Bokmelding

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Forestillinger om fortid. Historisk fiksjon i film og fjernsyn

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Both fictional films and documentaries on the historical past have experienced a boom in recent years. Or, one could say, yet another boom, since filmic representations of the past have never really gone out of fashion. Cinema has, from its very beginning, been preoccupied with historical themes. The broad appeal of historical film and its power to shape our views of the past make the genre an important and fascinating object of study. It invites questions on how and to what effect fictional film and television mediate and communicate the past. How does the mediatisation of history alter our understanding of the past? What role does film play in the formation of (national) identities and collective memory? Do filmmakers have an obligation to be true to historical facts? These are fundamental questions that have occupied historical and film scholars for many years. They are also addressed in a new book entitled Forestillinger om fortid. Historisk fiksjon i film og fjernsyn, by Sara Brinch, Hege Gundersen, Gunn Ragnhild Bekken, Julianne Rustand and Tonje Sørensen.

The monograph’s title and the cover image—a film still from the Norwegian TV series Kampen om tungtvannet—suggest that this is a book about historical film and filmic representations of the past. But is it? Although the volume covers a wide range of issues, it manages to be evasive about its aims and whom it seeks to address. Historians? Film scholars? Students? The general public? Or practitioners? For historians, film scholars and even students, the discussions are often too cursory, and neglect important methodological issues. The interested general reader, on the other hand, gets a good introduction to scholarly debates surrounding filmic representations of the past. Nevertheless, even a layman within the field would have profited from a more thorough historical contextualisation of the genre, and a discussion of its key concepts.
The book, for instance, never explains or defines what a historical film is. One can, of course, be critical of scholarly efforts to categorise historical film and divide it into subgenres. One can also question whether historical film really constitutes a genre or an industrial category, and whether it is the form, the industry or the audiences that define a ‘historical film’. The authors, however, simply pass over the issue of definition. Instead, they seem to consider all films that are not set in the present, future or a fantasy world, to be historical films. Films from different periods, origins and genres are lumped together under the label ‘films about the past’. This summary approach is highly problematic, as it ignores not only useful distinctions between genres, which exist despite obvious overlaps and fuzzy genre boundaries, but also disregards developments within the genre, as well as differences between films of different national origin.

Given the topic of the book, it would have been interesting to explore how filmmakers in different countries and at different times have dealt with historical subjects. What differentiates a Kurosawa film about feudal Japan from Visconti’s period drama on the struggle for Italian unification, or a Merchant Ivory production set in the Edwardian era? Readers who want to know more about developments within historical film or to learn about aesthetic or thematic differences between historical films from different cultural contexts will be disappointed. What is more, the book makes no attempt to problematise the notion of the past. What constitutes the past? Some younger audiences might indeed consider a film about the genocide in Rwanda a historical film because it is set in a period, and place, that is remote from their experience, whereas others would reject the label ‘historical’ for productions such as Hotel Rwanda. The introduction would have been the place to address these issues and to discuss the scope and aims of the study. It would also have been the place to elucidate the criteria for the selection of the films. The choice of films—predominantly from Norway and Hollywood, combined with selected films from British, German and Danish cinema and TV—is not contentious per se. What can be criticised, however, is that the authors make no case for focusing largely on recent productions and excluding the majority of continental European cinema, or cinema from other parts of the world except Hollywood.

A review should, of course, also focus on what a book includes, rather than what it simply omits. Forestillinger om fortid consists of an introduction and six chapters, each of which is devoted to a specific theme. A bibliography and an index complement the book. The individual chapters combine a discussion of key questions with short analyses of film scenes, mostly from recent film productions, or classics that most Norwegian readers will be familiar with. A positive feature is the images, often film stills of high quality and in colour, although the placement of the images seems somewhat haphazard. It is also useful that the thematic chapters can be read separately, and, despite some overlaps, that they complement each other.

The first thematic chapter, Chapter Two, examines filmic conventions in historical film, and debates the question of realism, authenticity and what constitutes a truthful representation of the past. Examples from Steven Spielberg’s war film Saving Private Ryan (1998) and the opening titles of the British TV period series Downtown Abbey (2010–15) are used to illustrate the argument. The general reader will learn how historical film uses colour and sound to visualise the ‘essence’ of a historical period and to reproduce an (imagined)
‘spirit of the age’. The chapter also underlines how film caters to and shapes the audience’s perceptions of the past by recycling and referencing earlier images, thereby creating a sense of authenticity. Unfortunately, the chapter also tries to cover too many issues and therefore lacks coherence.

Chapter Three is devoted to the discussion of the historical subgenre of the biopic, which has, according to the authors, experienced an immense upsurge in recent years. The essay takes up the tension between historical accuracy and artistic licence addressed in the previous chapter, and introduces the reader to a variety of approaches filmmakers have adopted to bring important historical personae back to life. However, is the recent wave of biographical films really a result of the individualisation of contemporary society and a celebrity-obsessed culture, as the authors claim? Biopics have also experienced great popularity in the past. Clearly missing, therefore, is a historiographical perspective that would have drawn attention to the varied purposes historical film served. How films about kings helped to boost the morale of the British audience in the Second World War, for instance, or how the wave of biographical films about medics in post-war Germany could be read in the context of wartime guilt.

Chapter Four deals with the difficulties surrounding the filmic representation of historical trauma. In their analysis of Hotel Rwanda (2004), Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959), Schindler’s List (1993) or Inglourious Basterds (2009) the authors show how filmmakers have experimented with different aesthetic and narrative forms to depict the horrors of genocide and war. Clearly one of the more persuasive chapters in the volume, it critically discusses whether and how forms of extreme violence can and should be depicted. Filmic representations of genocide have often triggered heated controversies, with critics castigating the glorification of violence, and survivors objecting to the falsification of reality. The problem is, as the authors argue, that the medium of film does not just describe events, but rather prescribes an audience’s access to and perception of those events. It seeks to invoke in the spectator a feeling of being present at the time, which inevitably conflicts with the experience of those who were really present. The authors therefore ask if the conventional Hollywood style can adequately represent the suffering of victims. Does extraordinary violence require extraordinary aesthetic means, and if so, can such a film actually speak to a broad audience?

Chapter Five explores how films create a sense of the past, using the examples of three popular TV series: the Danish Matador (1978–82), the Norwegian Vestavind (1994–95), and the German Heimat (1984). The author adopts Bakhtin’s literary concept of ‘time-space’ (chronotope) to explain how historical film visualises historical time. The discussion of how film historicises space and spatially expresses time is illuminating, but it also highlights the problem of the book’s broad notion of historical film. The German concept of Heimat is timeless and thus cannot be fitted into the confines of historical film.

Chapter Six reflects on the role of film in the formation of nations and national identities. Again reverting to the examples of Matador and Vestavind, the chapter’s first part examines how filmic representations of the past influence our views of it. The second part calls attention to the subversive and emancipatory powers of historical film. The Norwegian Kalde spor (1962), for instance, successfully questioned national myths, while the Samic Veivisern (1987) and Kautokeino-opprøretor (2008) asserted historical memories that had
been hitherto excluded from the national narrative. Although this is a thorough analysis that also addresses the concept of national cinema, the role of gender and the post-colonial turn, it nonetheless leaves the reader with many questions. How exactly does national film, apart from referencing national stereotypes or flags, mobilise the past to create national myths? How does the fact that national cinema is open to influences from other cinema influence its representations of the past? How is Norwegianness inscribed into the mountainous snowy landscape of *Kalde spor*?

Chapter Seven, which concludes the book, also examines historical film in the light of nation-building processes. However, its main focus is on the genre’s role in the construction of public memory, and the role it plays in commemoration. The chapter discusses how the popular TV series *Kampen om tungtvannet* (and the two films that depict the same event) and *Kon Tiki* (2012) have shaped public memory in Norway. The authors ask whether the filmmaker has a responsibility towards history given how greatly historical film shapes a society’s views of the historical past. The chapter also touches on the interesting question of how mediatisation and globalisation have turned history, or rather the filmic construction of national histories, into a global commodity. Again, these issues are examined all too briefly to satisfy the reader.

The fact that the authors decided against a conclusion is unfortunate. It would have provided the opportunity to draw together the book’s different themes, and sum up the key arguments the authors intended to make. As it is, the book leaves the reader with a plethora of images, thoughts and questions that may inspire some, but will leave others unsatisfied, and even confused.