Can filmed representations of the past contribute to historical knowledge?

Does the camera lie? Although a filmed representation of the past may give us not only a perspective on the period of history depicted in the film, but also a perspective on when the film was made, does this go as far as contributing to historical knowledge? In answering this, let’s first consider what “filmed representations” of the past could include: feature film, television film, newsreel and home-produced film. These can either represent true events through documentaries, contemporaneous film, or dramatized accounts of such events - or they can represent a fictionalised version of the past, such as an adaptation of a classic novel. I think all of these different types of film and representation fall into the definition of “filmed representations of the past”. Assuming this, we then secondly need to consider if such films “contribute to historical knowledge”. Is this contribution simply the dissemination to a wide and increasingly post-literate audience of existing historical knowledge, or is it the challenge, confirmation or addition to historical knowledge through film? I’ve assumed for this essay that a contribution to historical knowledge can work on both these levels.

Thirdly, there is the key question of what constitutes “historical knowledge” – is it as simple as the film getting the facts right or is it something further – the interpretation and evaluation of facts? If film is to be treated as a primary or secondary source, as with any other source, its relevance, validity and content has to be tested. If film doesn’t stand up to this scrutiny, can it still contribute to historical knowledge in some other, more indirect way?

A common criticism levelled at films by historians is that they are factually incorrect and therefore their contribution to historical knowledge is weakened. There are many examples of this: academic criticism of the novel and TV adaptation of ‘Wolf Hall’ due to the portrayal of a sympathetic Thomas Cromwell1 and a misogynistic, religious fanatic Thomas More2; while in ‘JFK’ historians have discredited the filmed representation of the conspiracy theory for President Kennedy’s murder3. However, even if films were to overcome this issue of inaccuracy and so aim for factual truth “to show how it really was”4, would these dramatizations of historic events then contribute to historical knowledge? Not automatically. A fundamental weakness of films of whatever type, but particularly mainstream Hollywood films, is that they are structured in such a way that they cannot contain different historical analyses or perspectives. The commercial requirement for ‘polished time compressed productions, full of drama and moral clarity’5 leads to a one dimensional, unambiguous and simplistic narrative6. Spielberg’s ‘Lincoln’ offers a good example of this: while a number of historians have praised the accuracy of this film (which focuses on the passage of the 13th Amendment)7 others have objected to the simplistic way in which it “frames the story of emancipation entirely through the actions of European Americans while reducing African Americans to the status of onlookers”8. This is a major weakness in the integrity of films as a source: their inability to provide a discursive representation9 of the past does not tie up with the level of scrutiny

1 https://www.ft.com/content/ec5583e2-b115-11e4-9331-00144feab7de
4 E.H.Carr “What is History” quoting Ranke p8
6 Richard Rosenstone “The Historical Film as Real History” – Film – historia volume V no1 (1995)
8 https://s-usih.org/2012/11/historians-and-history-at-movies/ 
9 Ian Jarvie in Rosenstone “The History on Film Reader” p33
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needed for historical enquiry. E.H. Carr describes historical knowledge as being created through an evaluation of sources, a weighing of evidence and dialogue between the historian and the facts. More recent discussions in historiography, especially since the rise of post-modernism, have led some historians to question the ability to claim the truth (or as near to the truth as is possible). However, faced with this, others strongly argue about the innate importance of facts and the need to use and evaluate evidence. Therefore, even if historical truth seems impossible to achieve, there is still an obligation to strive for it. Given this high standard for historical evidence against the structural flaw with films, it seems to me that films cannot automatically contribute to historical knowledge; instead, they need to be rigorously analysed like any other source. However even where a film fails this test, it can be argued that sometimes a film on its own terms – as a film rather than as a historical document – can illuminate history in a range of ways which I explain below.

Looking at the broader ways filmed representations of the past can contribute to historical knowledge, Natalie Zemon Davis, the writer of ‘The Return of Martin Guerre’, gives the example of ‘La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc’ by Carl Dreyer of 1927. Although Dreyer did a significant amount of historical research for the film including studying the 1431 trial records of Joan of Arc (the pages of which are shown turning at the beginning of the film), Dreyer records that ‘the year of the event seemed as inessential to me as its distance from the present’. Instead he said that he wanted to capture “the soul” of the period. He achieved this through a variety of techniques such as close ups of faces and unusual camera angles. I’ve found ‘La Passion’ a disturbing film to watch. Although I think it does convey the fear and isolation Joan would have felt at her trial, and so creates an emotional truth and connection with the past despite historical inaccuracies, I feel the film’s association with a specific moment in the past has been lost due to its sparse use of historical materials and evidence. Therefore I don’t think this film contributes much to historical knowledge. It portrays an emotion which would be felt by an oppressed person at many different times in history. Further, can history be reduced to emotion? Again I don’t think so: I believe historical knowledge is much more than just breaking the past into dramatic fragments – the body of history is more than this dramatized sensory experience of the past.

However, a stronger historical perspective – and so knowledge – is offered where a film shows more attention to the physical representation of the period of time combined with a concern to show how historical characters thought and felt at that time. The rich combination of screenplay, sight and sound can in particular cases fill in the gaps in history to create a work with emotional power and connection with the past which a textbook, academic article, book or essay could not achieve. Despite its inaccuracies mentioned above, the TV adaptation of ‘Wolf Hall’ is an example of this. I think so long as it is accepted that these works provide another perspective on and entry into history, accessible by a larger audience, then their benefit to historical knowledge at the general level should be recognised. However there is a danger that an uninformed audience might confuse fact with fiction. At the deeper level, I question whether any expert would gain much or any historic knowledge from them.

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10 Richard J. Evans “In Defence of History” p252
11 Natalie Zemon-Davis “The History on Film Reader” p20
Film can also illuminate the past. For example, film footage—such as newsreel, movie or documentary—records buildings, the environment and even the style of clothes at the time of filming, and so can potentially be a source for architectural, environmental and fashion historians\textsuperscript{12}. This is not all. If history is accepted as not only “the kings and battles approach”\textsuperscript{13}, using mostly written sources written by and about the elite, but instead also extends to ordinary people, then non-written sources such as oral and filmed history can be used, alongside other sources, to allow the history of those whose lives are not recorded in writing (and so would otherwise be forgotten) to be studied. The gaps again need to be filled. But use of film footage such as documentary is flawed. It portrays some types of events better than others: film is described as “the record made by and for the man in the street”\textsuperscript{14} and it has been commented on that while it may be difficult for the camera to show the decisions of the elite, it can show the consequences for ordinary people—for example showing footage of military action rather than the political developments prior to war\textsuperscript{15}. There are other flaws with film such as newsreel or news footage. They are normally heavily edited and can otherwise be manipulated, especially if digital. The possibility of censorship by government authorities, or more often bias of the filmmaker, producer, director, studio or broadcaster, is ever present. As with memory in oral history, documentary evidence is potentially unreliable, incomplete and biased, and thus is not a totally reliable source—it again needs to be weighed with other sources.

Despite its weakness as a primary or secondary source, very occasionally, a film can be so important that it becomes a historic item itself, and so contributes to historical knowledge. This sometimes happens when a film plays a very significant part in recording past events. An example of this is ‘Night and Fog’ by the French film director Alain Resnais\textsuperscript{16} released in 1955 (a film which was commissioned by the Comite d’Histoire de la Deuxieme Guerre Mondiale - a French government commission researching the Occupation in France - and by the Reseau du Souvenir association for the memory of those deported). Rather than a simple newsreel documentary, Resnais created a more experimental short film, combining black and white newsreel footage of the horror of the concentration camps with colour film of the camps and surrounding countryside in 1955. This film remains an extremely powerful and shocking testament; despite its horrific content, it is still used today in French schools\textsuperscript{17}, and has been shown from time to time on French national television. Despite subsequent films and documentaries such as ‘Schindler’s List’ and ‘Shoah’\textsuperscript{18}, I think its power goes beyond being a historic record, and a memorial to those lost, but also is a challenge to subsequent generations not to allow this to happen again. Moreover, I think that ‘Night and Fog’ has an even deeper value in the historical body as a primary source—by seeing the faces of the victims it shows the raw emotion, suffering and horror with an immediacy and strength that is hard to replicate in written documents, heightened by personal accounts. Therefore, ‘Night and Fog’ highlights the power of a primary source and the everlasting contribution it has to historical knowledge.

\textsuperscript{12} Anirudh Deshpande “Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History” – Economic and Political Weekly p 4457
\textsuperscript{13} Richard J. Evans p162
\textsuperscript{14} Paul Smith “The Historian and Film” quoting Penelope Houston p62
\textsuperscript{15} Paul Smith p61
\textsuperscript{17} Ewout van der Knaap “Uncovering the Holocaust – The International Reception of Night and Fog” p44
\textsuperscript{18} www.criterion.com/current/posts/289-night-and-fog-origins-and-controversy
Separately, a film can occasionally record historic events which may not be known by many people, and therefore act as a key source of historic awareness and so knowledge: an example is “The Battle of Algiers” by Gilles Pontecorvo (1966) depicting the Algerian struggle for independence from France in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. The film critic Philip French described it as “one of the greatest, most controversial of political movies”. The film, shot in documentary style, was banned in France until 1971, and so tells us something new about the sensitivity of the issue of Algeria in France at the time. It also maintains awareness of these events, despite the passage of time. In these ways, a very small number of films, perhaps not so well known generally, are in themselves historic and so contribute to historical knowledge by their content and fact of being made.

Films can at the same time reflect on different periods of history. A film can appear to just relate to the particular historic event in that film, but at the same time can potentially be a source of reflection and commentary on different events in another place and time. An example of this is ‘Danton’ (1983) by the Polish director Andrzej Wajda. This film critically shows the French Revolution and the struggle between Robespierre and Danton; however, it can also be understood as a commentary on the political situation in Poland at the time of filming, and in particular the struggle between the Solidarity trade union movement, led by Lech Walesa (Danton) and the Polish Government led by General Jaruzelski (Robespierre), and how revolution can turn to terror and devour “its children”. Therefore the film provides as much a perspective on Polish history, as of Danton and the French Revolution.

Therefore the many different types of film, and ways in which they can represent history, potentially offer a significant contribution to historical knowledge. However film has to be handled very carefully as source material – its value to record actuality, as one commentator describes it, is matched by its potential to distort reality. At the level of popular history, at its best it can connect a large audience with the past and make history live and keep history alive – and so add to historical knowledge in the broadest sense; at its worst, it can offer nothing or even mislead. At the other level of challenging, advancing and contributing to deeper historical knowledge, film is more problematic. Filmmakers are not necessarily also historians and so using a film as a source demands rigorous evaluation, alongside other sources. However this is also a benefit - filmmakers can offer a different perspective and so illuminate history in different ways, and potentially fill in the gaps, or create a remembrance of past events, which indirectly contributes to historical knowledge.

Word Count: 2282

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19 [https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/feb/05/4](https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/feb/05/4)
21 Paul Smith p51
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