

# Lights! Camera! Action! And the Birth of Historical Film

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## Abstract

Films convey the past as a different mode of expression and presentation. The past when translated as visual images in the moving picture, the narrative gets adapted to the massive entertainment structure of popular film. Written history that follows the dictum of positivist historiography stand apart from this genre of historical film. Where the written text fails, feature films succeed in capturing the emotive heuristics of the past through making plots and plots in the way of history telling. The mode of presentation in feature film and historical texts do follow different methods to recreate the past, but films engage in the recreation with signs and symbols different from textualised past. On the screen sometimes historical film take the central theme of the problem and without deviating from it, creates certain plots that did not happen in the past. This is done to capture the attention of the spectators. On a pedagogic level the use of films for propagating history seems highly promising in so far as the films make history an affectionate way of narrating the past.

## Key Words : Representation, Film, Fiction, Spectator

There is a convention in believing representation of the past, professionally called history, as dead past, unmoving and static in words and phrases and in the form of tangible artefacts, always reiterating positivist notions of objectivity and ultimate truth of historical science. In a post literate world too, many cling to this belief in positivist craftsmanship of history writing, a history that replicate the past, to quote Leopold von Ranke, past as it had exactly happened. Rankean traditionalists who were / are acclaimed professional historians, as a community, cherished the idea of projecting history as factual representation of the past in the light of the critical scrutiny and analysis of sources through a scientific methodology that legitimise the claim of history to the status of being called a science. They consider history as a science of the past that comes under the rubric of social sciences. Implicit in these notions is the belief in scientism, that would create a truthful knowledge of the past through eliminating the philosophical rumination or imagination of the historian and rejection of historical imagination that make room for accommodating an emotional world. In their desire for regulating the entry of the emotional world, a coercive restraint is recommended for containing imagination that would fictionalise and in effect weaken the claim of scientific history writing. Emerging from this standpoint epistemology, is the pertinent question of a narrative past like a chemical bond or mathematical equation that is born in the laboratory of the historian, the archives. The archives become a sacred space for the historian and therefore the textualised past of the archives is to be carried forward into the narrative of the historian.

Left to the world of imagination and creative representation, history moves closer to a novel, a story or a film that delegitimise scientific nature of the historical science. Unmoving belief in scientism and penchant desire for retaining the status of history as a science, any act of representation other than the stereotyped textual past was considered unscientific, biased, imagined and therefore not worthy of calling as qualified history. Even when showing some respect to literary forms of historical representation in sources like novels, stories and autobiographies with affiliation to certain definite historical context, films were usually regarded as highest forms of fictional representation, as the creation and production of films are basically for entertainment. Entertainment is not the work of the historian and it is the work of those people who create a fantasy world through irresponsible story telling, not history writing, it was argued. A mass popular cultural media, the film caters to all thought and lived worlds and therefore stand poised to impress the spectators through fictionalisation of the real lived spaces, people and events and on most occasions representing the miraculous powers and skills of the human world. How can Gandhi come out from the archives through flesh and blood and Pazhassi cry on the screen leaving the sacred space of the archives? How can colonialism and forms of European power told as stories? How can history be set to rolling with a cast of people that unfold their emotional, psychic and personal world without recourse to the conventional forms and structures of history writing? Most of these concerns were predicated on the grounds of a dislike and distrust of the filmic representation of the past from quarters affiliated with foundational positivist notions of historiography.

### **History as Film and Film as History**

Modes of representation of the past have changed over times often taking cue from the changes happening in the society. Creation of the motion pictures and the immense possibility that developed in representing life and times of the past offered a visual treat for the people and simultaneously created a plethora of sources for the historian to examine the spirited histories, an exposure that was inaccessible for the historian in the fixed world of the text. This is to argue that history writing and its epistemological dimensions are linked to the changes offered by technologies that simulate historical sense through intensely feeling with the past, instead of knowing the past through texts. All films have a history to communicate, as all films are produced at a specific cultural milieu. And, they do have a history to communicate through stories pinned to emotions like pain, agony, joy, happiness, contempt, solidarity, revenge, cruelty, care and kindness. What was considered as subjective is treated by films as subjective but the subjective representation on their count recreate a lost emotional world which was out of reach of the histories of the texts. Before proceeding to the argument, one must have an understanding about the genre, historical film. Representation of history(past) communicated through a script, moving images, acting, and other connected technologies like music, sound, editing and vfx can be broadly defined as a historical film. It can be a bio pic, period film and even a complex problem oriented film drawing source bases from political, social, ideological, gender and event oriented historical evidence. Like a historian select and analyse past evidence from various sources the film makers represent history through visuals and moving images through a selective use of the data available. As post modern film historians like Robert Rosenstone and Natalie Zemon Davies argue, historical films proceed with the past taking a central historical problem as the focus of the cinema and also through adding certain stories, invented for the visual

pleasure for the spectator who are not always students of history. This invention of plots and sub plots in no way undermine the historicity of the central problem that the cinema is projecting as a different kind of filmic representation.

### **The Spectator / Reader Conundrum**

All spectators are not readers of history. Historical film produced under the rubric of the film industry focusses on this aspect for the success of the film at the box office as well as its intellectual entertainment value. Films when depict history of an era or a period through shots and definite angles do have a perspective to display on the screen. Film makers as a team prioritise on the top the contentment of the viewer of the film through transmitting a message that can be easily digestible for them without reference to other sources and perspectives. Every shot is filmed bearing in mind of the illiterate spectator belonging to the elite, middle and the subaltern classes whose interest of viewing the historical film is based on aspects more psychological and not intellectual. Every shot is to transmit the meaning immediately to the spectator and any hurdle in understanding the meaning will take away the entertainment value of the film that portray a historical context in the form of an event or individual. The spectator is the viewer and reader of the film and since the film is a visual engagement for few hours, the spectator has to leave the cinema hall without any doubt. This is a major constrain of the maker of the historical film and usually the author of a history book is not concerned about the realisation of the contentment of the reader as the readers are selective members from the community who have the capacity to interrogate the author at any point of time. Beyond this, the reader enjoys the freedom of completing the book in days or even in months and sometimes make a selective reading of chapters. Film on the contrary, is an engagement with a very limited time scale, for a maximum of three hours in the case of lengthy films that develop only in progression with the history/ story that it unfolds. While the readers can wait, the spectators of a historical film cannot wait for days and months in completing their viewing of the film. On a different angle this is the major problem in making a historical film that caters to the diverse class based spectators of the historical film making the digestive nature of the history as the primary agenda of the film maker.

Films are basically made for seeing. It is a visual pleasure document created through collaboration among directors, writers, artists, technicians and other crew that belongs even to the mess. Films are at the intersection of seeing and reading for while at the time of seeing it is entirely a different document that make you feel at home or thrown open into the emotive world of discharge. Seeing is highly momentary and sensual, enabling the spectator as one with the actors and conditions on the screen. Once the seeing is open it opens immense possibilities for a reading of the film through repeatedly seeing the film from beginning to end or a selective seeing for analysing the film and its method of story telling. The later seeing of the film, takes the spectator of the film into an exercise of reading the film for making certain critical judgment in the case of historical films. Like the textual documents, one has the advantage of even reading the filmic text in print (the script) for making a detailed analysis of the historical representation embedded in it. At the end of seeing, in higher intellectual levels, the question of reading assumes significance, especially in the case of historical films as reading after seeing engages a textual analysis of the script as well as the montages the film use for

implicating its historical perspective. The reading of the historical film critically addresses issues connected with the writing of history into the film, an engagement that is markedly different from other representations. Seeing is popular and reading of historical film is intellectual and one must get to know that seeing in the first instance with popular spectators too enable a kind of reading history in their minds but that is outside the purview of the historian and an essential quality criteria of historical film maker. Seeing and reading are the twin epistemological engagements that the examiner of historical film engages with making inevitable for the person involved acquire competency in excavating meanings out of the reels which is an interdisciplinary act of knowledge creation at the highest cognitive levels. This argument is posited to state that reading the film at the scholar's level is secondary to the reading in the first instance at the spectator's level for the historical film is the primary reading that the film makers are looking forward. Visibility of the historical problem that the film targets is more popular one than intellectual taking the film reading as a different engagement when compared to the reading of a book on history.

### **The Data as People: 'Mammootty Pazhassi Raja'**

On the screen historical data found in the textual format in the archives have to be visually translated into moving images, like individuals, crowd, buildings, landscape and most critically as emotions on the move. A description about Pazhassi attack on Panamaram military camp of the British can be described in a book through a paragraph with citations and even explanatory notes. In reenacting the Dandi March speed and gestures of Gandhi become central in the film than the statistical data like the distance covered and the number of fellow walkers with the leader. In the historical film, the data is invisible and what is visible are the people and places that adapt the data through cinematic imagination of the film maker, primarily a collective effort on the part of the director, script writer, camera man, the sound engineer and the musician. Even the last in the hierarchy, the light boy do have a role to play in making the data visible through the moving shots. Fictionalisation of the data as stories and sub stories is not a sin committed by the film maker in this direction because on the screen history must be fictional to be objective. Realisation of the notion of objectivity differs with the methods through which past is visually translated. When the data becomes popular actors and actresses including the stars, the film maker is again in trouble owing to the popularity of stars and the resultant conviction of the spectator in looking at a particular actor as the hero in a historical movie. At this juncture the film maker makes certain true invention, as Rosenstone phrases it out, through branding a celestial star to fit into the heroic theme of the film. A suitable example can be drawn from the Malayalam movie *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja*, a film that showcases the struggles of a historical hero, who in archival terms according to the versions of the British administrators, looked like a monkey. To make things difficult, this is the only textual document about the appearance of the rebel king, who was to be identified when found dead or alive by the British. Again the description goes to say that he was wearing only a dhoti with a red cap and a moustache with no ornaments. According to the original colonial sources Pazhassi moved on the top of elephants as the terrain of the forest was demanding. For a positivist, archival trained professional historian, the cinematic portrayal of the rebel king can be problematic owing to the falsification of the primary sources, the sacred sources available in the repositories.

This issue makes a classic case for understanding ‘true invention’ as Rosenstone argued. Leaving a serious contestation of the veracity of the primary document, a film historian has to look at the popular perceptions of the rebel king whose heroism and valour are enmeshed in the historical memory of the people of Kerala over the centuries. In the mind and memory of the people the data regarding the physical features of Pazhassi is insignificant, where the heroism of Pazhassi Raja stand out like a fossilised relic in the popular memory or collective consciousness. The film therefore, cannot neglect this popular memory and straight away make a cross over from the archives direct to the screen. The screen is different, it is a space where history is to meet the emotional as well as societal understanding about the historical hero. Whereas, the archives do not have a corroborative cluster of evidence, the film maker instead of being on a slippery ground, turn to the act of a true invention in compressing the entire scheme of the film under the emotion of heroism. Pazhassi Raja is brought to the fore front in the celestial stardom of Mammooty and dispel any possible threat of rejection or nullification on the part of the audience. On the screen ‘Mammooty Pazhassi Raja’(emphasis mine) makes sense and go hand in hand with the spirit of the film, heroism and popular perceptions. Similarly elephant is replaced by horse as the symbol of the warrior king, attire is recasted with the look of the *Chekovian* of the Northern ballad and gold ornaments became an essential cinematic addition for bringing splendour onto the screen. Heroism, revenge, isolationism, grief and contempt became cinematic moods well reflected on the face of Mammooty and the whole audience literally moved along with him in the film. This felt realisation of the documents is *sine qua non* in historical film and true invention to that realisation is valid stemming from the responsible filmic- historical imagination of the film maker. It is not the super star but a galaxy of stars and other ordinary actors make the historical crowd visible on the screen, because Pazhassi’s struggle cannot be visualised on individual terms for his struggle happened on a vast geographic scale moving from the plains to the forest with lot of affiliating people belonging to different classes.

### **From Events to Processes: Imperialism in Film**

Is cinema incapable of presenting complex histories like the texts do? Can such issues be told through stories? Two crucial questions that need attention in understanding the intellectual as well as educational values of historical film remains as a problem for many historians. How can stories be theoretical? In cinema, theories are adapted into stories without disturbing the pleasure of the spectator, motifs including landscapes, material belongings and even gestures and moods are cinematically arranged to explain serious epistemological questions of the historical film. This cannot be a simplification or wrong sensical application of theory, but a story centric theoretical directionality essential for the pleasure effect of the movie. From the western box, Battleship Potemkin belongs to this genre where rebellion and solidarity are well explained in the Odessa steps, the steps that has phenomenal potential for locating similar movements and actions elsewhere in the world. The Odessa steps scene where people affirming their solidarity with the rebels unfolds the thesis of dissent and the collective consciousness of the masses that come out against dictatorial regimes of power. Hegemony, Imperialism, Dissent are conditions that need a touching scene wise depiction for moving history along the lines of theory, the theoretical *mise en scene* through cinematic imagination is the only option left



for the film maker. In *Iyyobinte Pusthakam*, a Malayalam movie which can be rightly labelled as a historical movie of complex issues of colonialism, hegemony and protest moves along the screen telling the story of landscape transformation, tea imperialism and exploitation in stories affiliated to individuals whose names may not figure out exactly in the archives. They are invented characters for the film, barring the timber merchant Angoor Rawther, a timber trader who dictated terms of timber business in the hilly regions. A timber trader as usual became a villain in the film, though available records do not have a trace in it to establish his villainy.

The encounter with the hero Aloysius towards the end of the film is an invented truth for confirming the defeat at the hands of the hero, celebrated star Fahad Fazil. These inventions in the script do not take away the significance of the film, its historical value in excavating into the deeper layers of the colonial culture that penetrated onto the hills and created images in the self of the native. The European culture on the hills including the culture of a changed ecology is well filmed in sync with the available documents. The hunger for land, be it the European or the Native and the subjugation of the female body as a just pleasure site is visualised by the film, adding educative value to locating manifestations of power, hegemony, gender and ecology on the screen. This film comes under the genre of problem oriented historical films that have a flair of bringing deeper concepts and ideologies onto the screen. Films belonging to this genre never uses terms and terminologies like hegemony, imperialism or gendering but put forth them through stories intelligible for the audience and along another plane caters to the need of the serious history researcher. More than that the film used immense material from the archives while conceiving the script that take the film closer to the status of being called a filmic critique of colonialism and the power structure it created.

### **Real vs the Unreal : Semantics of Historical Film**

A major question that confronts the historian or history aspirant is the question of the real past in the films. Real and real pasts are a question of imagination even when one look at the original records from the past. Every document that is classified as the original document on the past is created through imagination and perspectives that dominated the then present in the past. There is a Past/Present context for all documents that are examined through textual analytical tools and methods by the historian and any history that is reconstructed from these documents is a secondary imagination basing on the first and original emotion of the document writer. The sacrosanct nature of the written history draws its instrumental recognition from the rich source base of the archives. Other than this recognition, the written history too is the outcome of imagination at two levels, the first stage when the document is created in the distant past and the second stage when those documents are used for representation by the historian. In both the stages, imagination is at work. It is argued, therefore, that the reality constructed in the written text as well as the filmic representation are the outcome of imagination based on sources in two different modes of representation. Cinema follows the grammar of the visual and imagination at work in cinema is more revealing and spectacular than the imagination conceived in the written text. The real and the unreal are present in the deeper levels of both the engagements, in cinema as well as the text. The structured grammar couched in the definite format of the text makes the real as seemingly closer to the reader, whereas in the film it is dubbed as fantasy or falsification. Both use their own rules of

exposition but when cinema does it, it becomes fantasy in the case of historical films. Printed texts too proceed with meaning creation through an emplotment where plots are imagined in the minds of the historian. The same mode of sequential representation is resorted to by the film maker in communicating the historical with all its viewers and a strategy of such a communication is different in cinema. Real and the unreal are knitted together as the unreal is essential for the transmission of historical meaning for the general public. In texts too the unreal appears in the form of conclusions and standpoints taken by the author based on real/unreal documents of the past. Taking all in all, reality is a construct and implicit in it is the question of the presence of the unreal.

### **On the Use of Films as Source for History**

Any film produced in the past become a source base for the historian as it copy from the lifeworld of the real lived spaces. For instance malayalam films produced in the 1970's depict the milieu of Kerala as it was seen in those times. The landscape including the topography, rivers, trees, animals, attire of people, vehicles, roads, buildings, shops, campuses and all that are part of daily life come along with the humans. Even one could gauge the gender relations and social distinctions of living through a critical analysis of the films. The body and notions of aesthetics are visually transacted in the films that call for more critical studies in the social history of the region. One can ask very curious questions about the advent of technology and the question of alienation of the worker in the film *Odayilninnu*, a film that takes into cognisance the deplorable and miserable life of a rickshaw puller in Kerala. It is the arena where the subaltern world and its images are visually reflected on the screen. Here the film portrays not just the subaltern life, but the emotional world of the poor cycle rickshaw puller and the agony and disillusionment that transcends onto the face of the man (donned by Sathyan) which no records and written narratives can transmit. The film moves into the felt realisation of the poor to a greater degree than the novel of Keshav Dev can afford to effect through words. Shots from the sets enter the heart of the audience who sympathise with the poor man on the screen. One cannot think of getting a more stronger evidence in reconstructing the poor man's world than films in this instance. Visuals and moving mages bring life into historical reconstruction and turns out to be the evidence for writing textual histories bringing structural changes in the format of historiography. Movies in these respects make a rich source base for effecting an ideology of emancipatory historiography and democratise columns of social history vital for knowing the region. Films without any direct historical connotation comes closer to Foucault's argument that any kind of history is written from the present and in that sense all histories are presentist in nature. The film maker as in the above case might not have anticipated a turn in historiography but the ideology of post modern history in later times made departures in understanding films as important sources for writing histories. Quite interestingly, such films produced in far of times become historical films through the expanding scope of methodologies in history writing.

### **Silent Archives and the Noisy Cinema Halls**

All records of the past remain in the muted status inside the archives, the laboratory of the historian. Like a science laboratory the historian is attempting the selection of documents that fit into the narrative of his

history. Unknowingly imagination creeps into the histories without even the historian knowing of it and in the case of even knowing such an entry , the historian cannot stop imagining a past world as his/ her enterprise demand a narrative that people read and think on their own. The historian is helpless in breaking the silence in his narrative and the silence is broken in some cases through the imaginative thought world of the reader. The Historian is dead then. Histories speak out in new directions. Films are reenacted versions of the past bringing much noise, celebrations , frustration and joy onto the screens through moving shots. History become a story that moves every second like the life and people of the dead past were doing in their present. Along with lights, camera and action, the histories of the past start rolling for the audience who sit in the dark witnessing to the past. Filmic histories are not just moving histories but they do make rooms for feeling history. That makes a lot for the world of historiography.

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