

Re-remembering History in Contemporary Film

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Pam Cook (2005) *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*

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Pam Cook's *Screening the Past* is essentially a collection of disparate articles that reflect aspects of her research interests from 1982 to the present day. However, the author has collated her work in such a way that the articles fall under five descriptive headings linked by distinct themes and arguments, which interrelate to form an overall thesis. The first part reflects on changes in the study of contemporary cinema over the last three decades. The second section continues this theme to consider the Melodrama and the ways it tackles issues of social and cultural change, and gender relations, through emotional narratives. This enquiry shows a shift from text-based enquiry to other modes of analysis which include audience and reception study, an idea further discussed in the following part about film stars and Hollywood icons. It illustrates the ways in which film is not merely a vessel of determined meaning, but more a site of conflicted, yet interconnected discourses situated within concrete social and historical institutions. The fourth section changes tack to consider postclassical cinema and the films of Martin Scorsese. Here, Cook's articles deal with questions of masculinity, nostalgia and memory.

Although many feminists have argued against postclassical representations of violence, Cook considers the pleasures available to the female viewer as the male figure is placed in passive roles. This offers another way of seeing gender relations and the construction of the "masculine" within the scope of historical representation. In the final part, Cook reflects on the division between films that cling to some notion of a "real" or

"true" history and a cinema that represents the past through the celebration of irony and pastiche. These texts suggest that there is no such thing as an "authentic" history, only versions of recollection and projections of memory. Overall, Pam Cook's clear, accessible writing style offers an insightful and thorough explanation of the most prevalent and influential ideas within the study of cinema and history. She shows how the scrutiny of social context and cultural climate is as significant to the understanding of film as the analysis of the texts themselves. This makes this book of great use to both Film and Media Studies students in higher education and, of course, of much interest to film scholars and researchers in cinema history.

At the heart of Cook's analysis is a critique and exploration of contemporary debates surrounding the study of film representations of "history". Indeed, she explains that "the focus of this book is on the questions and challenges presented by the preoccupation with memory, history and nostalgia in contemporary cinema" (199). This study takes various forms, but there are two main areas which concern this article. The first is the way the author conducts her analysis by tracing the development of film theory from 1970s film criticism - which was, by and large, structuralist in its approach and saw meaning as grounded within the matrices of the text itself - to more contemporary forms of film analysis that depart from an isolated study of the text to consider the ways in which films are read within social, cultural and political contexts. This poststructuralist position indicates that the production of meaning in film derives from both the complex and shifting relationship between reader and text, and also from the social and cultural framework in which consumption takes place. From this exposition, Cook revisits feminist theories of cinema. The second area of concern is the exploration of the way "history" - as a social construction - is reflected in contemporary cinema. In this endeavour Cook negotiates a path through thorny issues of "authenticity", "truth" in representation and the declining authority of historical accounts. As the boundaries between fact and fiction become increasingly blurred in some films, she explores the ways in which memory in cinema can be used to create a sense of nationhood and cultural identity.

Cook begins her discussion by noting how the ideas propagated about film and film criticism during the 1970s seem to have been displaced (and even dismissed) by many contemporary film theorists and writers. Ahistorical approaches which favour Freudian, Marxist or anthropologically based analyses of the text - along with questions of ideology, representation and textual analysis - are seen as "outmoded". Perspectives that ground

film readings (and audiences) into fixed systems of meaning underpinned by capitalist and patriarchal frameworks have been usurped by an increased attention toward social, cultural and historical contexts in which films are consumed. This reflects an awareness of the interdependent and changing relationship between text and audience in the production of meaning. Here meaning is fluid and ever changing, not stable and fixed. This trend is most explicitly discussed in *Screening the Past* where Cook draws on work conducted around film stars and icons. In 1979 film historian Richard Dyer's book *Stars* (1979) broke with conventions of 1970s film theory. He did not see the film star as determined by a set of meanings embedded in an image. Rather, he recognised the representation of Hollywood icons as a space in which contradictory ideas and values about society could be dramatised and negotiated. Most notably, in his examination of the gay male viewer, he discussed why - in a world starved of positive images of homosexuality and powerful gay role models - many identified with particular female starlets like Judy Garland and Bette Davis. Dyer argues that they used their engagement with these images to explore their own social and sexual identity. His perspective was important because it emphasised the context of cultural consumption; his work highlights the significance of the social frameworks that shape the meanings that spectators create when they engage with texts. "It was at the forefront of a process of re-thinking issues of representation and sexual politics", Cook explains "and many subsequent studies acknowledged its impact on their own approach" (113). Dyer's work also challenged the intentionality of the filmmaker by showing that different audiences could read the same film in different ways, and how none of these readings necessarily corresponded to what the filmmaker might have "meant" to say.

Other researchers have extended these arguments to explore how stars (and the memory of them) play an important role in different people's lives and, in particular, those of women. Far from duping audiences into a "false consciousness," star identification has the potential to form part of a resistance process. Viewers respond to their reading of the "star" by physically changing some aspect of their own identity and mimicking and appropriating aspects of these on-screen personas. This process has provided film theorists with ways of seeing cultural resistance through spectatorship. Star identification can play an important role in processes of social change as different audiences produce meanings in texts that say something specific about their lives. Cook's intervention into these arguments about empowerment extends beyond existing debates because her work

examines both the sexual and gender politics of spectatorship. Her articles in this area focus on such films as *Outrage* (Ida Lupino, 1950) and *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990) to explore how the relationship between stars and spectators could be transformed without destroying pleasure. There are different and conflicting responses to the idealised star, she argues. Moreover, Cook challenges the idea that there is a fixed gender-specific cinematic address to women. We need to rethink, she argues, the categories in which spectators are placed. Traditional film studies has always privileged the male viewer and ignored the contribution of women to cinema. The time has come to acknowledge women's roles at the centre of cinema history.

This idea is further reflected in her work on the Hollywood Western. Here she explores how the genre is founded upon a paradoxical myth. Whilst this film type thrives on an opposition between dominant males and submissive females, the Western also portrays very strong women. However, often these characters wilt and shift into a role of subordination in the presence of the male hero who sits at the centre of the movie. Her analysis shows how history and representation are therefore fraught with conflict, struggle and contradiction. Cook illustrates how a rereading of this genre and its depiction of past societies shows how one version of history can replace another. In a sense, this is the process of history itself; this is how histories are created and also destroyed.

The theme of rewriting history is developed further in Cook's analysis of the Melodrama. This genre has provided feminist theorists with ways of thinking about how female spectatorship is filtered through a masculine gaze, but also how film can act as a social critique. The Melodrama (more than other genres) addresses the interests and social experiences of women. This enquiry uncovers "a hidden history of British popular films" (68) which largely attracted female audiences during the 1940s. Whereas much feminist research on Hollywood melodramas concentrated on the genre's more reactionary and conservative traits, Gainsborough films made in Britain provided women with a space to explore fantasies of social (and sexual) empowerment. Above all, these pictures mapped ways of negotiating female spectatorship in terms of viewing pleasure, rather than patriarchal oppression. The author's analysis returns to such classics as David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1946), Powell and Pressburger's *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945) and *Mandy* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1952). She explores how these films use nostalgic memory to privilege female protagonists and their perspectives. This reflects the historical

importance of female audiences and (even though these films circumscribe female empowerment) their influence on male filmmakers of the period.

However, the author's invention in this area of conflicting historical narratives highlights a broader context upon which Cook briefly touches. Gainsborough films in particular were the focus of much critical attention concerning the qualities and character of British cinema. She explains that the renewed concern with the historicisation of film emerged from another set of debates about the situation of British cinema in relation to an increasingly dominant Hollywood industry that was gradually colonising national cinemas across the globe. Britain, it is argued, was under attack from its American cousin. To counter this perception many film historians revisited certain types of British film that seemed to reflect British cinema in its heyday, when box office figures were healthy and British movies were seen to flourish. One of the most striking points her investigation raises is that these British films also trace the memories of émigré European film-makers (such as those who worked on *I Know Where I'm Going*). They reflect the contribution of non-British filmmakers. From this acknowledgment we can also study their impact on film aesthetics. Cook's argument relates to much larger questions about the nature of British cinema and how it should be defined. In the 1990s a discussion first began between two film historians John Hill (1992) and Andrew Higson (1997, 2000) about the identity of British cinema. Both felt that the nostalgic, heritage orientated caricatures of English national life found in much British film were highly problematic as they only appealed to (and reflected) particular factions of British society, while completely ignoring the existence of others.¹ They, and others, advocated a revaluation of British cinema that departed from monolithic representations of national identity. Indeed, I would argue that contemporary examples of British cinema – such as *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1991), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), *The Girl With Brains in Her Feet* (Robert Bangura, 1997) and *East Is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 2000) - question what it means to be British by showing the diversity of identities formed under that umbrella. What these films describe highlights the point Cook seems to be making in her book: British cinema is a heterogeneous set of cultural practices. Hill's phrase "nationally specific" (1992, 16) is ambiguous when talking about exactly what British film represents because (as Cook's

¹ I advanced a similar argument in, Jonathan Wright (1993) "Rereading the British Social Realist Film: Samantha Lay's *British Social Realism*" in *Film Philosophy* Vol. 8, No. 4.

research would suggest) ideas of memory in British cinema paint British film as inherently transnational. This further questions both how British cinema is made and also the range of perspectives it can embody.

The second major theme of interest to this article about *Screening the Past* follows neatly from the issue of the various perspectives portrayed in Britain's film culture. Pam Cook's analysis of the different forms in which history is represented is mapped by two opposing positions. On the one hand, some films mourn the loss of authentic histories. They see the growth of irony and pastiche as corrupting notions of "real" history, which damages the authority of historians. However, other films celebrate the blurring of boundaries between past and present because it illustrates that all history is a construct. Postclassical cinema is an example of film where this blurring takes place. The term is linked to notions of postmodern aesthetic. Key characteristics of postclassical film include a cynical distance from the conventions of classical cinema, where the audience is enticed into a knowing game with notions of memory and history. These social constructions - seen through cine-literature eyes - take shape only when represented in texts. "Yet the games are often accompanied by a palpable sense of loss, producing an effective response that tends to be overlooked" (168). The past and the present collapse into a singular narrative; moments in history only have meaning in the moments of the "now". For filmmaker Martin Scorsese (the subject of the fourth part of this book) this loss of a past can be tragic. He uses a sense of nostalgia for the past to reflect the loss of a secure and stable history that never really existed. He injects pathos into his character's lives. Rather than simply creating a distance from these characters and their nostalgia, the director encourages us to engage with these dysfunctional figures and empathise with their plight. Cook's analysis of Scorsesian postclassical cinema deals with questions of masculinity, nostalgia and memory. Many feminists rage against this type of representation, but she avoids what she calls "puritanical" rejection of deplorable violence to see what pleasures are available to the female viewer in these images of flawed, emasculated masculinity. Scorsese's films are an avenue of exploration. They cover a range of different and challenging masculine constructions through the gaze of the past.

However, postclassical cinema also runs the risk of losing sight of the idea that there should be a quest for authentic historical enquiry. Cook is interested in the opposition between a quest for authenticity and history in film and celebrations that can be found in some forms of postclassical filmmaking. She recognises that moments in history always

need to be returned to, and the priorities of enquiry constantly require reassessment. Historians always need to think about how history is approached and presented. While “truth” may be subjective, that does not mean that we live in a relativistic state where all versions of history and “truth” are equal. All history is a representation that needs to be read, reread and deconstructed. Historical representation says as much about the psychology of the historian and the filmmaker who portrays it, as it does about the content of the actual history presented. This has encouraged a positive shift away from the depiction of the “big events” in history toward an enquiry into the day-to-day, ordinariness of historical events. Often these analyses are more concerned with the subjective responses of filmmakers (and audiences) that can be seen to mirror social context and cultural climate. Cook argues for a closer examination that looks at the interplay between text and context to see how texts are shaped by history, and also how history is often shaped by representation. However, she admits this is a difficult task and often what happens is that text and context are brought together. This means that texts are regarded as little more than vessels of information to be used to record and preserve social events.

Cook’s understanding of filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow’s work illustrates a search for different histories. Bigelow is interested in transgender identities and her films use pastiche and parody. She draws from other films to create a “new” sense of history. Rather than create a sense of nostalgia about the loss of an authentic and stable past, Bigelow’s films use images of the past to rewrite history from a contemporary perspective. Some critics argue that pastiche and irony in cinema disconnect it from history and question the very notion of “a” history. The past is collapsed into a perpetual present “in which style and image are privileged over content and context, with a consequent diminishing of emotional affect” (202). However, Cook argues that this use of film can be used to create a new kind of awareness “of the role played by images in accessing the past, for example, or the way images create meaning by reference to other images, rather than by referring to a fixed content” (203).

This endeavour is intricately linked to Cook’s arguments in earlier sections of the book in which she deals with the fluid relationship between text and audience, and the different uses audiences have for texts when they engage with them. She suggests that the recognition of this interrelationship enabled audiences to produce meanings in ways that say something specific about their lives. I would argue that there is further evidence to suggest that this discussion about appropriation says something significant not just

about the audience, and more importantly about the filmmaker. This process shapes a political consciousness and critical “voice” and I think that links Cook’s examination of the contextualised study of film with questions of how histories are cinematically represented. Filmmaking can challenge dominant versions of history to provide a form of self-representation to those groups and communities that have traditionally been marginalized and silenced, stranded without self-representation. The most pertinent examples of this trend (in British cinema at least) can be found in the work of Black/British Diasporas. Black cinema portrays society through the idea that film represents a sense of collective history. When black filmmakers talk about autobiography they refer to collective experiences of black communities. These experiences shape “popular memory” (Weaver, 1982). As Teshome Gabriel (1989) argues, official history creates a “centre”, a dominant narrative which marginalizes the “other”. Memory reflects the ways in which dominant history is constructed and gives voice to those silenced by its machinery. Through the exposure of these suppressed elements, that which is being represented is formed through personal histories, memory and “trans-national” (Teshome: 1989, 53) collective autobiography. Therefore, many black films return to specific moments in history to reread those events in relation to how they affected black communities. There are two obvious examples of black filmmakers retelling history. *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1990) returns to the 1977 Silver Jubilee celebrations and *Time and Judgement: A Diary of a 400 Year Exile* (Menelik Shabazz, 1988) reconsiders the events in the early 1980s that shaped the world at that time. These strategies are designed to dramatise the issues and politics most important to black filmmaking. This illustrates why Pam Cook’s analysis seems to indicate the importance of a poststructuralist theorisation of cinema. As black film illustrates, when diasporic filmmakers appropriate existing images found in mainstream media they bring new meanings to a dominant (colonial) history. They retell its story using their own “voice”. This is an important intervention in film studies which examines both the ideological content of the text, and the political context in which cinema represents history. Pam Cook’s research lends a further (and vitally important) dimension to this discussion through her investigation of women, history, nostalgia and contemporary film.

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