

Rosenstone, Robert.

A história nos filmes, os filmes na história

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Ten years ago, when I began my research on history and cinema, there was little published in Brazil: a few translated works, some introductory theoretical and methodological texts and a few articles. I remember that, even for an apprentice researcher the considerations of historians about cinema and films seemed harsh, even ‘fearful,’ when not hostile to historic reflection in film images. I thought at the time that it must be a Brazilian problem, and that in the United States and in France historians had already resolved some of the questions referring to the existence of the cinematographic vision of history. The lack of translations and the quality of reflections were the result of our provincialism.¹ I was mistaken.

The new book by the Canadian historian Robert Rosenstone, *A história nos filmes, os filmes na história*, released in Brazil in 2010, brings some old questions about the cinematographic vision of history back to center stage. The text provides a panel of difficulties which historians create when they deal with cinema. This review intends to highlight the importance of the book and at the same time illustrate the ‘hesitation’ that still accompanies reflection on relations between history and cinema.

Rosenstone was a historian of social revolutions when, whilst preparing a work on the journalist John Reed,² he became a ‘historical consultant’ (at a time when this expression did not have a firm the meaning) for the biographical film *Reds* (1981), about the author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*. This was when he began to enter discussion about cinema and history. His later work came to be known in Brazil through a few translation in journals such as *Olho da História*,³ and by scholars such as Mônica Almeida Kornis, Cristiane Nova and Jorge Nóvoa.⁴ *A história nos filmes, os filmes na história* is the first Brazilian translation of a complete work of this important and controversial author.⁵

Although the book was slow to arrive here, as almost always happens with

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publications about this question in Brazil, what is surprising is to perceive that in 2006, when *History on Film/Film on History* was published in the United State, Rosenstone still felt obliged to defend the legitimacy of cinematographic interpretations of history. Nowadays, in dissertations, theses, articles and chapters of books, film is seen as an important thematic area in the historiographic field, but the cinematographic reading of history appears to have been marred, according to the author, by the association of film with what historians write. His underlying thesis is that the ‘correspondence’ to historical fidelity has corrupted historiographic reflection on the cinema.

Incorporating contributions of Hayden White, Rosenstone presents himself as a post-modern historian interested in the renewal of narrative and the theoretical perspectives of historiography through the incorporation of new styles of argumentation and writing. However, rather than just any defense of relativism his idea is to demonstrate how the existence of different discourses on the past (such as those present in films), rather than destroy truths, actually create alternative versions of history.

The book aims to understand if it is possible for a film to offer historical reflection comparable to that of historiography, if a film maker can be considered a historian, and if cinema is an alternative form of articulating the past. In his perspective, in the same way that historical knowledge has specific rules, styles and investigations, the visual media also has its own criteria and circumstances for the production of history – the historian is responsible for recognizing the existence, legitimacy, difference and influence of the representations of history produced by film.

The volume consists of nine essays dedicated to various topics. After a brief introductory chapter, the second text provides a precious bibliographic revision about how in the US historical community (and a little in the French), the cinematographic representation of history began to be thought by historians. The beginning of the book is dedicated to providing evidence for the formation of a field of investigation that emerged committed to the concern of historians about the historical fidelity of films. The majority of the texts reviewed tend to deny that films can articulate historic reflections (with the principal exception of Marc Ferro and Natalie Zemon Davis). Rosenstone shows that it is necessary to recognize that film, unlike historiography, does not possess fidelity among its rules of production, but this does not prejudice the capacity of film to condense, in its plastic forms, history. The author defends the understanding of the “rules of interaction of the dramatic feature

film with the remains of the past – and starts to glimpse what this adds to our historic understanding.”⁶

The Canadian professor remembers that film works through inventions, condensations, compressions, alterations and dislocations of elements from the past to mount its own interpretation of the past. This reasoning leads to all the reflections in the book in the following chapters, exploring the construction of cinematographic interpretations of the past in commercial dramas, innovative dramas, cine-biographies, documentaries, etc. Perhaps the most interesting is the seventh chapter, with the theme of the filmmaker as historian. Reflecting on filmmakers such as Oliver Stone, the historian emphasizes that some filmmakers are obsessed with and oppressed by the past, “continued coming back to deal with the subject making historic films, not as a simple source of escapism or entertainment, but as a way of understanding how the questions and problems raised continue alive for us in the present” (p.172-174). It is not difficult to find this type of filmmaker in Brazil, from Silvio Tendler to Carlos Diegues, demonstrating that memory and history involve actual social questioning in cinema as well.

To defend his thesis, Rosenstone works with two movements: first he distinguishes the *historic film* from the film whose plot is set in any historic period (epoch dramas), stating that the former constructs interpretation of history that rival those of historiography. Second, they showed that films do deal with traces of the past in a singular manner. The cinematographic representation of history is not a question of fidelity to the past, but to a media form that it creates with its own relationship.

A história nos filmes, os filmes na história, however, does not complete the reflection that is begun. Concerned with the construction of the legitimacy of the object, its discourse is left at a superficial level, resulting in an important book, but one that rejects the next step to be taken. To defend that the question of ‘history in films’ is related to the form of how visual language deals with the past, Rosenstone reduces the relationship with the past and its remnants to the construction of interpretations that can be articulated in a theme – here can be seen his debt to Hayden White’s concept of *historiophoty*, roughly the representation of history in the visual images and filmic discourse (p.44). Nevertheless, what is evident in his text is that understanding how the cinema is related with the past and constructs it is possible to become a topic of the theory of history, involving more than the interpretations filmed, the configuration of orientations in the experience of time.

If the objective of the theory of history is to reflect on what historians do

when they do history,⁷ Rosenstone's book hesitates by not exploring the relationship of the historiographic field with the cinematographic field in the construction of relations with the remnants of the past and with the concept of the past and time. This theme has been explored by cinema theorists, but ignored by the majority of historians.⁸ The Canadian author mentions the question quickly but soon abandons the subject (p.233).

Obviously, it was not the objective of the author to deepen the questions raised here. By the end of the reading of *A história nos filmes, os filmes na história* there is a desire for the constitution of a topic of investigation that covers relations of the historiographic field with visual forms of experimentations, orientations and socially active interpretations of the past, especially when fed by the investigative energy of spirits such as Oliver Stone, Sergei Eisenstein or Silvio Tendler. They point to direct relations with the question of *historic time* in a visual perspective, in the same what the distinction between past and future occurs in their relationship with the present, of which theorists such as Reinhart Koselleck have spoken to us.⁹

Nowadays there is a considerable reflection on films as source and means of research, nevertheless, Rosenstone greatest achievement is to point to the inclusion, among the topics of the theory of history (and not only of methodology) of a systematization of the history-cinema-past relationship. This important reflection, which has created excellent fruits in the literature-history problematization, still awaits developments for the cinema. Is this absence due to difficulty of historians to face what it means to have competitors in the construction of memory and social history, when these are already powerful as visual medias of which the cinema is only one example? The question remains open.

NOTAS

¹ FERRO, Marc. *Cinema e história*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1993, was practically the only important translation, though there were some Brazilian texts. Other important texts remained far from the publishing market, from texts by Rosenstone and Ferro to Michele Lagny, Pierre Sorlin, Natalie Zemon Davis, Tom Gunning, Andre Gaudreault, Richard Allen, Thomas Elsaesser etc.

² ROSENSTONE, Robert. *Romantic revolutionary: a biography of John Reed*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975.

³ ROSENSTONE, Robert. *História em imagens, história em palavras: reflexões sobre as*

possibilidades de plasmar a história em imagens. *O olho da história*, Salvador, v.1, n.5, p.105-116, 1997.

⁴ See KORNIS, Mônica Almeida. História e cinema: um debate metodológico. *Estudos históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, v.5, n.10, p.237-250, 1992; NOVA, Cristiane. O cinema e o conhecimento da história. *O olho da história*, Salvador, v.2, n.3, p.217-234, 1996; NOVA, Cristiane. A história diante dos desafios imagéticos. *Projeto história*, São Paulo: PUC/SP, v.21, p.141-162, 2000.

⁵ In 2009 another article was translated: ROSENSTONE, Robert. Oliver Stone: historiador da América recente. In: FEIGELSON, Kristian; FRESSATO, Soleni Biscouto; NOVOA, Jorge (Org.). *Cinematógrafo: um olhar sobre a história*. São Paulo: Ed. Unesp; Salvador: Ed. UFBA, 2009, p.393-408.

⁶ ROSENSTONE, Robert. *A história nos filmes, os filmes na história*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2010, p.54.

⁷ An allusion to the title of the following thesis: ASSIS, Arthur O. A. *O que fazem os historiadores quando fazem história?* A teoria da história de Jörn Rüsen e *Do Império à República*, de Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. Master's Thesis – UnB. Brasília, 2004. See also, RÜSEN, Jörn. *A razão histórica: teoria da história, os fundamentos da ciência histórica*. Brasília: Ed. UnB, 2001.

⁸ An example of this is the somewhat pessimistic reflection of JAMESON, Fredric. *Pós-modernismo: a lógica cultural do capitalismo tardio*. São Paulo: Ática, 1997. The author cites Jameson rapidly on page 233.

⁹ KOSELLECK, Reinhart. *Futuro passado: contribuição à semântica dos tempos históricos*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto; Ed. PUC-RIO, 2006.

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