

SLAVES
on
SCREEN

Film and Historical Vision



NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

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Film as Historical Narrative

An encampment just outside the walls of Rome, 71 BCE. A great Roman general confronts the captured gladiator Spartacus, leader of a slave uprising that had defied Rome's legions for two years. "Spartacus. You are he, aren't you?" Spartacus does not speak. "I am Marcus Licinius Crassus," says the general. "You must answer when I speak to you." Spartacus says not a word. The general slaps him. Spartacus spits in the general's face.

An island in the Antilles, in the 1850s. An angry Englishman looks into the face of an ex-slave, once his collaborator in revolt, now his opponent, the captured leader of the rebellious blacks. "Listen to me. It wasn't I who invented this war," the Englishman snarls, wanting some response. The black leader stares back in proud silence and spits at the white man.

A sugar plantation in Cuba, 1795. The count sits his most stubborn slave next to him at his dinner table in imitation of Christ and his Apostles. The two men look at each other, resembling in profile Giotto's celebrated painting of Jesus gazing into the face

of Judas. "Who am I?" demands the count, "Who am I?" The slave stares in silence, then spits at his master.



The count and his slave Sebastián from *The Last Supper*

THREE REENACTMENTS IN FILM of imagined moments in the long history of slavery and resistance to it: What do we make of them? Do we shrug them off, as Laurence Olivier merely playing the the Roman general, Kirk Douglas Spartacus, and Marlon Brando, the Englishman? Do we note the similarity in all the scenes—the masters seeking acknowledgment, the rebels silent, the spitting—and wonder whether the latter two movies are quoting the first, as filmmakers are wont to do? Or can we go on to ask whether these scenes are also serious efforts to represent conflicts and sensibilities in the history of slavery? Can we cast filmmakers, actors, and viewers as participants in a collective “thought experiment” about the past?

At first glance, this objective may seem to be a difficult one. Readers may well wonder whether we can arrive at a historical

account faithful to the evidence if we leave the boundaries of professional prose for the sight, sound, and dramatic action of film. In fact, this question was posed in ancient Greece, well before Spartacus’s day, in regard to historical prose and epic poetry. Herodotus and Thucydides had made the switch from poetry to prose in writing down their histories in the fifth century BCE, and it was something of a revolution. Homer had sung with divine inspiration of the quarrels that led to the Trojan War. Herodotus’s account of the wars between the Persians and the Greeks was drawn not from a goddess, but from what he had “learned by inquiry (*histories*).” Thucydides, too, wrote of the Peloponnesian War from his own “inquiries,” critically comparing accounts and evidence. Poets like Homer were permitted to exaggerate or invent, he explained, to please and engage their listeners, but he wrote only what he had witnessed or discovered from reliable sources.¹

Decades later Aristotle drew the distinction between poetry and history in another way, stressing less the importance of verse as opposed to prose and more their content and aim. “The historian relates what happened, the poet what might happen . . . Poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events.” Thinking of both epic and the tragic theater, Aristotle said that the poet must choose from events, actual or fictitious, and shape them to make a unified story, while the historian must tell whatever has happened within a time period, whether or not things fit neatly together.²

These classical distinctions were often blurred in practice. In regard to the many speeches quoted in his history, the rigorous Thucydides explained that he could not remember word for word what he had heard or what had been recounted to him, “so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really

said.” This convention of inserting made-up, but appropriate, speeches was followed by European historians into the sixteenth century.

Further, in choosing between conflicting accounts of events, Thucydides might well have been obliged to fall back on what was “possible” in human behavior—in other words, the task that Aristotle assigned to poetry. Historians today still perform this exercise. As for historians simply providing a shapeless account of everything that happens in a period, Aristotle’s picture of historical writing was not accurate. Historians picked and chose what to write about then and have done so ever since. History books may not have the same kind of beginning, middle, and end as a Greek tragedy, but they had and have an ordered structure nonetheless.³

The ancient contrast between poetry and history, and the crossover between them, anticipate the contrasts and crossovers between historical film and historical prose. Poetry has not only been given the freedom to fictionalize but it brings a distinctive set of *techniques* to its telling: verse forms, rhythms, elevated diction, startling leaps in language or metaphor. The conventions and tools of poetry can limit its use to convey some kinds of historical information, but they can also enhance its power for expressing certain features of the past. For example, Walter Rodney has told the story of slavery and working people in the Caribbean in scholarly social histories. Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* gives poetic voice to the sorrow and greatness in these same experiences. His griot laments the seizure of African slaves: “We were the colour of shadows when we came down / with tinkling leg-irons to join the chains of the sea.”⁴



What is film’s potential for telling about the past in a meaningful and accurate way? We can assess it under the same headings used

for poetry and history: the subject matter or plot; the techniques for narration and representation; and the truth status of the finished product. Here I will examine “feature films,” both those with a central plot based on documentable historical events of resistance to slavery and those with an imagined plot, but where historical events are intrinsic to their action. I choose feature films because they are a more difficult case than documentary films. Feature films are often described as creatures of invention, without significant connection to the experienced world or the historical past. The term “fiction films” is often applied to them in cinema studies, highlighting a contrast between unconstrained imagination in feature films and “truth” in nonfictional documentary. It is precisely this dichotomy that I want to question, not merely because there is a play of invention—of “fictive” crafting—in documentary film, docudrama, and *cinéma-vérité* (as there is also in prose historical texts), but also because feature films can make cogent observations on historical events, relations, and processes.⁵

In reflecting on film as a medium for presenting history, we should remember, too, that filmmakers have only a hundred years of experience behind them, years marked by rapid technological change in tools and equipment. Historical writers have had more than 2500 years in which to develop different genres, such as political history and historical biography; to widen or narrow their frames, from the history of a village, to the history of an empire, to global history; and to experiment with styles of exposition and proof. Filmmakers have had a century of experience with private, governmental, and institutional sources of funding and with different regimes of censorship. Historians have written over the millennia for many kinds of patrons, sponsors, and political figures, some of whom insisted on sycophantic loyalty, while others encouraged independence. Film is only beginning to find its way as a medium for history.

As for the subject matter of feature films, it is usually said that it must take the form of a concrete, limited story. Edward P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Peasants of the Languedoc* or Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* could never be transposed to film, so the argument goes, even though each has a collective "hero" and a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.⁶ Instead, a filmmaker inspired by such important books would choose among their myriad examples a craftsman's, peasant, or slave family, and single out a Luddite machine-smashing, a peasant uprising, or a slave escape.

Most historical films are organized around a particular story, even when a grand theme has captured the filmmaker's imagination. *Glory*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Saving Private Ryan* all follow a small group of individuals through, respectively, the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II. But we should not rule out other possibilities for cinematic plots. In his *October* of 1928, Sergei Eisenstein pictured the Bolshevik Revolution through mass scenes, symbolic figures or events, and the startling juxtaposition of images. Eisenstein told his film students that they could call an individual a "character," but they could also conceptualize a battleship as a character, or a crowd about to join an uprising, or an enormous unit of the Tsarist army.⁷

In its usual story form, the feature film can recount the past in the mode of historical biography and "microhistory." In microhistory, historians explore a telling example in depth—it might be a striking court case or crime, a dramatic rift or long-term quarrel in a village, a strange rumor and associated panic—and use it to uncover social processes that may be typical of their day or unusual. In their microhistories, films can reveal social structures and social codes in a given time and place, sources and forms of alliance and conflict, and the tension between the traditional and the new. Films can dig deep into family life in the past, one of the most important fields of social history in the

late twentieth century. Films can show people at work, from medieval peasants sowing and harvesting, to Chinese dyers staining crimson cloth in their great vats, to early twentieth-century seamstresses bent over their sewing machines. In cinematic biography, films can suggest how and why political decisions are made in different historical regimes, and their consequences. Films can show—or, more correctly, *speculate* on—how the past was experienced and acted out, how large forces and major events were lived through locally and in detail.

Beyond a well-researched plot, the historical power of a film stems from its multiple techniques and resources for narration. Early film theorists might have objected to that word *narration*, for films were said to imitate realities by showing, not telling. In fact, as David Bordwell has pointed out, films both show and tell, and narration covers all the methods used to get a story across.⁸ Director Gillo Pontecorvo described his "great moment" in filmmaking as the point "when you have nearly finished the cutting, and you begin to put the music and visual together. In this moment, you see the object and the purpose come alive."⁹ This coming together has implications not only for the coherence and beauty of a film but also for the account it gives of the past. The thousands of choices made can all make a difference to the historical narrative: the actors and their interpretation, the locations and sound; the film (black and white, color) and lighting; the ordering of time (flashbacks, jumps, slow motion, cutting from one event to another or presenting them simultaneously) and the ordering of space (close-up, bird's-eye shot, wide angle, movement around a room, view of the same scene from different angles); and the framing devices, objects, and props. These choices all have an impact on what is being stressed or questioned in the film, on the different reactions of participants to what is happening, on explanations for why events have taken place, and on claims for the certainty or ambiguity of the historical account.

Reviewers of historical films often overlook techniques in favor of a chronological summary of the plot or story line and the overall look of the moving picture in terms of costumes and props. These aspects of the film are necessary, to be sure. But viewers respond as well to the film's modes of narration, just as readers respond to the organization and rhetorical disposition of a history book.

As an example of how film technique shapes the historical message let us consider Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, made in 1966, not long before he began *Burn!*, a film about slavery and revolt. Pontecorvo portrays the growth of the movement for independence in the casbah of Algiers in the 1950s and the reactions of the French authorities in the European quarter. Though sympathetic to the Algerian cause, the film is remarkably even-handed, showing the bloody cost of violence on both sides. Viewers see the explosion of National Liberation Front bombs in a café where a baby is eating ice-cream and in a milk bar where young people are dancing, as well as the bombing of Arab families by the police and the ruthless torture of NLF supporters by the paratroopers. The NLF leaders are devoted to a goal they believe is just, and the film tries to win the spectators' assent to that justice. But the viewers also learn that the commander of the French paratroopers was himself a former hero of the anti-Nazi Resistance in France, and that, willing though the commander is to do everything necessary to keep Algeria French, he still respects the courage of his opponents. One NLF leader says preciently to his Algerian comrade, "It's later, when we've won, that the real battle will begin."

The Battle of Algiers, then, is not an epic celebration of national heroism. It achieves its power by smaller gestures, moving or frightening, but close to life: tears on an Arab woman's cheek and sometimes on a man's; the long and troubled glance of a woman, who has just placed a bomb, at the faces of those who

will be her victims a few moments later; the sounds of women ululating; the sight of the casbah stairs and the inner courts—where pursuits, attacks, and arrests occur—shown sometimes from way below, sometimes from way above.

The black-and-white film of *The Battle of Algiers* suggested to viewers that they were seeing events as they happened, rather than as they were staged about ten years later. Pontecorvo wanted it to seem this way. As he said:

There is a necessity for a realistic approach to action, a necessity to represent it as a form of document. It must be accented, more or less, depending on the subject. I pushed this tendency to the limit in *The Battle of Algiers* . . . [There], not only the images, but also the dialogue seems to come from reportage. Everything was filmed with a telephoto lens which gave it a graininess, the look of real events captured spontaneously.¹⁰

Pontecorvo's success here poses the question of the truth status of historical films. This issue was raised in 1967, when *The Battle of Algiers* was nominated for and won an Academy Award. Pontecorvo made an announcement, which thereafter opened the version of the film with English subtitles: "This dramatic reenactment of the battle of Algiers contains not one foot of newsreel or documentary film."



For historians, these added words are a welcome clarification, fulfilling one of the requirements—honesty—they set for telling about the past. These requirements have developed over the centuries since Herodotus and Thucydides. They were given an increasingly formal structure as historical studies were professionalized

in the nineteenth century. In the late twentieth century, influenced in part by certain philosophical and literary currents, they became more nuanced and flexible.

The criteria for writing about history can be summarized quite simply and provide a useful prelude to the exploration of films on slave resistance.¹¹ First, historians should seek evidence about the past widely and deeply, and should keep their minds as open as they can when they collect and assess it. The expression “open minds” refers to all the attitudes, values, and understandings they bring to a project. An earlier period might have called them “prejudices” or “preconceived notions and judgments”; more recently they have been called “constructions,” stemming from things as basic as our language.

These understandings and notions are not to be looked at only as handicaps; they are also our resources and tools for exploration. The danger is that they will blind historians to the different, the strange, the unexpected, and the surprising in their evidence, so they will remake the past in familiar terms, resembling too much the present, or what they have come to expect history to look like. “Keeping one’s mind open” means being aware of this temptation and developing techniques for detachment and imaginative perception as historians collect and think. Let the past be the past.

Second, historians should tell readers where they found their evidence and, when it is ambiguous or uncertain or contradictory, they should admit it. Historians have developed various techniques for doing so since the sixteenth century: discussions in the text, commentary in the margins, notes at the bottom of the page or in the back of the book, bibliographies, appendices.¹² Some historians turn to these sections first when they pick up their colleagues’ books.

Third, when historians decide what their evidence means and what account they want to give—whether they’re explaining

causes and consequences, ascribing motives and hopes, describing customs, systems, encounters, and styles, or whatever—they should make clear what they are doing and where they are coming from. They should suggest what assumptions they have made to link kinds of behavior at a certain time or place. If they are interpreting beyond what their evidence strictly offers, they should say so. Phrases such as “we may speculate that . . .” or “one could imagine that . . .” are one way that historians qualify their texts; “Caesar may have thought that . . .” “Cleopatra may have wondered whether . . .” are another. If historians find themselves creating a composite character—for instance, as Eileen Power did in *Medieval People*, using multiple sources to imagine a day in the life of a Carolingian peasant, Bodo, and his wife, Ermentrude¹³—fine, but they should say what they are doing. If they use a counter-factual argument or an imagined event to make a point, fine, but again admit it and explain why it helps. In all these ways, historians can move openly into the realm of the possible, assigned by Aristotle only to the poet.

Fourth, whatever subjective or normative judgments historians make in the course of their historical tale, they should not let them impede their efforts to understand the mental world of all their participants. “Understand, don’t judge,” declared Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, founders of the great *Annales* school of historical study back in the 1930s. Today, normative elements seem inevitable and not always regrettable in historical writing. Quite apart from mere partisanship, judgments are involved in the choice of subject, approach, and rhetoric. Should it be told as a tragic tale? an ironic tale? Historians can recognize these moral stances and perceptual habits in themselves and acknowledge them, say, in a preface. Whatever their preference, historians are urged to describe a situation from the point of view of the different actors. The old rule might be recast, “Judge if you will, but not without understanding first.”

Fifth, historians should not knowingly falsify events even in small matters, or suppress evidence so as to give a wrong impression. Even though imagination, speculation, and “fictive” crafting have their legitimate role in historical research and exposition, they should be identified as such where appropriate. Historians can make mistakes, too. But intentional falsification and tendentious concealment break the historian’s promise to readers, present and future, to try to speak true about the past.



Historians debate among themselves how narrowly these rules should be interpreted, and they continue to find new ways to live up to them. But tight or loose, are these rules relevant to the historical quality and truth status of feature films?

Let us note two important differences between historical filmmaking and historical book writing. In films, the processes of research, interpretation, and communication are widely dispersed, even if directors put their stamp on the product along the way and in the final editing. Research or research inquiries of a kind are made by scenarists, designers, costume and prop specialists, location seekers, casting directors, actors, composers and arrangers of music, and directors.¹⁴ What the film looks and sounds like will depend on small decisions from many sources—including the interpretive performance of the actors (tightly controlled by some directors, given free rein by others), the style of the directors of photography and music, unexpected events during filming, and post-editing interventions by producers. Such collective creation contrasts with historical book writing, whose cast of characters would extend at most to a few co-authors, student research assistants, an editor and copy editor, and a book designer.

Further, historical film and historians’ prose venture into different turfs in regard to claims of truth. Marina Warner, insightful

historian of Jeanne d’Arc’s life and reputation over the centuries, has extracted multiple and competing images of the young woman as they emerge from her trial and other contemporary documents. In May 1431, after three to four months of trial, Jeanne abjured her heresies: she said she had lied when she claimed to have undertaken her actions at the urgings of God and to have heard the voices of angels and saints, and she admitted she was a sinful and dissolute woman to have worn men’s clothing. Three days later she withdrew her recantation and demanded to have her male clothing back.

Warner comments: “In prison after her recantation, Joan realised she had signed away her specialness, and she wanted it back. And the outward sign of her uniqueness was her dress, both for [her judge] Cauchon and for herself.” This observation is Warner’s interpretation, but one she supports in regard both to the Maid and to the judge by recurrent quotations from the trial record and ample reference to contemporary thought about transvestism. Warner is affirming as true that this trial took place, that certain questions and answers were recorded by the scribes in a document that can be found at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and that Jeanne’s recorded words support her argument.¹⁵

In his celebrated *Passion of Jeanne d’Arc* of 1927, the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer pictures the trial through a set of extraordinary close-ups, where the ecclesiastical judges (one of them played by Antonin Artaud) circle around Jeanne and her eyes circle around them. Here the claim can only be to what Robert Rosenstone has called “proximate, appropriate characters, situations, and images.”¹⁶ But it can still be a well-documented approximation (Dreyer’s historical consultant was Pierre Champion, editor of the original trial transcript) and can still help viewers grasp the yawning gap between fifteenth-century doctors of theology and law and an unlettered village woman with strong religious and political affirmations. “What counted [for me],” said

Dreyer, "was getting the spectator absorbed in the past; my means were new . . . All those pictures express the character of [Jeanne] and the spirit of that time."¹⁷

These are the reasons I am suggesting that historical films can be a thought experiment about the past, involving many participants, sometimes even drawing in the persons living around the location where the film is being shot. And some directors, like Dreyer, care about being faithful to historical evidence. It is true that in 1936 producer Darryl Zanuck crowed jubilantly in a familiar Hollywood mode:

In *Rothschild* I made Rothschild an English Baron and there never was a Rothschild a Baron. I had the King of England give him the honor, and at this time there was no King of England as the king was in the insane asylum . . . The picture in England got the same wonderful reviews it received in America and no one ever mentioned these technical discrepancies.

But others would agree with Francesco Rosi, director of films about the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano and the American gangster Lucky Luciano:

If you choose to narrate something about a real person . . . you cannot invent, in my opinion, but you can interpret. There is a big difference. Why fabricate something just because it makes for more spectacular cinema and an easy way to grab the audience? No, I have all the room I need in my films to interpret the reality and this is the important thing for me, the interpretation of facts.¹⁸

Historical films extend the experiment in thought, sight, and sound to very large audiences, who react to what they have seen.

John Sayles, director of the excellent historical film *Matewan*, commented a few years ago:

There's a certain power that comes from history. I mean, I've heard producers say many, many times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says "Based on a true story." Audiences appreciate the fact something really happened. Whether it did or didn't, they're thinking that it did or knowing that it did.¹⁹

Sayles might better have concluded, "Audiences appreciate the fact something really happened, and they'll wonder after they see the film whether it got the story right." The passive spectator, naively accepting what comes off the movie screen, has disappeared from film theory,²⁰ and should also disappear from historical criticism of films. Spectators may delight in a historical film, be interested in it or repelled by it; they may replay parts of it in their minds and visualize Raymond Massey when they hear the name Abraham Lincoln, or Anthony Hopkins when they hear that of John Quincy Adams. But they do not believe automatically what they see in a historical film: rather, they ask about it, argue about it, and write letters of protest about it.

As long as we bear in mind the differences between film and professional prose, we can take film seriously as a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision. We can then ask questions of historical films that are parallel to those we ask of historical books. Rather than being poachers on the historian's preserve, filmmakers can be artists for whom history matters.