

Cinematic Histospheres: On the Theory and Practice of Historical Films, **by Rasmus Greiner. Palgrave Macmillan,** **2021, 229 pp. Open Access.**

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In *Cinematic Histospheres: On the Theory and Practice of Historical Films*, Rasmus Greiner argues that a historical film, conceptually, means not just a cinematic representation of history, but also a “histosphere” that is constituted by means of cinema for the audience to experience a historical world. Here, the historical film refers to fiction films that depict “historical events, individuals, and lifeworlds” (17). Drawing on many philosophical theories, such as Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenology of film and Frank R. Ankersmit’s historical experience, as well as on the film theories of Siegfried Kracauer, Béla Balázs and others, the author proposes the term “histosphere” to refer to “the ‘sphere’ of a cinematically modelled, physically experienceable historical world” (2). With this term, the book aims to provide a different theoretical basis for the practice of historical films and thereby broadens the existing theoretical discussion of the genre, which has centred on Hayden White’s point of view on the fictionality of historical narrative. Particularly, White has proposed the term “historiophoty”, parallel to the word historiography, for film as a specific medium to represent history, from the perspective of the analogy between cinematic history and written history at the narrative level (White). Following a different line of thought from White’s, Greiner, thus, theorises the historical film as a research subject from phenomenological and experiential perspectives, with a discussion of several key aspects and concepts of the histosphere in the book’s nine chapters.

In the introductory chapter, Greiner points out that, as an audiovisual medium, film seem to have “complete mastery of the dimensions of space and time” (3–4). This capacity allows the medium, in contrast to the implication of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, to create an effect of “making the past present” in front of us (189). Meanwhile, each historical film, as the author reminds us, is always produced in a present time, and the time in which the film was produced “is inscribed into its audiovisual modeling of a bygone era” (5). This temporal characteristic of historical films highlights the relationship and interaction between a historical world mediated through film and the spectator’s perception of history in the contemporary media environment. Drawing on Sobchack’s phenomenological notion of film as a subject with its own “body” and “point of view on the world”, and on her argument that film is an “embodied experience that addresses *all* the viewing subjects’ senses by way of a synesthetic interplay of moving images and sound”, Greiner therefore sees the histosphere as an “experiential field” in which “history is made experientially available” for the spectator, a subject with all the senses of the human body (6).

Based on this view, Chapter Two focuses on the central topic in historical film studies: fiction film and history. In this regard, Greiner does not follow White's famous analytical approach of historical writing and literary methods, but turns to classic semiology, arguing that fiction film and history narratively "are closely interwoven within this semiotic fabric" (19). It implies a complex and multi-layered meaning of the signs as historical references created in historical films. Greiner also suggests, with reference to Jacques Rancière, that cinema can contribute to the writing of history, seeing it as a "history-forming power" with its own "poetic relationship to the past" (22). On the basis of these accounts, the author goes on to argue that the purpose of the historical film is to create "a feeling of authenticity" rather than to fulfil the purpose of providing "incontrovertible factual accuracy" of history (17). In this regard, the notion of "reality effect" (in Roland Barthes' terms) and the strategic use of historical footage in fiction films are particularly noted (27).

Titled "Audiovisual History", Chapter Three looks at how film image and film sound, the two prominent sensuous and expressive elements of the medium of cinema, are used to model a historical world to be experienced. Drawing on Michel Chion's notion of audio-vision, this chapter points out the important role of film sound, a more neglected area of research than film image, in structuring the cinematic narration of history, in determining the mood of a sequence of the film and in generating an authentic feeling. Greiner then argues how film image and film sound as a "fused mode of perception" work together to generate a historical experience (43). Furthermore, the author suggests that the histosphere has the potential to serve as a "valid mode of expression" for history with film image and sound, given the ubiquity of audiovisual technologies and practices in our daily lives (44).

The fourth chapter delves into Sobchack's phenomenology of film and Ankersmit's philosophy of history as the core theories discussed in *Cinematic Histospheres*. To deepen the argument of the histosphere as an "experiential field" in which "history is made experientially available", Greiner connects Sobchack's phenomenological theory to Ankersmit's historical experience. In his view, Sobchack's emphasis on an individual's experience of a living encounter with a film is similar to Ankersmit's description of one's intimate, direct contact with an object in historical experience, through which one becomes aware of oneself. Here, Ankersmit's use of the term "surprise" in historical experience is underlined and compared with Benjamin's "aesthetics of shock" in film reception (55, 59). In this discussion, Greiner seems to be trying to point to an aesthetic dimension of the histospheres, in which the spectator's film experience and historical experience are perceptually "fused into a unified cinematic experience of history" (49).

The above four chapters provide a theoretical framework for cinematic histospheres, explaining why a phenomenological approach to the study of historical films is necessary. This phenomenological approach affirms the subjectivity of cinema, which has its capacity to make history experienceable, as well as the subjectivity of the spectator, who has his or her capacity to perceive and respond. In this view, the significance of a historical film lies in the relationship and interaction between the film and the spectator, rather than in the film as a historical text. At the same time, the significance of a historical film points to the heterogeneity and mutability of cinematic histospheres as an experiential field.

In the next four chapters, Greiner further develops the idea of cinematic histospheres with four paired, interrelated concepts, including "modeling and perceiving", "immersion and empathy", "experience and remembering" and "appropriation and configuration". Also, the author suggests several conceptual terms, such as "mise-en-histoire", "imaginative empathy",

“reminiscence triggers”, “incorporative appropriation”, etc., to highlight the important aspects of the paired concepts. In this way, the book demonstrates a great ambition to constructively examine the communicative relationship between the film, the filmmaker and the spectator at a theoretical level through an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical philosophies, such as Paul Ricoeur’s, with cultural discourses and research methods from theatre and performance studies, memory studies and film studies. In this respect, the term “mise-en-histoire”, which is coined by the author, can be a good example of showing the author’s ambition. Greiner uses the term to emphasise an important characteristic and function of the mise-en-scène in historical films for historical experience, as he writes:

Mise-en-histoire referentializes the world formed out of the film’s audiovisual figurations in popular historical consciousness and reciprocally links it to the spectators’ individual conceptions of history. While the *mise-en-scène* organizes the performative act of staging and the world created by it, and makes this world and act experientially available to spectators, the *mise-en-histoire* establishes a relation to collective and individual conceptions of the historical past. *Experiencing* a histosphere thus involves not just perceiving a historical world constructed by the film, but also the associations triggered by it. (93)

Together with the other aforementioned concepts, the term *mise-en-histoire* is used by the author as a key word to reflect on how our historical consciousness is shaped and influenced by historical films in the closing chapter.

Cinematic Histospheres is, if not the first, an academic monograph intended for the theorisation of the practice of historical films through the lens of phenomenology. The book aims to provide a theoretically thorough analysis of what a historical film is, recognising the intersubjective relationship between the spectator, who has the capacity to perceive, and film as an expressive medium that in some way influences our historical consciousness. A valuable contribution of this academic work is the author’s attempt to create a dialogue, albeit complex one, between phenomenology, historical philosophies and film theory. This not only encourages the exploration of one’s intuitive experience of history through film, but can also help to reinterpret the meaning of a historical film. In addition, the idea of historical films as cinematic histospheres, in a way, challenges a general definition of the historical film, which, as mentioned earlier, refers to films intended to represent particular (usually well-known) historical events and individuals, or, as Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu refer to, “films that deliberately set out to depict a past” (1). Can a film without the intention of representing particular historical events, individuals or a past still generate historical experience in the spectator? If so (especially considering Ankersmit’s theory of historical experience), can the film be defined as a historical film?

The content of the book, however, which deals intensively with complicated and philosophical concepts, could prove to be a challenging text for some readers. The book is also affected by some issues regarding theoretical construction and film examples. In the introductory chapter, the author explains that the book focuses on mainstream productions and has to exclude “experimental, non-commercial, and postcolonial films”, as he believes that these categories of film “lie beyond the scope of the theories developed in this book” (8). The author therefore selects two films—*Sky Without Stars* (Helmut Käutner, 1955) and *Years of Hunger* (Jutta Brückner, 1980)—and, somewhat confusingly, a mini TV series, *Ku’Damm 56* (Sven Bohse, 2016), as examples on which to base his theoretical framework. We can therefore ask whether these examples can be used to completely cover the theme of the histosphere. Or

can that be applied to other examples from mainstream productions? This selection of film examples also points to the question of the homogeneity of the selected films, in which the main language is German, and the crucial role of the language(s) used in the historical film. In terms of film experience, one's experience of watching a film definitely includes, and is significantly shaped by, one's perception of the language(s) used in the film—the spectator will gain a very different experience of watching the film if he or she understands the language(s) or not. This phenomenon reveals the underlying political relationship between language and historical representation, but also points to the heterogeneity of different spectators' different filmic and historical experiences in relation to language in the practical context of historical films. In order to be able to include and describe this kind of heterogeneity in a sophisticated theoretical way, there seems to be a need for an overview of popular historical films and for empirical research on representative historical films as film examples from the category of mainstream productions.

References

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