Marcel Englmaier

HIST3015: History and Cinema

Dr. Berto

08/04/15

History on Film-Film on History by Rosenstone

A Summary & Analysis

Robert A. Rosenstone has been a historian for the past four decades. He decided film can be a means of telling and creating history. After writing multiple papers, Rosenstone decided to author *History on Film-Film on History.* The book was written by an academic for academics, geared towards other professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students in classes revolving around film studies.

Chapter one opens with a very profound statement: “This shouldn’t be a book.” The author then goes on to discuss how a text, especially one such as this, should be seen through the medium it is analyzing, namely film. Rosenstone continues this sentiment by detailing “a world of colour, movement, sound, light, and life” which lies beyond the confining walls of a simple book. These words lay the foundation of his argument. Most importantly present in chapter one is Rosenstone’s thesis. Rosenstone argues that the world of written history and the world of history on film are equal in two ways: they partake in history and in fiction since both are made within the conventions of humans have developed over time. Rosenstone makes another point: that the historical film is both a reflection on the time period which plays out during the film, as well as a reflection of the time period in which the film was made.

Chapter two functions much like an extension of chapter one, as it continues by laying the ground-work for the rest of the book. Most important in chapter two are the discussions of different types of film such as the documentary or the dramatic feature film. During the descriptions of these types of films the author also begins to lay the foundation of how these films can and do reflect history. These types are reflected in later chapters.

Chapter three, for instance, focuses on the mainstream drama. This is referencing Hollywood-style recreations of history. The author brings up a few examples such as *Caligula* and *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and discusses the validity of these films as historical material as they tell more a story than actual historical fact.

Similarly, chapter four also discusses drama. But this time, it is innovative drama. The difference is that innovative drama is a form of drama not commonly found in the USA. This genre stems from films originating in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. They are innovative because they break the norms and standards common to Hollywood. The author argues for these types of films as they tend to have more historical content and focus less on telling the story of a single person. Instead, they seem to tell the story of a people.

Chapter five focusses on the documentary film. A key point the author is keen to make is that documentaries are not as unbiased as most people believe. Documentaries are meant to tell a story while still being entertaining to the viewer. Simply stating events such as in text is not feasible in film. The author states that most documentaries focus on a single or a few aspects of the overall events and use those to build a motivating story to tell. Along with this, documentaries must also show pictures. While showing images can be captivating, doing so for extended periods of time is not interesting and documentaries normally show some form of footage. The author points out that doing so creates fiction for a reason I will discuss later in this paper.

Similar to the documentary, chapter six discussed biographical films. As with documentaries, biographical films need to find and focus on a pattern to keep the viewer’s attention. The author uses the example of John Reed, an American poet, do show this.

Chapter seven sees the re-emergence of the author’s thesis in a new form. The author argues that film-makers can be historians for the same reason historians are historians: they tell a story in one way or another. For this chapter, the author focusses on the works of Oliver Stone. Oliver Stone focused on the resent US past, and the author makes the point that this is important because Stone has “created a powerful interpretation of contemporary American history.”

Chapter eight sees a different format than the other chapters. This chapter could very well function as a standalone essay. The chapter begins with an introduction to the rest of the chapter. The author decided this chapter would work well as an analysis and comparison of some major Holocaust-focused film released during the 1990s. The chapter continues by giving a short summary of each of the eight films chosen. As a summary to the chapter, the author argues about the validity of the films as historical artifacts.

Chapter nine is the conclusion to the book. It ties most everything back to the thesis laid out in chapter one. Chapter nine not only wraps up a few unclear points, it also reinforces them. The original thesis from chapter one is restated in a new form in the last paragraph. Then, the author ties history films back to written works and discusses how films challenge the traditional history.

Rosenstone’s goal throughout this paper is to broaden discussions on the historical credibility of films. He does so by discussing the significant aspects of certain films, as well as their pitfalls. In the conclusion of the last chapter, Rosenstone discusses why her chose the films he did. He chose to talk mostly about war related films. He said this was partly because these events in history are well-documented, partly due to the abundance of material and their ability to capture the audience’s attention, and partly due to his personal historical focus areas.

The author firmly believes films have their place in history, and should be seen as historical material similar to texts. He argues that films have a different way of being historical, but they do so quite well. In arguing this, it is clear that the author is well aware of the faults of movies, such as fictional characters or events in films. He uses this awareness to analyze other’s analyses in chapter two, and analyzes the films. During this portion of his argument, he repeatedly brings up the point the films are meant to entertain. They cannot do so without showing detail, and detail of specific actions, words said, clothes worn, or other aspects of a visual reproduction cannot be proven. Even the traditional historic texts can’t delve into that much detail. Films must show specifics, not generics, and therefore must invent things historical documents cannot prove. The author further argues that to be a history film, the viewer must inherently accept the fact that some of it is fiction, even in documentaries. Historical accuracy and the emotions evoked through film suffer from the impossible: they cannot be proven.

The clear objective of Rosenstone’s writing is to open the reader’s mind to films as history. The author believes that traditional historians are at fault for thinking movies must equal written text to be considered historical, but argues that this is impossible. Rather than focusing on the inaccuracies and theories within a film, the author focusses on how history is portrayed in film and the way film-makers have actually been working for the past century. He argues films cannot ‘seriously attempt to make meaning of the past’ and that written criteria should not and cannot be applied to films.

Furthermore, the author discusses the filmmakers. He states that filmmakers don’t have the same luxury as a researcher. They cannot sit down to think and then write for years like a researcher. For this reason the author emphasizes the use of historian contractors to help and make sure the film doesn’t accidentally represent an event or a time period completely opposite as it was.

In addition, Films are personal. They combine things like race, class, and gender into one rather than splitting them apart like a book can. History is a process, and books are referential while films are metaphorical, symbolical. Films evoke emotion rather than being analytical like books.

The book is written in a much more personal way than it seems at first glance. It comes off as a script for a film series, or a lecture series. Its goals are very clear: it is mean to slice the head off our stereotypes of what constitutes historical thought. This is discussed multiple times during the introduction, the first two chapters, and the last chapter. While the goals of the book are clear, the writing seems jumbled. The author does not always point back to his thesis and simple skips to the next example, often ignoring why the example is so significant. The author expects the reader to be intelligent and keep up, connecting the mental dots themselves. Since this is an academic book geared towards academics, this is expected. The reader must reflect on the points made while reading. Only at the very end of the chapters and during chapter nine does the author tie all the points he made together.

The author truly believes films belong in the historical context for which they are made and should be seen as historical material, and has succeeded in convincing me. We are never able to mirror a moment that has vanished, no matter how accurate we strive to be. And yet, the author states that we must speak for facts, facts cannot speak for themselves, and films are just a different way of doing so. We always violate the past when we attempt to preserve its memory, in text form or in film; it is inevitable and part of the price of our attempts at understanding the vanished word of our forbearers.