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History in Images History in Words

*Reflections on the Possibility of Really
Putting History onto Film*

My initial attempt to look at the broad issues posed for the historian by film, this essay was the first piece on historical film to be published in the American Historical Review. Like many of the essays to follow, it is a mixture of personal and theoretical concerns. So much difficulty did I have in keeping the ideas in line that in its original form, the piece consisted of thirty-four numbered and disconnected paragraphs. The editor insisted the AHR could not publish it unless the paragraphs were glued together in normal scholarly form. This did not make them more coherent, but it may well have kept readers from being even more upset than they were at the invasion of the journal by discussions of this new medium.

A Historian in Filmland

For an academic historian to become involved in the world of motion pictures is at once an exhilarating and

disturbing experience. Exhilarating for all the obvious reasons: the sex appeal of the visual media; the opportunity to emerge from the lonely depths of the library to join together with other human beings in a common enterprise; the delicious thought of a potentially large audience for the fruits of one's research, analysis, and writing. Disturbing for equally obvious reasons: no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (though it may satisfy the historian as film-goer). Inevitably, something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work in words.

The disturbance caused by working on a film lingers long after the exhilaration has vanished. Like all such disturbances, this one can provoke a search for ideas to help restore one's sense of intellectual equilibrium. In my case the search may have been particularly intense because I had a double dose of this experience—two of my major written works have been put onto film, and both times I have been to some extent involved in the process.

The two films were almost as different as films can be. One was a dramatic feature and the other a documentary; one was a \$50 million dollar Hollywood project and the other a \$250,000 work funded largely with public money; one was pitched at the largest of mass audiences and the other at the more elite audi-

ence of public television and art houses. Yet despite these differences, vast and similar changes happened to the history in each production, changes that have led me to a new appreciation of the problems of putting history onto film. After these experiences I no longer find it possible to blame the shortcomings of historical films on either the evils of Hollywood or the woeful effects of low budgets, on the limits of the dramatic genre or on those of the documentary format. Today *I* feel that the most serious problems the historian has with the past on the screen arise out of the nature and demands of the visual medium itself.

The two films are *Reds* (1982), the story of the last five years in the life of the American poet, journalist, and revolutionary John Reed, and *The Good Fight* (1984), a chronicle of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, that unit of American volunteers who took part in the Spanish Civil War. Each is a well-made, emotion-filled work that has exposed a vast number of people to an important historical subject previously known largely to specialists or to old leftists. Each brings to the screen a great deal of authentic historical detail. Each humanizes the past, turning long-suspect radicals into admirable human beings. Each proposes—if a bit indirectly—an interpretation of its subject, seeing political commitment as both a personal and historical category. Each connects past to present by suggesting that the health of the body politic and, indeed, the world depends upon such recurrent commitments.

Despite their very real virtues, their evocations of the past through powerful images, colorful characters,

and moving words, neither of these motion pictures can fulfill many of the basic demands for truth and verifiability used by all historians. *Reds* indulges in overt fiction—to give just a couple of examples—by putting John Reed in places where he never was, or having him make an impossible train journey from France to Petrograd in 1917. *The Good Fight*—like so many recent documentaries—tends to equate memory with history; it does this by allowing veterans of the Spanish Civil War to speak of events more than four decades in the past without calling their misremembrances, mistakes, or outright fabrications into question. And yet neither fictionalization nor unchecked testimony are the major reasons that these films violate my notions of history. Far more unsettling is the way that each tends to compress the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with essentially a single interpretation. Such a narrative strategy obviously denies historical alternatives, does away with complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history.

This sort of criticism of history on film might be of no importance if we did not live in a world deluged with images, one in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television, from feature films, docudramas, miniseries, and network documentaries. Today the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population—outside of the much-despised textbook—must surely be the visual media, a set of institutions which lies almost wholly outside the control of those of us who

devote our lives to history.¹ Any reasonable extrapolation suggests that trend will continue. Certainly it is not farfetched to foresee a time (are we almost there?) when written history will be a kind of esoteric pursuit; when historians will be viewed much like the priests of a mysterious religion, commentators on sacred texts, and performers of rituals for a populace little interested in their meaning but indulgent enough (let us hope) to pay for them to continue.

To think of the ever-growing power of the visual media is to raise the disturbing thought that perhaps history is dead in the way God is dead. Or at the most alive only to believers—that is, to those of us who pursue it as a profession. Surely I am not the only one to wonder if those we teach or the population at large really know or care about history, the kind of history that we do. Or to wonder if our history—scholarly, scientific, measured—fulfills the need for that larger History, that web of connections to the past that holds a culture together, that tells us not only where we have been but also suggests where we are going. Or to worry if our history really relates us to our own cultural sources, tells us what we need to know about other traditions, and provides enough understanding of what it is to be human.

Perhaps it seems odd to raise such questions at this point in time, after two decades of repeated methodological breakthroughs in history, innovations that have taught us to look at the past in so many new ways and have generated so much new data. The widespread influence of the *Annales* school, the New Social His-

tory, quantification and social science history, women's history, psychohistory, anthropological history, even the first inroads of continental theory into a reviving intellectual history—all these developments indicate that history as a discipline is flourishing. But—and it is a big but, a but that can be insisted on despite the much discussed "revival of narrative"—it is clear that at the same time there is a rapidly shrinking general audience for the information we have to deliver and the sorts of stories we have to tell. Despite the success of our new methodologies, I fear that as a profession we know less and less how to tell stories that situate us meaningfully in a value-laden world. Stories that matter to people outside our profession. Stories that really matter to people inside the profession. Stories that matter at all.

Enter film: the great temptation. Film, the contemporary medium still capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience. How can we not suspect that this is the medium to use to create narrative histories that will touch large numbers of people? Yet is this dream possible? Can one really put history onto film, history which will satisfy those of us who devote our lives to understanding, analyzing, and recreating the past in words? Or does the use of film necessitate changing what we mean by history, and would we be willing to make such a change? The issue comes down to this: is it possible to tell historical stories on film and yet not lose our professional or intellectual souls?

Can History Really Be Put onto Film?

Thirty years ago Siegfried Kracauer, a theoretician of both film and history, dismissed the historical feature as stagy and theatrical, in part because modern actors looked unconvincing in period costumes, but in larger measure because everyone knows—he argued—that it is not really the past on the screen but only an imitation of it.² If he neglected to deal with the equally obvious shortcoming of written history, or to explain why we so easily accept the convention that words on a page are adequate to the task of showing us the past, Kracauer at least made a stab at the theoretical problems of history on film. This is more than you can say of recent scholars. Despite a great deal of professional activity concerning history and the visual media—the articles and monographs, the panels at major conventions, the symposia sponsored by the AHA, New York University, and the California Historical Society—I have encountered but two discussions of what seems a most basic question: can our written discourse can really be turned into a visual one?³

R. J. Raack, a historian who has been involved in the production of several documentaries, is a strong advocate of putting history onto film. Indeed, in his view film seems to be perhaps a more appropriate medium for history than the written word. Traditional written history, he argues, is too linear and too narrow in focus to render the fullness of the complex, multi-dimensional world in which humans live. Only film,

with its ability to juxtapose images and sounds, with its "quick cuts to new sequences, dissolves, fades, speed-ups, [and] slow motion" can possibly hope to approximate real life, the daily experience of "ideas, words, images, preoccupations, distractions, sensory deceptions, conscious and unconscious motives and emotions." Only film can provide an adequate "empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives." Only film can "recover all the past's liveliness."⁴

The philosopher Ian Jarvie, the author of two books on motion pictures and society, takes an entirely opposite view. The moving image carries such a "poor information load" and suffers from such "discursive weakness" that there is no way to do meaningful history on film. History, he explains, does not consist primarily of "a descriptive narrative of what actually happened." It consists mostly of "debates between historians about just what exactly did happen, why it happened, and what would be an adequate account of its significance." While it is true that a "historian could *embody* his view in a film, just as he could embody it in a play," the real question is this: "How could he defend it, footnote it, rebut objections and criticize the opposition?"³

Clearly history is a different creature for each of these two scholars. Raack sees history as a way of gaining personal knowledge. Through the experience of people's lives in other times and places, one can achieve a kind of "psychological prophylaxis." History lets us feel less peculiar and isolated; by showing that

there are others like us, it helps to relieve our "loneliness and alienation."⁶ This is hardly the traditional academic view of the subject, but if one looks at history as a personal, experiential way of knowing, then Raack's arguments seem to make sense. Certainly he is right that, more easily than the written word, the motion picture seems to let us stare through a window directly at past events, to experience people and places as if we were there. The huge images on the screen and wraparound sounds tend to overwhelm us, swamp our senses and destroy attempts to remain aloof, distanced, or critical. In the movie theater we are, for a time, prisoners of history.

That, for Jarvie, is just the problem: a world that moves at an unrelenting twenty-four frames a second provides no time or space for reflection, verification, or debate. You may be able to tell "interesting, enlightening, and plausible" historical stories on the screen, but you cannot provide the all-important critical elements of historical discourse—you cannot evaluate sources, make logical arguments, or systematically weigh evidence. With those elements missing, you have history that is "no more serious than Shakespeare's Tudor-inspired travesties." This means that virtually all filmed history has been "a joke," and a dangerous one at that. A motion picture may provide a "vivid portrayal" of the past, but its inaccuracies and simplifications are practically impossible for the serious scholar "to correct."⁷

If most academic historians are likely to feel closer to Jarvie than to Raack, it is still necessary to ask to

what extent his arguments are true. Take the notion that the "information load" of film is impoverished. Surely this depends upon what one means by "information," for in its own way film carries an enormously rich load of data. Some scholars claim not only that an image of a scene contains much more information than the written description of the same scene, but that this information has a much higher degree of detail and specificity.⁸ One does not need to be an expert to discover this—all one need do is attempt to render into words everything that might appear in a single shot from a movie like *Reds*. Such an assignment could easily fill several pages, and if this is the case with a single shot, how much more space would be needed to describe what goes on in a sequence of images? The real question thus becomes not whether film can carry enough information, but whether that information can be absorbed from quickly-moving images, is really worth knowing, and can add up to "history."

What about Jarvie's assertion that history is mainly "debates between historians"? Certainly scholars do continually disagree over how to understand and interpret the data of the past, and their debates are important for the progress of the discipline—one might even say that debates help to set the agenda for research by raising new issues, defining fields, refining questions, and forcing historians to check each other's accuracy and logic. And certainly it is true that each and every work of history does take its place in a discourse that consists of pre-existing debates, and the

very meaning of any new work is in part created by those debates even if they are not acknowledged within the work itself.

The question for history on film, however, is not whether historians always, or usually, or even sometimes debate issues, or whether works take their place in a context of ongoing debates; the question is whether each individual work of history is, or must be, involved in such debates, and involved so overtly that the debate becomes part of the substance of the historical work? To this question the answer is "No." We all can think of works which represent the past without ever pointing to the field of debates in which they are situated; we all know many excellent narrative histories and biographies that mute (or even moot) debates by ignoring them, or relegating them to appendices, or burying them deep within the storyline. If written texts can do this and still be considered history, then surely an inability to "debate" issues cannot rule out the possibilities of history on film.

The Dramatic Feature

When historians think of history on film, what probably comes to mind is what we might call the Hollywood historical drama like *Reds*, or its European counterpart *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983)—the big-budget production in which costumes, "authentic" sets and locations and well-known actors tend to take precedence over attempts at historical accuracy. Such works in truth fall into a genre that one might label

"historical romance." Like all genres, this one locks both filmmaker and audience into a series of conventions whose demands—for a love interest, physical action, personal confrontation, movement towards a climax and denouement—are almost guaranteed to leave the historian of the period crying foul.

Yet this need not be so. Certainly in principle there is no reason why one cannot make a dramatic feature set in the past about all sorts of historical topics—individual lives, community conflicts, social movements, the rise of a king to power, revolutions, or warfare—that will stay within the bounds of historical accuracy, at least without resorting to invented characters or incidents. If by its very nature, the dramatic film will include human conflict and will shape its material in accordance with some conventions of story-telling, this does not entirely differentiate it from much written history. One may argue that film tends to highlight individuals rather than movements or the impersonal processes that are the subject of a good deal of written history, yet we must not forget that it is possible to make films that avoid the glorification of the individual and present the group as protagonist. This was certainly one of the aims and accomplishments of Soviet filmmakers in the twenties in their search for non-bourgeois modes of representation. If the best known of their works—Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Oktober* (1927)—are for political reasons skewed as history, they certainly provide useful models for ways to present collective historical moments.

To represent history in a dramatic feature rather than a written text does involve some important tradeoffs. The amount of traditional "data" that can be presented on the screen in a two-hour film (or even an eight-hour miniseries) will always be so skimpy compared to a written version that covers the same ground that a professional historian may feel intellectually starved. Yet the inevitable thinning of data on the screen does not of itself make for poor history. On many historical topics, one can find short and long and longer works, for the amount of detail used in a historical argument is arbitrary, or is at least dependent upon the aims of one's project. Certainly Jean-Denis Bredin's recent book, *The Affair*, though four times as long, is no more "historical" than Nicholas Halasz's earlier *Captain Dreyfus*, and Leon Edel's one-volume *Henry James* no less "accurate" than his full six-volume version.

If short on traditional data, the screen does easily capture elements of life which we might wish to designate as another kind of "data." Film lets us see landscapes; hear sounds; witness strong emotions as they are expressed with body and face, or physical conflict between individuals and groups. Without denigrating the power of the written word, one can claim for each medium unique powers of representation. It seems, indeed, no exaggeration to insist that for a mass audience (and I suspect for an academic elite as well) film can most directly render the look and feel of all sorts of historical particulars and situations—say farmworkers dwarfed by immense Western prairies and moun-

tains, miners struggling in the darkness of their pits, millworkers moving to the rhythms of their machines, or civilians sitting hopelessly in the bombed-out streets of cities.⁹ Film can plunge us into the drama of confrontations in the courtroom or the legislature; the simultaneous, overlapping realities of war and revolution; the intense confusion of men in battle. Yet in doing all this, in privileging visual and emotional data and simultaneously downplaying the analytic, the motion picture is subtly—and in ways we don't yet know how to measure or describe—altering our very sense of the past.

The Documentary

The other major type of history on film comes under the label of documentary. Yet whether it is the film compiled of old footage and narrated by an omniscient voice (the voice of history), a film that centers on talking heads, either survivors remembering events or experts analyzing them, or some combination of the two, the historical documentary—just like the dramatic feature—tends to focus upon heroic individuals and, more important, to make sense of its material in terms of a story that moves from a beginning through a conflict to a dramatic resolution. This latter point cannot be too strongly emphasized. All too often historians who scorn dramatizations are willing to accept the documentary film as a more accurate way of representing the past, as if somehow the images appear on the screen unmediated. Yet the documentary is

never a direct reflection of an outside reality, but a work consciously shaped into a narrative which—whether dealing with past or present—creates the meaning of the material being conveyed.

That the "truths" of a documentary are not reflected but created is easy to demonstrate. Take, for example, John Huston's famed *Battle of San Pietro* (1945), shot during the Italian campaign in 1944 with a single cameraman. In this film, as in any war documentary, when we see an image of an artillery piece firing followed by a shell exploding, we are viewing a reality created only by a film editor. This is not to say that the shell fired by the gun that we saw did not explode somewhere, or that the explosion did not look pretty much like the one that we saw on the screen. But since no cameramen could follow the trajectory of a shell from gun to explosion, what we have in fact seen are images of two different events spliced together by an editor to create a single historical moment. And if this happens with such a simple event, how much more does it mark complicated events which are shown to us in actuality footage?

As a form capable of conveying history, the documentary has other limits as well. Some of them are highlighted by my experience with *The Good Fight*. In writing narration for this film, I was frustrated by the directors in my attempt to include the issue of possible Stalinist "terrorism" in the ranks. Their reasons were as follows: (a) they could find no visual images to illustrate the issue and were adamant that the film not become static or talky; and (b) the topic was too com-

plex to handle quickly, and the film—as all films—had so much good footage that it was already in danger of running too long. This decision to sacrifice complexity to action, one that virtually every documentarist would accept, underlines a convention of the genre: the documentary bows to a double tyranny—which is to say, an ideology—of the necessary image and perpetual movement. And woe be to those elements of history which can neither be illustrated nor quickly summarized.

The apparent glory of the documentary is that it can open a direct window onto the past, allowing us to see the cities, factories, landscapes, battlefields, and leaders of an earlier time. But this ability also constitutes its chief danger. However much film utilizes footage (or still photos, or artifacts) from a particular time and place to create a "realistic" sense of the historical moment, we must remember that on the screen we see not the events themselves, and not the events as experienced or even as witnessed by participants, but selected images of those events carefully arranged into sequences to tell a particular story or to make a particular argument.

Toward a Visual History

Historians can easily see how such film conventions of both the dramatic feature and the documentary shape or distort the past in part because we have written work by which the piece of visual history can be judged. What we too easily ignore, however, is the

extent to which written history, and especially narrative history, is also shaped by conventions of genre and language. This needs to be underscored. So many scholars have dealt with questions of narrative in recent years that narratology has become a separate field of study. Here I only wish to call to mind a few of their insights that seem relevant to history on film: (a) Neither people nor nations live historical "stories;" narratives, that is, coherent stories with beginnings, middles, and endings, are constructed by historians as part of their attempts to make sense of the past, (b) The narratives that historians write are in fact "verbal fictions;" written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself, (c) The nature of the historical world in a narrative is in part governed by the genre or mode (shared with forms of fiction) in which the historian has decided to cast his story—ironic, tragic, heroic, or romantic, (d) Language is not transparent and cannot mirror the past as it really was; rather than reflecting it, language creates and structures history and imbues it with meaning.¹⁰

If written history is shaped by the conventions of genre and language, the same will obviously be true of visual history, though in this case the conventions will be those of visual genres and visual language. To the extent that written narratives are in fact "verbal fictions," then visual narratives will be "visual fictions"—that is, not mirrors of the past but representations of it. This is not to argue that history and fiction are the same thing, nor to excuse the kind of outright fabrication that marks Hollywood historical

features. History on film must be held accountable to certain standards, but—and this is the important point—these standards must be consonant with the possibilities of the medium. It is impossible to judge history on film solely by the standards of written history, for each medium has its own kind of necessarily fictive elements.

Consider the following: in any dramatic feature, actors assume the roles of historical characters, and provide them with gestures, movements, and voice sounds that create meaning. Sometimes, in fact, film must provide a face for the faceless, such as that South African railway conductor, undescribed in Gandhi's autobiography, who pushed the young Indian out of a train compartment for whites and started him on the road to activism. In such cases, certain "facts" about individuals must be created. Clearly this is a fictive move, yet surely no real violence is done to history by such an addition to the written record, at least not so long as the "meaning" that the "impersonators" create somehow carries forth the larger "meaning" of the historical character whom they represent.

To begin to think about history on film not simply in comparison with written history but in terms of its own is not an easy task. Current theories of cinema—structuralist, semiotic, feminist, or Marxist—all seem too self-contained and hermetic, too uninterested in the flesh-and-blood stuff of the past, the lives and struggles of human individuals and groups, to be directly useful to the historian. Yet the insights of theoreticians do offer valuable lessons about the problems

and potentialities of the medium; they also point towards some of the important differences between the way words on the page and images on the screen create versions of "reality," differences that must be taken into account in any serious attempt to evaluate history on film." At the very least, historians who wish to give the visual media a chance will have to realize that because of the way the camera works and of the kinds of data that it privileges, history on film will of necessity include all sorts of elements unknown to written history.

New Forms of History on Film

Although they are currently the most common forms, it would be a mistake to take the big Hollywood feature or the standard documentary as the only possible ways of doing history on film. In recent years, directors from a variety of countries have begun to make movies that convey some of the intellectual density that we associate with the written word; films which propose imaginative new ways of dealing with historical material. Resisting traditional genres, these filmmakers have moved towards new forms of cinema which are capable of exploring serious social and political issues. The best of such films present the possibility of more than one interpretation of events—they render the world as multiple, complex, and indeterminate, rather than as a series of self-enclosed, neat, linear stories.

The names of these innovative filmmakers are not

well-known in the United States outside of specialized cinema circles, but some of their works are available here. For the historian interested in the possibility of complex ideas being delivered by film, the most interesting and provocative of such works may be the feature-length *Sans Soleil* (1982). Impossible to summarize in words, this best-known work of Chris Marker, an American who lives in Paris, is a complex and personal essay on the meaning of contemporary history. The film juxtaposes images of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands with those of Japan in order to understand what the filmmaker calls "the poles of existence" in the late twentieth-century world. It can also be seen as a kind of oblique investigation of Marker's contention (made in the narrative) that the great question of the twentieth-century has been "the coexistence of different concepts of time."¹²

Far from Poland (1984), made by Jill Godmilow, is another good example of how film can render historical complexity. An American who had spent some time in Poland, Godmilow was unable to get a visa to go there to make a "standard" documentary on Solidarity. Staying in New York, she made a film anyway, a self-reflexive, multilevel work, one that utilizes a variety of visual sources to create a highly unusual "history" of Solidarity—actuality footage smuggled out of Poland, images from American television newscasts, "acted" interviews from original texts that appeared in the Polish press, "real" interviews with Polish exiles in the United States, a domestic drama in which the filmmaker (read "historian") raises the issue of what it means to make a film about events in a

distant land, and voice-over dialogues of the filmmaker with fictional Fidel Castro, who speaks for the possibility of contemporary revolution and the problems of the artist within the socialist state. Visually, verbally, historically, and intellectually provocative, *Far from Poland* tells a good deal about Solidarity and even more, perhaps, about how Americans reacted to and used the news from Poland for their own purposes. Not only does the film raise the issue of how to represent history on film, it also provides a variety of perspectives on the events it covers, thus both reflecting and entering the arena of debates surrounding the meaning of Solidarity.

The topics of both Marker and Godmilow may be contemporary, but the presentational modes of their films are applicable to subjects set more deeply in the past. Nor are documentarists the only filmmakers who have been seeking new ways of putting history onto the screen. All historians who feel a need to resist the empathic story told in Hollywood films, with its "romantic" approach and its satisfying sense of emotional closure, will find themselves at one with many Western radical and Third World filmmakers who have had to struggle against Hollywood codes of representation in order to depict their own social and historical realities.¹³ In some recent Third World historical films, one can find parallels to Bertold Brecht's "epic" theater, with its distancing devices (such as direct speeches or chapter headings for each section of a work) that are supposed to make the audience think about rather than feel social problems and human relationships.

Though the filmmakers are no doubt working from

a native sense of history and aesthetics, this is what seems to happen in such works as Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* (1977) and Carlos Diegues' *Quilombo* (1984), both of which present historical figures with whom it is impossible to identify emotionally. Made in Senegal, *Ceddo* portrays the political and religious struggle for dominance that occurred in various parts of Black Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when a militant Islam attempted to oust both the original native religion and the political power structure. The Brazilian film *Quilombo* presents a history of Palmares, a remote, long-lived, seventeenth-century community created by runaway slaves that for many decades was able to hold off all attempts of the Portuguese to crush its independence. Each film delivers its history within a framework of interpretation—*Ceddo* upholds the pre-Islamic values of Black Africa, and *Quilombo* glorifies the rich tribal life of a culture freed of the burden of Christian civilization.¹⁴

For anyone interested in history on film, the chief importance of these works may lie less in their accuracy of detail (I have been unable to find commentaries on them by specialists in their fields) than in the way they choose to represent the past. Because both films are overtly theatrical in costuming and highly stylized in acting, they resist all the usual common-sense notions of "realism" that we expect in movies like *Reds*. Clearly the camera in these films does not serve as a window onto a world that once existed; clearly it represents something about the events of the past without pretending to accurately "show" those

events. Yet just as clearly, each of these films is a work of history which tells us a great deal about specific periods and issues of the past.

In their unusual forms, *Ceddo* and *Quilombo* work to subvert a major convention of history on film, its "realism." At the same time, they also highlight, and call into question, a parallel convention of written history: the "realism" of our narratives, a realism based—as Hayden White showed two decades ago—on the model of the nineteenth-century novel. It is possible, in fact, to see these works as examples (in a different medium) of what White was calling for when he said that if history were to continue as an "art," then to remain relevant to the issues of our time historians would have to move beyond the artistic models of the nineteenth century. *Ceddo* and *Quilombo* may be products of Third World nations, but they point the way towards the narrative forms of the twentieth century, towards the necessity for modernism in its many varieties (expressionism, surrealism, etc.), or even postmodernism, as modes of representation for dramatizing the significance of historical data.¹⁵

The Challenge of the Visual

Almost a century after the birth of the motion picture, film presents historians with a challenge still unseized, a challenge to begin to think of how to utilize the medium to its full capabilities for carrying information, juxtaposing images and words, providing star-

tling and contrastive mixtures of sight and sound, and (perhaps) creating analytic structures that include visual elements. Because its own conventions are so strong and, to the historian, so initially startling, the visual media also serve to highlight the conventions and limitations of written history. Film thus points towards new possibilities for representing the past, possibilities that could allow narrative history to recapture the power it once had when it was more deeply rooted in the literary imagination.¹⁶

The visual media present the same challenge to history that they have to anthropology, where the ethnographic documentary, born as a mode of illustrating the "scientific" findings of written texts, has in recent years cut loose from its verbal base to seek what one scholar calls "a new paradigm, a new way of seeing, not necessarily incompatible with written anthropology but at least governed by a distinct set of criteria."¹⁷ Now it seems time for such a "shift in perspective," one occasioned by the opportunity to represent the world in images and words rather than in words alone, to touch history. Doing so, it will open us to new notions of the past, make us ask once more the questions about what history can or cannot be. About what history is for. About why we want to know about the past and what we will do with that knowledge. About possible new modes of historical representation, both filmic and written—about history as self-reflexive inquiry, as self-conscious theater, as a mixed form of drama and analysis.

The challenge of film to history, of the visual culture to the written culture, may be like the challenge of written history to the oral tradition, of Herodotus and Thucydides to the tellers of historical tales. Before Herodotus there was myth, which was a perfectly adequate way of dealing with the past of a tribe, city, or people, adequate in terms of providing a meaningful world in which to live and relate to one's past. In a postliterate world, it is possible that visual culture will once again change the nature of our relationship to the past. This does not mean giving up on attempts at truth, but somehow recognizing that there may be more than one sort of historical truth, or that the truths conveyed in the visual media may be different from, but not necessarily in conflict with, truths conveyed in words.

History does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values. Our kind of rigorous, "scientific" history is in fact a product of history, our special history which includes a particular relationship to the written word, a rationalized economy, notions of individual rights, and the nation state, and many cultures have done quite well without it. Which is only to say that there are, as we all know but rarely acknowledge, many ways to represent and relate to the past. Film, with its unique powers of representation, now struggles for a place within a cultural tradition which has long privileged the written word. Its challenge is great, for it may be that to acknowledge the authenticity of the visual is to accept a new

relationship to the word itself. We would do well to recall Plato's assertion that when the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake. It seems that to our time is given this vital question to ponder: if the mode of representation changes, what then may begin to shake?