had directed a couple of more traditional historical dramas, but these late films were different – consciously didactic, they attempted, in words he wrote at the outset of these efforts in 1963, to 'tell the story of the great events of nature and history in the simplest and most linear fashion' (Brunette 1987: 255). Rossellini saw history as a kind of science, which meant his task was the presenting of 'pure information' about the past on the screen. Yet at the same time he was a leftist who wanted to unmask the sins of capitalism. Never did he seem to understand (or at least he never admitted it in public) the basic contradiction in his ideas – that information cannot be conveyed neutrally, least of all by someone with his agenda. To make the

past linear is already to interpret it; to tell from a Marxist perspective is to add another layer of interpretation.

The underlying theory of Rossellini's history films may involve some self-mystification, but his practice was indeed an attempt at a new way of conveying the past. Containing minimal camera movement and montage, little plot, and no suspense, these films are what I have called, 'dedramatized' – designed to be distanced from viewers almost in the manner of Bertold Brecht's 'alienation effect', raising no emotions and thus allowing the audience time to think (supposedly) about what is happening on screen (though snoozing is a more likely reaction to these works than thinking). While the settings can be sumptuous as a way of conveying the sheer materiality of the past, the actors (often amateurs) do not use gestures, movement, or even voice inflection to create their characters. Indeed, characters is probably the wrong word, for the figures in Rossellini's historical films are no more than emblems of particular groups or classes; certainly they are never individuals who attempt to make us understand who they are or what they feel. In these works we see, but we don't share, the past; we look on and watch characters in costume stand around and, essentially, deliver lectures to each other. *The Age of the Medici*, for example, contains an enormous amount of talk about the Florentine economy, the cloth industry, banking, the new art works by Masaccio. The result of Rossellini's theories are works that seem less to be films than a series of tableaux in which movement is slight, and the lack of action seems meant to let us focus on the historical lectures the director wishes to deliver. Aside from *Louis XIV*, which embodies a materialistic thesis about how the king came to control his unruly nobles through building Versailles and making them dress lavishly as he did, none of these movies achieved more than minimal success with critics and virtually none with audiences. They remain as an interesting, sustained attempt by one director to become a historian by refusing to utilize the practices of dramatic film.

If almost no film-makers have wished to claim the title, historian, it may well be that they, as much as the public and the scholars, have been acculturated into traditional notions of history as a written discourse. Reviews of films in the press continually make directors aware of the sharp boundary lines drawn by the culture between what might be dubbed 'proper' history and the dramatic film. Despite this, certain directors in various parts of the world have been burdened enough by history to make them repeatedly turn to the past as a setting for films in which they try to raise significant historical questions. Most of these directors have worked outside Hollywood. With lower budgets, often government support, and a deeper sense of the constraints that history place on the present generation, film-makers in Europe and parts of the Third

World have a more continuous and better record of dealing with historical issues on the screen. Among them I would include such people as Andrzej Wajda in Poland, Ousmane Sembene in Senegal, Margarethe Von Trotta in Germany, Miklos Jancso in Hungary, Theo Angelopolous in Greece, Carlos Saura in Spain, Maria Luisa Bemberg in Argentina, Hsueh Hsien in Taiwan, Vittorio and Paolo Taviani in Italy, and Emir Kusturica of Serbia (to name just a few).

Claims for directors as historians have already been advanced by some scholars in cinema studies. In a book-length analysis of the films of Theo Angelopoulos, Andrew Horton not only devotes the second of nine chapters to the director's obsession with the past of modern Greece, but continues to point to the historical questions and themes in the work as part of the analysis of individual films in other chapters (Horton 1997). Angelopoulos's historical vision is described by Horton as a broad one. His consciously created trilogy (*Days of '36*, 1972, *The Travelling Players*, 1975, and *Alexander the Great*, 1980) traces the history of his homeland from the turn of the twentieth century through the civil war of the late 1940s, while in two later films (*The Suspended Step of the Stork*, 1991, and *Ulysses Gaze*, 1995), the director has expanded his vision to encompass the devastating conflicts of the 1990s that have roiled and helped to re-draw the map of the Balkans.

For the most part these works are not based on the lives of actual figures. Angelopoulos sets fictional characters into historical situations. He focuses not on the rulers of the country but on more common people, their indirect victims, those who must live and suffer the results of the decisions made by governments and revolutionaries for war, peace, revolt, resistance, development. What is acknowledged by many as his best historical film, *The Travelling Players*, follows the movements of a peripatetic theatre company in its cross country trials and tragedies over the course of almost two decades. Through the individual experiences and destinies of its characters we are given a view from below of Greece, starting with the dictatorship of General Ioannia Metaxas in the 1930s, and going on to the Italian invasion, the German occupation, the Partisan resistance, and finally the Civil War of the late 1940s and early 1950s – the first time that controversial war was depicted on screen.

Angelopoulos may provide a kind of invented history, but taken together his films are, in Horton's words, 'narratives that reflect his perspective on the complex web of Greek history', works of enormous complexity that are at once meditations on the past and explorations of what has been repressed by official discourse (the Civil War being a case in point). His body of works represents 'an attempt to see clearly through the dark window of Greek history

... with all of its internal conflicts, external pressures, and ancient baggage from past empires and eras so that we experience ... how individuals and their destinies are absolutely woven into and form the fabric of their culture and their times' (Horton 1997: 57).

Less concentrated on a single era, the Taviani brothers have made films which straddle a period in Italian history from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, but the questions they deal with in their dramatic works are similar to the kinds posed by historians. As scholar Marcia Landy points out, their works are germane to the issues of national history and culture as raised by the well-known Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci. Whether dealing with the age of the *Risorgimento* (*Allonsanfàn*, 1973), World War II (*La notte di San Lorenzo*, 1982), or the recent past (*Padre padrone*, 1977, *I sovversivi*, 1967) – the brothers repeatedly raise questions of subalternity, regionalism, and class struggle while dealing at length with the country's political, economic, and cultural divisions between north and south (Landy 2000). Often they take on the conventional historical wisdom. *La notte di San Lorenzo* challenges one of the country's sacred and deeply imbedded myths – that of the breadth of Italian Resistance, and the notion of a nation united against Nazism and fascism (Sorlin 1995: 77–87). In this film, through the eyes of a female narrator, we see a young girl's view of the deceptions, cowardice, and complicities that marked a particular town (San Miniato, where the Tavianis were born) during the brief period between the retreat of the Nazis and the coming of the Americans. Such historical re-enactments, as Landy points out, consistently portray 'the struggle for cultural self-expression and engagement on the part of both their upper-class and peasant protagonists'. They also manage neither to sentimentalize nor monumentalize the past, for the Tavianis' 'treatment of history is predominantly interrogative, analytical, and ironic ...' (Landy 2000: 165).

What makes the directors mentioned in the preceding paragraphs into historians? It seems to me they are a different breed from those film makers who during the course of a career turn once or twice to the past as the setting for a movie. What these directors have in common is some sort of personal stake in history. All seem *obsessed and burdened by the past. All keep returning to deal with it by making historical films, not as a simple source of escape or entertainment, but as a way of understanding how the problems and issues that it poses are still alive for us in the present.* Throughout their dramatic films, these directors ask the same kinds of questions of the past that a historian asks – not just what happened or why it happened, but what is the meaning of what happened to us today. Such questions are obviously answered not as an academic historian would, but within the possibilities of the dramatic genre and the

visual media. In the totality of their works, the best of these film maker historians provide a broad interpretation of, or larger perspective upon, some topic or aspect or theme out of the past – the civil war in Greece (Angelopoulos), the meaning of modernization in Italy (Taviani), the shadow that the lingering legacy of colonialism casts over modern African nations (Ousmane Sembene), the struggles of a country with fascism and communism as well as the experience of living in the Third Reich (Margarethe Von Trotta).

To call their accomplishments those of 'historians' is, as mentioned earlier, to broaden and alter the notion of what we mean by that term. Perhaps a new word is necessary, but 'cinematic historian', as used (or not) by Oliver Stone, and more recently in the writings of Robert Toplin, seems to indicate a historian of the cinema, not someone who uses the visual media to tell the past (Toplin 2002: 34–9; 2004: 8–57). My own preference is to keep the word 'historian' and define it as someone who devotes a significant part of her or his working career to making meaning (in whatever medium) out of the past. Obviously on screen this entails different conventions for rendering history than those we traditionally use. History on film is largely about emotion, an attempt to make us feel as if we are learning about the past by vicariously living through its moments. And this experience comes in stories that, like the work of more traditional historians, both engage the discourse of history and add something to that discourse. In doing so, the directors make the past meaningful in at least three different ways – they create works that *vision*, *contest*, and *revision history* (Rosenstone 1995b: 8–13).

To *vision history* is to put flesh and blood on the past; to show us individuals in life like situations, to dramatize events, give us people to identify with, make us feel to some extent as if we have lived moments and issues long gone. It is to give us the experience and emotions of the past – in this it is very different from the distancing and analyzing of a written text. To *contest history* is to provide interpretations that run against traditional wisdom, to challenge generally accepted views of particular people, events, issues, or themes – personal, national, or international. To *revision history* is to show us the past in new and unexpected ways, to utilize an aesthetic that violates the traditional realistic ways of telling the past, or that does not follow a normal dramatic structure, or that mixes genres and modes – all these towards the end of making the familiar unfamiliar and causing the audience to rethink what it thinks it already knows.

With these categories in mind, I want to examine the works of Oliver Stone, in recent years (perhaps in all of American history) the director who was from the mid-1980s through to the mid-1990s persistent in the practice of rendering history on film. In half-a-dozen works, he wrestled with the agonies of

American society during and after the era of Vietnam, making three films directly about the war, two that deal with the Presidents whose lives bookend the war, and one about US involvement in the civil war in Salvador – which can be seen as an extension of the foreign policy themes of Vietnam. In these works, Stone has not only brought alive the issues of the past, but in one of the two presidential films, *JFK*, has raised the issue of to what extent the past is knowable and representable. This film also stands as a perfect example of what can be seen as another possible task for the historical: to be provocative. To create a past on the screen so outrageous or controversial that it forces a society to openly debate an important historical issue. Not only did *JFK* refuel the controversy over who killed President Kennedy, it also forced Congress to pass a law declassifying tens of thousands of documents relating to the case.

To analyze Stone as historian is to be faced with a dilemma surrounding chronology. Does one deal with the films in the order in which they were made, or in the order of historical events they depict? The latter would seem to make the most sense, save for one thing – such a chronology will not reveal how his views on the past have shifted, even hardened over time. Stone's beliefs, particularly about historical causation, grew more murky and conspiratorial over the passing years. The motivation for US involvement with the Central American right wing leaders (and death squads) that is depicted as fairly straight forward imperialist militarism (and the overcoming of the 'Vietnam syndrome') in the first film, *Salvador*, has morphed by the last film, *Nixon*, into a view of the course of history being caused by something the President and other characters refer to as 'the Beast' – an apparent metaphor for the military-industrial complex which, since President Eisenhower first used the term in 1960, has metastasized into a vast cancer that infects all of American policy, domestic and foreign.

Perhaps the best way into Stone's historical works is through what he sees as the central experience of that era, the war in Vietnam. Central both in terms of personal growth, artistic and historical vision, and national developments. As a patriotic young American, Stone volunteered to serve in the army in Vietnam, where he was twice wounded and awarded a Bronze Star. His tour of duty in that war without front lines – a war in which the elusive enemy was nowhere and everywhere, where body counts rather than strategic points seized became the supposed measure of military success, and some of the American military were exposed as guilty of committing atrocities – left Stone, as it did many soldiers, disillusioned about the American mission and highly sceptical about the gap between official rhetoric and on the ground reality (body counts regularly proved that the US was winning the war). As the conflict dragged on and on, those attitudes grew into a larger critique of the

whole American effort. What were we doing in Vietnam anyway? Were we really fighting communism? Or were we attempting to put down a national liberation movement? What was so vital to American interests in this land eight thousand miles from home?

Stone's personal encounter with Vietnam infuses his three films about the war. It also seems to lend a kind of authenticity to his depictions that other films about the conflict never quite achieve. At least that was part of the reaction from film critics and veterans alike. *Platoon*, the first Vietnam film, left many ex GIs claiming that the confusion, terror, arguments, mixed motives, poor morale, deadly firefights, atrocities, and widespread use of marijuana that Stone put on screen were precisely what they had experienced in Nam (Roberts and Welky 2000: 66–90). The film was, in fact, a thinly-disguised autobiographical work that drew not just for atmosphere but also for incidents, directly on Stone's own tour of duty. The second film in the trilogy, *Born on the Fourth of July*, derives from Ron Kovic's autobiography of the same name, but the director identifies so closely with the author – 'Ron and me, we're like brothers' – that he merges his own story as soldier and veteran (along with those of other GIs) into the film (Kagan 2000: 145). The third film, *Heaven and Earth*, which tells the story of a Vietnamese woman, seems to draw on Stone's experience not of the battlefield but of the towns such as Saigon, where soldiers went for rest and recuperation, as well as on the guilt he must have felt over what how the American presence warped the culture and economy of Vietnam – the bars, the prostitution, the drugs, the GI treatment of young girls as hookers and chattels, the arrogance of the foreign soldiers towards the natives.

Platoon, as many critics have pointed out, is a film that on the surface omits any historical, political, or military context. What we see is the initiation of a young volunteer, Chris Taylor, into battle through experiences and encounters that, for the most part, could have taken place in almost any war. With a story that is less a fully formed plot than a series of incidents, the film nonetheless raises historical questions because of its inevitable insertion into the ongoing debate over American involvement in Vietnam. It was released in 1986, just 11 years after the fall of Saigon, and if the war was not still a daily topic of conversation, its shadows and trauma, its costs and consequences for the nation, still were very much part of the American landscape. The first image – new recruits exiting from the hatch of a transport plane while plastic body bags are being loaded onto it – and the first ironic words, spoken by hollow-eyed, returning vets to the newcomers, 'Gonna love the Nam', already suggest that something is amiss, especially to an American audience, raised on war films that stress the triumphs not the costs of our military undertakings.

The tone set at the outset continues throughout the film. Chris Taylor does not just enter combat, he enters a culture of grunts who are shrewd, hip, wary, and highly sceptical about the leaders and issues which have brought them here to the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Unlike American soldiers in other films, these soldiers do not talk in agitprop phrases about the coming glorious victory but, seeming to know the war is unwinnable, mostly speak about how best to survive to the end of their tours of duty. This culture of GIs is, like the United States itself, divided, at war with itself. In Nam, the conflict is between the juicers and the dopers, those who get drunk to the strains of Country and Western music, and those who smoke marijuana and listen to psychedelic rock, with the latter – in an echo of the culture wars at home – including both the Black and the more sympathetic of the soldiers. In the sequences of combat, the intense firefights during the day or night, another historical lesson emerges, though one that might be a bit more difficult for an audience to read. Here the mountainous terrain and dense jungle work to highlight the miscalculations of those who planned the war as winnable through American technological superiority. For the landscape and foliage nullify air power. On the ground it is the skill of the soldiers which wins skirmishes – and the Vietnamese know how to use the terrain and brush far better than do the Americans.

More than anything else, the depiction of atrocities mark *Platoon* as something new – if not in the national experience (for atrocities have been committed by US soldiers in other wars) then in American films. In a particularly horrifying sequence, the soldiers respond to the murder of one of their own by going berserk in a native village, shooting innocent civilians, clubbing children to death, attempting rape – and the mayhem only stops when their lieutenant gives orders to burn the food supply, poison the wells, and torch the village. In other words, the random atrocities are ended by officially sanctioned ones. Only after this does Chris realize the war is unwinnable. So does the other hero in the film, the highly moral Sergeant Elias, who comments: 'We been kickin' other people's asses so long, I guess it's time that we got our own kicked.' What might be considered treasonable words in any other film (or in life) make perfect sense in the world of *Platoon*, which in the words of one critic 'has told the familiar young soldier's story without copping-out on the ineradicable bitterness and confusion of the Vietnam war' (Kagan 2000: 107).

Born on the Fourth of July, Stone's second go at Vietnam, works on a much broader canvas than the first. As if assuming we have already seen *Platoon* and understand the pain and confusion of the grunts in the field, this film spends only 20 minutes of its two-and-a-half hours on combat scenes. The rest of the time goes to the home front, as witnessed through the lens of one person, one

family, and one community. In telling the story of Ron Kovic of Massapequa, Long Island, partly before and largely after his two tours of duty in Nam, Stone explores some of the causes and consequences of American involvement in the conflict. But not on a geopolitical level. This film represents a kind of history from below, a micro-history that deals with the human cost of the war. For this purpose, Kovic is the perfect subject, a living metaphor. The product of a competitive, hyper patriotic family, a young man prone to repeat 'love it or leave it' every time someone voices a criticism of the United States, Kovic joins the marines with the notion that he can help to stop communism from reaching American shores. In Nam, he is shattered psychically and physically – first by accidentally killing one of his own men, then by sustaining major wounds that leave him with a body dead from the waist down, a paraplegic in a wheelchair who will never again be able to walk or to father children.

Kovic's return home degenerates into a harrowing journey through a period of shame, guilt, fear, darkness, and despair, before he finally begins a turn towards some vision of hope for the future. While the focus on the film remains steadily on Kovic, the way he is treated by family, friends, the community and the nation helps to shed light on larger historical issues. Honoured as a hero, he is ignored and mistreated as a human being. At the under-funded Veteran's Administration hospital where he spends many months, conditions are horrendous (men forced to lie in their own urine and excrement) due to the fact, as one nurse explains, that the government is spending its money on the war. Back in his home town, the members of his family don't know how to deal with his grief and anger at his condition – some of his siblings are against the war, while his highly patriotic parents turn away in disbelief from his stories about killing civilians and babies. A friend who managed to avoid the draft offers him a two-bit job as a cashier at his successful fast food restaurant, callously saying of the lowly position, 'You have to learn to walk before you can run'. His former girlfriend, now at Syracuse University, is too occupied with the anti-war movement to have much time for him. When in full dress uniform, he rides alone as a local hero in a convertible during Massapequa's annual Fourth of July parade, some of the younger members of the crowd boo and give him the finger. Later that day, at a public gathering where he is supposed to speak in support of the troops in Vietnam, he falls mute, his mind crowded with flashback images and sounds from the battlefield. Here at home, the war continues to take a physical and mental toll not just on our hero, but on him as a symbol of America.

His reaction to this uncomprehending reception at home (after the 4 July parade, he and an old friend who also was in Nam have a poignant discussion over how nobody understands or cares about what they actually went through out there) involves a descent into near madness, a period of drunkenness,

fighting in bars, brutal quarrels with his family, dope smoking, a move to Mexico, an attempt to romance a whore, and finally a physical struggle in a wasteland with another wheel chair vet over who really killed more babies in Nam. This is the nadir, the point at which a kind of redemption begins, one that involves two moves: first, seeking out the family of the man he accidentally killed and confessing what he considers to be his crime, and second, joining the Vietnam Veterans against the war. As a leader in that movement, he is among the demonstrators who break into the Republican Convention in Miami that renominated Richard Nixon in 1972. At the conclusion of the film, clean shaven and wearing a tie and jacket, he rolls out to address the 1976 Democratic Convention on behalf of the Vets, after telling a reporter, 'Just lately, I've felt that I'm home, like maybe we're home'.

This upbeat ending has been widely criticized as Stone's attempt to soften the sting of the sharply negative picture of the United States that pervades the rest of *Born on the Fourth of July*. Some point out that the confession to his victim's family is not part of Kovic's autobiography, but only an invention of the film maker – without seeing that the entire book is the confession, and the sequence only an attempt to visualize that confession in a dramatic form. Other critics complain that this film, like *Platoon*, ignores the big questions of economics, politics, and empire – why the United States got into war, why the ideology of anti-communism was so pervasive, how the administration of the military draft ensured that it was the sons of the lower, not the middle classes, who preponderantly fought and died in Vietnam.

That such charges are largely true does not diminish the real accomplishments of *Born on the Fourth*. It only means that Stone is making a particular work of history with its own thesis and claims on our attention. As historian Jack Davis put it:

Born is more honest and forthcoming than the typical institutional history, and it rejects the ancestor worship pouring forth from public history. Stone's film can be seen as an actual inquiry rather than a mere presentation. He frames the movie around a historical problem, addresses critical questions about the American experience, and offers an interpretation of the recent past than approaches that found in academic scholarship (Davis 2000: 136).

The 'historical problem' is set not at the national but the individual level: why did Americans go and how did the war effect them? The answer in part comes in an unusual thesis, one, perhaps unique to Stone. From the early sequences which have the Ron Kovic playing soldier in the woods near Massapequa, batting on the Little League baseball diamond, and competing on the high school wrestling team, the film roots the aggression of Vietnam in a kind of

competitive masculinity linked to blind patriotism – what might be called the John Wayne syndrome. The link, interestingly enough, comes through President Kennedy's bellicose inaugural address, with its warning to all foes and its demand that Americans ask not what their country can do for them, but what they can do for their country. The Kovic family gathers to listen to the speech, and we see them clearly taking this call to heart. In later films, especially *JFK*, Stone will mark America's troubles from the assassination of the President, who will be portrayed as the good king struck down prematurely. What this suggests is that like other historians, Stone has the ability to alter his interpretations over time, but whether this is a sign of growth and maturity, or mere intellectual skittishness, is something for the viewer to decide.

The ultimate contribution of *Born on the Fourth* is less that of a biography than of a metaphoric history of America in the Vietnam years. In the film we encounter a small, American community both before and during the war; undergo the harrowing experience of battle with its atrocities; suffer the degradations of a handicapped veteran's life; and confront the gap between the rhetoric of patriotic justification and the reality of events on the battlefield and after the war itself. To this vision can be added elements that are very much part of traditional history. *Born on the Fourth of July* recounts, explains, and interprets a single life, and by extension, a whole period – the experience of Vietnam. In depicting the actions and attitudes of Americans in Vietnam and afterwards, the film engages and adds to the body of evidence we have from the war as carried in other books, essays, films, works of history. The film also makes an original and interesting interpretation of American involvement in Vietnam by linking the high cost of blind patriotism to a certain kind of American masculinity. Finally, it generalizes the experiences of one man to be those of a nation, showing the way war touched not only other veterans but also civilians who lived outside the circle of experience of the war. By giving us images of a painful split in the Kovic family, the film suggests the split in the family of the nation itself.

The third film in the Vietnam trilogy, *Heaven and Earth*, deals with America more indirectly. Here Stone does what few historians of the United States would dare to do – attempts to render the Vietnamese experience of not just the war but the entire struggle for liberation. The work is based on the autobiography of Le Ly Haslip, daughter of a peasant family who farm rice in a beautiful valley and live in a traditional, Buddhist way, in harmony with nature. Into this Eden, history erupts, first in the form of French soldiers, who burn the village; then as Vietcong guerrillas, who take away the sons of the peasants; and finally in the combination of South Vietnamese troops, their American advisers, and the ever present helicopters which turn the sky to

thunder and flames. Le Ly becomes one of the victims of history – raped and beaten, her home destroyed, she finds her way to Saigon where she becomes pregnant, works as a dope dealer, and occasionally as a prostitute. A marine sergeant falls in love with her (largely out of guilt over America's actions in Nam, it turns out), eventually marries her, and brings her back to San Diego, where over time the cultural differences in expectations and social roles ultimately tear the marriage apart. Years later, after she has founded a business and prospered, she returns to Vietnam with her three children and finds her mother and one brother still alive, back in their old village. But now there is a huge gulf between them, for her family treats Le Ly more or less as a foreigner, as the American she has, without knowing it, become.

The portrait of traditional Vietnam in the film may be sentimentalized (though Haslip herself thinks it remarkably good), but that of the American invaders is no more of a caricature than that of the revolutionary Vietcong. Both can be brutal in the course of military or intelligence operations (active on behalf of the Vietcong, Le Ly is interrogated by the South Vietnamese and Americans, and raped by a Vietcong). The GIs we see in Saigon are for the most part decent enough, yet they are young men in an alien land in search of the pleasures that young soldiers generally seek, and inevitably their money works to corrupt and coarsen the natives. What is rare is that *Heaven and Earth* does provide a picture of Vietnamese villagers as real people, not just part of the backdrop for American actions. The broader interpretation of history has to do with the cost to other lands and people of America's involvements abroad.

A similar theme runs through *Salvador*, the story of Richard Boyle, a once famous photographic journalist who has through drink and drugs become a kind of deadbeat, living on the margins in San Francisco. When his wife walks out on him, Boyle decides to redeem his reputation by returning to Salvador, a country where he formerly lived and worked, and where he has left Maria, a woman he once loved. Using the lure of drugs and promise of beautiful women, he convinces a disk jockey friend named Dr Rock to drive him to El Salvador. Soon Boyle finds Maria and proposes marriage. He also finds evidence of the growing right-wing power in a country where leftists in the jungle are threatening revolution and a middle-of-the-road government is caught between the extremes of right and left. Boyle's journalistic nose leads him to photograph the freshly dead bodies at the garbage dump of El Playon, people murdered by right-wing death squads, headed by Major Max, a leading politician, candidate for president, and a man who has a good deal of support among the personnel of the American embassy. Dr Rock, who starts out as a naïve tourist, slowly begins to learn about the thuggery and chaos that are

beginning to overwhelm this Central American world. They and we witness the growing arrogance of the right – their rape and murder of four American nuns; and finally the crushing of a leftist uprising with the aid and complicity of the incoming American administration of Ronald Reagan.

Central to the film is the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the leading figure in Salvador's fight for social justice. From the pulpit of the cathedral after a Sunday mass he delivers a powerful speech (the film version is close to Romero's own words) aimed at the military establishment, ordering them to stop supporting the right by killing their peasant brothers and sisters, saying 'Violence on all sides is wrong. I order you in the name of God to stop this oppression'. Minutes later, immediately after Boyle and Maria have taken communion, Romero is gunned down by one of Major Max's men – and then all hell breaks loose as the worshipers in the packed church flee out the door, only to be met by squads of soldiers who wade in to disperse the crowd with clubs and guns.

While these events are documentable, they happened not, as depicted in the film, in a single day, but over the course of a week. Archbishop Romero's speech denouncing right-wing death squads was made in the cathedral on a Sunday. His assassination came the next day while he was saying mass in a small neighbourhood chapel. At his funeral service a few days after that, the crowd of 100,000 mourners outside the cathedral was attacked with clubs and guns by the military, leaving at least 50 people dead. By condensing these three events – the sermon, the assassination, the military action against the people – into one passionate sequence, Stone is able to make clear the connections between Romero's views and his assassination, as well as to underline the complicity between the death squads and the military.

As with the Vietnam films, there were critics who found *Salvador* simplistic, a film which failed to delineate the perilous socio-economic conditions of Salvador (or Central America) that created the political situation, a study in black and white which ignored the moderate centre in the country in the form of President Jose Duarte, a work too sympathetic to the leftist revolutionaries. Yet while he admits there is some truth in those charges, diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber argues that in this work Stone becomes a 'cinematic historian' because the film catches much of the atmosphere of the period so well, and gets 'the political debate accurately . . . There could be no political resolution in El Salvador because, as Stone correctly argued, during the 1980s there was no viable middle ground . . . the United States continued its all-out support of the Salvadoran military even as Washington officials hoped that in some miraculous way the more moderate Duarte could control the politics' (LaFeber 2000: 108).

In *Salvador*, the story of Boyle and Rock becomes symbolic not just for what happened in that country in the early 1980s, but for the whole thrust of American anti-communist foreign policy, with its long history of overt and covert actions in Central America. By telling the story obliquely, through the eyes of these two Americans, Stone engages the debates about American foreign policy since World War II. The critique made by the film is rarely heard outside history books written by leftists such as LaFeber or published in the small radical press – that anti-communism was a cover for profits for American corporations and power for our military and secret intelligence services; that the US has in the name of this anti-communism played a basically anti-democratic role throughout the Western hemisphere, supporting killers and thugs who masquerade their own self interest behind anti-communism. Agree or disagree, this is at once a legitimate and exceedingly contestatory interpretation of US history rendered for the general public.

Up to this point my treatment of Stone has been largely in terms of characters and stories – as if the filmic qualities of his work were not important. But nothing could be further from the truth. Stone is a master of his medium, with a particular talent for rendering the visceral on screen, the tangible feeling of reality, very close up and very 'in your face'. This is true in the earliest film, *Salvador*, in such a grisly sequence as the one in which Boyle is pistol whipped by border guards and dragged off to be shot (the rifle misfires and he is saved); true in the shocking realism of *Platoon's* terrifying firefights that led veterans to say: 'that's the way it was in my Vietnam'; true of the VA hospital when Ron Kovic spends months screaming for nurses to clean away the vomit and feces that stain his bed. Stone is also superb at rendering the confusion of battle and mass movements of crowds – the military attacking the worshippers fleeing the site of Romero's assassination, the chaotic disorder of the battle in which Kovic shoots one of his own men, the struggle between anti-war demonstrators and police described at the outset of this chapter.

Stone's aesthetic in these films is powerful and confrontational, the very opposite of subtle. It is the film-making of excess, with sequences that are strong, bombastic, over the top – noisy with sound effects and loud voices, bright with primary colours, underscored too often with swelling orchestral music or the pounding beat of hard rock. If a character screams 'fuck you' once in a Stone film (as Kovic does to his mother), he will probably scream it a hundred times. If one character is full of light and a beacon of goodness, like Sergeant Elias in *Platoon*, then another will be full darkness, a black hole of evil, like Sergeant Barnes. If a man commits suicide, as does Le Ly's American husband, he shoots himself while naked in a van in a public place. Stone

always goes for the jugular, using every effect of the medium to emotionally heighten the audience's experience, as if to make certain that as much as the characters, you feel the pain (there is little joy in his films) of history.

All this said, there is a definite change over time, a growth in Stone's mastery of film technique and language, one that both helps to propel and strongly inflects the meaning of his histories. The narrative in an early work like *Salvador* is straightforward, the colours bright and primary, the set-ups and editing standard Hollywood realism, with perhaps just a touch of the grotesque that one associates with expressionism. But by the time he makes *Born on the Fourth of July*, the director's palate has broadened considerably to include what might be called the odd, hyper-realism of the Massapequa's two Fourth of July Parades, or the smoky oranges, jerky hand-held camera images, disorienting swish pans and odd angles that characterize combat in Vietnam. Visible as are these changes, at least in retrospect, nothing prepares one well for the quantum leap in film-making that Stone will take when he makes *JFK* (1991), a change in visual historical language so radical that its lessons have yet to be absorbed by other directors. Indeed, Stone himself will not go so far again in an historical film, though the experiments in expression with colour and editing that start in this film will continue in *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

JFK is a superb example of a film which doesn't tell history so much as revision it – through both its form and its message, with the two of them inextricably linked. (The violent objections to the work, which began long before its appearance, have had to do with both.) The film does not, of course, tell the story of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in office, but of his assassination and its aftermath. Rejecting the Warren Commission findings that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin, the film explores the question of who was really responsible for the President's death. The driving investigative force on-screen is the real life character, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, whose book *On the Trail of the Assassins* serves distantly as the source of the story. Garrison, who actually brought an alleged conspirator named Clay Shaw to trial, and lost that trial, plays the role of surrogate historian in search of truth. Clearly he is also meant as a stand-in for all people of goodwill who believe in democracy and want the real story of the assassination to be uncovered. Following Garrison's search, the film recounts the events, real, possible, and imagined, that lie behind the assassination; explains them as part of a major conspiracy at the highest levels of the US government, and interprets this conspiracy as one set in motion by various people, groups, agencies, and companies that had much economic gain to make from the continuation of the Cold War and the hot war (in Vietnam) against communism.

To put a label on it, *JFK* may be seen as a work of modernist or even post-modernist history. It presents events from competing perspectives, mixes film

stocks (black and white, colour, and video), idioms, genres, and period styles (documentary, Soviet montage, Hollywood naturalism, domestic melodrama) to represent the variety of contexts in which the event occurs. It tells multiple stories and creates many interpretations of the assassination, including some which contradict each other. These competing possibilities for what happened, all asserted with the same degree of possibility, tend to emphasize the artificial and provisional reconstruction of any historical reality. What seems to be happening here is that *JFK* both questions history as a mode of knowledge (the multiple interpretations) and yet asserts our need for it (Garrison's closing address in the Shaw trial, in which we in the audience are put in the position of the jury trying a supposed conspirator). The district attorney questions witnesses, ferrets out documents, and tries out theories seeking a truth, yet at the same time seems to show that ultimately truth is impossible to find. The past in the film, the possible history, becomes an unstable mix of fact, fiction, truth, illusion, a fragmentation of contexts, motives, beliefs, rumour. Yet the theme is clear enough, for the work leaves us with the feeling that we live in a dangerous, national security state that is out of control of the people, a hidden state with power over national and international events – including the assassination of the president (Burgoyne 1997: 88–103).

A similar mood hovers over *Nixon* (1995), where – as mentioned earlier – references to 'the Beast' point to a government run by hidden powers. Like *JFK*, this film abounds in government conspiracies, yet these are far better documented than the ones hinted at in the earlier film. The attempts of the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro with the help of the Mafia (using such bizarre methods as poisoned cigars); the burglary of the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press; the Watergate break-in of the McGovern campaign headquarters – all these are a matter of public record. But *Nixon* is not really a film about conspiracies. Nor, surprisingly, is it a film about politics but, rather, one that centres on character – a portrait of the president as a tragic hero. The model for the film is, at some distant removed, Shakespeare – somewhere between the histories and the tragedies. Essentially this is an attempt to understand why this obviously smart and talented politician undertook criminal acts that led to his humiliating downfall.

In so far as it is political, the film gives a fair picture of Nixon as a moderate conservative on domestic affairs and a visionary in international relations, a president who withdrew from Vietnam so slowly that more Americans died after he came into office than before his election, but who also, over the objections of right wingers, sought *détente* with the Russians and reopened relations with China, going to Beijing to meet with Mao Tse-Tung. Stone's portrait is flavoured with insights drawn from quasi-Freudian psychology. In flashbacks from the White House days, we see Nixon's poverty-stricken back-

ground and his difficult relationship with his harshly religious parents – the father who beat him, the mother who controlled him through an almost erotic combination of love, punishment, and guilt. Such sequences don't quite add up to a convincing argument that childhood traumas are responsible for the paranoid and rather dishonest man who became president, but they do create some sympathy for the president in his trials and downfall.

In keeping with its theme, *Nixon* highlights drama rather than film-making. Stone is still a stylish director, but unlike *JFK*, here there is no attempt to expand the formal boundaries of historical film. Once again we have some razzle dazzle editing, unusual intercutting of colour film, black and white, and video; inventive mixtures of documentary footage and drama. But by now it is familiar, part of a visual brilliance that has become part of Stone's normal repertoire. A major motif in the film concerns Nixon's rivalry with John F Kennedy. Or, to be more specific, his rivalry with Kennedy's image – the young, handsome, rich, smooth, sexy, smiling politician was always envied by this stiff, awkward boy whose poverty clung to him like an ill-fitting suit. In disgrace and on his way out of the White House, Nixon looks up at a portrait of Kennedy and says 'When they look at you, they see who they would like to be; when they look at me, they see who they are'.

In this chapter I have been making claims about the film maker as historian – about what such a phrase can and might mean. Earlier in the book I have argued that certain historical films are able to render the past in a meaningful (if fictional) way, render it well enough so that the issues surrounding the history of race in America, or the Bolshevik Revolution, or the life of one American radical, are brought before us anew. Here I have been trying to take this idea farther by explaining how certain film-makers have over their careers created a large enough body of works to be considered not just as one shot historians of a single topic, but as historians in a broader sense – ongoing interpreters of a nation, an era, a field.

To suggest that film makers can be historians is to reach for a meaning of that word that long predates our current idea, which dates from the nineteenth century, that history is a matter of telling the past as it really was – or in the case of film, showing us the past as it really was. It is to accept the notion that history is no more (and no less) than the attempt to recount, explain, and interpret the past, to give meaning to events, moments, movements, people, periods of time that have vanished. Clearly that has been an aim of Oliver Stone in *Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven and Earth*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*, works which consciously confront some of the major historical issues of the recent US past. As much as any historian who works in words, Stone has

wrestled with the late twentieth-century history of the United States – the 1960s, the war in Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination and what followed: the presidency of Nixon, the scandals of Watergate, intervention in Latin America. Doing so, he has created a powerful interpretation of contemporary American history.

This engagement of Oliver Stone with history is hardly accidental. He is a man who was obsessed (I write in the past tense because in the last decade Stone's work has moved off into realms other than history) with historical questions and the search for answers. Each of his films has a conscious thesis about the past, almost always stated right at the outset in a montage, or a speech, or a sequence of images (often documentary footage) which let us know that what we are about to see involves the great public issues of our time. *JFK* opens with President Eisenhower's farewell address, with its warnings about the dangers to America of the growing military industrial complex. *Salvador* begins with a montage in which peasants are beaten and slaughtered by the military in an act of terror that comes to symbolize the betrayal of democratic elements in that country. Early in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic's family gathers to hear President Kennedy's inaugural address, with its call for Americans to bear and burden, pay any price to defend democracy. The subsequent dramatized history in such works plays out the early thesis, showing how the events provide a context for the actions of, for the most part, ordinary Americans.

As with other historians, in Stone you can also find a larger, cumulative body of meaning. Taken together, the six films mentioned above create a kind of collective historical argument about contemporary America. Central to his historical vision is the assassination of President Kennedy as a pivotal event in America's problems (but as mentioned, like any historian, Stone can be contradictory, for *Born on the Fourth of July* seems to point to Kennedy's rhetoric and stance as the cause of the Vietnam War). His larger interpretation has in some quarters been called paranoid – that the US government is out of control, or in the hands of secret agencies; that lots of things being done in the name of the American people are criminal; that our democratic heritage and institutions serve as a kind of ideology to cover the activities of greedy men and scoundrels. One may ask: is this a true picture of America? Nobody can answer such a question definitively, or at least for anyone else, but certainly enough evidence has become available since Vietnam – of assassinations, secret wars, Watergate, Irangate, the Contras, the allegations concerning CIA involvement in crack cocaine, charges of collusion between oil interests and foreign governments – to say this portrait is at the very least a historically plausible interpretation.

To what extent does Stone himself believe this broad notion? There does seem to be a kind of running contradiction in his historical work. In interviews

and in the films, he sometimes insists on the chaotic, multiple, relativist nature of history – in essence, on the untellability of the truth of the past. But this does not prevent him from going ahead and directing films with stories that carry the force of truth. Indeed, more than simply storytelling, Stone uses the past for the purpose of delivering certain kinds of truths about our national life. They usually come through the words of most of his major characters – Chris Taylor, Richard Boyle, Ron Kovic, Ly Le Haslip, and Jim Garrison – all of whom are seekers after and tellers of the truth. In his insistence on the moral lessons of history, Stone seems to be exceedingly traditional.

His dilemma would seem to spring from a simple human problem: Stone wants to have it both ways at once without having to reconcile the differences. He wants to get the history right and yet he knows that such a task is essentially impossible. Perhaps this is why, in a film such as *JFK*, form seems to be at war with the contents – the razzle-dazzle multiple realities of the montage at odds with the tepid realism of Jim Garrison's home life and the limp domestic drama about why he doesn't spend more time with his family. Stone's sense that history is not a single story also can run against his notion that it is important to tell the truth of the past. This dilemma may be why he appears angry in so many interviews about whether his works should be labelled history or fiction. It is as if he dimly recognizes the dilemma and stymied by the contradiction, occasionally bursts into verbal violence, saying things like, 'Who knows what history is? It's just a bunch of stories people tell each other around the campfire'.

My suggestion is that history also resides in the kinds of works Stone has created for the screen. Given a society in which reading, particularly serious reading about the past, is increasingly an elitist endeavour, it is possible that such history on the screen is the history of the future. Perhaps in a visual culture, the truth of the individual fact is less important than the overall truth of the metaphors we create to help us to understand the past. Fact, we must remember, has not always been the primary tool for telling the past. The 'truth' contained in facts was never highly important to griots in Africa, or to history-makers in other oral cultures. Maybe Oliver Stone is a kind of griot for a new visual age. A person who, in a sense, makes history by making myths, and makes myths in order to tell truths. Wanting the myths he recounts to have a truth value. And in so far as they do, these are not the literal truths that our scientific age expects in print, but truths for a coming age (or one already here?) in which a visual culture expresses its own kinds of truth.

Let's face it: the problem that Stone and other film makers face is very real – how do you make the past serious to a large audience? How do you communicate lessons from the past to a public in a post-literate age. Surely public

history in the future is less likely to be propagated by scholarly monographs than by stories presented on the large and small screen. Is this a shocking idea? To accept Stone or other directors as historians, one must understand that the theory and practice of history today are not what they were when I received my PhD almost four decades ago. For at least the last half century (and more in some quarters) the practice and truth claims of history have been under major attack from philosophers, literary and cultural theorists, post-modern critics, and historians themselves. The literature on this is far too huge to deal with here, so all I wish to do is to suggest that the cumulative weight of the arguments add up to the following: That written history, academic history, is not something solid and unproblematic, and certainly not a 'reflection' of a past reality, but the construction of a moral story about the past out of traces that remain. That history (as we practise it) is an ideological and cultural product of the Western world at a particular time in its development, one when the notion of 'scientific' truth, based on replicable experiments, has been carried into the social sciences, including history (where no such experimentation is possible). That history is actually no more than a series of conventions for thinking about the past. That these conventions have shifted over time – from the stories of Herodotus to the scientism of a Von Ranke – and that they will obviously shift in the future. That the 'truth' of history does not reside in the verifiability of individual pieces of data, but in the overall narrative of the past. If he does nothing else in his films, Oliver Stone – like Theodore Angelopoulos, the Taviani brothers, and many other directors – makes films that enter into, engage, comment upon, and contest the existing body of data and arguments on recent America that we professionals call the discourse of history.

Chapter 9

Film on history

In the fall of 2000 I made a lecture tour of several universities and cultural centres in Japan. My topic for the tour was a short version, illustrated with film clips, of what is now Chapter 7 of this book – its title: ‘Oliver Stone as Historian.’ After my lecture at the American Center in Tokyo, I went out for food and beer with some former students from the year I was a Fulbright professor at Kyushu University. One of them, a mathematician who is now a major figure in the Genome Project in Japan, and who is also a serious student of Buddhism, told me the following: my explanation about the history film reminded him of the beginnings of Buddhist paintings in Japan. The priests (and here we are, no doubt, in the sixth or seventh century) realized that an illiterate population could not read the sacred Sanskrit texts, so they decided to create visual works, paintings (the mandala is one of the forms we know best) to instill in the population the ideas of Buddhism. Smart and educated men, these priests realized that these paintings could not contain all the information and all the complex ideas that were part of the sacred texts, that they were in fact a kind of simplification of those written texts. Yet they strongly felt that the more public and more accessible medium of painting would convey the spirit, the feeling, and the meaning of Buddhism to the general public who did not have the skills to read. Over the centuries, these visual representations of Buddhist ideas began to take on an integrity of their own, as more and more people came, and still come, to know the ideas of the religion through these images rather than through the sacred texts that were their inspiration. Today they have for most people, including priests, taken the place of those texts; indeed, some find them more characteristic and revealing of Buddhism than the original texts.

More than any comment made on my efforts to understand and explicate the role of the history film, more than anything said by any critic, fellow historian,

narratologist, or cinema studies expert, this idea struck home. For it seemed to point directly to some of the major questions with which I have been struggling ever since beginning to write on film. The question of how to think about or understand the relationship between history on the screen and history on the page. The question of whether this is a lesser or simply a different realm of history. The question of how and what and if the work of history on the screen adds to historical understanding. At least this brief story suggests that surely if there is more than one way of understanding the doctrines of a lengthy and complex religious tradition such as Buddhism, with a history in Japan that goes back almost 15 centuries, then there can be more than one way of understanding the past and more than one medium in which to convey that understanding.

Even if one accepts this insight, it leads to more questions: what exactly is *historical understanding*? What do we mean when we use that term. And is such understanding, whatever it is, always and everywhere the same, or is historical understanding (as it must be) itself historically determined? To say we understand the past surely means we know more than simply the traces of the past we call data or facts, otherwise chronicles would be a perfectly adequate way of knowing. Clearly understanding has to do with how we put those traces together to mean something to us today. The most common device for doing so is narrative. We come to understand the past in the stories we tell about it, stories based on the sort of data we call fact, but stories which include other elements that are not directly in the data but arise from the process of story telling. Through the work of recent theorists, we have come to know that this narrative of the past is itself a device – our narratives select some of those traces, and in doing so, ‘constitutes’ them, that is makes them into the ‘facts’ that we then link together to show and explain and interpret what happened – to, in short, produce meaning. By now we also know enough about narrative history to suggest that a great deal of this ‘meaning’ often precedes the ‘facts’ and is part of the process that helps to constitute them.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this book, I came to think and write about historical film well into my career as an historian. Before turning to film, I produced, along with a number of essays and articles, three works of narrative history, though to be precise, the second was a biography and the third a series of three interlaced biographies. When I was writing these books, I certainly did not think about the relationship between facts and narrative, or even about the truth claims of what I wrote. I simply worked within a discipline that had standards of procedure which did not very much reflect upon themselves or their origins. You followed those standards and produced historical truth – which somehow included historical understanding.

Personally I grew restless with the traditional narrative form. My second book, *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (1975) took several small steps away from the linear, and my third was a full blown experiment in a different way of writing history. Perhaps influenced by my own experience and its unusual theme, how living and working in Japan changed three nineteenth-century American sojourners, my book, *Mirror in the Shrine* (1988), was a self-reflexive work that told its story in multiple voices, was written in the present tense and sometimes the second person, and utilized occasional direct address to the audience or to my characters. As a one-time sojourner myself, I wished to share something about the immediacy of the experience of an alien culture, the shock of its sights, smells, personal encounters. In a sense, I wanted to create on the page the kind of encounter with the world of the past (in this case nineteenth-century Japan) that film so effortlessly seems to provide. The book was generally well received, but some reviewers chided me for lapsing into the first or second person, worried that I was not writing proper 'history', or was indulging in 'fiction' because I had stepped outside the normal narrative boundaries.

Even before undertaking this narrative experiment, I had begun to teach and write about historical film. Like many historians who introduce film in the classroom, I at first did so in a somewhat unconscious and wholly untheoretical way. When talking about the twentieth century, it seemed useful to share some of the common images, which meant showing a film like *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to demonstrate something about immigrant groups and the changing culture of the 1920s, or *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) for a flavour of the Dust Bowl, or *Triumph of the Will* (1935) to give a sense of the Nazi self-image, or *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) for the founding ideology of the Soviet State. My use of film expanded from an occasional one to an entire course in historical film in 1977 after attendance at my once over-subscribed class on radical and revolutionary movements, shrank from 35 students to 2. Changing the topic to Radicalism and Revolution on Film served to boost my enrolments back to their previous numbers. It also provided another level of history, another discourse to talk about in class, although I would not have put it that way at the time. What was soon clear was that the written works of history and those on film pointed to the same topics but dealt with them in different ways, raising different sorts of questions and providing different sorts of answers about the past.

The issues raised by this double discourse became more important when I began to write about film in the early 1980s. This happened largely because two of my written works were used, more or less, as the basis for films. One of them, *The Good Fight* (1982) was a feature-length documentary about the

Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War. Since this was precisely the topic of my first book, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion and the Spanish Civil War* (1969), I became the chief historical consultant on a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and undertaken by three young filmmakers. More than simply adviser, I ended up writing the narration for the film. The whole experience, beyond the insight it provided into the process of making a documentary, let me see how much such a work was shaped by the beliefs and agendas of the film-maker historians, and how much its narrative strategies and structure shared with the dramatic feature – such things as the need for interesting characters, a plot with a sense of development, and a conclusion suffused with a strong moral position.

The other film was the big budget Hollywood feature, *Reds*. While I was still in the process of writing *Romantic Revolutionary* (1975), I was contacted by Warren Beatty, who had learned at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, which houses Reed's papers, that I was at work on the topic. The year was 1972, and if you wanted to talk to someone in detail about Jack Reed, his friends, milieu, and times, I was the one. Beatty and I talked on and off for the next seven years, until the film went into production and I joined the production company as historical consultant. This was a loosely-defined job. Basically both I and my files were available to help the film makers (writers, director, producers, production designer, cinematographers, wardrobe, etc.) with any questions they had about anything to do with Reed and the worlds in which he moved. I also read and made critiques of various versions of the script, suggested some changes of actions or language (I have a couple of lines of dialogue in the film), and went on location with the company for a few weeks in Spain, where I was gratified to see copies of my book being read by people all over the set and was treated to the great pleasure of having director of photography Vittorio Storaro (who won one of his four Oscars for *Reds*) tell me that my book was his Bible, that he never lit a scene and set up a camera until he had re-read the relevant part of *Romantic Revolutionary*.

The experiences of working on these films, created in part from my own research, made me start to wonder exactly what happened on the way from the page to the screen. But only after a request from the journal, *Reviews in American History*, did I write my first essay on film, 'Reds as history'. In retrospect, it seems like a naïve essay. While it praised some aspects of the film and yet took it to task for some of its historical errors – in part for getting certain details wrong; in part for missing what I thought to be the overall important theme of John Reed's life – the essay never stopped to consider that film was such a different medium from the written word that it had to be judged by different criteria (Rosenstone 1982). But to say that is to get ahead of myself.

It took some years for me to realize how easy it is to criticize historical films for errors. And how much more difficult to figure out how the products of this visual medium sit with relation to written history. Or to try to understand just how, and what do they convey, about the past?

This excursion into autobiography seems necessary because working on film provides more than a little insight into what sorts of things can and cannot be done on screen – either through normal dramatic practice or the limitations (and demands) of the medium. These experiences helped me to understand, if only unconsciously, how film of necessity did and had to do something different from the written word. Figuring out what that is, and how to think about it, has been my task, on and off, ever since. What seems clear is that too many academics critique film naïvely, unthinkingly – as I did in my first essay. Why? Because movies run against our notion of proper history. It still runs against that notion in me, but I have come to see – as you will know if you have read the earlier chapters – that film is not history in our traditional sense, but it is a kind of history nonetheless. An important kind which may well have already changed the way we see and describe the past. Film has given us tools to see reality in a new way – including the realities of a past which has long since vanished from our sight.

A second reason for indulging in autobiography is to explain to the reader the choice of movies which I have used to illustrate my theme. I am well aware that they have been largely devoted to war, social upheaval, and catastrophe. As the books on Spain and John Reed indicate, the early part of my career was devoted to the study of radical social and political movements of both modern Europe and the United States. For years as a researcher, I delved deeply into the discourse of radicalism, while as a teacher of a course called The Modern Age, I of necessity focus to a great extent on movements dealing with social upheaval – the two world wars, the Russian Revolution, Nazism, and the Holocaust. One result is that, in line with my belief that it is necessary to know the discourse of the particular field to be able to write in depth on the history film, my choice has been limited to works depicting such events. (Another area of my research, the relation between the United States and Japan in the nineteenth century, has produced too few films to warrant explication.) If I am right in my arguments about the history film, then they apply to other fields in the past as well, to questions, say, of industrial development, the growth of the middle class, to family and gender history, cultural change, international relations, colonialism, to any topic which involves people in the past about whom a story can be told. I am aware, too, that a large number of the films analyzed in this book deal with specific, documentable people and events, but one could easily do a book like this analyzing films that, like a couple of those in the

chapter on the Holocaust (e.g. *Under the Domim Tree, Sunshine*) deal with fictional characters placed into specific historical settings.

As I pursued my studies on the history film over several years (usually in response to requests that I present a paper or take part in a panel on the increasingly popular, to both historians and people in cinema studies, topic of history and film), I for a long time kept trying to look at films with an historian's eye, trying to make film fit into the rules and conventions we academic historians use to construct a past. Early on it became obvious to me that some film makers were obsessed by the past in the same way that historians are. Oliver Stone, Ousmane Sembene, Carlos Diegues, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Margarethe von Trotta, Andrejz Wajda, Istvan Szabo, the Taviani brothers – all kept returning to the past for their subjects, and dealing with serious moments, events, and people in their respective nation's histories. So why, I asked myself, weren't they considered historians? Just because they worked in a popular medium? My 'Aha!' experience came after viewing Alex Cox's *Walker* and going back to read everything about that nineteenth-century adventurer – and seeing that this black comedy about the American invasion of Nicaragua engaged precisely the same questions that engaged historians about American involvement in Central America. This was the moment I could set aside my training and ask: Why not just accept that a Cox or the others are already historians and take a look at how such film makers create their histories – *why not investigate their rules of engagement with the traces of the past, rules of engagement that come out of the possibilities and practices of the medium in which they work*. Rather than criticizing historical films for doing or not doing this or that, why not try to figure out what we would want the ideal historical film to be? From that point on, my attention focused on films and film makers who obviously (from an historian's point of view) were attempting to create a meaningful historical world – which to me means a world on the screen that engages the kind of historical issues about which historians also write – ethnicity, war, revolution, social change, gender relations, colonialism, race.

To accept film makers as historians, as I have been proposing throughout this book, is to accept a new sort of history. The medium and its practices for constructing a past – all ensure that the historical world on film will be different from that on the page. In terms of informational content, intellectual density, or theoretical insight, film will always be less complex than written history. Yet its moving images and sound scapes will create experiential and emotional complexities of a sort unknown upon the printed page. Like the Buddhist paintings, the historical film can convey much about the past to us and thereby provide some sort of knowledge and understanding – even if we cannot specify exactly what the contours of such understanding are.

Lest I seem terribly naïve, let me say that I understand there is another, perhaps more likely possibility: that the visual media will simply wipe out history or any sense of the past as we have known it for the last couple of hundred or couple of thousand years. That the mixing of past and present, the kind of pastiche used in advertising and literary fiction and film, the flattening of reality, the jumble of images from different ages and cultures, about which so many post-modern theorists such as Frederick Jameson have worried, will destroy history as we have known it. Since we historians don't predict the future, I have no answer to that critique except the gut feeling that one of the constants of human history is that people always want to have some knowledge, however imperfect, about where they and their ancestors came from, literally and figuratively. And that as long as screens, large and small, are a major medium for showing and telling us about our world, then film will be one way of rendering the past.

However we think of it, we must admit that film gives us a new sort of history, what we might call history as vision. It's earliest predecessor, oral history, tends to create a poetic relationship to world. Then over a two-thousand-year period, written history has created an increasingly linear, scientific relationship. Film changes rules of the game and creates its own sort of truth, creates a multi-level past that has so little to do with language that it is difficult to describe adequately in words. Certainly the historical world created by film is potentially much more complex than written text. On the screen, several things occur simultaneously – image, sound, language, even text – elements that support and work against each other to create a realm of meaning as different from written history as written was from oral history. So different that it allows us to speculate that the visual media may represent a major shift in consciousness about how we think about our past. If this is true, then it may well be our film maker historians are probing the possibilities for the future of our past.

What kept and continues to keep historians from fully coming to grips with film as history is our traditional reflex: empiricism. However much we might enjoy a dramatic feature set in the past, the specialist of the period represented is bound at many points to cry 'foul' – and to argue that a particular scene, a character, a moment, a bit of dialogue or a whole sequence of events is not an accurate reflection of the sources, but only an invention. Such judgements are not mistaken. Settings, actors, costumes, gestures, dialogue, music and other elements on the screen – all of necessity, as Pierre Sorlin pointed out 20 years ago, partake of a good deal of the imaginary. Certainly the screen provides no clear window onto a vanished past; the best it can do is to provide a construction of proximate realities to what once was. Here we face the larger point, the more fundamental issue raised but never fully explored by Sorlin: if the bulk of

what historical films show on the screen is fiction, how can we consider them to be history?

Maybe one should not insist upon the word – at least not in its capitalized form. The best and more serious kind of historical film does 'history' only in so far as it attempts to make meaning out of something that has occurred in the past. Like written history, it utilizes traces of that past, but its rules of engagement with them are structured by the demands of the medium and the practices it has evolved – which means that its claims will be far different from those of history on the page. To give but a few examples. The basic element of the medium, the camera, is a greedy mechanism which, in order to create a world, must show more precise details – arrangements of furniture, the way tools are handled, stances or gestures, the exact locations of warriors in a landscape or strikers before a factory – than historical research could ever fully provide. The dramatic structure, which means the need for plausible characters and psychic tension, and the limitations on screen time, ensures that dialogue will have to be created, events and characters condensed, compressed, altered – even invented. However counter intuitive it may seem, what we see on the screen is – and in this sense precisely like written history – not a window onto the past but a construction of a simulated past, not a literal reality but a metaphoric one.

The notion that written history works as metaphor has been powerfully argued by more than one theorist in recent years. Even those who do not accept the position that metaphor is central to historical understanding have come to realize that works of history cannot literally recreate the past but can only enfold its trace elements into a verbal construction, a text that attempts to explain vanished people, events, moments, and movements to us in the present. Doing so involves much more than the literal. Even the most scholarly histories are, in the words of Robert Berkhofer, 'more structures of interpretation than the structures of factuality they purport to be' (Berkhofer 1995: 57). Indeed, the literary job of historical realism, the only mode of writing historians recognize as legitimate – and one to which most film makers slavishly adhere – is to 'make the structure of interpretation appear to be (the same as) the structure of factuality'. What this suggests is that both written history and films invoke the authenticity (or reality) that comes from using those traces, that documentary evidence we call 'facts', and then go on to employ a literary or filmic vocabulary to create 'history'.

Whatever they share in terms of interpretive structure, the relationship of data to discourse, historical books and films divide on one crucial issue: invention. The most radical theorists may talk of the fictive qualities of all narrative, but however metaphoric, historical narrative is always built on blocks of verifiable data. The dramatic film, by contrast (and here is where it parts

company most sharply with the documentary and gets closest to the historical novel), indulges in the invention of characters, dialogue, incidents, and events; indeed, some historical films are made up of wholly invented characters placed into a documented setting or situation. This practice of invention may be enough to remove from the dramatic film the word 'history', but certainly not the ideas of historical 'thinking' or 'understanding'. Not if by that phrase we mean coming to grips with the issues from the past that trouble and challenge us in the present – questions of social change, gender relations, individual and group identity, class, ethnicity, war, colonialism, revolution, ideology, and nationalism.

It is just these kinds of major social and cultural issues that are explored in what one might call 'the new historical', a film with roots in the past – Eisenstein's *October* or Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* (1928) are among the forebears – which have become increasingly common in the last 30 years. The break-up of the Hollywood studio system, the creation of film capabilities in newly-independent Third World countries, the activism of the 1960s, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the creation of lightweight, less expensive film and video equipment, the vast expansion of television channels and cable systems – such factors no doubt underlie, but don't exactly explain, the flourishing of this genre of dramatic motion pictures (which has a counterpart in the proliferation of documentaries, sponsored by television channels) that downplay or eschew traditional romance and attempt to deal seriously with the meaning of the past.

The term, 'new historical', may seem to imply a movement, but it would be more accurately described as a tendency, and a diffuse one at that. Individual examples of such films have been produced just about everywhere movies are made, but they also tend to appear in two sorts of clusters: as either several works by a single director (Andrzej Wajda, Poland; Oliver Stone, US; Theo Angelopoulos, Greece; Ousmane Sembene, Senegal) or several films in a single country in a brief period of time (the New German Cinema or the Cinema Nuovo of Brazil, both in the 1970s; Cuban film in the 1960s). Attempts to pinpoint the cause of such clusters can be no more than speculation. Financial and business considerations must certainly be involved, yet such movies tend to appear at moments when nations are undergoing some kind of cultural or political stress, change or upheaval – the attempt to come to grips with the trauma of Vietnam (Oliver Stone); the corruption and internal conflicts that presaged the end of communism (Wajda); terrorism, repression, and the legacy of the Third Reich (New German Cinema); the breakup of a nation (the cinema of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s); the desire to find (or create) a heritage for a post-colonial country (Sembene, Cinema Nuovo, Australia in the 1980s); or to justify a revolutionary change of régimes (Cuba).

For the traditional historian, my argument for the film as a form of history may be indigestible. But to those historians with faces set towards the future, it may seem more like common sense. Even if the film could deliver data as well as the written word (which it cannot, as a practical matter, do very well), what would be the point? We already have books. To attend the cinema, or to watch a television screen, is to undergo an experience far different from that of reading words on a page. That difference lies at the heart of the history film. However we define, measure, and analyze that difference – and none of this has yet been undertaken very convincingly, perhaps because of the great slip-page involved in translating a multi-media experience into linear words – we can at least understand that the experience is different enough to let us think that ultimately the historical film takes us back to the most basic questions: what do we want from the past? Why do we want to know it? What else might we want to know that we don't already know? To learn by example? To feel (or think we feel) what others (may have) felt in given situations? To experience, if only distantly, what others experienced in war, revolution, political crisis, times of trouble and times of plenty? Or perhaps, as in the history once practised by the Greeks, to be inspired into ethical or aesthetic contemplation of the human condition?

It may seem counter intuitive, even downright insulting to suggest the film as a new form of historical thinking. Yet living in an increasingly visual age, we must be prepared to at least entertain such a notion. For visual thinking of the past, metaphor and symbol may become far more important than amassing data or creating a logical argument. Theorist Frank Ankersmit has already argued that even with regard to written history, 'the metaphorical dimension . . . is more powerful than the literal or factual dimensions', and has broached the notion that in the future we need to focus less on the past itself than on the language we use for speaking about the past (Ankersmit 1994a: 180). This at least suggests that we might judge historians less by their data and more by the aptness of their metaphors. In a world of film, these would be visual metaphors – or perhaps something we can simply call vision. Here is a major point shared by both films and books – each is more than the sum of its parts. A written work is based upon data, but the totality of its words transcend the data and launch into a realm of moral argument and metaphor. Film also utilizes data, if in a rather more casual way, before it too launches into the same realm. Vision, metaphor, overall argument or moral is precisely the point at which film and written history come the closest to each other. The details of the past are necessary, interesting, even fascinating but what we really want to know is how to think about them, what they mean. The printed page and film are both ready to tell us.

If the dramatic film can successfully meditate upon, interrogate and analyze the past, or explore that which has been repressed by official histories, as I have tried to show in earlier chapters, then surely it plays part of the role we assign to traditional History. More than a quarter of a century ago, Marc Ferro, in the essay which suggested that some directors had already created a filmic writing of history, went on to claim that in a more general way, motion pictures provide what he called a 'counter discourse' on contemporary society. Let me take his idea one step further and claim that the history film creates a counter discourse on the past. An unusual discourse, to be sure, for it bridges Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry – such films include both what happened and what might have happened.

To change the medium of history from the page to the screen, to add images, sound, colour, movement, and drama, is to alter the way we read, see, perceive, and think about the past. All these elements are part of a practice of history for which we do not yet have a decent label. Nor do we have a good sense of its coordinates, how and where it sits in time, space, and in relation to our other discourses. Yet this kind of history is a challenge, a provocation, and a paradox. If its world can never be taken literally, the history film creates rich images, sequences, and visual metaphors that help us to see and think about what has been. Its truths are metaphoric and symbolic, not literal. The history film not only challenges traditional History, but helps return us to a kind of ground zero, a sense that we can never really know the past, but can only continually play with, reconfigure, and try to make meaning out of the traces it has left behind.

Guide to key reading

While there has been an increasing amount of writing on the topic of history and film in the last quarter of a century, it's difficult to point to many texts as 'key' to what still must be seen as a field (or sub-field or sub-sub-field) in search of a methodology. The Ur texts in the field are four collections of essays and one single authored work, all of them published between 1976 and 1981. Three of these volumes more or less emerged out of conferences on film and history held at such places as University College, London, the Imperial War Museum, and the Universities of Utrecht, Göttingen, and Bielefeld. The essays in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), deal mostly with questions of how historians can evaluate newsreel as historical evidence and how to use films in the classroom, while K.R.M. Short (ed.), *Feature Films as History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), considers dramatic features and the issue of how clusters of them made in certain periods can serve as windows into exploration of particular ideologies or climates of opinion. The largest and broadest of the collections, Karsten Fledelius *et al.* (eds), *History and the Audio-Visual Media* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1979) divides its essays into three revealing categories: didactic problems, film and TV materials as source materials for historians, and content analysis and mass communications.

The kind of analysis pursued in *History on Film/Film on History*, which sees the visual media as a legitimate way of representing the past, begins with two books – the suggestive essays of Marc Ferro that are collected in *Cinema et histoire* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1977), especially the last essay, 'Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?', and the work by Pierre Sorlin entitled *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1980), which examines feature films that deal with the American Civil War, the Russian