Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History

The time has come to seriously examine the approach of historians to cinema in general and the historical film in particular. Since history itself has proved to be a dynamic discipline, the habit of viewing films with an eye to 'facticity' should give way to a nuanced understanding of the historical potential of cinema. This paper argues for a new relationship between visual and written history in the interest of both public memory and a socially relevant history. If historians want to bridge the widening chasm between public and academic histories they have no choice but to take relatively new forms of knowledge like film seriously. On the other hand, film-makers cannot, and should not, ignore the context of literacy informing their work. Given the will and ample opportunity to collaborate, historians and film-makers, operating in a heterogeneous field of post-literacy, literacy and pre-literacy, can learn a lot from each other.

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I Introduction

Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.

– E H Carr (1961:86)

In some ways visual history is older than oral history. Since the dawn of human history visual art has influenced the formation and evolution of social memory. During the paleolithic period hunting-gathering communities resorted to cave paintings to recreate and express their feelings, activities, desires and indeed life itself. These cave paintings are found in many parts of the world and only experts can tell us whether men and women of the stone age became part-time artists in an endeavour to leave behind records consciously. Undoubtedly these incredible expressions – scenes depicting group activities like hunting, sacrifices, funerals, etc – enrich our understanding of these societies along with other things like tools, bones, fossils and occasionally preserved human remains. From the neolithic and chalcolithic ages, etching, sketching, painting and modelling developed as diverse and cultivated ways of generating, preserving and leaving behind historical records by largely pre-literate societies. Chalcolithic Egypt, Harappa, Mesopotamia and China are justifiably renowned for their visual art. Archaeologists take these records seriously with other evidence at their disposal. Since the ancient period visual art grew to embody a significant component of public history alongside oral and other traditions. In countries like India sculpture, painting, pottery and temple and rock carvings, such as the ones found in Ajanta, Ellora, Sanchi, Puri and Konark, were important media of depicting socio-cultural expressions.

This situation remained unchanged even in those societies which later made the transition to part-literacy. Portraits, landscapes, documentary illustrations and still-life became increasingly popular in almost all societies on the threshold of modernisation. The past came to be increasingly associated with images drawn by artists. In Europe the past as an accurate image through the artists’ eyes, and with the help of his tools, gained significant currency from the Renaissance onwards. Technology aided this process – better pens and ink, improved paints and water colours made for more lasting objects portraying reality to begin with. Finally these products became the past as ‘it must have been’ to gaze at and theorise. Without seeing too much in these early developments it is tempting to anticipate the emergence of latter-day positivism and realism in them. The belief in the capability of the human eye to observe, and human hands to reproduce, truth was fortified by the evolution of the specialised visual arts.

In medieval India, for example, traditions like the pad paintings of Rajasthan combined with royal eulogies sung by the charans and their local counterparts informed popular history and the hegemony of the ruling orders long before the advent of literacy and printing. Thus was history harnessed to power in a feudal hierarchical society. Visuals drawn by artists patronised by the ruling elite illustrated legends and complemented ballads composed and sung as folklore. The invention and spread of printing, it is well known, increased the reach of visuals – including genres like calendar art – tremendously. The great breakthrough in visual representation of reality, the camera, was invented the industrial revolution of early the 19th century. The camera provided a view of things and people as they were. It went beyond the artist’s impression; the photograph was distinct from the portrait or paintings preceding it. Visuals soon began to assume an authenticity hitherto lacked by the medium. From the mid-19th century the camera began to play an increasingly important, though quiet and underestimated, role in the fashioning of public history in a world slowly moving towards literacy. The combination of photographs and text presented to society specially by the media became a powerful tool for influencing opinion and thereby both history and historiography. How the press used this in the service of ideology and policy has been the subject matter of innumerable studies.

This process was revolutionised by the invention of the moving camera by Edison. From the early 20th century this reel using
camera began showing history ‘as it must have happened’ to large masses of literate and illiterate people. Historical and spectacular events such as war were now being filmed by professional photographers and participants alike. Instant cinematographic records were being created and presented an immediate history of events to contemporary observers. Nothing could have been better for people interested, above all, in facts. Film-makers began commanding substantial audiences and thereby influencing social perceptions almost as soon as cinema became popular. The influence of this on social discourses and indeed public history in its broadest possible sense, was significant and noticed quite early. The talkies and news reels heralded a new public culture of cinema. While viewing films and discussing them became an important pastime records testify to the growing popularity of newsreels and film music in the early 20th century. But this was not all. Cinema spawned its written archive – film scripts, magazines, reviews, newspaper supplements and books, advertisements, biographies and autobiographies of cinema personalities. A large corpus, with its forward and backward linkages in society, thus accumulated by the time colour films began to flood the cinema houses. Cinema began to assume the shape of an industry with its vested interests. Though much of this occurred before the second world war, only recently have historians started investigating the ideological and identitarian implications of these developments.

Challenge and serious competition thus arrived for a professional history based almost exclusively on written documents. In the beginning the relationship of historians with cinema was marked by uneasiness if not outright hostility. There is enough reason to believe that historians generally viewed early historical cinema as a trespasser. Few historians of the period, except perhaps the French, were willing to experiment with their vocation. Even the Marxists were rarely willing to venture beyond labour history. They generally remained focused on questions of interpretation and facts while developing a critique of capitalism. Their view of history, not unlike the bourgeois notions they criticised, was essentially unilinear and progressive. Moreover, till the works of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci gained acclaim, culture was considered too much a part of the superstructure in the Marxist paradigm. The secondary status of culture in Marxist theorising seemed to have dissuaded the Marxists from carrying out a serious examination of cinema. If historians at all wanted to associate with cinema it was because, as self-appointed masters of historical facts, they were confident of making cinematic history appear more authentic. This attitude was inevitable given the historians’ unshakeable faith in the immortality of raw historical facts. Rarely did it cross the minds of the historians to fruitfully examine why historical cinema was being produced as it was during a particular period. Or why its popularity posed such a formidable threat to their documents.

On the other hand, the popularity of cinema suggested that audiences were imbibing history in ways not considered serious enough by the historians. For almost 50 years historians either ignored cinema or continued to criticise it on grounds of facticity. Their criticism of cinema’s propensity to ‘distort’ and fictionalise history stemmed from a positivism which itself was besieged by the growing social sciences and historical developments in the 20th century. The unfolding horrors of western modernity in the first half of the 20th century raised serious doubts about the meaning of universal ideas promoted by the west like progress, development, civilisation, individualism, etc. Although history gradually opened itself to the influence of other social sciences, with the French leading the way, its penchant for looking at facts objectively and thus appropriating the truth about the past continued to colour its perception of cinema. This faith in the ability of facts to somehow emerge unscathed from the bias of documents blinded most historians to the omnipresent possibility of changing historical perceptions. If facts were sacred then why did historians disagree despite being in agreement on the positivist methods of historiography? Perceptions obviously made facts relative and not absolute. Historians, like doctors trapped in their separate systems of medicine, were not used to discussing the nature and context of construed historical facts. Only recently, and after repeated assaults on narrative history, cinema is receiving the attention from historians it deserves. This attention, the subject of this paper, is twofold. First, considering cinema as source of history. Second, cinema as a different form of history. But whether as history or source of history, cinema is now being considered with a new found seriousness by historians who have finally broken the shackles of the 19th century.

II

History versus Cinema

The dead hand of vanished generations of historians, scribes, and chroniclers has determined beyond the possibility of appeal the pattern of the past [Carr 1961:13].

Can historians view photos and cinema on par with other evidence as legitimate sources of history? Can history be written without documentary sources or with only partial reference to documentary evidence? Can there be a history which does not privilege literacy over other forms of knowledge? Our attitude towards historiophony will depend upon the answers to these questions. If historians choose to stick to documentary sources they do end up limiting the scope of their enterprise. They will then consciously turn their back on those people who may not figure in documentary sources but might appear as crucial traces in visual sources of both past and present. They might even miss out crucial ‘facts’ recorded by cameras – like the ones carried by German soldiers deep into Poland and Russia during the second world war – and ironically end up writing a history deficient in facts. The Holocaust and widespread German atrocities in east Europe acquire both a greater facticity and human sensitivity precisely because of the visual recordings of these horrors often made by the Germans themselves. Can historians, even for a moment, conceive of writing a history of the Vietnam war or the contemporary US excesses in Iraq without reference to photographic evidence. Would the evidence from Iraq have emerged with half its poignancy, and so instantaneously, without the digital camera and its connectivity with the internet?

Imagine the difference between American and British soldiers smoking, laughing and clapping while pointing at the genitals of a beaten, broken and humiliated Iraqi prisoner as photographic evidence of history and as documentary narrative emerging many months or even years after the Iraq tragedy. Closer home video recordings of greedy politicians and retired army officers eagerly accepting bribes add up to interesting visual sources dispensable for contemporary history. Events like the Babri masjid demolition of 1992 and subsequent developments leading up to the Gujarat carnage of 2002 have an established film history by now. A documentary history of these events cannot be written without reference to this camera footage. Such footage is necessary.
to refresh social memory and public history. It has been used by some film makers to make excellent documentaries. Rakesh Sharma recently made a film on the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 masterminded by the Sangh parivar. Though this film has received international recognition, the Indian censor board has predictably remained lukewarm to it. Some years ago Ajay Bhardwaj compiled a lucid documentary using news and video footage to highlight the criminal-politician nexus in Bihar in the context of the murder of Chandrashekhar, a respected political activist, in Siwan. These are crucial sources for any history of crime, and specially political crime, in modern India.

If such visual evidence is ignored by historians in favour of documentary sources a history of modern imperialism will perhaps never be written, of course there might still be historians more than willing to ply their trade with one eye shut. For a long time historians fetishised documents and ended up writing the history of only 10 per cent of the human population. The history they wrote was full of facts and political gossip but quite obviously devoid of much of human experience. Were there no other facts in history worth recounting than the ones favoured by the grand narratives of the past? Would not history have changed without the so-called ‘turning points’ in history? Conscious or sub-consciously for the greater part of the existence of historiography, historians remained chroniclers of the ruling classes – the ones most likely to generate self glorifying documents for posterity. So the question whether historians must take cinema, all cinema and not only historical cinema, seriously is linked to what history must eventually become. Undoubtedly historiographical change can be precipitated upon the changing interpretation of similar sources utilised by differing historians. However there is no harm in accepting that sources have their limitations. Hence the need to seek new sources for new kinds of histories. As the subject matter of history broadens, the deficiency of standard sources is revealed. Fortunately the critique of narrative history and its elitist bias has provided several new options to historians.

Since the positivist approach, a hangover of the 19th century: flish of facts and documents, does not govern the social sciences anymore, historians cannot consider sources which are not written documents as strangers to their discipline. Why they should have thought so in the first place is difficult to understand these days. History and historical facts were always based on primary evidence collected by history’s auxiliary disciplines many of which were not exclusively devoted to documents. History, for instance, could never have been written without the support of archeology or numismatics. Nonetheless historians can be whimsical and fashionable in their attitude towards other disciplines. Indeed personal experience tells me that there are historians who might enthusiastically support anthropology and yet not consider archeologists as historians in the same breath! Thankfully historians appear more broadminded in the matter of sources now than they ever were before and admit to fixing a range of them while attempting generalisations.

To illustrate this further I draw your attention to oral history – a concept unheard of in the days when history was made to labour under the hegemony of archival documents. Not that historians did not use stories and interviews in writing their monumental works but they continued to pretend that the pen was superior to the human voice. For example, the memoirs of colonial military and civilian officers right from the beginning were used by historians in the west to write various histories of the colonised people in America, Asia and Africa. What was being presented to the world as superior objective accounts written by ‘civilised’ scholars of the colonised contained the bias of official memoirs which themselves were often based on a great deal of hearsay. Fortunately, oral history or oral tradition is now a recognised part of history and specially to write the histories of marginal groups generally condemned to obscurity by histories concealed in the temples of literacy. Many libraries and archives now possess an oral history section. Whether you consider oral tradition as history or ‘historiography’ – as Vansina, the pioneer of African studies, once suggested – or an important source of history for preliterate societies there is no getting away from the relationship between orality, public memory and history. Why should historians trivialise what people say and record in their peculiar ways? Why cannot these popular records be held on paper with official or unofficial written documents? Why should historians give literary precedence over other forms of information and knowledge? These are important methodological and ideological questions which historians across the board have addressed in the last two decades. The results have been encouraging. There is no doubt that with corroboration, oral sources form a legitimate corpus of historical information. Cinema often relies heavily on them. They are often used extensively – as interviews – to travel between past and present in the making of historical documentaries. That some of these interviews are edited and take place in a ‘controlled’ environment should be kept in mind while assessing their worth as historical sources.

The same criteria should apply to cinema or film in any form. If historians take cinema seriously they must evolve a method to deal with it like they did with oral tradition. They must classify it into useful, less useful and useless categories.

Within the world of cinema, with its various genres, the historian will find historical recreation of two types. The first kind comprises consciously produced histories – costume dramas, historical documentaries, biopics and the ‘period’ historical film which painstakingly recreates the past in great detail. ‘Reading’ and sifting through the ideological layers of these films is easy for the professional historian. The easiest films to analyse and expose are official propaganda films. While regarding all historical films the historian, using Pierre Sorlin’s (2001) method of looking at the historical film, must examine their claim to originality, favourable reception by the public and the reasons for their production during times of crises. If possible, the historian must get hold of original prints and unedited versions to examine the process of editing itself. Often what is edited out of a film to make a finished product could turn out to be historically more productive. Admittedly this is a difficult task because valuable extra reel is generally thrown away or even destroyed in the process of polishing up a film. Beyond this the question why and how a historical film or documentary presents a historical viewpoint is more important here than looking for missing facts in them. In fact Sorlin asserts that the feature film could be considered a more important source of history than documentaries. This is because when the camera records history unintentionally we get to see geographical or social reality despite careful editing. Outdoor shooting is important here and despite careful editing a film might display significant historical details pertinent to various aspects of social, urban or rural history. Trees, roads, bridges, monuments, streets, extant architecture, onlookers, civic amenities or their absence, means of transport, clothes people wear, expressions on people’s faces, etc, can rarely escape the camera even in the making of feature films. Much of this
gets recorded as crucial incidental historical trace. Since all film is edited reel the argument that the screen is a window to the past is deeply flawed to begin with – hence films must always be viewed critically. Feature films, both standard and experimental, shot outdoors tend to incorporate valuable incidental information on topography and infrastructure. Since films can easily be dated, and once their originality is assured, all this comprises valuable source material for social history. This point can be easily illustrated with the help of numerous examples from all over the world.

So much for treating cinema as a historical source. And what about considering film as another mode of history? Let us first see the reasons why the popularity of historical films beats the books. Once you accept Robert Rosenstone’s (2001) premise that film “is a disturbing symbol of an increasingly post-literary world (in which people can read but won’t)” the road to a “systematic understanding” of Hayden White’s “historiophoty” starts. White’s concept refers to the “representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse”. Can we even think of history, and specially modern history, without reference to visual representation? Is there a modern home without a chronologically arranged photo album? What would be the history of modern warfare, for instance, without the photos of atrocities committed by invaders in Poland, Russia, China, Vietnam, Timor, Africa and, more recently, Iraq? Film’s claim to present an alternative to written history rests on the answers to these questions. Undoubtedly there are zones from which photos and films, as eloquent factual testimonies, emerge but documents do not for obvious reasons.

Rosenstone asserts that historical films, both drama and documentary, derive their popularity from criteria they share with narrative history. They present history as a story of progress which is individually driven and finally, inevitable. Only experimental films question this format by criticising the narratives of modernity, progress, individual heroism and history as inevitable drama. Hence the experimental film opens up possibilities of new histories emerging on the screen. However, the strength of the historical film lies in emotionalising, personalising and dramatising the past. The period loc or presents the viewers an ostensibly window into the past. But by far the greatest asset of the historical film is its ability to show history as an integrated process to a curious audience. It is this ability of the film which poses the greatest challenge to written history. Historians also try to paint a holistic picture of the past but very few of them are writers of prose good enough to successfully do so. In contrast, the capability of a good film to bring alive, figuratively speaking, various dimensions and details of a social setting simultaneously is impressive. There is no dearth of examples to illustrate this point. Music enhances this effect. In combination with flesh and blood actors enacting historical or fictional characters – dress, weapons, facial expressions, voice, emotional subtleties – the camera produces a powerful historical effect on the audience. Salt and pepper historians may continue to trash historical films as essentially fiction but none of us can ignore their having become a preferred mode of receiving and understanding the past in contemporary society.

[Image of book cover: MULTINATIONALS IN INDIA Managing the Interface of Cultures JAI B P SINHA

MULTINATIONALS IN INDIA
Managing the Interface of Cultures
JAI B P SINHA

Pursuant to the opening up of the Indian economy, numerous multinational corporations have set up shop in India. Among the various challenges they face is managing the interface of a global (or domestic) corporate culture with the deep-seated and widely varying cultural practices prevalent in India. In order to understand these processes, Jai B P Sinha selected five large multinationals representing three distinctly different cultural zones (Anglo-American, Scandinavian and the Far Eastern), and which are engaged in a wide variety of activities. This rich comparative analysis reveals that while each corporation brought to India its unique organisational culture, they rapidly understood the need to adapt their management practices to Indian settings.

GLOBALIZATION AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN ASIA
Changing the Local-Global Interface
ed. by DEV NATHAN, GOVIND KELKAR and PIERRE WALTER

Globalization has profoundly affected both the ways of life and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples worldwide. The 12 original essays in this book are based on fieldwork conducted in India, China, Nepal and parts of the Himalaya-Hindukush region. The contributors to this volume demonstrate how new forms of community and continued non-market access to critical productive resources—for example, land and forests—would allow for a greater and more equitable spread of the benefits of globalization and simultaneously address some of its negative features.

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Locating the Historical Film

Finally, how does the historian ‘situate’ the historical film. Towards the experimental film, which portrays social reality in a departure from narrative history, we can easily adopt a favourable attitude. For instance films highlighting systemic exploitation, the underworld, wage slavery, the emotional trauma of women or problems of migrant workers and the unemployed need not fictionalise history – that is the stuff history is made of in any case. They are necessary to draw our attention to many emotions which written history either ignores or cannot express. They do constitute the most productive film histories and should be accepted as such. Historians will face no problems in contextualising them. Hence, to illustrate the point further, a ‘new wave’ film without being a ‘period’ film often becomes an excellent example of a historical film. Recreation of human feelings in realistic social situations – like the ones involving the exercise of power and exploitation – is more important to these films than a ‘period’ look. However this does not mean that the directors of these films do not pay adequate attention to historical details. A film like Shyam Benegal’s ‘Ankur’, for example, is at once historical in its focus on rural feudalism in a region of south India and socio-cultural in its presentation. The same is true of Govind Nihalan’s ‘Aakrosh’ which underscores the exploitation of tribals by India’s ruling elite and their agents.

But what about the historical film which fictionalises history? To begin with, it must be understood and conceded from the viewpoint of accuracy, that all historical films are fictional to a lesser or greater extent. If they were not, they would bore the audience to death and fail at the box office. Without the play of imagination, fictional characters, invented minor events and emotional responses of historical persons the historical film cannot be made. In contrast suppose the historian begins analysing films by first asking himself a question regarding the authenticity of his product. Do historians manage to paint a true picture or even a literal picture of the past with the aid of their conceptual tools and documentary sources? What would their discipline be without the aid of imagination, turn of phrase, selection and editing of sources? Once the process of writing history itself is critically evaluated, its monopoly over historical truth weakens. Historians should never have exercised this monopoly given the fact that the ancillary disciplines of history, the chief sources of her facts, like anthropology, archaeology, geology, geography, economics, etc, have themselves been in a state of constant evolution. According to Rosenstone, historians express themselves in words. These are powerful enough to express complicated feelings in a condensed form. But is the universe of words enough or relevant enough to express the truth about the past? We must admit that though words are not enough to express the total richness of human or other experience, historians and social scientists seem to have little choice in the matter. Perhaps this is where the power of the film makes its difference.

People take history written by trained historians seriously because they think the historian knows the past better than anyone else. While this may well be true, historians should resist the temptation of converting their rights over the past into a monopoly. There are people who continue to believe that the historian narrates the truth about the past or at least the historian on their side does so. Such people are not entirely misguided. After all the evolution of history as a modern subject, the rigorous training in methods which historians undergo, the widespread institutionalisation of history as an academic discipline and the social acceptance of historical traditions enhances the prestige of history. Historians would do well to be modest. Instead of misusing the prestige of their subject to claim a monopoly over immutable historical truths the historians can, on the basis of training, assert probable truths of the past. Moreover since historians can scarcely write without descriptive words and theoretical concepts they can also admit that much of their history, like film history, is also representational history. So the historians’ introspection in the process of dealing with film leads to the inevitable conclusion that the educator needs educating. If cinema records reality through the filters of a camera, written history too filters down to the readers through the medium of the historian. So much so for redefining the attitude of historians to films. This still leaves the question of film redefining itself vis-a-vis history open.

Cinema became popular after history had already consolidated its hold over a literate public as an academic subject. The age of post-literacy – in which people could but did not read – emerged much later. Men and women who went to schools and universities had a fair idea of history against which to examine films. Hence films could not operate in a social vacuum. They had to be made and screened in relation to growing historical knowledge and also the knowledge being forged by the simultaneous development of the other social sciences. Therefore, the historical film could not be allowed to affect – quite like some history books – a ‘historical innocence’ in its making. While urging the historian to consider visual history gently we can hardly transfer the arrogance of historians to film-makers. They should not be allowed to get away with the assumption that historical films can happily be made with disdain for carefully crafted written history. As mentioned earlier films are eminently equipped to portray many emotions and experiences which actually have no written histories. They have the power to illustrate concepts and hence complement and enrich written texts. With this power (to borrow a sentence from ‘Spiderman 2’), must come great responsibility.

Love, humiliation, hatred, anger, helplessness, emotional repression and even protest are only inadequately addressed by most of written history. But these feelings, visual history could do well to remember, exist in historical contexts conceptually explained by written history. These contexts are not always easy to reproduce in pseudo-historical period settings. It must never be forgotten that the historians’ explanations help cinema in the same way as historical fiction stokes the historian’s imagination. Hence in dealing with cinema and specially its potential to heighten emotions and its hitherto troubled relationship with academic history, Friedrich Nietzsche’s advice to achieve a healthy intellectual balance of the unhistorical and historical must be heeded.

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