

History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines, **by Eleftheria Thanouli. Bloomsbury** **Academic, 2019, 279 pp.**

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Many connections between history and film may spring to mind as we consider the title of Eleftheria Thanouli's *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines*. No, this book is not about the history of film or about films as historic artefacts, but it deals with those films that provide us with an interpretation or explanation of history; in short, Thanouli addresses the representation of history in film. Over the course of her book, the author develops a carefully constructed argument about the status of cinematic history and the merits of history in film, as well as a taxonomy for the analysis of representations of history in film. Accordingly, the book is organised into two parts, each comprising three chapters.

The introductory chapter aims to provide an overview of academic thought with regard to cinematic history from the two disciplines of history and film studies. While written history still enjoys the reputation as the trusted and objective source of knowledge about the past, the historical film is, more often than not, met with suspicion and its merits are largely ignored when examined for truthfulness and authenticity alone. However, scholars concede that historical films contribute to historical thinking and imagination, functioning as “cultural sites where meaning is negotiated” (6). This relates, of course, to the familiar argument that films make meaning of history in the present.

Before Thanouli delves into the particularities of history in film in the second part of her book, part one deals with the conceptual and theoretical issues involved in discussing historiography and “historiophoty”—the term coined by Hayden White by which he means “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (“Historiography” 1193). Chapter One focuses on works by Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes, and Jean-Luc Godard, and their respective ideas on the relation of historiography with cinema and literature. All three of them point towards the similarities in the problems and questions faced by historians and filmmakers. Kracauer's comparison of general history writing to the theatrical film (based on their shared aim for unity and consistency) is picked up by Thanouli to emphasise the commonalities of history and film in the use of narrational devices. Thanouli underlines the “search for unity and cohesion, the construction of temporality, and the tendency to establish clear cause-and-effect chains of events” as shared features of written history and film (26). Besides David Bordwell's discussion of classical film narratives which aim for this transparency, Hayden White's *Metahistory* is a cornerstone to this argument because White, likewise, proves that in fact all written history uses comparable narrational strategies. In a similar vein, Barthes' discussion of

historiography is based around the narrational strategies employed by historians to simulate their objectivity (“Discourse”). Importantly, when considering photography, Barthes identifies the photograph as the only medium with unique ties to (historic) reality, therefore casting both written history and film in opposition to photography due to their fictional status (“Reality”). Finally, another common ground found by historians and filmmakers is expressed in Godard’s argument about audiovisual historiography, his cinematic account of a history of cinema in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, when the filmmaker becomes the historian and vice versa. What Thanouli draws out as the uniting factor between Kracauer, Barthes, and Godard is that their considerations of history in relation to cinema and literature call into question the privilege of written history over the past: cinema and literature challenge the very idea of history and its practice.

Chapter Two provides space for Thanouli’s discussion of media specificity. The author uses the analogy of analogue and digital cinema to point out that, while two media may seem to differ greatly when put into direct comparison, they actually have a lot in common that is overlooked when taking such a medium-specific view. The analogy of the digital here serves to highlight that written and cinematic history use many of the same devices in their representations of the past. Thanouli advocates that we should move away from a media-specific view and focus on shared practices instead.

Chapter Three looks at the historical and institutional settings of history and film. The points made throughout are interesting nuggets of information that provide other entries into thinking about history. The author discusses the continuities in historic writing and its recurrent questions, as well as the close collaboration between historians and filmmakers since the early Hollywood era. Using Michel Foucault’s philosophical thinking about history, Thanouli situates academic historiography as the form of knowledge generation from the nineteenth century and historiophoty as the representation of history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This chapter provides further explanations for the perceptions around historical films discussed in the introduction, such as the point that film is predestined to an increased exposure to critical evaluation due to its visual information overload and the mass reach of the medium in comparison to written history.

The three chapters of the first part of the book appear somewhat disjointed and the argument made by Thanouli is, at times, lost in the background of the many other authors she references. Thanouli’s contribution to the debate of the representation of history in film lies with her suggestion to think of the historical film, on the one hand, as the dominant form of history in our contemporary age and, on the other hand, as a “magnified miniature of a historical book” (12). Thanouli argues that cinematic history has replaced academic history as the dominant form of making meaning of the past in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a point she elaborates somewhat in Chapter One. An important commonality between historians and filmmakers is the narrative devices used by both to turn a chronicle into a story, a point that the author repeatedly makes throughout Part One of the book. Much of Thanouli’s work is therefore grounded in Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, which argues that historians construct the past through narratives and that their work is necessarily enveloped in the respective authors’ ideologies. Thanouli’s argument then is that filmmakers of historical films act as historians in that they select, organise and present historical facts. These practices are much more apparent in films than they are in written history, so “filmic histories magnify, multiply, and intensify all the key traits of academic written history”

(59). Thanouli maintains that, while written history seeks to maintain a transparency of representation, historical films alert us to the underlying mechanisms in the construction of any historical discourse. Precisely because historical films do not claim to represent the past as it really was, they allow us to examine the ways by which professional history writing strives to forge an illusion of objectivity in getting to the one historic truth. In short, historical film as the “magnified miniature” enables us to recognise the mechanisms of written history. Thanouli’s choice of analogy would have benefitted from an elaboration, which she merely manages to begin in the concluding chapter.

The second part of the book focuses on the narrational strategies which are employed in the historical film and which provide additional meaning. The organisation of Part Two appears more rigid than the first three chapters due to the more detailed parts of the framework the author chooses. Some helpful tables are provided by the author for ease of following the structure.

In Chapter Four, Thanouli assembles a taxonomy for the close analysis of narration in historical films by merging concepts from White’s *Metahistory* (mode of argument, and mode of ideological implications) with David Bordwell’s narrational strategies (classical, art-cinema, historical-materialist) and her own extension of Bordwell by the category of the post-classical narration. Thanouli ends up with a set of three modes (narration, argument, ideological implications), which provide a variety of explanations that a historical film can offer about the meaning of the past to us today. While these can theoretically be mixed to any liking, certain combinations of modes are more amenable than others. For instance, she argues, the art-cinema mode of narration is likely to be combined with an Organicist mode of argument and an Anarchist mode of ideological implication, while the post-classical mode of narration favours a Contextualist mode of argument and a Liberal or Conservative mode of ideological implication.

Chapter Five focuses on the representation of history in the fiction film and provides more detailed explanations of each mode of narration and the likely combinations with modes of argument and ideological implication. Rather helpful is the brief discussion of six fiction films about the Second World War to illustrate different combinations of modes: *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*, Roberto Benigni, 1997), *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, László Nemes, 2015), and *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009). Chapter Six deals with the representation of history in the documentary film. Here, Thanouli briefly introduces Bill Nichols’s taxonomy of the documentary film which she adapts to form the mode of representation (as opposed to the mode of narration in fiction film). Examples are selected from documentaries about the Vietnam War—*The Fog of War* (Errol Morris, 2004), *Regret to Inform* (Barbara Sonneborn, 1998), *Sir! No Sir!* (David Zeiger, 2005)—and biographic accounts—*Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry* (George Butler, 2004), *The Last Bolshevik* (*Le tombeau d’Alexandre*, Chris Marker, 1992), and *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (François Girard, 1993).

The second part of this book is thus a presentation of a more technical framework that merges the well-known taxonomies on narrative strategies by Bordwell and on documentary strategies of representation by Nichols with White’s modes of explanation found in written history. This part of the book stands in contrast to the more philosophical and fundamental questions addressed in the first part of the book. Thanouli uses the short concluding chapter to reiterate her

argument that historical films enable scholars to scrutinise the processes involved in historical representation of all kinds through their exposure of narrational devices. She has a few short words about her “magnified miniature” analogy, but immediately introduces another analogy for thinking about historical film as “failure”.

In sum, *History and Film* provides the reader with a selected literature review of some of the important works that engage with the intersection of the two disciplines. Moreover, it assembles a taxonomy for the analysis of historical films, both fiction and nonfiction, that may prove useful to students of film. Its most novel contribution, however, lies with the analogies that Thanouli employs to think about historical film, and her book leaves the reader wishing she had made more of this.

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