The Omnipotence of Simulacra:

Charles II and the Divine Right of Signs

Peter Morgan
State University of West Georgia

Abstract

Building on the earlier reasoning of Barthes, Baudrillard, and Jameson, this article reads the hyperproduction of historical signs as a symptomatic expression of the loss of History and argues for a new mode of cinematic historiography (under Deleuze’s sense of “falsifying narration” and Baudrillard’s conception of “neo-realism”), operating under an epistemology which, in its revised explanation of our relationship with history, should now be seen to occupy the space of the real. Michael Hoffman’s 1994 film Restoration, representing a filmic genre newly described as “historical cine-fiction,” is shown to be simultaneously an example of contemporary nostalgia and a validation of the neo-real.

Keywords

film theory, history, historiography, neo-realism

“The territory no longer precedes the map,” as Baudrillard says: “It is the map that engenders the territory.” Nowhere is this more true than in the celluloid world of historical cine-fiction, a genre that seems to have enjoyed renewed popularity of late, particularly, although certainly not exclusively, with respect to films claiming to represent eighteenth-century literature and culture. “Hollywood History,” Mark Carnes says in History According to the Movies, “fills irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities” (9). Many history teachers, he notes, use Hollywood films as class texts (Ghandi, Columbia, 1982; Malcolm X, Warner, 1992; etc.), while television recreates the past each night for “these United States of Amnesia.”¹ Carnes believes, however, that filmmakers are doing something

¹ This is, although perhaps not originally, Gore Vidal’s famous term from his 1992 book Screening History (2). Fredric Jameson, however, develops the notion in a more sophisticated way when he speaks of the “media exhaustion of news,” which, he argues, relegates contemporary events rapidly to past history and therefore works to promote forgetting “to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia” (125).
different than historians: perhaps, he says, they are teaching “important truths about the human condition” (9) rather than compiling and presenting reliable historical evidence, as if these two things were somehow not always the same. He quotes Plato to support his claim that “a representation of a thing is not the thing itself; yet a comparison of renderings is instructive” (10) and points to the fact that films often construct narratives that rework issues of concern contemporary to the film rather than its historical subject. As one might expect, Carnes’s text ultimately maintains a fairly clear sense of real versus reel history: extensive marginal commentary beside the discussion of each film he addresses is taken up with what promotes itself as an “objective” statement of how it all actually happened, which the reader is implicitly invited to contrast with the filmic shadow.

**Art in the Age of Historical Production**

While the status of art in this age of historical production is certainly somewhat more complex, Carnes’s perspective has long been the dominant one, certainly in historical and probably even in most film and literary circles. Filmic representations which appear to rewrite history, certainly many in eighteenth-century studies lament, are part of a world often as unconstrained by historical narrative as it is unconfined by literary precedent, a sense, one could argue, that is illustrated in the relatively recent Pen Densham version of *Moll Flanders*, a film which shares not very much more with Defoe’s novel than its title.\(^2\) In fact, *Moll Flanders*, while not the main text of my argument here, provides a useful framework for setting up the background and terms of the issues at stake.

Screenwriter and director Densham, formerly celebrated for *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (about which one might make similar arguments), was apparently inspired

\(^2\) As Linda Troost notes, “the film uses many popular clichés of the time: the gin drinking, the in-dining-room chamber pots galore, etc. What was not true to the period? The scientific artist would not, under any circumstances, have been using cadavers whose former owners ‘willed them to science.’ One would have hired a body snatcher or bribed the hangman. Moll would not have been in a Roman Catholic convent—but I wonder if the idea of charity schools would have been unfamiliar to an audience of non-specialists.... And I cannot help but wonder if everyone at an 18th century birthing would be chanting ‘Push, Push’? Seems a little Lamaze to me.”
by the birth of his own daughter and other life-changing events to conceive a particular kind of heroine:

I wanted to write about a mother who had made mistakes in her life, who had lost her direction and then regained it, but despite it all retained her spirit. I began thinking about a story in which I could champion that kind of a character. (The Making of Moll Flanders)

Reportedly, Densham performed his research by reading several eighteenth-century novels; however, he tells us,

... when I picked up Defoe's Moll Flanders and it said on the front cover that it was a memoir of a woman who was a thief and a whore but who ended up living well in Virginia, I saw that here was an identity on which to build my story. (The Making of Moll Flanders)

And so Densham’s Moll was born, as Richard B. Lewis, one of Densham’s two partners describes the screenplay, a Robin Hood story, “with a whole new layer added to it,” a “labor of love” that took “five intense weeks to complete” (The Making of Moll Flanders). Moreover, the fact that Densham’s Moll is admittedly, even avowedly, the Moll he wanted to write and in very few senses at all the Moll that Defoe wrote was a fact that caused barely more than an academic ripple in the broader late-twentieth-century audience unimpeded by widespread familiarity with academic accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history, an audience functioning in a world which, as Baudrillard describes it, “begins with a liquidation of all referentials,” and crystallizes “in a system of signs, which are more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence” (167).

Baudrillard, in his now classic essay, demonstrates how “representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent,” how the sign, as much as the Host in the sacrament of Holy Communion, is the body (170). From here, the image may operate—in a sense hubristically, perhaps—to mask or distort prior conceptions of the real and then, in fact, to masquerade as reality, as a shade or spirit or essence of a reality at once both present and absent, a reality simultaneously invoked and continually deferred. Consequently, in the final stage of semiotic transubstantiation,
the image enters the order of the simulacra—it is simultaneously the sign and signifier of nothing more than of itself. ³

**An Iconography of Simulacra**

The application to film of this line of reasoning is clear; moreover, it seems to me that the simulation of history in film is, if not entirely different, at least a great deal more pronounced than in more conventional modes of narrative fiction. An historical film does more than simply tell a story located at a point in the past; rather, it recreates an *apparently* complete texture of the past in which it locates its narrative, fictionalizing the historical medium while leaving what Baudrillard calls “the reality principle” intact. ⁴ As Gilles Deleuze says, “the cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world. This is why, very early on, it looked for bigger and bigger circuits which would unite an actual image with recollection-images, dream images, world images” (68). Thus, because what appear to be “true symptoms” (or historical facts) are represented as having been engendered by the apparent conditions of the simulated world of the film in a far more psychically compelling way than in narrative fiction—because action and context “known” beyond the theater seem to spring from the quasi-real (or neo-real) world of the film—those conditions take on a plausibility which appears to legitimate simultaneously both the narrative and context, on screen and off. If history, or rather [big H]istory, functions in the same way as the divinity which Baudrillard suggests breathes life into the icons of the temple to create *not* a visible machinery of theology, but an iconography of simulacra that displaces “the pure and intelligible Idea of God,” then the filmic iconography of the past, engendered by a naive faith in historical essence, erases one sense of history from the consciousness of the viewing public and replaces it with a like omnipotence of

³ Of course, even if the film were “history,” even if it were nothing but a sign and signifier of itself, this would hardly suggest that it were “nothing” in the postmodern world of high-tech capital-generating products.

⁴ Baudrillard speaks of “the reality principle” in terms of feigned sickness. If a simulator produces real symptoms, there is a distinct difficulty in establishing whether or not s/he is sick, since the *meaning* of sickness is in fact that it produces certain symptoms (168).
simulacra, a semiotics of historical presence of which the ties to anything beyond its own closed system of reference are constituted by the collapse of the fictional into the fictionalized.

For an audience to recognize this, however, following Baudrillard, would theoretically engender a metaphysical despair rooted in the fear that the images conceal nothing but themselves. Of course, to speak of any such despair in relation to mass consumer culture’s concern with a past more than two hundred years distant would clearly be to overstate an anxiety any but the most arcane scholars of the period probably feel; rather, it seems to me, we should describe this relationship more in terms of a—largely unconscious—metahistorical confusion, a loss of confidence in the idea of the knowability of the past (and, not uncoincidentally, the knowability of the present). In social terms, the blurring of the general sense of a belief in what was into an equally respected sense of what conceivably might have been, requires a consequent and necessary undermining of ideologically constructed master narratives which such anxiety seeks to reinscribe. We are thus divided into two camps: on the one hand are those who accept a simultaneous (yet consequent) suspension of faith in historical narrative, a foregrounding of historical constructedness and a sense that the mists of the past shroud ideologies that are no less present for the fact that they are not directly approachable. Such thinkers might accept Densham’s Moll Flanders as a cultural text of the late twentieth century and suppose that Densham is doing no less, ideologically speaking (and all judgments of artistic skill aside), than Defoe himself did. On the other hand are those who, often claiming the militant ground, preach a reactionary and slavish reaffirmation of these images of the past, who build a bridge to history with the ephemeral bricks of nostalgia because they fear, although they can rarely define it, a sense of the self-consuming ontological uncertainty which appears to deface their tomb-like monuments to tradition. This camp would be peopled by those who damn Densham’s Moll precisely because it is not Defoe’s Moll: those who feel that Defoe’s text, like all texts, is finally and strictly knowable in New, Old, or some other sense of historicism and that it is a sin that undermines not only History but moreover reality to pretend otherwise.
As George Lipsitz tells us, “the dominant model of historical scholarship presumes an objectivist documentary relationship with the past, one whereby scholars ‘find’ concrete evidence to support arguments that can be replicated by other researchers exposed to the same facts.” Yet mass-mediated texts (such as film), he goes on to say, undermine this teleological model: by seeming “to represent the essence of rupture with past and engagement in the sensations of the moment, they provide a crucial test case for these judgments” (148-58). Historical cine-fiction thus demands a different sense of history and its relation to the present, a postmodern sense of history, for the want of a better general term, following Fredric Jameson in the belief that “postmodern” is more than a style or technique but in fact a periodizing concept that requires a thorough revision of many if not all of the relationships through which the subject is constructed.

A Postmodern History in Film

The concept of a postmodern history might be approached in the way that Jameson describes postmodern art: constituted in “the effacement ... of key boundaries” and the erosion of the dichotomy between the high and popular forms of expression, a “paraliterature,” in fact, a parahistory (112). While Jameson speaks of the difficulty in distinguishing philosophy, history, social theory, and political science, a further key difference here in terms of film is of course the difficulty in distinguishing any or all of the above from “entertainment.” In describing what he terms “nostalgia films” (such as Chinatown, American Graffiti, and others), Jameson identifies a contemporary inability to achieve “aesthetic representations of our own current experience,” which he claims is “an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history” (116-17). He aligns such films with certain novels that do the same thing—not historical novels in the accepted sense, but stories about “our ideas or cultural stereotypes about that past.” Like those philosophers imprisoned in Plato’s cave, he claims, we can no longer view the world (or the past) directly: we can but trace the images it makes on the walls of our prison (117-18).

The resulting appeal to nostalgia, in Baudrillard’s terms, is rooted in
... the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (Jameson 125)

Nostalgia, Baudrillard tells us, finally assumes its full meaning when “the real is no longer what it used to be” (171). This is to say that, in the space opened up by the desire for historical legitimacy, for a precedent to validate the proposed ideology,

there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence. (171, emphasis mine)

Certainly I am not suggesting that the current popularity of historical cine-fiction is necessarily indicative of an immediate and devastating crisis in the ontological confidence of the culture; however, it does seem to me that the infiltration of the postmodern into everyday life has brought us to a Janus-faced juncture in our cultural self-conception—certainly in academia and, to an extent, even beyond—a point where, struggling to preserve a nostalgic sense of structure and value in the wake of an inexorable surge of technological transformation and social fragmentation, we consume with relish the lavish productions of simulated history represented by such films as Moll Flanders, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, Clarissa, The Madness of King George, Restoration, and others.

In fact, Michael Hoffman’s Restoration is perhaps the best example of this anxiety to fix meaning, to tell it like it was, while at the same time grappling with the discovery that meaning is not only relational but constantly deferred while its place is occupied by the convenient fiction, the not quite conviction, the simulacra of filmic iconography—indeed, the neo-real. John Sayles, noted for his filmic contributions to social history, once remarked to Eric Foner,

I’ve heard producers say many, many times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says ‘based on a true story.’ Audiences appreciate the fact that something really happened. Whether it did or didn’t.... William Goldman, the screenwriter once said that it’s not important what’s true, it’s important what audiences will accept as true. (17)
Significantly, perhaps, Restoration won Academy Awards not for the merits of its screenplay, acting, or directing—for how well, one way or another, the narrative as truth is presented—but for costume design and artistic direction, for how well the context as historical is represented. This context of the narrative—the sumptuous, even masturbatory excess of presentation that becomes part of the story in its metaphorical support of the recreation of Charles II and the Caroline court as hedonism incarnate—was not only what members of the Academy (the other academy, that is) chose to recognize, but indeed what the film as a whole seems in large part constructed to display. Certainly, many accounts exist of Charles’s sexual appetite, of his inconstancy, and of his arbitrary and quite ruthless manipulation of those in his service, both men and women; but the events we have in this version of Charles’s life have as much basis in the imagination as in such “historical” narratives. What makes them here so convincing however, so compelling, is twofold: first, their presentation as simulacra, as representations which, although they maintain some few specific referents outside their own narratives, yet they somehow partake of a mystical absent authenticity; and second, and perhaps paradoxically, their intimate and infinitely credible relationship with a contextual representation of late seventeenth-century life which itself, in Restoration, advances and retreats from simulation, anchoring itself in empirical history, yet washing over and collapsing the boundaries of truth until truth as a legitimizing concept is of little referential use.

If I am correct in my description of the world of historical cine-fiction, and specifically here of Restoration, one might expect to find consistent and irrepressible evidence within the filmic text of an ongoing self-referentiality. And indeed this is the case, for the story line, too, wavers between the trite Bildungsroman of a young doctor,

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5 James Acheson took the Academy Award for Best Costume Design; Eugenio Zanetti won for Best Art Direction.

6 Of course, even these aspects do not please everyone: Anthony Sallis objects, “While I quite enjoyed the acting, the music was very unsatisfying (why wasn’t decent period music used?)... On the whole I found the thing fraudulent—it had nothing whatsoever to do with what we consider ‘the’ Restoration. Obviously it was Merivale’s [sic] restoration, but they needn’t have bothered in the name of authenticity.... It failed completely for me as an authentic period piece because it seemed unable to portray the mannered and grandiose sensibilities of the day and seemed over written with a later 18th century typeface.... I’m still waiting for the real thing.”
who, in his youthful exuberance and debauchery, loses sight of his medical “gift” and only regains it in the context of the Black Death of 1665/6, and the far more complex and troubling issue of who exactly this young doctor, Robert Merivel (Robert Downey, Jr.), is and what kind of relationship he enjoys with the “real,” both within and outside the text.

The film begins with the conventional scene-setting text (in historical-looking letters!):

In 1660 Charles II was restored to the English Throne ending 11 years of Oliver Cromwell’s bleak Puritan rule. Thus began the age of Restoration. It was an era of scientific discovery, artistic exploration and luxurious sensuality. It was also a time of natural disasters and archaic medical practices. Science was pitted against superstition. This is the story of one man’s journey through the light and dark of those times.

Ironically, perhaps, this somewhat trite framing device actually suggests quite candidly what we are to see: one man’s journey through a film—literally a play of light and dark on the screen of cultural memory. This screen, Gilles Deleuze argues, “is the cerebral membrane where immediate and direct confrontations take place between the past and the future, the inside and the outside, at a distance impossible to determine, independent of any fixed point…. The image no longer has space and movement as its primary characteristics but topology and time” (125). Deleuze speaks, encompassing the sense in which the cinema experience is like a dream narrative—the spectator/participant seated in the dark, physically passive but intellectually involved with electronic images that seem to spring from nowhere, or from memory, or perhaps from the unconscious, as if they were always already known.

Unsurprisingly perhaps in a post-Freudian world, the attempt to capture the historical moment begins with the imposition of narrative, indeed, the imposition of a rather hackneyed binary paradigm that opposes King and parliament; despondency with hope; moving forward with looking back; science, method and discovery with art and passion and the ephemeral. It is implied that these polemics somehow correspond: that

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7 Of course, this is not quite the accepted story: Charles I was executed after the second Civil War in 1649, but Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, two years before the Restoration of the monarchy.
the opposition of one pair is somehow the same as the opposition of another. Moreover, it seems that by setting up the two ends of a (fictional) narrative spectrum, everything has been said, history has been encompassed, and all that is left is to observe its effect on the individual. The fictive nature of such an individual, in this case the young doctor Merivel, is suddenly a non-issue, for the only part he seems to play initially is the connection of real circumstances, of “history,” and thus his theoretical existence creates exactly the cinematic icon of the neo-real.

At the same time, Merivel the human simulacrum is an integral part of our relationship with the history the film claims. In fiction-writing terms, he is the figure that makes the viewer/reader want to enter and remain in the text: he is the only one who can, quite literally, touch the heart of the audience, just as he touches the beating heart of the mutilated freak who arrives at the Royal Society with an unhealed chasm in his chest, a fistula covered with a leather shield resembling nothing so much as a primitive lens cap. Similarly, Merivel’s medical instruments, symbolic of his own supposed importance in his fictive history, are housed in a heart-shaped case, a case he pawns when he loses heart and with it the sense that his own significance in this chaotic world is marked by anything more than physical sensation and the pursuit of pleasure. And Charles’s gift to him, the token of his title and fortune, is a silver heart- pendant which hangs over his own heart and shapes both his identity and his actions. And one could go on. Most interesting, however, is the King’s use of Merivel to divert the wrath of Barbara Castlemain, Charles’s “grande amore,” when she believes Charles (Sam Neill) is overly attentive to Celia Clemens (Polly Walker), another of his mistresses (and the only one, as we later learn in an interesting choice of words, ever really to make Charles “live”). Merivel is selected to marry Celia so that she may be respectably secreted close to court for Charles’s regular visits. But while Merivel himself is to be given a house, title, and fortune, he is, Charles dictates, to be a husband in only one sense of the word: “There will be no intimacy of any kind between you. Though she is your wife, she is yours in name only. You are to be a paper

8 Jean-Louis Baudry suggests that the position of the spectator is similar to that of the dreamer: “the darkness of the place and the passive immobility of the spectator” and the “hallucinated” perception of reality (118).
bridegroom.” Once more, Merivel’s position as facilitator, as vehicle without tenor, is his defining characteristic; but since form cannot exist without content, since one is hailed by one’s role and constructed according to the social conventions of that role, and since one might expect on hearing such a definitive prohibition that the contrary will indeed take place, Merivel, by and by, does fall in love with his “wife” (who has by this time been banished to the country for herself making demands on Charles for the exclusivity of his attentions), thus once more raising the question Baudrillard addresses when he describes the “reality principle”: acting something and being that thing are not only not always separable, they are not always different.

Charles, as I have said, stands for much more than just the King here: his is the quasi-divine iconography of historical presence, and when Merivel rightly observes that “The King regards a betrayal of time as a betrayal of faith,” he comments not simply on the fictive King’s insistence on punctuality but on the tenuous system of belief that must be preserved in order to maintain the simulacra. In a sense, time is indeed betrayed, not just in this one act, but in the whole process of recreating history, a process that locates historical cine-fiction in the realm of a tradition of faith in film as a medium that can and will deliver the real.

Merivel learns that the King wants Celia back—although on terms that Charles himself wishes to establish and define as a recreation of the past. Celia will go back penitent, the King says, believing without question in the omnipotence of his own narrative, and she will accept his favors as and when they are bestowed without seeking any more from him than this. Yet Merivel does not exactly communicate these terms to Celia; instead, he reconstructs the King’s mandate to read that Celia should stay at Bidnold (Merivel’s county estate) until she becomes aware of “the changeful nature of all things.” So Merivel, the absent presence in the simulated history of Charles and Celia, begins to take on a life and a power that is in direct contradiction to the purpose of his theoretical conception: instead of existing to display the obtuse structures of historical recreation, he is now rising up against and contradicting them—the image becomes the real. Charles’s response to this is one of narrative as well as semiotic control. Merivel is summoned to court—a much changed court in which the vigor of
the historical moment is visibly depleted, the props of historical simulation falling quickly into disuse precisely in response, it seems, to the changeful nature of all things. He walks through the models of the new city of London, the plan for which Charles takes so much pride, a plan that seems to hold the promise of a return to royal narrative control—after all, Charles does not yet know that these plans, too, will escape him in the world beyond the film when tenants and landowners of the 1660s refused to cooperate with his ideas for the gentrification of the City by declining to register their properties with the crown for fear they may be appropriated to make way for Charles’s wide avenues and grand vistas of the river. Charles leads Merivel through the plans, like God showing Moses the Promised Land. And then he changes the story:

Remember we once made a plan together Merivel, and in that plan love was not asked of you. Indeed, it was the only thing specifically forbidden of you. By ignoring what we agreed, you have driven yourself out of paradise.... It happened because you allowed it to happen. By trying to be the thing that you pretended to be, you have rendered yourself useless to me.

Similarly, Restoration, by trying to be what it pretended to be, “historical,” renders itself useless in the terms it claims to inhabit. Just as for Merivel love with Celia is structured as an impossibility—no matter how much the audience may desire it—historical “truth” is the one thing which, according to conventional models, is not only inaccessible to the film’s audience, it is simply a romance beyond the power of the medium—perhaps beyond the power of any medium—to construct.

The Anxiety of (Mis)Representation

Clearly, the story itself, as much as it is a historical fiction (that is to say, it is a contemporary period piece, not a seventeenth-century fiction9), is also a story of the contemporary anxiety of (mis)representation and a conservative, if unsuccessful, attempt to “discover the imprint of our steps to madness” so that we might recover an apparently departed sense of culture, history, and value. It is also a classically American narrative in its concern with a young hero who, touched and for a time

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9 The fiction to which I am referring is of course Rose Tremain’s Restoration: A Novel of Seventeenth-Century England.
swayed by the corruption of wealth, power, political intrigue, regains the path and achieves happiness in rediscovering his moral and vocational roots. Surely it is no coincidence that it is an American, Robert Downey, Jr., who, as Merivel, plays the figure of the common man chaffing against the power of history and tradition, of the state, of the very Englishness that Sam Neill as Charles II appears to command (although once more this is a simulacrum, for Neill is a New Zealander). And this need not even be a conscious recognition on the part of the viewer, for it is so much a part of American ideology as to resonate in the psyche of an American audience at any level. These are the concerns that the filmic narrative both invokes and disgorges, both constructs and deconstructs, as it spills from the cinematic imagination to the text of history.

The question then becomes one of how an audience is to enter and respond to such an apparently closed system. Perhaps the first step is to explore these links—albeit simulated links—to a time and culture far from ours, links that, like turnstiles at a boarder crossing, allow the spectator to enter the world of the filmic text while no reference—and perhaps no spectator—is officially permitted to escape. Baudrillard, of course, suggests that it is precisely such apparently closed systems, such “entangled orders of simulation,” which construct the image of otherness by which we define our own reality, our secure sense that “that is not how it is here.” Through them we “imagineer” the “real” world of secure national borders, honest capital enterprise, benign if not utilitarian exploitation of technology, pure and democratic political glasnost, and, most of all, the integrity and fundamentally motivated nature of the trans-historical sign/signifier connection.

10 The now familiar argument goes something like this: the neo-real worlds of Disneyland, Six Flags Magic Mountain, Marine World, even Watergate, serve to construct the image of otherness by which we define our own reality, our secure sense that “that is not how it is here.” Disneyland, so the belief might go, is a sugary fake, although pleasantly enchanting structure concealing a fundamentally commercial enterprise based on feeding fantasy and providing escape from the grind of proletarian existence, but that is not how it is outside. Six Flags Magic Mountain is a series of violent, life-threatening jolts provided by an unseen technology to which we happily trust our fragile bodies in the naive faith that we will be protected by a higher power looking out for our best interests, but that is not how it is outside. Watergate was a scandal with sinister and far-reaching implications, but that is not how the rest of politics operates. These images then, images of our insecurities—perhaps it would not be too bold to say images of our worst nightmares—serve “as a means to regenerate a reality principle in distress” (172-73).
As I have said, it is almost a commonplace to suggest that the world of historical cine-fiction, and perhaps other genres, too, operate according to these same principles, using a safe historical referent to articulate some those things we are reluctant to own in our own society. *Restoration* provides a particularly effective proving ground for such a theory, exploiting a decadent love of excess; a frivolous consumption of art and artifact from the widest reaches of mercantile capitalism; a tyranny of arbitrary power wielded by the rich and powerful just because they can; a moral quagmire where political figureheads are more concerned with concealing their sexual exploits than with effective government; and all of this set against a background of religious strife and haunted by the shadow of a plague against which modern medicine is seemingly powerless and which strikes without apparent regard to class, status, or moral conduct.

But if this is the case—if this is *all* that historical film does, what does *Restoration* ultimately restore? A golden age of past certainty? A world where disease once more ebbs back to lap within comfortable limits? A syntax in which sign and signifier are fixed in their relationship by royal proclamation or divine pre-ordination?

Clearly not, despite its apparent promise. I said earlier that historical cine-fiction appears to recreate an apparently complex texture of the past—something that technology, married to the vast resources generated by the motion picture industry, becomes ever more convincingly able to do; but, as a fiction, clearly the genre does more than this, effectively redefining the register of history as much as it reaffirms in a direct sense the reality of the present day. When *Restoration’s* Charles, for example, takes his leave of what he now thinks of as the useless Merivel, he bids him “Farewell,” adding, however, “I shall not say ‘Adieu,’ for who knows, in the future, history may have another role for you.” As such the text recognizes and prepares not just for a cinematic sequel but for an ongoing correspondence between the fictional voice of the present and the simulated figures of history. To deny such a relationship would effectively be to silence both stories, and there is obviously too much at stake (and not just economically) to do that.

Since history, as a narrative, plays between the foreground and the background of “historical” film, exchanging the lead constantly with fiction, the audience is not only
denied an unproblematized entry into any such a concept as “real history,” it is directly confronted with the instability of the present (since the real is proved—or tested—by the imaginary, just as Baudrillard claims “truth is tested by scandal ... law by transgression” and so on [176-77]). However, let us not be like Henny Penny, flustered that the instability of a rational, causal, linear notion of the present means that the sky is about to fall. As Bruno Latour reminds us, ”the sky is supported by many firmer pillars” (74). Although Derrida has demonstrated the violent hierarchy that upholds certain epistemological premises, when we sweep away that hierarchy, what we are left with is not an absence of truth but a plethora of truths (41). In *Restoration*, not only is Merivel on a personal quest to discover his own truth, John Pierce (David Thewlis) has discovered a different truth in Quakerism and seeks in its austere practice to order his own world. Likewise, Katherine (Meg Ryan) has established her truth about men and their “leaving step,” and although we are invited to think of it as “mad,” and indeed in the small Quaker community Pierce heads, it may be, as Katherine moves between contexts in the film, she is shown alternately as one of the most insightful, indeed one of the sanest figures in the narrative. Similarly, the gypsy card player attempts to create his own slippery truth with regard to where the “lady” is hiding; Finn, the King’s portrait painter (Hugh Grant), tries to capture the true image of Celia Clemens, the King’s mistress, thinking that in its perfect representation lies his way to royal patronage, but realizing to his cost that he is not sure which truth is currently approved (with cherubs or without?); and the King himself tries to impose his own grand narrative, changing truths as he finds it politically expedient or personally gratifying to do so. Merivel, of course, finds his (ultimately rather conservative) truth in rebuilding the human connections he has severed and in rejoining the ideology of the mainstream. Thus the filmic text, despite the finally rather trite moral, embodies the postmodern challenge to a unified, rational belief in a single truth and articulates its own challenge to “the traditional epistemological quest to find a philosophically privileged vantage point from which to mirror reality” (Ward 78). In this way, *Restoration* becomes not a
parody of history, but a pastiche in which a diversity and heterogeneity of histories is accommodated.\footnote{Jameson describes the moment when pastiche replaces parody—the time when imitation loses its satirical tone by virtue of the fact that the “normal,” the standard by which the text being parodied is}

**History and Narrative**

In this new sense of filmic history that I am attempting to validate, it remains to explore the connections between historical cine-fiction and other modes of cultural production—documentary film, for example—that claim similar historical legitimacy. First, let me acknowledge, with Roger Rosenstone (in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*) that big-budget historical features do indeed belong to a sub-genre Rosenstone defines as “historical romance,” complete with conventions that require “a love interest, physical action, personal confrontation, movement towards a climax and denouement … almost guaranteed to leave the historian of the period crying foul” (30-31). Yet, as Rosenstone also argues, these things are certainly not ahistorical; and in fact they are the very things that many written histories also embody in their narratives. Furthermore, while the sorts of (certainly important) historical “facts” traditional historians are keen to document and footnote may not be easily presented in the filmic medium, other kinds of “data” that are similarly difficult to represent on the page offer an equally informative impression, as we are able to “see landscapes; hear sounds; witness strong emotions as they are expressed with body and face, or physical conflict between individuals and groups” (31). To cite a literary example, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* is now widely recognized as a complex historical romance that nonetheless intersects with other modes of history in ways that are often empirically elusive but undeniably valid on a number of levels.

William Guynn describes how historians of the nineteenth century discarded the figures of classical rhetoric as fictive techniques and embraced a new historiography that sought to establish a scientific method of representing facts, thereby distancing itself from—indeed, defining itself against—literary discourse (13). Early film was
seen in this historiographic mode, the camera serving as “the mobile machine of analogical reproduction” that captured the real in its native environment, while later feature films on the other hand were viewed as descendants of the novel, the product of an imprisoned camera demanding all the “paraphernalia of theatrical illusionism” (Guinn 22). For over a century, prevailing thought has been dominated by this logos of empiricism, and it has taken more than a decade of sustained deconstructionist readings for the historical establishment to admit, however tentatively, that, as Hayden White has demonstrated, “historical narratives tend to be written exclusively as tragedy, comedy, romance, and adventure” (Lipsitz 149), indeed, that all ways of seeing are mediated through, even co-constructed by, shared cultural forms. Finally recognizing this himself, Rosenstone explains how, in writing *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan*, and as a historian attempting both to see through the eyes of his subjects while simultaneously foregrounding for his readers the problems the discipline often elides of “weighing evidence, making sense out of random data, explaining the inexplicable, and constructing a meaningful past” (5), he finally arrives at the sort of polyvocal, multivalent textuality that Roland Barthes originally posited in *Writing Degree Zero*, in Rosenstone’s words, “a multivoiced work set in both the past and the present that simultaneously told a history and problematized its own assertions” (5).

Of course, this is exactly what *Restoration*, my primary example of historical cine-fiction, also does: in foregrounding its own construction on a fundamental narrative level, it breaks from conventional realism, from the sense in which Roland Barthes suggests the signified is eclipsed behind and conflated with the referent, and simultaneously eschews the “pretense that the screen can be an unmediated window onto the past” while invoking a new visual vocabulary to describe history as a “multilayered vision” (Rosenstone 14). What Hayden White calls for in a new relationship with history, an “intransitive middle voice” that would analyze, encounter, and experience history at the same time as continually interrogating “the facts, fictions, and memories of the past, and also ... itself,” is provided in this and indeed much of the
new filmic exploration of the eighteenth century (37-53). Calling into question essentialist epistemologies undermines the *a priori* claims of an outmoded and dogmatic scientific “method” of history. Literary theory, acknowledging “the world as a text to be continuously retranslated and reinterpreted” (Ward 74) is no Young Pretender: in the hostile takeover in which it assimilates science into its own discourse, it has become the primary modern discursive formation. Moreover, Baudrillard’s sense of the neo-real has been refined still further by Deleuze when he describes a neo-realism in which what he calls the sensory-motor action image is displaced by pure optical and sound situations where the character becomes a kind of viewer rather than a vehicle to unite actions and lead the spectator through settings which formerly had a purely “functional reality, strictly determined by the demands of the situation” (4). In Deleuze’s neo-realism, “it is as if the action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it” (4). Suddenly, the Academy Awards *Restoration* earned for costume design and artistic direction seem as or more important than the celebrated but perhaps more superficial “best actor” award. And where once we might have said that what I will call a “critical historiography” sacrificed the real to what we called a neo-real process, radically affirming “the continuous production of cultural meaning” (Ward 75), now it is in fact this new epistemology which best explains our relationship with history and which we must therefore call the real.

**Works Cited**


thus simply a “neutral practice of mimicry without parody’s ulterior motive” (114).


About the Author


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