

Against the Ivory Tower: An Apologia for "Popular" Historical Documentaries

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What makes a documentary good? What makes one bad? These two little questions account for probably eighty-five percent of the ink that has flowed in discussion of documentaries in general and historical documentaries in particular—both in academic circles and in the popular press. These questions continue to provoke strong disagreements. It is a safe bet that they are in no danger of a speedy resolution. Nonetheless, when it comes to the practical matter of doing things with historical documentaries—using them in the classroom, at conferences, in our writing—they are questions that insist upon answers. I do not have any all-purpose answers. I would like to make a case, however, concerning how we ought to approach the questions.

I recently completed a lengthy study of the public response to popular historical documentaries: reviews, letters to producers, public debates, and interviews with filmmakers.¹ The purpose of this study was to discover how people generally make sense of historical documentaries—that is, what people suppose to be the purpose of doing history, what they expect of documentaries, what constitutes “evidence” in the minds of viewers, how they evaluate depictions of the past, and so on.

The public response to historical documentaries turns out to be rather complex and, predictably, to vary considerably depending upon individual viewers’ interest in and previous “knowledge” about historical events depicted in a film. It has also varied quite a lot historically, just as the form of historical documentaries has. Nevertheless, there is one striking constant that cuts across all of the variables. Namely, non-academics tend to discuss historical documentaries in very different terms than academics do. The evidence of this is so strong that one might with reason suppose that the two groups even *see* historical documentaries differently. To state the difference simply (indeed, over-simply), non-academics are overwhelmingly concerned with the emotional “pull” of documentaries about the past, while scholars prefer to adopt a more critical, self-conscious stance. Historians and film scholars are no doubt well aware of the strengths of their scholarly approach to movies about history. The question I wish to ponder here (as an academic writing to other academics) is, What is wrong with the *other* way, the “popular” way, of watching, thinking about, and discussing documentaries about the past. Indeed, what is wrong with historical documentaries that deliberately appeal to this “popular” mode of reception?

Historians and film scholars have an admirable if somewhat impractical tendency to talk to each other about how filmmakers ought to make films. My ambition here is somewhat more modest. I wish to discuss only how historians and film scholars ought to *talk* about films. This discussion is aimed not at people who make historical documentaries, but at people who write about them and use them in their classes. It is not about what historical documentaries ought to do. It is about what scholars ought to do *with* historical documentaries. Rather than making specifications for historical documentaries that may be made in the future, it speaks to the problem of what to do with those that are already history, so to speak.

Academic historians naturally tend to evaluate historical documentaries according to how well they do what academic historians are supposed to do. Their verdict, when analyzing extant historical documentaries, is almost always that they do not do that very well. This is not just a matter of factual inaccuracies; in fact, it has to do more with the kinds of questions that historical documentaries pose and answer. It has to do with how they function as *discourses* about the past.

This view is reflected in the numerous essays by historians in a special issue of *American Historical Review* on “The Filmmaker as Historian.” As Robert Brent Toplin writes in the introductory essay,

By presenting subjects in a conclusive manner, films imply that the study of history is a tidy operation, that it involves little more than laying out a chronology and “getting the story straight.” Films

rarely give audiences a sense of the challenges in historical interpretation. They address subjects authoritatively, suggesting that the investigator works with an orderly universe of evidence. They fail to show that a filmmaker must give shape and meaning to the sources. In short, films rarely point out that the facts do not speak for themselves and that the filmmaker must speak for them.²

Toplin goes on to discuss numerous exceptions to this rule. Still, the general consensus among historians is that documentaries about history, particularly popular ones, are simply not sufficiently scholarly.

This may be true. I certainly do not wish to argue otherwise. Nevertheless, it must be said that there is something a bit perverse about these arguments. They are analogous to a James Michener fan complaining of a scholarly history that it is insufficiently entertaining. It seems more appropriate to judge something in terms of what it is *supposed* to be than for what it is not.

Historians seem to assume that historical documentaries are *supposed* to be akin to scholarly history -that is, historians assume that popular or "ordinary" audiences tend to draw the same kind of conclusions from historical documentaries that scholars draw when they do or read academic history. Toplin's essay and others suggest that what modern historians are most interested in is the complexity or multidimensionality of the past. They regard the past as something to be considered from a number of angles. Another common view among historians, traditionally, is that the past is something to be explained.

It seems clear from the public reception of historical documentaries like Claude Lanzmann's documentary about the Holocaust, *Shoah*, and Ken Burns' acclaimed series for American public television, *The Civil War*, that popular audiences of historical documentaries are not particularly interested either in the complexity of the past or in explaining it. What they want more than anything (and what they generally find, if a historical documentary is at all "successful") is a powerful emotional "experience." This can be a vicarious experience or an aesthetic experience or an experience of belonging to a special group. In many cases, it is all of these. These considerations, in turn, appear to be rather remote from the concerns of academic historians. In other words, it appears that what academic historians "get out of" their studies of the past and what popular audiences mainly "get out of" historical documentaries are two completely different things, judged according to completely different standards.

Of course, in having an "experience" of the past, popular audiences may *also* jump to improper conclusions. They might conclude, for example, that having seen the ugly, seamy side of former U.S. President Lyndon Johnson "exposed" in a documentary, they now know all there is to know about the man. Or they might conclude that having "relived" the experience of the gas chambers through *Shoah*, they have now seen the Holocaust as it *really* was- "*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*" This kind of false or improper generalization from the "experience" of a movie is the danger that concerns historians.

Typical viewers of historical documentaries know that movies are not "real life." They are also surely aware that "real life" is not all there is to history and that having had the sense of "experiencing" an event in the past does not mean knowing everything there is to know about it. Viewers of historical documentaries probably also have a decent intuitive grasp of the differences between academic and popular history. They are clearly pretty adept at distinguishing "fact" from "fiction." Still, knowing all of these things does not prevent viewers from jumping to false or improper conclusions. Even professional historians sometimes jump to wrong conclusions. More importantly, knowing all of the things I outlined above does not necessarily instill the kind of skeptical stance that modern historians espouse: a stance that is always looking for other angles on the past, that is always doubtful of conclusions, that is never so caught up in an emotional "experience" that it fails to think critically about the past. This skeptical stance is one that popular historical documentaries, with their traditional emphasis on "facts" and "feelings," do little to encourage. That is the main reason that historians tend to be somewhat leery of them.

Still, it needs to be said that historical documentaries are generally not *supposed* to instill a skeptical stance on the past, which is to say that audiences neither want nor expect them to do so. Historical documentaries, by and large, are supposed to be popular. This supposition entails a different set of standards -a set of standards that historians tend to dismiss because, as scholars in the academy, they

are primarily engaged in a very different kind of discourse. What are we to make of these popular standards? Are they at all good? Or do they *deserve* to be dismissed?

On questions of good and bad or right and wrong we are all forced, in the end, to base our answers upon opinions. My opinion is that to simply dismiss popular standards, as historians tend to do, is both too pat and too simple. If people say, as many have, that watching *Shoah* helped them grow, or brought them closer to other people, or did something else that they regard to be beneficial to themselves, who am I -who is *anyone*- to discount or disparage their claims?

Critic Loudon Wainwright wondered why people bothered to attend *Shoah* at all, since the movie is so long, so painful, and dwells on so terrible a topic. When he asked, he found that the reasons people gave are varied and complex. Some were simply curious. Others felt somewhat guilty at having escaped the experience by accidents of birth or geography. Others had actually lived through the experience. But the one reason that people gave most often, Wainwright found, is that the film “keeps the memory alive.” The viewers he questioned all seemed to regard this to be a powerful good of the film.³

To the extent that people regard such things as good, I think we need to simply accept them as good. That does not mean that is all we need to do. Historians can teach another way of looking at *Shoah* that is not completely compatible with the way popular audiences tend to look at the film and one that accomplishes different sorts of objective. But they can do this in a way that holds out the possibility of alternative “readings” and enhances the *total* experience of the movie, without disparaging or diminishing popular readings.

Modern historians value having access to a variety of vantage points on the past. In the same way, I advocate having access to a number of vantage points on movies about the past. In other words, I advocate seeing movies as complicated *discourses*. Movies are not constrained to do just one thing or another. As texts, they are free to move among a variety of discursive contexts, affording a variety of possible benefits (and, of course, representing a variety of possible dangers).

The Atomic Cafe, by Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, and Pierce Rafferty -an ironic compilation of “instructional” films about the atomic bomb from the ‘50s and ‘60s- is a film that some historians have suggested is particularly dangerous to use in history classrooms because it encourages a kind of smugness toward which college students are already somewhat too prone.⁴ Their solution is simply not to show the film in order to steer clear of the possibility of smugness altogether. I suggest that it might be better to deliberately show the film in order to address, head on, the possibility of adopting a smug attitude toward the past. Such smugness has real dangers that college history students would do well to recognize. And what better way is there to teach them this than by showing and discussing with them something that is often construed (even by reviewers in the popular press) as an example of this tendency?

It is also valuable to recognize that even such “smugness” may have its benefits. Permit me to offer my own experience here, as an example. I took part in anti-nuclear marches in the early eighties. Although I might not do the same today, participating in those marches was an experience I still cherish. I think it did *me* good, even if it had no political impact whatsoever. I remember how, when I saw *The Atomic Cafe* at the time, it motivated and inspired me and made me feel like I was one of an important group of concerned people. Even in retrospect, I think that was good. *The Atomic Cafe* may be awful as history. But it is not *just* history, it is also a movie. As a movie, it has (or had for me) certain benefits quite apart from its possible uses as history. Historical documentaries are complicated discourses about the past, with certain typical limitations and dangers, but many possible benefits, besides. Scholarly history, too, has dangers, lest we forget -the danger of the “ivory tower,” to name just one.

Like historians, film scholars have also had a tendency to dismiss ordinary viewers’ responses to documentaries -especially emotional responses. Film scholars’ reasons are somewhat different than historians’, however. Film scholars are generally not so concerned about the *particular* wrong or improper conclusions that viewers may draw from a documentary. In a sense, they seem to have by and large accepted the inevitability that people will jump to false -or at least unwarranted- conclusions while watching movies. Indeed, people *always* generalize from their experience. This is as true of their “real life” experience as it is to their experience of movies. People’s specific generalizations might be said to be a product of the interpretive “frame” that they bring to their experience. This “frame” is in turn in large

part the product of culture-which is to say, it is steeped in ideologies of various kinds. That, too, is unavoidable.

What troubles film scholars is a particular kind of “frame” that traditional documentaries -including most documentaries about history-seem to encourage. As Toplin points out, documentaries tend to make representations in a conclusive fashion and to address subjects authoritatively. They often seem to imply that there is but one correct view of reality to which they have privileged access. Even a relatively “open” and apparently non- or anti- authoritarian documentary ,like Fred Wiseman’s “cinéma vérité” documentary , *High School*, may seem to suggest that, because it shows “just the facts,” its implicit conclusions are incontrovertible. What *High School* actually represents is not Northeast High at all but Wiseman’s *High School*, a highly selective, ordered, and judgmental “take” on reality -a “reality fiction,” as Wiseman puts it, not the “truth.” But because the film creates this “reality fiction” out of snippets of actual film footage of Northeast High -a real place inhabited by real people- it may mislead viewers into believing otherwise. In other words, documentaries -even relatively “open” documentaries like *High School* -can encourage people to think, “Now I see things as they *really* are (or were).” The “frame” that documentaries invite might be called a “know-it-all” frame. Again, the reception of *The Atomic Cafe* makes this particularly apparent.

There is some question about just how susceptible typical viewers of historical documentaries actually are to a “know-it-all” frame. For instance, reviews of *The Civil War* and letters to the producer make it quite apparent that in the minds of many viewers, that series is a highly constructed *account* of the American Civil War -a work of “art” or “rhetoric”- not a God’s-eye view of history. Even viewers who are quite taken with the series do not seem to suppose that it “knows it all” or that, after seeing it, they “know it all.” Still, it appears that viewers of *The Civil War* who are most taken with the series are also somewhat prone to be “taken in” by it, at least to the extent that they do not notice the ways in which ideology is working through the discourse. The possibility of being “taken in” in this fashion is the danger that tends to be of most concern to film scholars.

The danger here is not in being taken in *per se*. It is not that viewers do not *really* know it all, or even that they may think they do. Such “delusions,” if you will, are an ordinary part of our day-to-day existence and, ordinarily, quite helpful. (To see a wall or a precipice in ambiguous or less than positive terms, ! or to spend minutes or hours pondering possible alternative meanings of “Please pass the salt” would ordinarily be extremely counterproductive.) The problem that film scholars perceive is that documentaries *lay claim to special power or privilege* on the basis of a supposed relationship to reality. It is this exercise of power that is the real danger.

Most if not all discourse involves some exercise of power. But to the extent that documentaries invite the “know-it-all” frame I described earlier, they may be especially prone to a particular kind of abuse of power. When we bring a “know-it-all” frame to our interactions with other people, it can have serious and grave social and political consequences. In other words, people are liable to get hurt by documentaries in ways that they rarely are by fiction films.

Scholars of documentary have responded to this danger by dwelling on the ways in which documentaries do *not* truly represent reality. They have tended to devote their energies to showing how documentaries are constructed or artificial or “fictive.” For example, in the introduction to his new anthology , *Theorizing Documentary* , Michael Renov argues (quoting Hayden White here) that, “all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and analyze objectively” and (summarizing filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha’s essay in the same anthology), “documentary film [is] an historically privileged domain of truth ...whose claims for authority demand to be rigorously questioned on political and philosophical grounds.”⁵ An extreme example is another recent book by William Gynne, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, which develops a case that documentaries merely *purport* to reproduce the real by *disguising* their relationships to fiction films.⁶ Documentary theorist Bill Nichols and others have retreated from such extreme claims, recognizing the extent to which non-fictional discourses can have real, instrumental consequences. Still, much if not most of Nichols’ recent book on documentary, *Representing Reality*, is also devoted to exploring the ramifications of what he terms the “incommensurateness between representation and historical reality.”⁷

I do not wish to dispute any of these claims. My question concerns their social consequences. The question is, How should we treat the responses of “ordinary” viewers of historical documentaries, which tend to be predicated upon the notion that documentaries *can* somehow put us in touch with reality? For example, what are we to respond to the claims of people who feel that *Shoah* somehow truly reflects the “reality” of the Holocaust and truly keeps it “alive” in memory? Are these viewers being deceived? Are they wrong? In a strict sense, yes, they are deceived and wrong, since both the text and the memories it supposedly keeps alive are merely compelling constructs-creations, representations, “fictions.” Still, it is my opinion that this answer is, again, both too pat and too simple.

Philosophically speaking, reality and our representations of it are truly “incommensurate.” Practically speaking, however (and *practically* is the way viewers of documentaries ordinarily speak about the films), documentaries have the power to *really* put us in touch with reality-just as “really,” that is, as our senses put us in touch with reality. We can never know reality, it is true, but we can very definitely know certain things *about* it. Evolution has guaranteed this. Philosopher William James put the same idea very nicely nearly a century ago, in describing what he called his pragmatic method:

Where direct acquaintance is lacking, ‘knowledge about’ is the next best thing, and an acquaintance with what actually lies about the object, and is most closely related to it, puts such knowledge within our grasp. [Light waves] and your anger, for example, are things in which my thoughts will never *perceptually* terminate, but my concepts of them lead me to their very brink, to the chromatic fringes and to the hurtful words and deeds which are their really next effects.⁸

Shoah does succeed in giving viewers some acquaintance with what actually lies about and is most closely related to the actual, historic event of the Holocaust. I think that, as a practical matter, film scholars are wrong to ignore or minimize the extent to which this is so.

I am impressed, again, by how well William James articulated the potential value of the kind of “knowing” that documentaries can provide-a value that historians and film scholars alike, in their eagerness to point out the legitimate dangers of documentaries, have tended to either ignore or dismiss.

The towering importance for human life of this kind of knowing lies in the fact that an experience that knows another can figure as its *representative*, not in any quasi-miraculous ‘epistemological’ sense, but in the definite practical sense of being its *substitute* in various operations, sometimes physical and sometimes mental, which lead us to its associates and results. By experimenting on our ideas of reality, we may save ourselves the trouble of experimenting on the real experiences which they severally mean.⁹

Where we have no direct access to the real experience, as in seeking to comprehend the past, this kind of knowing is not only useful, it is indispensable.

My conclusion, then, is that we would all do well to devote more attention to *what viewers perceive popular historical documentaries to do* (like “bringing the past to life”) even if this means paying somewhat less attention to what historical documentaries do *not* do (like affording a scholarly view of the past) or that viewers do not *perceive* them to do (like advancing ideologies). It is in what people perceive in historical documentaries that one finds the most (perhaps the *only*) significant potential for good in them. It is also in what viewers perceive in historical documentaries that one finds the most immediate and consequential possibilities of harm.

Discourses are (whatever else they may be) eminently *pragmatic* affairs: practical, instrumental, ends-oriented, “useful,” “down-to-earth,” governed by participants’ perceptions and expectations, driven by participants’ aims and desires. If we wish to understand historical documentaries as actual forms of discourse, we need not only acknowledge this, we need to study the ways it is so.

Historian Michael Frisch, one of the most astute commentator critics of public history, has written that the chief problem an historians, at least in the U.S., ought to be the extent to which the relationship between history and memory is fractured in contemporary life, the extent to which our public culture is disconnected from the past.¹⁰ What we need to overcome this problem, he suggests, is more history like Marcel Ophuls’ documentary, *The Memory of Justice* -a documentary dealing with the Nuremberg trials that is actually less about history than about how people remember it and relate it (or try not to relate it) to their own lives and to events of the present. *The Memory of Justice* is not an especially

scholarly film, nor does it go out of its way to expose its own ideological operations. Nonetheless, Frisch says, it is an unusually “intelligent” film, not for what it knows or says, but on account of the “the care, depth, insight, and sensitivity with which it reflects on and explores a profound problem.”¹¹

“The Ophuls film,” Frisch writes, “helps to focus on what I think must lie at the heart of [the role of memory] in a public history that will matter—a fundamental commitment to the importance of that verb at the heart of memory, making it something *alive and active* as we confront our own world.” “We need projects that will involve people in exploring what it means to remember, and what to do with memories to make them *active and alive*, as opposed to mere objects of collection.”¹²

If Frisch is correct in these claims, then surely the perception of many viewers that *Shoah* “keeps a memory *alive*” and that *The Civil War* and other popular historical documentaries “bring the past *to life*” is not something to be scoffed at or dismissed. I must agree with Frisch, in the end, that, to the extent historical documentaries even *appear* to put us in touch with a real “living” past, they are “seizing an opportunity not nearly so accessible to conventional academic historical scholarship, whatever its virtues: the opportunity to help liberate for that active remembering all the intelligence [in the way Frisch defines the word] of a people long kept separated from the sense of their own past.”¹³ That opportunity can no doubt be exploited for good or for ill, but it is an opportunity nonetheless. And it is an opportunity that scholars will realize only to the extent they engage with documentaries as complex *discourses* about the past, rather than merely as more-or-less academic representations of the past or as more-or-less illusory fabrications.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) *"Bringing The Past to Life": The Reception and Rhetoric of Historical Documentaries*, Dissertation, University of Iowa, 1994. I gratefully acknowledge the support of a Dissertation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in performing and writing this study.
- (2) "AHR forum: The filmmaker as Historian," *American Historical Review*, No.93 (December 1988): 1216-17.
- (3) "A Movie Made for Remembrance," *Life*, No 8 (Dec. 1985): 7.
- (4) I am referring to a recent discussion on the history and film list on Internet, H-film (H-film@uicvm.uic.edu), among I. C. Jarvie, Peter Rollins, myself, and others.
- (5) "Introduction: The Truth About Non-fiction," *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 7.
- (6) *A Cinema of Nonfiction*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990, p.241.
- (7) *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- (8) "A World of Pure Experience" [1904], *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed, John J. McDermott New York: The Modern Library, 1968, p.207. James actually wrote "etherwaves" instead of "lightwaves," a scientific "error" that does not detract from his argument but that I nonetheless expunged here in order to avoid distraction.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- (10) "The Memory of History," in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 25 & 27; my emphases.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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