

Perspectives on European Film and History

LEEN ENGELEN and ROEL VANDE WINKEL (eds.)

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The most recent addition to Academia Press's *Film and TV Studies Series*, *Perspectives on European Film and History* asks not only that we more deeply consider the relationship between film and our collective understanding of history, but also, that we re-examine the sorts of films that are typically included in that consideration. A large gap exists in scholarly literature on the often-uneasy relationship between moving images and the construction of historical knowledge—a body of literature dominated by Hollywood and a handful of European “art films”—and *Perspectives on European Film and History* takes significant steps to fill that void. By highlighting films and histories not typically included in scholarly conversations about how cinema represents the past, the essays found in *Perspectives on European Film and History* contribute a wide range of new images, meanings, and cinematic traditions for consideration.

Co-editor, Leen Engelen, further complicates this relationship between film and history, in her essay, “No Way to do History? Toward an Intertextual Model for the

Analysis of Historical Films,” by noting that the nearly-exclusive study of Hollywood blockbusters has served to create a problematic understanding of the history film genre, itself. Engelen calls into question the assumption that predictable, reliable commonalities exist across cultures and cinematic traditions, or among such a diverse grouping of films. As a remedy to the generic approach to historical film, Engelen suggests a radical model, wherein each film is considered a component of a continuously expanding intertextual network, ultimately feeding back into Barthes’ concept of “the book of culture,” from which all texts draw substance.

The successive chapters consist of nine cinematic case studies, each exploring the interplay between historical moments, social and cultural perceptions, iconic figures, and received knowledge. The chapters, however, push significantly beyond the approach of “Great men, great women, great moments,” to examine the many ways in which historical films may be fruitfully studied. How do cinematic texts and representations shore up historical myths or create modern versions of their own? What can we learn from moving images about the paradigms and structures of power that inform a given society? How are historical films shaped by the processes of distribution and consumption? And most significantly, how do we begin to understand the relationship between historical “fact” and historical “reality”?

These questions are carefully considered from various angles and perspectives, as each of the contributing authors examines “history,” as it is made by moving images. Yet, as diverse as their topics, themes, and modes of inquiry might be, the chapters are drawn together by a number of critical underlying agreements regarding the ideological, social, cultural, and political functions of historical films—notably among these, the way historical films work to create, support, and maintain nationalist culture, identity, rhetoric, and myth. This focus on the nation-state serves the volume well, as it opens a portal for explorations of the “imagined reality” that historical films bring to the work of identity formation from various facets of the social world. (9) Along this, and other, thematic threads, films as diverse as *Andrei Rublev* (1966), *Rembrandt* (1936), Luc Besson’s *The Messenger* (1999), and *Vera Drake* (2004) are the focal points of discussion, joining perhaps more obvious cinematic vehicles of the nation-state, such as *Downfall* (2004), Herbert Wilcox’s *Dawn* (1928), *My Friend, Ivan Lapshin* (1983/1985), *Waterloo* (1928), and *Cromwell* (1970). Each essay, in its own fashion, addresses its respective film both as film, and as historical artifact, satisfying scholars who come to the study of the historical film from both sides of the aisle.

While each of the essays is well-considered and makes a significant contribution to both the volume and the existing body of literature, several stand out in particular support of the volume’s aim to include diverse and marginalized histories and representations in scholarly conversations on historical film. Among these is Jasmijn Van Gorp’s work on Alexei German’s film, *My Friend, Ivan Lapshin*—the film that began cinema’s interrogation of the Stalin regime. Van Gorp’s essay not only examines the collision of top-down history and cinematic social critique, it also captures the differences in essence and detail between history-writ-large—grand-scale, politically-patronized history—and the history of everyday life, or what Van Gorp terms “small, real history.” While the film’s narrative contains no explicit mention of historical background, its taken-for-granted cues and details evoke the historical moment in ways that are otherwise unattainable.

Similarly, Pascal Vandelanoitte's essay, "An Icon of Change: *Andrei Rublev* (1966) as a Historical Film about the Birth of Russia," also explores a film where historical background is unspoken, in the service of larger historical statements. The film itself is heavily laden with dates, characters, and events familiar to Russian audiences—as cultural "insiders"—but which fail to provide adequate context for cultural "others," allowing history to remain a puzzle. As a result, *Andrei Rublev* has frequently been denied status as an historical film in Western circles. Vandelanoitte's work unpacks the film's historical content, in tandem with the painter's psychological conflict, in order to demonstrate Tarkovsky's use of Rublev's story as an allegory of broader social change in Russia, in the early 15th century.

But whether discussing small, unfamiliar histories, such as these, or historical narratives more familiar to Western audiences and scholars, such as those found in *Cromwell*, *The Messenger*, or the acclaimed *Downfall*, each of the essays in *Perspectives on European Film and History* engages directly and provocatively with existing knowledge sets on historical films. In particular, Roel Vande Winkel's essay on *Downfall* offers a well-researched and meticulously considered exploration of the tension between fact and truth, historical and symbolic reality, and the re-working of the past to speak to the present. The work of each of the contributors asks that we reconsider our understandings about the nature of the genre, the ways in which Hollywood-centric scholarship and audiencing have affected the range of historical films studied and considered, and how expanding our investigations to include "other lives; other histories" serves to expand and deepen our cultural and political understandings, as well. The volume as a whole, and each of the essays individually, would make a valuable addition to coursework on the historical film, and serve to move the study of film and its relationship with history in challenging and productive directions.

Cynthia J. Miller
Emerson College

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