SUSPICIONS OF A NON-MOVIE-GOER

NELL IRVIN PAINTER

Robert Rosenstone's essay on historical films and history strikes me as virtuous in the extreme. Recognizing the supreme difference of genre between the history that historians write and that which moviemakers film, Rosenstone seeks to persuade stiff-necked academics that historical feature films constitute a way of doing history that is legitimate. This is fair and good. He holds, and rightly so, that we scholars who have gotten knocked about by filmmakers ought to loosen up and recognize that movies are made for the post-literate, not for us, and even we learn a lot of history from the movies. While we prize accuracy, whether our own analyses are dramatic or not, whether our own books engross readers or not, the movies present a past that is theatrical above all. And the drama in the movies depends upon a megadose of fiction.

It occurs to me that Rosenstone might have gone farther in analyzing how film influences — or should influence — the way that historians do history. The example set by historical feature films can actually improve our teaching and our writing if we take certain of the movies' ideals to heart and write clearly and interestingly. Although we may reckon that academic respectability demands drabness, we ought not squander the drama in the past.

When Nikki Keddie asked for a respondent to Rosenstone's ideas, it would not have occurred to me to offer myself as any sort of film critic, as I seldom go to the movies, and I read movie reviews in a haphazard fashion. My abstention does not stem from indifference or lack of interest,

however. Perhaps my motives for staying home are worth a phrase or two. There simply are not a lot of films that I can bear to sit through. I am:

> too grown-up and female to pay good money to watch standard-issue American movies built of macho bloodshed and the slaughter of women. This also means that I miss some of the work of black filmmakers, because the movies are so violent and their women characters seldom transcend sexualized stereotype;

> too feminist for films about murderous career women or teen-agers shown as seductresses of older men;

> too black to tolerate Woody Allen-esque, lily-white stories set in New York City. (In fact, I don't like to watch *anybody's* lily-white productions — it's too much like work.)

> Too anti-imperialist to abide films about Europeans in the colonies, even when the British come out looking silly. That kind of emphasis — on white expatriates instead of local people — still marks colonial mentality to me.

This means that though I saw *Glory*, I boycotted *Mississippi Burning*. The latter film's revision of the southern civil rights movement as white drama reminds me of two additions that I would make to Rosenstone's list of movies' "tasks." His list: alteration, condensation, invention, and metaphor. My additions: displacement and erasure, especially in regards to race.

Rosenstone mentions race, and he says — diplomatically — that the movies are not very reliable in its regard. I would have wished that his remarks had been more pointed, especially as he mentions not only *Mississippi Burning*, but also *Birth of a Nation* in his introductory remarks. The citation of *Birth of a Nation* is perhaps emblematic here, for the very fact of its maker's need to secure President Woodrow Wilson's famous endorsement, which Rosenstone quotes in his opening line, relates directly to its viciously negrophobic portrayal of southern history. A blurb from President Woodrow Wilson (who was a white southerner of a certain age as well as the holder of the nation's highest office) was intended to silence critics who branded its handling of Reconstruction as a cruel distortion. *Birth of a Nation* has long been appreciated as a great, influential, and pioneering film, a masterpiece of the genre, just as its white supremacist

message has gone unmentioned. Rosenstone's essay does not share in that disregard, yet the issue he raises leads this reader to other trains of thought.

When I saw *Glory*, for instance, I was struck less by the fictionalization of events than by two kinds of displacement. First, in a film about an all-black Civil War regiment, the main character becomes the figure of the upper-class, white Robert Gould Shaw. It may be unfair to pick on a film as admirable as *Glory*, which does manage to spend a relatively long time with its black characters. Still, the point needs to be made that non-black American filmmakers seem reluctant to focus squarely on leading characters who are black. *Mississippi Burning* and *Glory* are prime examples of black histories that in the hands of filmmakers become white narratives. (Although I have not seen the film *Cry Freedom*, I understand that an analogous displacement occurs, in which the figure of the white journalist, Donald Woods, occupies the center, and the Steven Biko character is oriented toward the white man.)

Secondly, as Rosenstone points out, *Glory* displaces the characters of actual black soldiers, who are to be encountered in the historical record, and deals, instead, with stereotypes. This is not the first time this has happened in the movies. Naturally the phenomenon of *Gone with the Wind* provides the prime example. Its producer, David O. Selznick, was obsessed with historical realism in his sets and costumes and spent tens of thousands of dollars getting every detail exactly right. Yet the black characters are little more than stock-figured faithful darkies who love their white folks. When it came to their action, Selznick paid his allegiance to racial stereotype, even at the cost of throwing verisimilitude to the winds. As a result, the movie opens with a strange chronological juxtaposition. As decreed by southern racial stereotype, the slaves have to be happily picking cotton in the fields. But the plot opens as the Civil War is about to begin, i.e., in April. Too bad that in life, cotton bolls do not open until the fall.[1] In *Gone with the Wind* as so often in the movies, racial cliché, familiar and simple-minded, obscures the complexity of experience of actual black people.

The erasure of blacks from so many movies reflects a wish to make the whole nexus of race/racism disappear from American history and culture, for race is a sort of elephant in the American family living room, a kind of family secret. In American historical drama, few famous white persons or institutions would emerge as heroic if our attention were allowed to dwell upon the inevitable presence of slavery, segregation, or the take-for-granted white supremacy that permeated American life. Even

the engaging, well-meaning *A League of Their Own* alludes only fleetingly and obliquely to the racial exclusivity that characterized that league, an allusion that in today's racial climate represents a brave honesty, I suppose, and which leads me to a notion I have long harbored.

I suspect that part of the attraction of historical themes for American directors and audiences is to be found in the very existence of the color bar that existed in American life until just yesterday. Films set in the South before the 1960s can claim historical accuracy when they create virtually all-white settings in which the only black faces belong to servants. The ultimate displacement occurs in the legions of movies that are set outside the South and that simply omit black characters entirely. By turning to the American past, filmmakers can avoid casting black actors as fully-realized characters and circumvent the sensitivities that surround the issue of race.

It would be exceedingly difficult to substantiate to historians' satisfaction my assertion that filmmakers use historical settings to avoid blackness, for I imagine that most such thoughts go unformulated, unstated, or undocumented. But the possibility deserves mention, given the narcissism of white American producers, directors, writers, and audiences to whom the mass media play. Reflecting the blemishes in our history and culture, our movies — especially our historical dramas — erase the presence of black people from history and decenter them within their own narratives.