

## Introduction

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**B***lack and White in Colour* represents a convergence of two historiographical streams: African history and ‘film and history’, the former long established, the latter of more recent origin. The academic study of African history first emerged in the last decades of European colonial rule but accelerated with the coming of independence to the former colonies as the new states sought a ‘usable past’. By the 1970s it was a well-established area of historical study, deeply embedded in the academy, with prestigious journals and well-attended conferences.

The study of ‘film and history’ got off to a slower start. Though historians occasionally used film as a teaching aid in the classroom, there was a collective scepticism about the value of film as a means of engaging with the past. Pioneering attempts in the 1970s to grapple with film’s possibilities focused primarily on its uses as evidence.<sup>1</sup> How might film footage surviving from the past supplement other more traditional forms of evidence – the written word in particular – in broadening historical understanding? How might newsreel film, for example, complement the written record?<sup>2</sup> This focus on film as evidence expanded to include fiction films. What might these reveal about the values and preoccupations, the mentalités, of the societies and times in which they were produced?<sup>3</sup> What might they tell us of the ideologies that shaped their production? What could we learn, for example, about Nazism from the popular cinema of the Third Reich? What did Hollywood’s science fiction films of the 1950s reveal about Cold War angst?

This growing interest in film as evidence emerged against a backdrop of continuing scepticism on the part of historians at large about film, particularly fiction film, as a reliable vehicle for representing the past. Feature film was seen as inherently flawed as a means of ‘doing history’; when historians condescended to discuss these ‘historical’ films, they were summarily dismissed for their many inaccuracies and errors large and small.<sup>4</sup>

The turning point came in the late 1980s, with a debate in the pages of the

esteemed – and mainstream – *American Historical Journal* about film's value or otherwise as a means of understanding and representing the past.<sup>5</sup> (One of the participants would later joke about the editor's efforts to turn his article into a more acceptable form that 'may well have kept readers from being even more upset than they were at the invasion of the journal by discussions of this new medium'.)<sup>6</sup> The contributors to the forum included the philosopher of history Hayden White, who counterposed the notion of historiophoty, 'the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse', to historiography with its 'representation of history in verbal images and written discourse'.<sup>7</sup>

The other key participants were Robert Brent Toplin and Robert A. Rosenstone, who in subsequent years were both to make major contributions to the theory and practice of history on film. Rosenstone's article was republished in an influential collection of essays he authored in the mid-1990s, titled *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. In one of these Rosenstone provided a valuable yardstick – widely employed in the current volume – for measuring the historical merits of history films. While insisting that invention was an inherent and acceptable element of the historical feature film, he distinguished between 'true invention' and 'false invention', invention engaging with the 'discourse of history' as opposed to invention ignoring or violating the 'discourse of history'. 'To be considered "historical"...', he wrote, 'a film must engage, directly or obliquely, the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of the ongoing discourse of history. Like the book, the historical film cannot exist in a state of historical innocence, cannot indulge in capricious invention, and cannot ignore the findings and assertions and arguments of what we already know from other sources. Like any work of history, a film must be judged in terms of the knowledge of the past we already possess.'<sup>8</sup>

In this and subsequent writing, Rosenstone mounted an energetic defence of the 'dramatic feature' as history. Accuracy (as in 'facts alone') was not the sole criterion, he argued, for good history, whether written or filmic. Instead, what we demand from history, in whatever medium, is to be told what to think about 'the facts'. Historical filmic dramas, he insists, can, just as well as written histories, 'recount, explain, interpret and make meaning out of people and events in the past'.<sup>9</sup>

While Robert Rosenstone has elaborated the theoretical underpinnings of history on film, Peter C. Rollins and Robert Toplin have contributed significantly to its practice, the former as the editor of *Film and History*, its leading journal, the latter through his work on Hollywood's 'use and abuse of the American past'.<sup>10</sup> Through *Film and History* and the writings of Toplin and others, Hollywood's enduring fascination with history – dating back to the days of silent film – has

been thoroughly canvassed. Most recently Toplin has offered a sturdy defence of Hollywood history. While conceding that feature films are inferior to books 'as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis', he maintains that they 'can communicate important ideas about the past ... the two-hour movie can arouse emotions, stir curiosity, and prompt viewers to consider significant questions.'<sup>11</sup>

What of the study of filmic history beyond the Hollywood version,<sup>12</sup> in particular what of 'film and history' in Africa? Inevitably this is at a more pioneering stage than its American counterpart. While African film in general has attracted considerable scholarly attention,<sup>13</sup> the study of 'film and history' in Africa is in its infancy.<sup>14</sup> The editors of this volume convened the First International African Film and History Conference in Cape Town in July 2002.<sup>15</sup> Among the papers delivered was a 'critical survey' by the film scholar Mbye Cham of 'current trends and tendencies' in 'film and history in Africa'.<sup>16</sup> Cham argues that there has been a significant 'turn towards the subject of history' among African filmmakers in the past few decades. Since the 1970s many have drawn on the African past for their film narratives, often as a means of engaging with and 'historicizing' the pressing issues of contemporary Africa. These history films set out to contest older, European versions of the continent where 'Europe is presented as the bringer of history and civilization to an ahistorical Africa'. Instead these films 'present versions of the African past from African perspectives', revisioning its major themes, including slavery, imperialism, colonialism and post-colonialism, in 'more complex and balanced' ways and, crucially, reaffirming African agency.

Cham's brief survey (which discusses some of the films covered in this volume) coincided with a more extended treatment of the topic by the American-based sociologist Josef Gugler in his *African Film: Re-imagining a Continent*, published in 2003.<sup>17</sup> Pursuing his theme of the ways in which film has provided a 'window on Africa', Gugler selected fifteen 'key films' – three of these are in the present volume – by African filmmakers and contrasted them with two highly popular but less authentic cinematic visions of Africa, Hollywood director Sydney Pollack's glossy *Out of Africa* (also discussed in this book) and the South African director Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, dismissed by Gugler as 'the world according to apartheid'. Like Cham, Gugler stresses that the African filmmakers he discusses present an image of Africa altogether different from the stereotypical Western view of the continent. They 're-imagine' Africa and its people; in their cinematic vision, 'Africans inevitably hold centre stage'.

While Josef Gugler's selection of films deals with both contemporary and historical topics, the films chosen for this volume on 'film and history' in Africa focus squarely on the historical and include films both African and non-African in provenance. The editors, historians themselves (with a specialist interest in

film and history), have recruited a team of fellow historians to consider how a selection of 'historical films' – all 'fictional' as opposed to non-fictional or documentary – chosen both for their geographical and chronological coverage of the continent's history and for their intrinsic interest as attempts at filmic history, has represented (or misrepresented) the African past. The contributors (all scholars engaged with the African past) have been asked to take into account the theorising of film and history, particularly by Rosenstone. This, inevitably (and productively), has yielded a wide range of approaches which (as the term 'film and history' suggests) should be of interest not only to historians, but also to those engaged in film studies.

It is not the intention of this introduction to summarise each of the seventeen essays that follow. Rather, we hope to give a sense of why particular films were selected for inclusion, the range of historical topics they address, and the ways in which the authors have analysed them for what they contribute to historical understanding. Thus the particular African history films in this collection were chosen partly for their subject matter, the history they relate, and partly to provide examples of very different kinds of ways in which such history can be conveyed in dramatic (rather than documentary) form in this medium.

We wished to provide considerable geographical, chronological and thematic coverage of the African past. The films included duly range from reconstructions of pre-colonial West African societies located in an indistinct (perhaps far distant) period, to representations of genocide in Rwanda, and South Africans struggling with questions of truth and reconciliation in the near present. However, we also wanted to include examples of different kinds of history films. Rosenstone's latest schema suggests that many of our films could be put within one of two major categories in this respect: 'mainstream' (Hollywood, or imitative of Hollywood) dramas and 'innovative' ('oppositional', compared to Hollywood) dramas.<sup>18</sup> Both are represented here, most obviously the former by *Out of Africa* or *Cry Freedom*, and the latter by *Proteus* (about a same-sex relationship in the 18th-century Dutch Cape Colony). Most West African history films (for example) are 'innovative' compared to Hollywood-style dramas. And within Rosenstone's broad headings there are numerous gradations of difference in terms (for instance) of narrative strategies or casting policies. Almost all – *The Battle of Algiers* is a notable exception, but even here director Pontecorvo initially wanted to cast Paul Newman in the leading role of an American journalist – tell their stories through the perspective of (one or more) individual protagonists. But some of the innovative dramas are played by 'stars' (who may carry with them the 'baggage' of former roles) and others by relative or complete unknowns. Equally, protagonists vary according to gender, ethnicity, race or nation – and differing 'identity' perspectives are likely to have consequences for the history

conveyed. Protagonists in these African history films include males and (less commonly) females, 'whites' and 'blacks' – if rarely the latter in 'mainstream' dramas about Africa – 'African' insiders and 'non-African' outsiders. Yet how, in this last respect, might we categorise the white protagonists of films set in apartheid South Africa or its aftermath, such as *Cry Freedom*, *A Dry White Season*, *Red Dust* or *Country of My Skull*? This is a question beyond mere academic debate in contemporary South Africa.

Almost all the films we have included deal with issues that have received extensive attention in written histories of Africa: the nature of pre-colonial African societies, the nature and effects of the slave trade, of imperialism and colonialism, of racism, of the two world wars, of anti-colonial resistance, of gross human rights abuses during apartheid, and of genocide in Rwanda. Different ways in which these issues are represented on film are not, of course, simply a reflection of different or similar subject matters, or indeed budget, though both are certainly important factors. Portraying radically different topics – romance on a 'farm in Africa' (*Out of Africa*) rather than a bitter and vicious civil war in Algiers (*The Battle of Algiers*) – might well suggest the need for radically different styles and story-telling strategies. Clearly West African directors like Kaboré (*Wend Kuuni*, *Buud Yam*), Cissé (*Yeelen*) and Kouyaté (*Keïta!*), or activist filmmakers like Greyson and Lewis (*Proteus*), do not have the same financial resources at their disposal as a Spielberg (*Amistad*) or Attenborough (*Cry Freedom*), and this has in some instances affected the nature of their reconstructions (for instance, in terms of casting or extent of 'spectacle'). Yet just as important in explaining the contrasting nature of 'historiophoty' are the diverse motivations behind the making of particular history films, themselves intimately connected to when and where each was made – in our collection, ranging chronologically from 1964 (*Zulu*) to 2004 (*Hotel Rwanda*, *Country of My Skull*, *Forgiveness* and *Red Dust*), and geographically from Africa to Australia (*Breaker Morant*), Europe and North America – as well as by whom, and with what audience and effects in mind.

So understanding and explaining these often highly varied visions of the past requires knowing not only something of the histories they ostensibly discuss, but also of the individuals who made them and (film industry, historical and social) contexts in which this happened, as contributors to this collection demonstrate. For example, the motivations for making films and the aesthetic preferences of the directors of these historiophoties range from those of an Ousmane Sembène (*Ceddo*, *Emitai*, *Le Camp de Thiaroye*) – someone whom Rosenstone has accorded the accolade of 'filmic historian' – continually concerned with understanding and explaining what the past has meant to the present, to 'industry professionals' like Basil Dearden (*Khartoum*) and Sydney Pollack (*Out of Africa*), primarily con-

cerned with producing films that succeed commercially in Europe and the United States.<sup>19</sup> Using this scale, the likes of Richard Attenborough (*Cry Freedom*) and Steven Spielberg (*Amistad*) arguably lie somewhere in-between.

Contributors demonstrate that many directors were avowedly politically motivated, are on record as stating that they wished to make ‘issue’ films or to bear witness to past or ongoing injustices – with varying levels of enthusiasm or auterist ability to determine the final product – and apportion blame. Beyond those mentioned thus far (leaving Dearden and Pollack aside), these would include Alex Haley (*Roots*), Haile Gerima (*Sankofa*) and Roger Gnoan M’Bala (*Adanggaman*), all of whom deal with the slave trade. They would also include John Greyson and Jack Lewis (*Proteus*), Raoul Peck (*Lumumba*), Gillo Pontecorvo (*The Battle of Algiers*), Ingrid Sinclair (*Flame* – about the experience of women in the Zimbabwean freedom struggle), Euzhan Palcy (*A Dry White Season*), and Terry George (*Hotel Rwanda* – about the 1994 genocide). Less obviously from their subject matter, we might also include Gaston Kaboré and Dani Kouyaté. Mahir Saul demonstrates that Kaboré (*Wend Kuuni, Buud Yam* – about pre-colonial Burkina Faso) wanted to counteract what he believed to be Western stereotypes of an Africa without any tradition worth remembering. Ralph Austen persuasively argues that Kouyaté (*Keita!* – about modern ignorance of oral epics of Sunjata, the founder of the Mali empire) wished to critique a Burkina Faso education system that (whether under the French or after independence) supposedly neglected Mande history, and specifically the existence of powerful states in the pre-colonial past.

Werner Herzog (*Cobra Verde* – another film ostensibly about the slave trade), a leading figure in New German Cinema, would appear to be primarily interested in film as an art form rather than in history, let alone African history, *per se*. Of course many of the directors we have already mentioned (most famously, Sembène and Pontecorvo) are interested in both. For some, their interest in the African past was at least partially a result of personal childhood experience. Beyond West African directors, Ruth Watson suggests that this is true of Claire Denis (*Chocolat* – about colonial life in post-Second World War Cameroon). Likewise David Moore tells us that Raoul Peck’s interest in Lumumba stems from his childhood in Leopoldville, and led to him making not only the eponymous feature film but also a documentary, *Death of the Prophet*, eight years earlier.

The films have been analysed by the contributors in one or more of the ways that have interested historians in the medium: as attempted filmic histories that can, while employing greater and lesser use of ‘true’ and ‘false’ invention, be compared with existing historiography on the topics they deal with; as ‘texts’ that contain evidence about the ideologies of the people, places and periods that produced them; for their role ‘in history’, in shaping opinion about the past and

present (and debates about the connections between the two); and for the ways in which they either directly raise questions about the nature and purpose of history or, not least through comparing them, indirectly prompt us to think about such matters.

Some of the films offer more serious engagements than others with 'the discourses of history'. This is not simply a matter of the degree to which they deal with 'real' rather than 'fictitious' people and events in the past. Arguably both *Cry Freedom* ('real' people like Steve Biko) and *A Dry White Season* ('fictitious' people) are equally serious engagements with the nature of apartheid South Africa in the mid-1970s and both, according to Bickford-Smith, are largely 'true inventions' of a record that 'itself consists in large part of opinion about people, reports of speech and events'. Robert Harms goes as far as to argue that in making a 'fiction' film about the slave trade, Roger Gnoan M'Bala (*Adanggaman*) is able 'to reflect on the relationship between Africa and slavery without being accountable to historians'. Certainly he may feel less burdened by the need for 'factual accuracy', compared to those making films about 'real' people and events in the recent past. But Harms adds that accountability is also connected to whether filmmakers are claiming to be producing 'history through art [as Debbie Allen, the producer of *Amistad*, claimed] rather than making art out of history'.

Many contributors have demonstrated the ways in which their particular history films relate to contemporary, and subsequent, written accounts of their topics. Some examples must suffice to suggest disparate conclusions. Thus Austen reveals how Souleymane Cissé's depiction of the Mande past in *Yeelen* both attempts to challenge and may yet replicate elements of European ethnography. Worden suggests that *Proteus* was made by filmmakers 'well aware' of recent social and cultural histories of the Dutch Cape Colony. *Proteus*, like some of these written histories, employs a 'micro-narrative' technique to explore the 'hidden histories' of the socially marginalised. This technique entails, *inter alia*, the analysis 'of a specific episode in great detail ... to illuminate the kinds of social and mental processes that could exist at a particular time and place': in this instance, questions of sexuality, gender and power. Hamilton and Modisane assert that 'on most issues of substance' *Zulu* and *Zulu Dawn* 'were faithful to or, perhaps in certain aspects, in advance of the written history of their respective times', although they also warn that, as historiography develops, 'the evaluation of the historical accuracy of the films shifts' accordingly. Nasson guides us adroitly through general histories of the two world wars as well as of Africa in the 20th century, and the particular historiography surrounding African conscripts, to point out the nature, achievements (and limitations) of the history on offer in *Black and White in Colour* and *Le Camp de Thiaroye*. This includes their common 'harsh' construction of French colonial administration and the unmuffling of the 'identities and

voices of France's colonial African soldiers'. Barnes argues that *Flame* reinforced the work of Norma Kriger by offering a revisionist view of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, one that challenged the triumphalist and androcentric narrative that dominated since independence: 'when *Flame* [the nom-de-guerre of the female guerrilla fighter] is raped by Che, you can almost hear thirty-odd years of mainstream nationalist historiography crashing to the floor'.

In contrast, others are more critical. Baum argues that although Sembène (in *Ceddo* and *Emitai*) portrays 'a dynamic strength in African cultures ... he sees little constructive role for organised religion. Therefore, he writes it out of the historical record or oversimplifies its complex role in the historical events that he portrays.' Mendelsohn doubts the seriousness of *Breaker Morant's* engagement with the discourses of history. He explores what has been written about the eponymous hero of this film, an Australian soldier executed for killing Boer prisoners in the South African War, to suggest that director Beresford's portrayal is more concerned with reinforcing heroic Australian legend and Australian identity than replicating the evidence of the historical record. Equally, David Moore suggests that *Lumumba* is also hagiography, not least for omitting its hero's earlier career as a 'liberal and an embezzler'. Adhikari argues that *Hotel Rwanda* largely ignores the insights of existing historiography on the underlying causes of the genocide, particularly those that reveal the reinforcement of Hutu and Tutsi ethnicity in the colonial period and the removal of 'flexibility and safety valves that had blunted social conflict' before European conquest. Consequently, the film may suggest to Western audiences that the 1994 genocide was just another (if extreme) result of 'savage' African 'tribalism'. For his part, Philips contends that *In My Country* is guilty of too many 'false inventions' about the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) process in South Africa.

The fact that Philips argues that *Red Dust* provides a far better sense of 'the drama of the amnesty process', and that *Forgiveness* 'offers a good sense of the working-out of issues of reconciliation ... in the post-TRC environment' reminds us of the rewarding possibility of comparing filmic histories on the same, or similar, topics. Indeed, if there are seldom alternative visions or internal debates about how to interpret the past within a single film, these are implicitly there if several are analysed. So such an exercise was a deliberate element of this collection, and exists within many individual chapters, with (for instance) Harms surveying as many as seven history films that deal with the slave trade. Equally, by including two films on very different topics by the same filmmaker, Baum demonstrates some of the enduring characteristics of Sembène's engagement with the past.

Most of our history films try to achieve a sense of authenticity in terms of the 'look' of the past, even while attempting to convince the viewer that South

Australia (*Breaker Morant*) or Zimbabwe (*Cry Freedom, A Dry White Season*) is in fact South Africa. Some go to considerable lengths to do so, and thereby lend authority to their historical arguments: Attenborough, for instance, carefully copies the framing of Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of the dead Hector Pieterson during *Cry Freedom's* reconstruction of events of 16 June 1976 in Soweto. Others, particularly filmmakers reconstructing the more distant West African past, are less concerned with authenticity than with making a more general statement about history and its significance to the present: Kaboré is seemingly not worried about offering us imprecise geography and material culture in his rendition of an idealised Burkina Faso past in *Wend Kuuni* and *Buud Yam*. And in *Proteus*, as Worden demonstrates, Greyson and Lewis intentionally introduce anachronisms as part of an attempt to draw parallels between Robben Island in the 18th century and the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1960s and the ongoing fight for gay rights.

Whether or not a particular history film is seriously engaged with the discourses of African history, contributors have demonstrated that it can also be a rich resource of historical evidence about contemporary ideologies of the place or period that produced it: surrounding, say, appropriate gender roles, imperialism or the nature of war. The films gathered here may collectively, for instance, bear witness to what Natalie Zemon Davis (in discussing films about slavery) sees as a growing concern in the course of the late 20th century for the horrors of large-scale persecution 'under the shadow of the Holocaust'.<sup>20</sup> But ideologies also include, of course, attitudes towards particular people, places and events they portray. Such attitudes are often most apparent in stereotypical depictions of people: evil Afrikaner security police (*Cry Freedom, A Dry White Season*); amoral and libidinous white Kenyans (*White Mischief*); or, perhaps most noticeably of all, what Hamilton and Modisane call the 'massed collectivity' of black Africans, in other words black Africans rendered as hordes largely devoid of individual identity and, implicitly, individual agency, in films like *Zulu, Zulu Dawn* and *Khartoum*. But both Watson and Penn, in their chapters on settler experience in Cameroon and Kenya respectively, focus on one way in which Africa itself has been stereotyped (in *Chocolat* and *Out of Africa*), as hyper-aestheticised, a people-light (but perhaps exotic animal-full) landscape devoid of black politics, poverty or protest.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Penn persuasively argues that it is largely thanks to Blixen's book and Pollack's film that pre-Mau Mau colonial Kenya has endured in Western popular consciousness as the epitome of this romanticised view of Africa. Yet sometimes, of course, depictions of people, places or events can be more ambivalent: Hamilton and Modisane detect both pro- and anti-imperial ideology in *Zulu*; and *The Battle of Algiers*, as Harries puts it, 'is not a propaganda film glorifying one side at the cost of another' (unlike the way that black nationalist causes are depicted, say, in *Lumumba, Cry Freedom* or *A Dry White Season*).

Discussing ideologies of filmic histories begins to suggest ways in which these films have been analysed by contributors for their roles *in* history: for shaping attitudes about Africa or Africans, or about national, ethnic or racial identities (both African and non-African), or about specific processes or events (such as slavery, apartheid or the genocide in Rwanda). Some may have achieved intended or unintended political results, though this is not always certain: perhaps *Cry Freedom* played a part in promoting world-wide revulsion that helped end apartheid; more certainly the South African government feared the consequences of its release and intervened to ban its exhibition. In any event, contributors give attention to how their history films were received. Patrick Harries goes further than most by making this a major way in which he analyses the historical significance – ‘as an icon of memory for the left and as a source of division for the right’ – of *The Battle of Algiers*.

Finally, many history films use the past to raise questions about the present – a point made by Marcia Landy and reiterated by Hamilton and Modisane.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as Saul asserts, Kaboré’s depiction of an idealised Burkina Faso past was partly meant to lead to comparisons in Burkinabe minds with a considerably less-than-ideal present; or, as Baum argues, Sembène intentionally draws parallels between the role of Islam and Muslim leadership in Senegal’s past and present; and, as Adhikari acknowledges as one ‘well-accomplished’ theme in *Hotel Rwanda*, Terry George’s emphasis on the inaction of the international community has ongoing and recent relevance (most obviously in Darfur). Yet an ‘experimental’ history film like *Proteus* goes further, as Worden demonstrates, and raises questions about the very nature of historical knowledge itself: be it the ‘untrustworthiness’ or ‘instability’ of the historical record or the fact that all history (written and filmic) is merely ‘a construction’. This is a single film that ‘forces us to face the central question of the practice of history: can we ever really know the past?’ Such ‘philosophy of history’ questions are of necessity also raised by the very process of analysing and comparing the often very different approaches to representing the past on film that we have deliberately gathered together in this collection. Most obviously, they include the matter of how and why ‘history’ has been used in the way that it has in each film, and what the films are saying about what the past means or should mean to us.