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**Introduction: Reel Histories****1. History on Film**

Numerous film productions of the last two decades are obsessed with history. From successful TV films such as the multipart PBS series on American history to the riveting visual histories of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *The Crucible* (1996), *The Patriot* (2000) or *Pearl Harbor* (2001), filmmakers use motion pictures to bring forceful interpretations of the past to the masses. In contemporary media and cultural studies, however, hardly any work can be found that discusses comprehensively “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (White 1988, 1193). Professional historians frequently address historical films in terms of how cinematic history compares to written accounts of the past.<sup>1</sup> While some film scholars assess visual history as a special medium of historical representation that offers the spectator the “chance of finding a view of the present embedded within a picture of the past” (Sorlin 2001, 36; cf. Barta 1998; Toplin 1988 and 1996; Carnes 1995; Grindon 1994; Ferro 1988; Rollins 1983), others share David Herlihy’s verdict that historical films “cannot serve as independent statements regarding the past. They are illusions and must be recognized as such” (1988, 1192). Likewise, in her *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (1996), Susan Hayward compares historical films to classical Hollywood screen genres such as epics and costume drama. Accordingly, she defines the historical film in terms of both its pseudo-historical depth and its aesthetic styles that displace ‘real’ history:

From setting, costumes, objects, to use of colour [...], every detail must appear authentic. [...] The narrative focuses on a real event in the past, or the life of a real person. Often highly fictionalized, the historical film invests the moment or person with ‘greatness’. [...] In this respect, historical films have an ideological function: they are serving up the country’s national history [...], teaching us our history according to the ‘great moments’ and ‘great men or women’ in our collective past. (172-3)

Considering this brief sketch of critical statements one might come to the conclusion that the historical film is best regarded as a regression to the mythic nature of past events. It is these historical fiction films and their rendering of history that obviously appeal less to leading film critics such as Robert Rosenstone

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*. The journal was founded by the Historians Film Committee as an affiliation of the American Historical Association in the 1970s. According to Peter C. Rollins, the journal explores the relationship between “America’s favorite art form and America’s historical legacy as defined by those academically trained to research and write history” (Rollins 2003, xiii).

(cf. 1988; 1995a; 1995b; 1996). He proposes to pay critical attention exclusively to such cinematic productions that are “serious about describing and understanding [...] the beliefs, ideas, experiences, events, movements, and moments of the past” (1996, 215). Certainly, the primarily commercial nature of such cinematic histories as Walt Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995), for instance, may be one reason why critical interest in visual history has remained low in film studies and theory.<sup>2</sup> This neglect might also derive from the difficulty to define and classify the genre of the historical film (cf. Landy 2001, 1-22). Comparing it with other film genres such as the western, the comedy, the thriller, or the science-fiction film, for instance, Pierre Sorlin asserts that “[t]he peculiarity of historical films is that they are defined according to a discipline that is completely outside the cinema; in fact there is no special term to describe them” (1980, 20).<sup>3</sup>

Hayden White, on the other hand, questions the division drawn by most film critics between verbal and visual representations of history. In his essay “Historiography and Historiophoty” (1988), he shows that both written and filmed history construct a sense of the past by using narrativizing techniques. Sequences of shots, the use of montage, or close-ups narrativize events in a similar way as plot and tropological strategies that are applied by historians in order to construct a meaningful story. White maintains that “[e]very written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced” (1988, 1194). Therefore, White does not treat the historical film as a complement to historiography, but rather as a “discourse in its own right [...] capable of telling us things about its referents that are both different from what can be told in verbal discourse and also of a kind that can only be told by means of visual images” (1988, 1193). Thus, White’s term “historiophoty” conceptualizes the historical film as a textual production that creatively invents rather than discovers possible pasts and, in doing so, suggests that history is all the ways we encode the past in narrative form to make it a present.

Gilles Deleuze’s two-volume study on *Cinéma* (1983) is one of the first attempts to do justice to the historical film as a discourse in its own right. According to Deleuze, the historical film gravitates toward the grand scale picture emphasizing action and relying on a narrative that relates parts to the whole (cf. 1986, I, 141-59). This type of “organic” narration combines personal narrative with historical vision and thus merges romantic drama and social spectacle. Furthermore, the movement of camera, the editing system, and the easy-to-follow cutting pattern in Hollywood cinema provide an avenue from the most private actions to a vista of immense scale, to the effect that “the American cinema constantly shoots

<sup>2</sup> Neither the four-volume *Film Theory* (Simpson 2004) nor *The History and Narrative Reader* (Roberts 2001) contain entries on history and film.

<sup>3</sup> Other approaches of film criticism range from formalist and genre criticism to cultural, psychological, gender, semiotic and structuralist readings. See, for instance, Bordwell (1985) and for a comprehensive selection of new approaches in structuralist and poststructuralist film criticism (cf. Stam 1992; Sorlin 1980).

and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilisation” (1986, I, 148). Consequently, American filmmakers reenact the past in terms of progressive history. In doing so, they frequently juxtapose different historical epochs in order to show, for instance, that the fall of the great nations in world history foreshadows the rise of an American empire in the west. American filmmakers frequently utilize culturally familiar narrative patterns (i.e., the rise and fall of great empires, America as a redeemer nation or as asylum for freedom) in order to re-stage history on film. Deleuze’s references to national cinema ultimately illustrate that cinematographic styles are closely tied to particular narrative conceptualizations of the nation. He thus concludes that the historical film forms the “great genre of the American cinema” (149) and, at the same time, underscores the transgeneric character of the American historical film. According to Deleuze, it is “in the conditions peculiar to America [that] all the other genres were already historical, whatever their degree of fiction: crime with gangsterism, adventure with the Western, had the status of [...] exemplary historical structures” (149). Deleuze warns against a too simplistic form of criticism that only “make[s] fun of Hollywood’s historical conceptions” (149); rather one should consider how the historical film brings together different aspects of the past in order to narrate a coherent conception of history.

Uniting essays by major film critics in her *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (2001), Marcia Landy outlines the changing aspects of the cinematic uses of the past along various theoretical formulations of historical thought. She draws on Nietzsche’s thoughts about history (cf. Nietzsche 1980, 8-35) in order to distinguish narrative modes that prevail in historical film. Nietzsche depicts three different forms of historical reconstruction that are fundamental for regarding the past. Monumental history envisions the past during moments of crisis and heroic conflict. It reveals a penchant for the actions of heroic figures. These figures come to define the character of an age, their actions being considered as models to be imitated. Antiquarian history resides in its preservation of and reverence for ancestral goods. It focuses on the artifacts of the past in minute detail. While monumental and antiquarian history tend to be prescriptive in their veneration of the past, critical history reexamines the methods and values that have motivated historians in constructing their narrative accounts of the past.

Applying this classification to history on film, critics frequently consider the historical fiction film as a visual account of the monumental and antiquarian forms of historiography described by Nietzsche. By contrast, the critical historical film resembles very much what Robert Rosenstone calls the “postmodern historical film” (1996, 213). The postmodern film seeks to undermine conventions of historical representation, notably by abandoning the historically conditioned aesthetics of cinematic realism. Proposing imaginative new ways of dealing with historical material, filmmakers have produced works that, in form and content, differ crucially from the standard Hollywood formula with its insistence on omniscient narration, linear causality, temporal closure, and the notion of the screen as an unmediated window onto a ‘real’ world. Rather than subscribing to familiar narrative

structures that combine story, progression, and morality within an integral whole, postmodern film has made use of the unique capabilities inherent in the visual medium to foreground its own constructedness in creating aesthetic systems which dissolve conventional narrative hierarchies and blur generic boundaries.

## 2. History as Drama vs. History as Experiment

As suggestive as these attempts at defining the historical film may be, they nevertheless reveal an impasse that emerges out of the opposition between history as drama and history as experiment. According to Rosenstone (1995b, 50-79), both mark “categories” of the historical film. History as drama is the most common form of historical film. Dramatic films tell stories about the past in which the central plot and the fictional characters are placed in historical settings. History as experiment, by contrast, rejects the codes of representation of mainstream Hollywood films and refuses to see “the screen as a transparent ‘window’ onto a ‘realistic’ world” (53). Whereas the experimental or postmodern historical film wants to bring about a novel form of historical consciousness and thus “promises a revisioning of what we mean by the word *history*” (54, emphasis in text; cf. Skoller 2005), the dramatic or standard Hollywood film is a “popular” and “uncritical” form of history, “the kind history ‘buffs’ like” (54). The “varieties” of historical films offered by Rosenstone are based on two different modes of narrativization of the past in written and visual history. While the experimental film seeks to translate the anti-narrative impulse of postmodernism onto the screen, the dramatic film is seemingly caught in the trap of narrative as it builds the story around a linear, progressive, and morally complete interpretation of the past. In his attempt to define the “‘serious’ historical film” (53) that parallels or even supersedes scholarly written history, Rosenstone and like interpretations of the historical film underrate the significance of popular forms of historical narratives for the maintenance and transformation of culture.

The anti-narrative impulse of postmodernism frustrates ‘classic’ narrative analysis that emphasizes the autonomy of the narrative structure in a given text. In general terms, narrative analysis insists on structural characteristics that all narrative forms have in common, regardless of the medium. Hence, narrative analysis distinguishes such elements as story outline, plot structure, the spheres of action commanded by different characters, the way narrative information is channelled and controlled through point-of-view, and the relationship of the narrator to the figures and events of the story-world.

Contrary to the formalist logic of narrative explanation in film narratology (cf. Stam 1992; O’Connor 1990; Bordwell 1985), postmodernist anti-narratives ask questions about the production of meaning both within and outside the text. They unmask the role of ideology, culture, and myth in historical knowledge; they also shed light on the various operations by which historians both create and give meaning to culture through representation (cf. Hutcheon 1989, 107-17). So, if it is true that narrative creates the illusion of sequence, coherence, and truthfulness, anti-

narratives, on the other hand, unmask the very process of meaning that is applied by the historian in order to fabricate these illusions. In his evaluation of the postmodern critique against narrative, Robert Scholes (1981, 200-8) sketches out some of the key features of the anti-narrative impulse in contemporary storytelling:

[A]nti-narratives [...] force us to draw our attention away from the construction of a diegesis according to our habitual interpretive processes. By frustrating this sort of closure, they bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, requiring us to see them *as* codes rather than as aspects of human nature or the world. The function of anti-narrative is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us. (207; emphasis in text)

This highly self-reflexive form of narrative that refuses to sum up meaning in a totalizing manner is also part of Rosenstone's attempt to herald "the beginnings of postmodern history" on film (1996, 201-18). According to Rosenstone, historians have failed to produce postmodern histories. For Rosenstone, postmodern history is not alive on the page, but it is created on the screen by a host of experimental filmmakers. They create disjunctive, multicausal, and unique representations of history on film. In doing so, "postmodern historical films" challenge written history since their visual representations of the past "subvert" traditional forms of historiographical narratives that seek to appropriate the past in terms of linearity, progression, and completeness.

Moreover, Rosenstone's plea for "suggestive works which open up new possibilities for historical representation" (1996, 214) confronts "postmodern historical films" or "history as experiment" with mainstream representations of history on film, or what he calls the "dramatic film." For Rosenstone, the dramatic type functions at best as a popular communicator of history that tends to highlight individuals and includes human conflict. Historical films such as *Reds* (1981), a movie about the American journalist John Reed and his involvement in the Russian Revolution, either envision the past in light of the 'great man' theory of history, or they shape the material of the past in accordance with archetypal story patterns like the romance, for instance, in which the plot centers around young heroes who gloriously master the great conflicts of their times (cf. Davis 2000, 1-15; Custen 1992).<sup>4</sup> In light of the anti-narrative representation of history in postmodern historical films, Rosenstone (1996) contends that the dramatic film simply appropriates the past in terms of a "completed moral story [...] suitable as visual transfer to anyone who finds the [h]istorical discipline and its metanarratives satisfactory" (215).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For Leger Grindon (1994), by contrast, the conflictual setting of dramatic film demonstrates how it deals with historical cause and how it represents the significant forces producing social change. "The historical film," Grindon affirms, "strives to expand its characters into a portrait of a people to synthesize the individual and collective causes operating in history" (6). For Grindon, the romance and the 'grand scale spectacle' are key features of the historical film genre, as both bring about a narration in terms of monumental history (cf. Deleuze 1986, I, 150-1).

<sup>5</sup> Opposing Rosenstone's critique of history as drama, White claims that in order to tell a story a contest is necessary. In addition, by using the annalist's account as an example for a type of historical narration which contains a sequence of events without beginning or end, White shows that the lack of a "social center" (White 1980/81, 15) undercuts the annalist's attempt "to work up his discourse into the form of a narrative" (15). Challenging the postmodernist concept of

Following recent developments in the theory of historiographical representation, Rosenstone asserts that “[h]istory does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values” (1988, 1185). Hayden White would certainly agree with the constructivist idea of historical ‘truth.’ However, he would strongly argue that “underlying values” do not make history, but rather we construct a sense of history through narrativity and the values ascribed to the narrativizations of the past by a culture. The “underlying values” used to create a meaningful version of past events tell us something about the cultural function of narratives and how a culture narrativizes the past in order to endow historical data with a meaningful story.

Contrary to the postmodernist rejection of narrative, White maintains that “[t]o raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture” (1980/81, 4). He stresses the mediative function of historical narratives. As such, they do not simply reproduce the events they describe, but they tell us how to think about events. As they ‘liken’ events to familiar story types (for instance, the romance, the tragedy, the satire, the epic), historical narratives fulfill a twofold function: they bring to the fore particular narrative modes that are used by the historian in order to make meaning of past events and they “tell us what image to look for in our culturally encoded experience in order to determine how we should feel about the thing represented” (White 1978a, 53).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, even conventional story types inform the discursive space of culture since it is through their interpretations of the past that this very space is reflected, contested, and decided.

### 3. The Historical Film as Cultural Text

The essays in this special issue ask how historically based cinematic narratives contribute to our understanding of the meaning and significance of past events.

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effective history, White implies that it is impossible to imagine “historicity” and “narrativity” without some reference to a subject that “serve[s] as the agent [...] of historical narrative in all of its manifestations” (16). By contrast, “[h]istory,” according to Michel Foucault, “becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being [...]. ‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature [...]. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity” (1984, 88).

<sup>6</sup> Extending and revising White’s notion about the cultural function of narrativizing discourse, recent cultural critics reconceptualize narrative as a source of knowledge that is central to an understanding of cultural formations. Mark Currie (1998), for instance, sheds light on the ‘narrativist turn’ in cultural and media studies by pointing out that “culture not only contains narratives but is contained by narrative in the sense that the idea of culture, either in general or in particular, is a narrative” (96). Likewise, in his study *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative* (2002), Wolfgang Müller-Funk follows up new directions in narratology that seek to conceptualize culture as narration. He explicates the process of cultural formation in terms of “narrative communities” (“Erzählgemeinschaften,” 14) and characterizes them in accordance with their use of “narrative modes of emplotments” (“Erzählmuster,” 13) in a wide range of discourses, including film, advertisement, the press, literature, and TV (cf. 100). Contrary to Rosenstone’s postmodernist position, he contends that “[e]ven if we follow the most programmatic form of anti-narrativity, we remain caught in the web of narration” (34; translation mine).

Therefore, the following essays conceptualize historical films as cultural texts and discursive systems where meaning exists both within and outside the text as a result of such factors as cultural, ideological, historiographical, and mythical predeterminants. The essays share the assumption that filmic discourse functions as an “apparatus for the production of meaning rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent” (White 1987, 42). Consequently, a reading of the historical film as a “discourse in its own right” questions critical approaches that judge cinematic narratives in terms of the message they either convey about the past (truth) or the information (facts) rendered by them. In doing so, the essays aim at expanding the range of access to the meaning and cultural uses of the historical film.

The following essays deal widely with functional aspects that can be attributed to the central role of narrativity in making sense of the past, i.e., its effectiveness in familiarizing unfamiliar and disturbing experiences, its employment as a strategic act of legitimation, and its ideological, culture-sustaining function. They examine the role of narrativity in representing reality and explore the fictional dimension of these practices, as well as the problematic nature of traditional distinctions between historical discourse and fiction. The essays also elucidate the transformation of culturally significant and politically contested events *into* history. White’s distinction between the “authority of ‘culture’ [over] that of ‘society’” (1982, 3) and his assumption that the forms of narrative the culture provides have the “power to master the dispiriting and corrosive form of temporal processes” (3), underscores the ways in which the historical film responds to, interrogates, and creates history.

The various readings of historical fiction films here do not exclusively focus either on genre or on auteur-cinema. Neither do the essays attempt to classify the historical film by presenting the reader with a typology of forms, themes, and topics (cf. Rollins 2003). Rather, the premise shared by all the essays is that the historical film is best understood as a performative and transgeneric discourse in which diverse narrative conventions overlap. As such the historical film draws on a repertoire of culturally inherited patterns of sense-making in order to endow a set of past events with a particular meaning. In doing so, the examples of cinematic representations of history chosen by each contributor foreground the relationship of narrative strategies to the constitution of historical realities and to the audience’s perceptions of those realities.

In the first essay that opens this special issue, “Intertextuality and History: America’s Colonial Past in *The Scarlet Letter*” (1995), Frank Obenland extends filmic analysis into the realm of particular modes of narrativization that characterize the historical film. He reassesses the historical film as a tissue of texts and contexts, connections and associations, paraphrases and fragments. Following Renate Lachmann’s assumption (cf. 1997) that texts both knowingly and unknowingly place and displace other texts, he interprets the popular historical film not as a container of meaning but as an intertextual space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce. In contrast to numerous readings of Roland Joffé’s filmic adaptation of

Hawthorne's novel as a deceptive costume party of America's colonial past, Obenland asserts that "the creation of historicity and a historicist reading of the cinematic text depend on the viewer's identification of a web of intertextual references" (see below 217). In doing so, he illustrates how the film, through the character of Roger Chillingworth, for instance, "produces a figure that is positioned at the nodal points of a web of intertextual allusions and references" (see below 221). Obenland unfolds the dramatic film as the "memory theatre of a culture" (Lachmann 1997, 15), a complex arrangement of intertextual connections. As a discursive system that is based on reiteration, the film seeks both to domesticate the past in terms of culturally sanctioned meanings, as well as to recreate the past in terms of revisionist trends in historiography that intend to render the past "beyond the great story" (cf. Berkhofer 1995).

Many historians and cultural critics see history enter the meat grinder of media that immediately spews back a prodigious number of nostalgic images about the past (cf. Jameson 1991, 23-35). The unending duplicability of signs of the real undercuts any claims to an authentic representation and thereby negates the demands for reference to a spatio-temporal, or historical specificity. By extension, the process of narration, in whatever form, seems to lose its force as a source of knowledge, for the claims of narrative representation are untenable in the age of electronic reproduction and simulation. In his "Mainstream Movies and the Reimagination of History in *The Patriot* (1999)," Ulrich Schermaul picks up on these assumptions as he deals with one of the most successful and controversial historical fiction movies in recent years. He argues that history meets Hollywood through "narrative forms of individualized history" (see below 229). His paper discusses the mixing of star cast and historical figures. Schermaul demonstrates the ways in which the mainstream historical film creates a patchwork historical character who is at the center of the movie's narration. In doing so, he examines the mode of narration the film utilizes in order to connect historical events with individual character plots. Screenwriters and directors mingle historical and fictional biographies in order to fashion 'historical' persons who perfectly fit the film's dramatic narrative. Schermaul argues that in order to transform the experience of an incomprehensible reality (American revolutionary wars) into a perfectly intelligible account of the 'real,' it is the star image as a constructed personage both in filmic and non-filmic discourse that contributes decisively to the audience's perception of history.

Maria Schwenk examines the ongoing remembrance of George Washington who turned into a touchstone of national memory after his death in 1799. Given the wide circulation and visibility of Washington's images in American history and culture, *The Crossing* (2000), as Schwenk points out, has to be read in light of the 200th anniversary of George Washington's death. The film underlines the continuing effort to reassess the posthumous image of the nation's founder in the changing context of its manipulation by fiction writers, historians, biographers, painters, and exhibit curators. Given the revisionist trend in historiography that seeks to portray Washington less as the monumental figure commonly

represented in national history but rather as a more personally compelling figure, the film monumentalizes the past. *The Crossing* reassembles Washington through a visual memory that consists of a tissue of references to well-known images of him in historiography, art history, and popular culture.

Schwenk argues that the film's reenactment of the Battle of Trenton and Washington's leading role in it consists of a complex mixture of verbal and visual codes. TV-reenactments such as *The Crossing* take into account the "enormous number of kinds of narratives that every culture disposes for those of its members who might wish to draw upon them for the encodation and transmission of messages. [...] every narrative discourse consists, not of one single code monolithically utilized, but of a complex set of codes" (White 1987, 41). *The Crossing* is thus one more *new* staging of a historical event which has been enacted, performed, and commemorated again and again throughout American history. Therefore, apart from the presentation of historical facts, the film heavily builds upon the visual memory of George Washington as it has been maintained by numerous American artists and the many illustrations of the "nation's father" in popular iconography. Moreover, by blending historical facts with well-known historical paintings and popular images of George Washington, the TV-reenactment not only unfolds a history of continuity of a particular commemorative cult, but is a dynamic medium of visual memory as it reconfigures the national iconography as well as the cultural, ideological, and mythical implications that pertain to it.

In an age in which much of historical knowledge is acquired by watching movies and television, historians like Natalie Zemon Davis (2000) and Hayden White (1988) have argued that motion pictures can do as good a 'job' in explaining the past as books by academic historians (cf. Burgoyne 1997; Oesterberg 2001). Feature films, at the same time, reveal a great deal about the prevalent cultural preconceptions, myths, and social tensions of a given time (cf. O'Connor and Jackson 1979; O'Connor 1990). Heike Bungert's essay "Two Times 'Geronimo': Changes in the Representation of Native American History in Film" reassesses the ways in which Hollywood represents Native Americans and their history on screen (cf. Rollins and O'Connor 1998, 1-11). Her essay investigates the changing attitudes in the United States towards Native Americans by looking at Hollywood movies from the 1960s and the 1990s. Bungert discusses the filmic representations of the resistance by the Chiricahua Apache Geronimo and his followers against the U.S. Army and White settlers. While the 1962 film *Geronimo* reveals most of the well-known stereotypes about Native Americans, the 1993 remake *Geronimo: An American Legend* seeks to reappropriate Indian themes in light of multiculturalism and historical revisionism. However, as Bungert contends, now being allowed to speak Apache on screen does not undo stereotypical Hollywood representations that either vilify or romanticize Native Americans. Reading both movies in the context of contemporary Indian policy and Indian resistance as well as in the context of other contemporary movies about Indians, the essay maintains that filmic representations of Native American history leave much to be desired from the Indian's as well as the historian's point of view.

We conclude the volume with a pair of essays that deal with the historical appearance of the Western. The essays by Jörn Glasenapp (“John Ford’s *Rio Grande: Momism, the Cold War, and the American Frontier*”) and Jon-K Adams (“The Layering of History in Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*”) examine the Western as both a mirror of and a sensitive comment on the respective social and political situation in the United States. Jörn Glasenapp argues that John Ford’s *Rio Grande* can be regarded as a prime example of the ways in which the Cold War Western reappropriates the history of the American frontier. Released in November 1950, the film was read by many film critics as the director’s right-wing statement on the Korea crisis. *Rio Grande*, as Glasenapp shows, supports the conservative gender politics of American postwar society, which fought communism not only in remote parts of the world, but also and especially in the family, with women and particularly mothers singled out as blameworthy for involuntarily supporting the ‘red’ infiltration.

Jon-K Adams deals with Sam Peckinpah’s classic revisionist Western *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The story of a group of American outlaws who, after a payroll robbery, escape to Mexico only to become involved in a local conflict, served Peckinpah as a foil for taking apart the myth of the West. The movie’s bloody battle scenes give a relentlessly pessimistic view of frontier life during the Mexican revolution in 1913. After its release in the late 1960s, *The Wild Bunch* polarized critics and audiences alike. Peckinpah’s uncompromising representation of violence on screen reminded viewers of the carnage that the Vietnam War had caused. Therefore, in addition to the Mexican Revolution, as Adams argues, there are two other wars that are layered into the film’s narrative: the First World War and the Vietnam War. This layering of historical events, he asserts, establishes an analogy between Peckinpah’s group of outlaws in Mexico and the American intervention in Vietnam. Adams also points out that in terms of this analogy, the failure of Peckinpah’s roughnecks to help the Mexican farm workers to prevail over a group of corrupt generals and politicians parallels the failure of America to help the peasants in Vietnam.

This collection of essays ultimately intends to signal why historical films create forceful narratives and have established themselves effectively among the interpreters of American history. Taken together, the essays in this special issue demonstrate that a lasting mastery of the “burden of history” (White 1978b) requires perpetual narrative interventions in the representation of past experience.

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