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DISCURSIVE DIVERGENCES BETWEEN FILM MEDIUM AND HISTORICAL SCIENCE

Introduction

The movie *Dream Team 1935* (2012), which tells the story of Latvian basketball team winning the European Championship in 1935, became a major hit locally thus projecting its strong concept of historical conditions in Latvia in the interwar period. The film is filled with anachronisms, inaccuracies relating to the environment and costumes; it also has an ideological predisposition. The film well illustrates the narrative trends prevailing in historical films that have been produced or are still being produced in the Baltic states for the last two decades. Film to a large extent has taken over the functions of historical novel and as a structure dominates the public understanding of the course of history. During the last decades a number of historians in the world have turned to the study of film as a medium influencing history narrative, research methodology is being worked out and differences among cinematic representations of various epochs are analyzed.

This article conceptualizes the discursive differences between scientific historical research and historical movies in order to create a basis for further studies of the historical films and their adequacy to scientific perspective. In order to understand the discursive differences between the historical narrative approved by historical science and the one created by films, it is necessary to examine the existing research tradition concerning the problems of interpretation of the narrative of historical films. The article examines several groups determining these differences – historical preconditions that appear with the emergence of film medium in the second half of the 19th century; the impact of the prior research on contemporary studies; the differences between science and film medium as categories. Also the parameters should be collected that according to the academic researchers do not allow the films to represent history adequately, turning to those differences in reflecting history that are to do with construction of the plot and story. Special attention is to be paid to the impact of film dramaturgy upon transformation of the perception offered by historical science. The article also outlines an alternative

history narrative possibility – hybridized form of historical account created by film that finds its methodological approach – historiophotic analysis.

Different research practices

The wide-spread account of film as a non-historical medium promotes a strong polarization between the film-makers and historians, because they are reluctant to analyze separate historical issues, just taking mutually exclusive position. Interpretative view of this problem facilitates a strong polarization between film-makers and historians since there has been no analysis of specific problematic segments but a common antagonistic vector. Extremely different view of the problem at the same time is also viewing of history as science in correlation with theories that have been developing in history of philosophy in the second half of the 20th century. The most radical and conservative approach, clearly shown by William Hughes, rejects films as inexorably erroneous in regard to presentation of history, only demonstrating how a certain imprint of a specific historical epoch in each case of re-writing history has been left. “Films like other artefacts are objects created by people. Their form and function indicate the created cultural economic and technological impulses” [Hughes 1976: 54]. Hughes’ arguments often included also the national or ethnic factor.

Attempts to translate history in film in general focus on the question what is lost during this translation process. Among the things that are lost the traditionalists like Marc Ferro mentions precision of detail, complexity of interpretation, auto-critical and inter-critical dimensions of historiological reflection, qualifications of generalizations that are necessary, for instance, due to absence of documentary testimonies or their inaccessibility [Hughes-Warrington 2007: 18–21].

Opposite to the conventionalists’ view, a new approach is represented by a group of other authors, for example, Marc Ferro whose liberal view stipulates that even by making factual mistakes, historical films as a document can fully capture the way in which a new story about history is created. It entails not only a process of deconstruction or reconstruction but also an original contribution to understanding the phenomenon of the past and its relations with the present [Ferro 1988: 164]. Thus film appears to be a more modern historian because it has access to memory that registers all the radically different and unique phenomena in the world to equal extent. In its own way camera is the privileged technique of historical “thinking” because photographic capturing of the world will describe more than a common observer would even want to discover. Ian Jarvie confirms such a position with his thesis that the “informative force” of cinematic representation of historical events and processes is inevitably reduced when examining the question whether “weakening of data” on the screen “functions as bad history” [Jarvie 1987]. Robert

Rosenstone agrees with Jarvie by turning in his study not so much to the historical film per se “but to the new sorts of history that are made possible by the medium of film” [Rosenstone 2006, 35].

Studies of audio-visual medium firstly serve as a borderline for the traditional historiographic practice. Film is not perceived merely as the cause of meta-historical reflections but at the same time as its precise medial transformation. In this way we can talk about post-modernization of the historical film. According to Rosenstone it means that the post-modern “visual medium” liberates us from the thought that “perhaps history is dead in the way God is dead” [Rosenstone 2006: 142]. The post-modern approach liberates us also from the argument put forward by critics of the historical film that there exists a social convention considering camera as a means of representation through which the world is portrayed directly and seemingly without human intervention. Ferro offers this convention to study the function of the new historical text in society. From his ideologically critical perspective the history science is controlled by interests of the ruling class, hence he expects from mass media devices “how to deconstruct that, which several generations of statesmen and thinkers have built into such beautiful harmony” [Ferro 1988: 33]. Yet the use of historical films for “society’s counter-analysis” is based on prior assumption that they will be analyzed in accordance to one’s own relations with the dominant ideology, as well as social and historical memory.

Specificity of the medium in translation process of history poses the question about Hayden White’s historiophoty principle or verification of an image as a historical source [White 1988: 1193–1199]. Historiophoty potentially decreases the aspects of analytical historiography and facilitates the significance of emotional identification in regard to the historical facts on the screen. At the same time history representations in film have nothing explicitly analytical and nothing that would be explicitly anti-historiologic towards historiophoty. Rosenstone reverses the anti-historiophoty discussion, considering that this argument has been created ignoring the extent to which any type of historiography possesses the same kind of restrictions [Rosenstone 1995: 1173–1185]. We obtain pseudo-factual representation of the causal relationships but it is not a false representation. Rosenstone says that it is possible to imagine a situation when a sufficient number of cameras are placed in a way to capture the situation with a greater sense of immediacy and detail than it is simulated in a verbal representation, also with a greater factual precision [Rosenstone 2006: 38]. Argumentation of supporters of historiography is based on the argumentation that cinematic representations are no less or more informative and factual than the verbal ones, because the scope of detail provided by them is not different. Proceeding from the view of analytical historiography that the provided scope of details ensures true representation of

micro events from which follows that true representation of macro events in film can be ensured as well. For example, when historians enumerate consequences of a large-scale historical event, it is no different activity from the one performed by film editor who shows visual signifiers of these consequences. The difference between a written and filmed account is not so much in the overall precision of details as in the different forms of concreteness granted to images – in one case they are verbal, in other case – visual. Events take place or happen; facts are constituted by descriptive categorization of events which means – via groundless statements. Thus the “adequacy” of any account about the past depends on the choice that must be made from the concepts already used to transform information about events not into general “facts” but into specific type of “facts” (political, social, cultural and psychological). The fact that the very distinction between “historical” facts on the one hand and non-historical (for example, “natural” facts) on the other hand, a distinction without which specific historical knowledge would be unimaginable, is unstable, indicates the constructivist nature of historians’ activity [Rosenstone 1995: 168]. Talking about usefulness or adequacy of cinematic account of historical events, it would be suitable to think about the ways in which an explicitly metaphorical discourse is or is not capable to transform information about the past into a specific type of facts. For instance, unlike photography, the use of framing of sequences and montage and close-ups can be used as signifier as effectively as phrases, a sentence or sequence of sentences in the written and oral discourse. And if film can signify, then it can achieve what Jarvie calls the essence of historical discourse [Munslow 2004: 10–11]. In addition, a sound film has resources, like analytical narration or specific dialogue, to supplement the visual figurativeness with different verbal contents that in the name of the need for dramatic effects does not have to sacrifice analysis. As for the notion that portrayal of filmed historical events cannot be “defended” and “commented”, there is no reason to assume that it cannot be done in principle [Rosenstone 1995].

Film medium as separate phenomenon

Film by its alienation and fragmented reality, its unique possibility to reproduce movement as image and to combine the separate fragments and movements into the totality of diegesis, includes many historical meanings in each of its expression. For the written history, as soon as it is confronted with the wide scope of these meanings, it is complicated to sift off peculiarities of the past. Yet the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze identified in film such qualities that are not difficult to attribute to activity of any practicing historian [Deleuze 1986: 2].

Depictions of the real life, fantasy, future or past on the screen engage the spectators drawing their imagination to reflection of reality that has narrative time,

space, shape and sound. The spectator replicates this experience because he incessantly re-confirms the perceived hybridized reality by simply following the screen story. When engagement works, diegetic skills of the film-makers are precise, when the engagement is lacking, it is possible that the film-maker's skills have not been realized or the spectator had not been involved with the necessary perceptive self-identification with diegesis. Similar "co-operation" exists also between writer and reader, therefore in this aspect there is little difference between reading a literary text and perception of historical narrative in film.

Written history can be "stopped" in order to validate it, register and start anew, and as history it must have verifiable references compliant to academic standards. Films can afford innumerable made-up things, starting from deep psychological descriptions to an impossible outcome of history. Feature films possess freedom and a "true story" on the screen is fiction, like the film itself because to create dramatic diegesis a great deal of made-up elements are required [Buckland 2004: 88–89]. Every object, phenomenon or mutual relations must be re-invented for them to depict the imagined world of the past. Yet the major difference is close to what Deleuze designates as "movement image". The present screen is not an image to which movement has been added in some way, and depiction of the past does not offer to the spectator the past to which the film has been added. With filmic processes creating the greatest degree of the sense of presence the audience is offered image of the past. The present of film diegesis, certainly, has a context of space and time that remains active in spectators' fantasy even if it is intellectually inhibited [Deleuze 1986: 12–16]. Films present comparatively genuine link between what is seen in the frame and the elements beyond it. It is similar to the selection of all the historical events when the most large-scale or alternatively constructed historical events remain essentially beyond frame. Plasticity of filmic image and its actuality excludes a wider historical consciousness but activates narrower segments of history. There are films that try to sustain in the spectator's consciousness the "beyond frame" concept, and even in the conventional industry films there are styles that maintain the sense of presence of the world beyond the screen. A very fine example to be mentioned is Latvian director Laila Pakalniņa's film "Shoe" (1998), which reconstructs the period of Soviet occupation in Latvia. Most of action and events in the film takes place behind the frame, thus intensifying the sense of their presence, providing a much broader presence of the historical diegesis. The concept "film beyond film" helps to create the scope of historical insights beyond what is seen in film that as a result of subsequent public adaptation becomes historical narrative.

Film historiography is also based on indivisibility of time dimension. Time in film is implied in a constructed space that possesses reality of story, i.e., history and not the reality of experiences or actual reality. In its artificial space the film engages

also into synthetic expansion and compression of time. We follow the story time that most frequently has nothing to do with the actual screening time. Every film shot creates a scope of movements that are related by the French film theorist André Bazin both to space and time [Bazin 1967: 27–35]. The most powerful impact of film is connected with this short-term dimension that involves the real time, as well as the modified historical time because the very perception of a frame is mobile. Time dimension acquires even wider impact by the use of montage, which at first sight is as if in contradiction to the feature of frame continuity. Montage by linking and separating these isolated mobile entities radically increases perspectives of space, time and movement. The shot represents the existing coherence between characters, space, phenomena and objects but their real meaning emerges only through montage, relating one shot to another. Historical narrative, irrespective of the film-makers' intentions, is expanded in spectators' consciousness. Montage aspect can activate the spectator's perception to the most complicated correlations even when he is fully focusing on what is being shown literally. The imaginary space within which the spectator experiences film's reality and which is directed by the author of the film, is created in parallel by anyone in audience – in a preeminent, internal, but at the same time in a completely dimensional way [Bazin 1967: 26–27]. Every spectator possesses the uncontrollable force of interpretation, which is mapped by individual contexts and references. The space is influenced and shaped by large scope of historical narrative of which it is not aware since it lies beyond the frame. Thus in history as a form of cognition a transition or change of consciousness can be identified – from seeing everything with one's own eyes to seeing nothing with one's own eyes. During the last four decades the perspective of academic history has been influenced by montage fragmentation, which involves study of individual processes and phenomena, showing that each process in the past may have several perspectives, contingent and free interpretations. Cinematic narrative/signifier offers diversity of forms of expression that still can create substantial forms of historical discourse.

Art of acting interprets historical events – patterns of relationships, behaviour, and psychological reactions – similarly to the way academic history interprets sources filling up narrative gaps. Historical interpretation gains if it is conscious of its non-historicity therefore a possible transition to qualitative historical area or historical reactivation can be offered, to use the term by French historian Pierre Sorlin [Sorlin 1994: 8]. For a film to be historical it cannot do without self-understandable distancing of the historical present through the use of dramatic techniques of the film. This is a position maintained also by separate academic historians who want to include the historical film narrative in the historical research as a completely new history narrative. In their view, reality that is created in film's

diegesis, cannot but be historical [Deshpande, 2004: 4457]. It doesn't matter if it takes place in the "past", "present" or future, it has immediacy of presence and it also tells a finished story.

Conclusion

Discursive differences between historical films and history science are basically created by film medium specificity that stipulates realistic reproduction of historical events and phenomena but at the same time excludes the presence of historical reflections, critique of generalizations and factual precision. The historical research constructed by film is a very recent academic phenomenon. Critique by the academic history of historical films is being revised in the contemporary research putting forward arguments about discursive and categorial mistake existing between history science and historical films. The discursive mistake is created in the view that the historical narrative formed by film has a more precise or less precise link with the history narrative produced by academic historians based in sources. Film, to a large extent, reproduces alternative discourse and alternative history narrative that exists parallel to the one created by academic history. This narrative is consumed by a much larger audience, therefore it gains much larger dissemination whose existence is not to be ignored.

Sources

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Abstract

Representation of history is the most powerful formative factor of historical insights in society in the 20th and 21st century. Currently, there have been a number of films in production which interpret Latvian history, thus raising the profile of issues relating to the portrayal of the history of the cinema. This article conceptualises the discursive differences between historical research and historical films in order to create a basis for further studies of historical films and their adequacy for the research perspective. This article also outlines the historical features of the cinema, as well as the possibility of an alternative historical narrative: a hybridised form of a historical account created by film.

Keywords: *history, narrative, film, diegesis, representation.*