

Editorial

The History of Movies, Movies of History

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In the same way that history can be conceived, cinematographically speaking, as a series of interwoven perspectives that give a representation more or less of what occurred; film can be understood as a more or less loyal reflection of the echoes of history^{1,2}. From the beginning, the seventh art has never denied being a window from which to contemplate the most varied of worlds: from the simplicity of daily life, to the voyages and expeditions to the most remote places on Earth and in the galaxy; from international conflicts and civil wars, to religious disputes and confrontations; from reviews about the most intimate human psychological aspects, to the recreation of the production of some scientific discoveries...

On occasion, beyond historical acts, lie literary pieces which serve to help the development of a movie script. In the present, halfway between the facts of contemporary history and literature, we rely on the analysis of three movies. In addition to scientific interest, *Robert Koch, der Bekämpfer des Todes* (1939), by Hans Steinhoff, based on a novel by Hellmuth Unger, offers us a distorted look at his political life marked by the national-socialist Germany of the Third Reich. Closer to the genre of historical biography is the work by William Dieterle *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935). Born in Ludwigshafen, the director moved to Hollywood in the 30s. Dieterle extraordinarily combined the scientific rigors of German film with the elements of fiction, making biography his preferred genre. He used this technique in his other works about Émile Zola (1937), as well as Benito Juárez (1939), in which the Spanish scientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal becomes the narrator of his own life in his return trip from Cuba to Spain. León Klimovsky shows us the protagonist of *Salto a la gloria* (1959) as a brave man, put in danger in his own historical reality and engaged in a fight against the ill-

ness. He is distressed by his malaria and tells a companion a sort of life testament, which results to be the thread which would call for its investigation.

These three works reveal that, from the narrative point of view, anything can happen or be seen in the space and time of a movie. The result is always a concrete work, particular and precise; a work which plants objectives, some ends, employing a series of technical procedures to exactly carry out the plan of the director. The virtuality of movies, as a particular type of artistic expression, is one which has overcome the established theoretical limits of art that try to separate the spatial arts from the arts of time³. Space and time are identity markers which, on one hand, aesthetically construct the art that makes movies and, on the other, reveal a potential practically unmatchable.

Film is a mirror image of life itself because it flows in the same way as does life, generates images, sensations and plants more questions than it answers. Movies are, like history, a narration in which the physical key is inseparable from the variable time⁴. There are histories of movies, but there exists, as well, the drive to construct or reconstruct history itself through moving images. This recreation does not generate a closed object, is not static, is not self enclosed, but rather better put, an open work, open to any question, to any topic and, of course, open to anyone. Even more, history and movies share the need for an *istor* (a witness to the tale and someone who can tell how it happened) – a roll which would be given, in the one case, to the historian and, in the other, to the camera lens, which acts as an extension of the eye of the director. Both search to reach someone who is neither a witness nor storyteller, but a viewer-contemplator.

In spite of all this, the space-time concept share two differences which we cannot continue to

hide. The first is that of the “witness” of history, which assumes the intention of the truth; while the eye of the camera is not liable to more than the intentions, be them as they may, of the director. The second refers to the perspective of another: the “onlooker” of history who wishes to know the reality of the acts in the most precise way, exact and true, while the movie spectator looks for something more than mere knowledge. To put it another way, to watch a movie does not necessarily assume a search for the truth; however it is not entirely to be ruled out. A movie can be a fantastic invention, something created exclusively to entertain. It can present itself as purely aesthetic, artificial, unreal and subjective, qualifiers which would be completely different signs if we were to apply them to a history book.

The limit of history is reality. Film, like any other art, can adapt itself to reality in order to go farther beyond the limits. The structural liberty which is given to the art does not stop film from being a witness, but rather permits it to have many other narrative registers, ranging from documentary to science fiction, passing its way through worlds, possible and impossible, real and unreal⁵⁻⁷...

In any case, we cannot forget that, at the heart of it, history and film are cultural elaborations created by humans; at times, much too human - in them we contemplate our doubts, our hopes, our dreams...

References

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