Moving History Beyond The Optics: *Killers of the Flower Moon, The Bikeriders,* and *The Zone of Interest*

Robert Burgoyne

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 55, Number 1, Summer 2025, pp. 16-30 (Article)

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.2025.a965733

MOVING HISTORY BEYOND THE OPTICS: *KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON*, *THE BIKERIDERS*, AND *THE ZONE OF INTEREST*

ROBERT BURGOYNE
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Over the course of the last year, Kim Nelson, John Trafton, and I have been publishing the monthly podcast *Moving Histories*, treating the representation of history in visual media and focusing on contemporary films and mini-series. The term "moving histories" refers to moving-image works about the real historical past (Nelson 1). One of the questions that continually animates our discussions is the potential of new works to engage the past differently, to reimagine the past by troubling the conventions of the history film, both in terms of subjects being considered and in terms of form being imposed. Some new perspectives have emerged from these discussions, challenging expectations, and I can best explain this provocative set of challenges by examining three titles: *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), *The Bikeriders* (2023), and *The Zone of Interest* (2023).

All three of these three films contest how historical films are traditionally anchored to the actual, documentable events of the past. This convention of historical filmmaking has been affirmed and reinforced by the historian Natalie Zemon Davis. As she writes, the events of the past are at the center of the written historical account; the historical film, necessarily, should also be constructed around documentable events. Although the history film, she allows, may include an imagined plot and may involve entirely fictional characters, the historical events themselves should remain grounded in fact. The historical film as a genre, she writes, is composed of dramatic feature films in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events, or in which an imagined plot unfolds in such a way that historical events are central and intrinsic to the story (5).

For many years I have relied on this restrictive definition to distinguish historical films from other types of films set in the past, such as the costume drama or period film. The events of the past, I have argued in several places, are the elements that give the history film its genre identity and specificity. Recently, however, I have realized that the criterion of "documentable historical events"—history conceived as past public events that have been documented in written or other types of recorded form, studied, and passed down as the "facts" of what occurred—comes from a dominant popular and academic culture, not from any philosophical or scientific certitude. A subtler question has thus emerged: Can Davis's restrictive definition of the historical film accommodate events that have, indeed, occurred and personages

that have, certainly, existed but have never been registered as "historical?" How do we situate, as historically meaningful, the charged experiences of people who are outside any dominant or recognized historical framework, such as the Osage tribespeople in *Killers of the Flower Moon* or the motorcyclists in *The Bikeriders*, to take two recent examples? *The Zone of Interest*, for its part, challenges Davis's prescriptions in another way, favoring a sensual depiction of the past rather than plot and narrative as a dominant mode of historicity. In short, the criterion for representing historical events is tested when the cultures or peoples being represented exist outside the horizon of the historical, as it is conventionally understood, or when the experiences of the past are represented through sensory channels such as hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

Killers of the Flower Moon (2023) and the Moving Histories of "Hidden Nations"

Killers of the Flower Moon is a history film drawn mostly from the "missing pages" of history. No full investigation of the great majority of the murders, thefts, and systems of economic exploitation suffered by the Oklahoma Osage during the period covered in the film, the early to mid 1920s period known as the "Osage Reign of Terror," has yet been done. And what was known of this history has largely been forgotten or ignored by later commentators, with the notable exception of journalist and author David Grann.[1] In terms of historical filmmaking, the work fits into none of the categories I have set forth in my earlier book, *The Hollywood Historical Film*. It is not an epic, nor is the film a biopic. It is neither a topical film, which typically concerns a singular event, such as the attacks on 9/11, nor a war film. *Killers of the Flower Moon* cannot even be described as a metahistorical film, a type of film that deconstructs and rethinks the existing written history of a period or an event (Burgoyne 2008).

Rather, the work uses the very limited known and documented events of the past—the murders and thefts committed by William Hale, with the assistance of his nephew Ernest Burkhardt—as an opening, a way to suggest a much larger and deeper portrait of the past that has yet to be written or recorded. Even the known events—the murders of the Osage woman Mollie Burkhardt's family members, the murder of the Osage man Henry Roan, and the arrests and convictions of the white Hale and Burkhardt by the fledgling Bureau of Investigation for first degree murder, are only a small part of the history that could be written—a decades' long story of white racial murder, consisting of poisonings, shootings, and bombings, as well as economic theft, a story that has not yet been fully investigated or documented. For its part, the film

[1] The excellent work by David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (2017), provides a background accounting of the Osage natives complicated system of "headrights" and a detailed excavation of the murderous scheme of William Hale to steal the headrights of Mollie Burkhardt. The book spends a great deal of time, as well, on the formation of the FBI and its investigation of Hale and Ernest Burckhardt. It is less focused, however, on the lives of the Osage tribespeople apart from their victimization by many of the white townspeople.

sets forth many scenes that suggest how widespread the murders of the Osage were. Grann estimates that there were hundreds killed (307-308). But the quick vignettes of Native murders sketched in the film remain speculations about events that have never received a proper legal or historical accounting.

This obscured, larger history of widespread white racial murder in Oklahoma, from the removal of the Osage to Oklahoma in 1907 to the convictions of Hale and Burkhardt in 1926, is itself only a miniscule part of an even larger story, the history of the forced displacement of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, and the near-genocide of the Native population in the US, along with the expropriation of their lands and wealth. The empirical facts of this extensive and sordid history may be discoverable, perhaps, given sufficient motivation, effort, and time. But the film *Killers of the Flower Moon* also suggests that a historical account from the dominant culture perspective may well be a distortion in its own right—the categories, logic and underlying themes that govern Western historical recounting would be inadequate for such a story. Western historiography's particular styles of framing and narration, its emphasis on agency, causation, and teleological organization, may well obscure or occlude more than it would reveal.

The anthropologist Edward Spicer has written of the "hidden nations" that are embedded in all national entities. Every nation-state, he writes, "is a plural entity," containing within itself two or more nations, populations that are not part of the established order, nations that are essentially invisible (31). Although the widespread use of the term *nation-state* tends to obscure the fact, the nation-state is not a welded unity, but rather, almost without exception, consists of several entities that have long been considered nations in their own right, possessing distinct languages, histories, and cultural symbols with their own modes and traditions of recounting the past (Spicer 26-48). Until recently, nation-states have generally succeeded in concealing or eradicating the cultural particularity of these hidden nations. In keeping with this observation, a Western historiographic treatment of the Native past may, paradoxically, contribute to what Spicer calls the weaving of a "cocoon of confusion" surrounding Native culture (48).

The Osage of Oklahoma, however, were a special and complicated case, moving suddenly from being a "hidden nation" to one of the most widely known, publicly visible peoples in the US. With the discovery of oil beneath the barren lands they held by treaty – an agreement that included mineral rights, thanks to a prescient tribal negotiator, the Osage became the wealthiest people on earth, according to newspaper articles of the time, "the richest nation, clan, or social group of any race on earth, including the whites, man for man" (Jefferson 1994). The media made a spectacle of the Natives' wealth, emphasizing their flamboyant consumption of Western goods, and occasionally reporting on the many early deaths of the tribespeople, some of whom were said to have been afflicted with a "wasting disease." The oil-rich Osage of Oklahoma were living lavishly but were also being exploited for their wealth by the white townspeople. They were, moreover, living under a media

spotlight. Traditional tribal ways were abandoned by many, as the natives, for the most part, enthusiastically embraced Western consumerism.

The ostentatious wealth of the Osage headright holders—the hereditary share of a certain percentage of the oil extracted from Osage lands, a share which was restricted to Osage tribespeople and their spouses—was accompanied by a steady and systematic deprivation of their agency and autonomy, the theft of their wealth, and physical victimization, exemplified by the numerous poisonings and other instances of violent murder. The film suggests that many prominent members of the white population of Osage County were involved, including the two doctors featured in the film, the banker, the Sheriff, judges, and many more.

Overall, the film adheres to conventional narrative codes of historical filmmaking, centering the story on Mollie Burkhardt, an Osage woman, and the efforts of William Hale to acquire her headrights, which include having his nephew, Ernest Burkhardt, marry her and participate in the murders of her sisters. Ultimately, Ernest also participates in poisoning her; although to my mind, the film leaves some doubt as to whether he knew the food and the insulin he was administering to her to treat her diabetes were tainted. *Killers of the Flower Moon* traces a complex murder plot that is in part governed by traditional historical narrative codes of causation and agency, and oriented to a particular outcome—the arrest and conviction of Hale and Burkhardt. In certain scenes, however, it suggests that there may be another type of history woven into the realistic narrative fabric, a history that shows itself when the patterns of the past are perceived from a different angle. Another dimension emerges—a visual and sonic register that departs from historical filmmaking in order to suggest a different realm.

Several shots and scenes have a surreal, hallucinatory quality to them. These include Mollie's vision of an owl as she is nearing death because of the poisoning, which she interprets as a visit from her dead mother; her "hallucination" of William Hale standing over her bedside when she is almost dead, a vision that reveals his murderous agency; her mother Lizzie's death scene, where she walks from one zone of reality to another, accompanied by long-dead elders. These surreal departures from standard narrative syntax are filmed "realistically"—there are no visual cues to indicate that these are imagined, subjective scenes, or hallucinations. For me, they suggest the co-existence of another world, another reality, dwelling alongside the depicted historical world.


Lizzie's death scene in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023)

The powerful and haunting scenes I have just alluded to, as well as several others, evoke a realm that exists apart from, or in addition to, the world of punctual events. They expand our sense of what the past contains or could contain. The idea of history—the knowable past—as the domain of strictly punctual events, with causation, agency, teleology, and consequence mapped onto a coherent trajectory, may be challenged here. In Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon,* the narrative toggles between a historical recounting anchored to actual historical events, and a poetic recounting that hints at the multiple worlds the past contains. In *Killers of the Flower Moon,* a novel sense of the past co-existing with the present, what poetically might be called an ancestral past, is layered into the narrative. This past-present layering, as represented mainly in the film's mise-en- scène, is composed not only of human actors and the things that have occurred to them, but also of non-human animal avatars, as well as the memories and messages embedded in the natural world, including the wind, the rain, fire, and smoke, all of which are expressly evoked as carriers of messages from another realm. An alternative form of temporal consciousness comes into view, beyond or perhaps alongside empirical human history and agency.

The Bikeriders (2023) and Vernacular Moving History

For my second example, I consider a very different film, with a very different topic—*The Bikeriders*, directed by Jeff Nichols. The work is derived from a book of photographs by Danny Lyon, who rode with the Chicago Outlaws Motorcycle Club for four years, from 1963 – 1967, and from interviews he did with members of the club. The film covers the period, roughly, between 1965 and 1973.

The Bikeriders challenges the conventions of the history film in several ways. For one, it consists of a wholly imagined narrative drawn from documentary photographs and interviews. No historical events are represented in the film; it is resolutely not anchored to documentable historical occurrences. Moreover, the

characters conjured from Lyon's collection of photographs seem to exist in an almost complete historical vacuum. Public historical events, such as the deaths of Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, the police riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, and major social movements, such as the Civil Rights and the anti-war movement, have been bracketed from the dramatic frame. Nevertheless, the film's fictional Vandals Motorcycle Club, self-defined as completely outside mainstream culture, acquires increasing prominence and cultural visibility, just as so-called outlaw motorcycle clubs—the clubs not approved by the American Motorcycle Association—became a cultural touchstone during the period represented in the work.

The film explores what I consider to be a historical paradox: a group of misfits and malcontents that exists almost entirely outside the reach of public history nonetheless leaves a decisive mark on it. In its rendering of an iconic manifestation of vernacular culture, the film does not connect public history to the ordinary lives of the characters, as many films do, but rather showcases a very different kind of history, a drama of emergence, as the motorcycle club acquires a potent social visibility that I will call "prestige from below," a phrase I am borrowing from George Lipsitz who uses it to describe the popularity of Black music among white audiences (110-111). The film also chronicles the slow erosion of prestige, as the club takes on an increasingly menacing public persona and finally descends into violent criminality.

The Bikeriders poses a particular question for critical consideration: can vernacular forms of cultural expression be understood within a historical horizon, or further, as an expression of historical thinking? A work based on an imagined story, derived from a book of documentary photographs, *The Bikeriders* builds a diegetic world not from the events of public history, or the way these events intersect with the lives of ordinary people, but from a semi-poetic meditation on a particular social milieu. It presents a unique critical problem for the analyst of historical films. As with *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the usual categories that I have employed to delineate the subgenres of the historical film cannot be discerned here. One could ask whether the idea of the historical is even relevant to the world depicted in the work? With its detailed rendering of period costumes, older motorcycles, (which the director called the "biggest divas he's ever worked with"), behavioral styles, haircuts and makeup, highways and commercial architecture, the film is highly evocative and naturalistic (Nichols 2024). The challenge the film presents to the historical genre thus revolves not around whether it provides an accurate or inaccurate depiction of a certain period and social group. Rather, the difficulty in critical definition arises from the ambiguous historicity of a past not marked or shaped by any recognizable public events. *The Bikeriders* can be seen as dramatizing a particular and generally ignored *historical* phenomenon—the sudden rise into public visibility of an underground vernacular culture that thrusts itself into cultural prominence. It brings into relief a surprising and radical form of historical self-authoring, perhaps not so unusual in American culture, an insistent writing of the self and the collective into history.

Several other manifestations of prestige from below, the writing of the self or the group into cultural consciousness, can be found in American life, ranging from the well-known zoot suit movement of the 1940s, to the emergence of the Mardi Gras krewes, the costumed Mardi Gras tribes of New Orleans, into high-profile alternative societies, at least for the duration of Carnival, to the relatively recent B-Boy and B-Girl breakout into mainstream culture, to the artistic appropriation of public space in the work of graffiti artists. In each of these manifestations of social emergence, a certain physical and imaginative space is transformed. The ordinary domains of quotidian life, the Hispanic neighborhoods and dance clubs of 1940s LA, the streets of New Orleans, and the urban corners where breaking was developed, are inscribed in a new way, converted into a kind of arena or stage. The public square, in these moments, becomes the signature space for the realization of a different reality, an alternative world, with a new set of protagonists.

My principal example of this vernacular inscription in *The Bikeriders* is the space of the road, which serves as the symbolic matrix of the film. A familiar trope in American cinema, the road is usually pictured as a locus for the working out of a personal and often tragic destiny. One thinks immediately of *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Wild One*, the film's acknowledged antecedent, and of songs like *Born to be Wild* and *The Leader of the Pack,* among many others. Here, however, the road functions as a space not for the playing out of an individual destiny but for collective emergence. In *The Bikeriders*, the public space of the road becomes a zone of self-expression, a domain reclaimed from the plebian world of ordinary life, of commercial culture and civil authority. In the mass spectacle of motorcycle riders appropriating the road—a space oriented to order and control, despite its connotations of freedom—the film suggests a counternarrative of 1960s American life, usually portrayed as a charged historical canvas of racial struggle, political assassinations, the Moon Race, anti-war protests, and the rise of the counterculture. *The Bikeriders* portrays the period without the usual historical markers. Instead, the sounds of the bike engines, the colors the riders wear, their denim and leather vests and iconographic patches, the tattoos that ornament their faces, arms and shoulders, all function as a kind of mobile tagging, to borrow a term from urban culture, a *recoding* of the road as a space of performance, for the assertion of the self, an arena for displays of masculine identity centered on collective power.

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of the road as the key chronotope for what he called "the novel of historical emergence" (1986: 10-59). In Bakhtin's formulation, the protagonist of this type of work moves along a narrative trajectory, encountering challenges, overcoming difficulties, and occasionally receiving favors. The road becomes the setting and the symbolic pathway for the emergence of the hero, who comes into full flower along with the emergence of the historical order itself. Although the hero narrative can no longer be sustained in *The Bikeriders*, the performative command of the public space of the road in several scenes that give the film its aesthetic power suggests a historical shift, defined by a unique form of prestige from

below, translating the riders from passive outsiders, consigned to the social margins, to agents of a collective identity that gains increasing cultural and social visibility as the film develops.

In its approach to a historical phenomenon that exists on a different wavelength than what is ordinarily considered historical, the film proposes a challenging new perspective. In other ways, however, it trades on tropes of performative masculinity in film that are well known and conventional. Paul Willeman has described the way the male body is displayed in several film genres, the types of scopic pleasure that are solicited by the male figure in Westerns, epics, and crime films: "The viewer's experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' (that is, walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes, or more abstractly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated ... and restored through violent brutality" (18).

The spectacle of the male figure riding, fighting, moving through the landscapes of a midcentury Midwest is one of the key sources of visual pleasure in *The Bikeriders,* a film that solicits the gaze from its initial sequences. The film confirms Willeman's dichotomy of the pleasure coded into seeing the male body move, and the unquiet pleasure of seeing that body mutilated. Indeed, the character Benny, one of the two male leads, receives a vicious (and potentially mutilating) beating from two bruisers in a bar in the first scene of the film, who demand that he "take off his colors." He refuses to remove his Vandals vest, "You'd have to kill me first." The beating that ensues, and that inaugurates the film, comes to us out of narrative order; it begins the film, but its occurrence in the story is shown to be much later, as if the director, Nichols, wished to foreground precisely the dynamic of violent wounding and violent reparation that Willeman describes. The resurrection of Benny, however, and the violent brutality that the Club administers in response to his beating, is narratively deferred. The film opens with violence and then circles back to underline the pleasure of watching the male "exist."

After the initial scene, the plot jumps back a year or two, unfolding in linear chronology from this point forward. Benny soon emerges as the principal protagonist of the film, an avatar of the rebellious and semi-articulate male beauty so vividly exemplified by James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the like—a moody, mysterious figure with a perfect pompadour, perfect whether he is at rest or in motion. The camera studies his way of smoking a cigarette, his style as a pool player and as a bikerider. The story of the Vandals Motorcycle Club, with Benny as a kind of male emblem, is in many ways a celebration of the mystique of the bikeriding male.

Throughout the film, the desiring gaze is centered on Benny, played by Austin Butler, whose almost wordless performance magnifies his allure. Serving as a projective screen for his girlfriend Kathy, played by Jodie Comer, as well as for Jack, the leader of the club, Benny and Kathy's first meeting in the biker bar is staged around a series of point of view shots, eyeline matches, and lingering closeups. Although Kathy's reaction shots are emphasized, the optical drama spotlights Benny as the

object of desire, not only for Kathy, but for the other bike riders, and especially for Johnny, played by Tom Hardy. Benny's narrative agency is entirely based on the handsomeness he radiates, in shot after shot of him riding, moving, or simply existing in the bars and streets where the Vandals preside.

Kathy and Benny in *The Bikeriders* (2023)

The Bikeriders concerns a zone of American culture that, until recently, has been underrepresented in film, and in media generally—the white male culture of sub-working-class men who are well down the rungs of the social ladder. The film examines what we might call the psychology of enfranchisement—the identity and sense of belonging that membership in the motorcycle club confers, and the violence that is a first resort when that culture is threatened. Although Kathy's voice narration ties the scenes together, and the actor, Jody Comer, is superb, she is very much a secondary character, almost like a one-person Greek chorus, commenting on and narrating the diegetic action, but secondary to it. The principal concerns of the film are the opaque zones of male comradery, an inarticulate homosocial network that is mediated by machines, beer drinking, and the group choreography they perform on the road. *The Bikeriders* provides a portrait of a world that is both alluring and repellant, a world where aggression is a default setting and where the rules and codes of the motorcycle club are both unwritten and aggressively enforced.

The Bikeriders provides an example of the myriad ways that films engage in historical reflection, in this case dramatizing the emergence into public visibility of a heretofore little known and understood social group, a kind of hidden nation in its own right. It also registers a certain historical sensitivity to time. In *The Bikeriders,* the way temporality is rendered shapes the film's image of a past that is familiar but now lost. Here, the textures of the past emerge not through punctual events but through behavioral details, through gestures. Time figures, nevertheless, as a key theme in the film, not historical time as we ordinarily conceive it, heading inexorably toward a teleological resolution, but lived time, the time Benny spends outside Kathy's house,

waiting for her to come out for another ride; the time it takes to smoke a cigarette, or many cigarettes; the time of waiting; the time of the run; the miles of road that unfold beneath the wheels until the gas runs out. These are offered as moments stolen from history proper, from historical time, as it were, from the clock-time world that all the players feel is pursuing them, in one form or another, and that is bound to catch up.

Killers of the Flower Moon and *The Bikeriders* trouble one of the cardinal tenets of historical film work, the idea that history films must be anchored to actual historical events. As I hope to have shown, the category of historical events is entirely informed by a dominant culture perspective on the past—the past construed mainly in terms of punctual events, occurring in a specific place and time, caused by agents that are knowable, and linked to other events occurring earlier and later in time. The films I have chosen to set against this paradigm are films where the concept of "event" is ambiguous, where the agents of events are unknown, unspecified, or concealed, where historical causes, where they can be noticed at all, are undefined. And yet, the idea of the past as meaningful shapes each film's overall construction of a world, a world that exists and unfolds, in the main, outside any traditional historical horizon.

The Zone of Interest (2023) and Corpographic Moving History

The Zone of Interest also challenges the conventions of historical cinema. Although the film unfolds within the general frame of one of the most heavily represented of historical periods, the Holocaust, its focus on the family life of the Commandant Hoss and his wife Hedwig, whose house lies just outside the walls of the Auschwitz death camp, allow it to explore a unique subject: the quotidian daily life of the household, the sensorium the characters experience, and the psychopathology that undergirds their lives. Although historical events, cause and effect, human agency, and the teleology of a known outcome are emphatically present, the core of the film lies outside the horizon of the historical, focusing rather on the world of the senses and the zone of domestic routine.

I would like to offer a few preliminary observations about history and its representation in film, providing what I hope is a useful framework for this somewhat speculative part of my essay. Historical films are replete with optical signs that communicate "pastness," signs that are inscribed in mise-en-scène —in costumes, settings, and décor—and that extend to the color schemes that are associated with certain historical periods, exemplified in the pastel pallet that is often used to suggest the 1950s, or in the saturated whites, reds, golds and bronzes that connote the ancient worlds of Rome or Greece. Lighting styles are often similarly employed to evoke the past, as in the candle-lit interiors of *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *Franklin* (2024). The formal coding of pastness in the history film extends even to editing rhythms, which tend toward the deliberate. A fast montage, for example, serves as a noticeable exception for the genre, visible only in a few films, such as the work of Sergei Eisenstein or perhaps in some films by Oliver Stone. In historical films, optical signs of pastness

carry a doubled meaning. The act of "seeing" the film becomes a surrogate for the notion of "seeing" the past, of looking through a window into a past world. The impression of re-witnessing the past itself as we view its representation on screen is underlined in the language we use to describe the history film, a lexicon suffused with phrases like visioning or re-visioning the past (thank you Robert Rosenstone for these terms).[2] Films are often said to provide the closest thing to an eyewitness account of the historical past. As Roland Barthes once said about the experience of watching a wide-screen epic, it was like "standing on the balcony of History."[3]

The impression of imaginatively seeing the past with one's own eyes is especially important in Holocaust films, I suggest, which typically emphasize the act of seeing, of bearing witness. Seeing the death camps, seeing the bodies of the murdered, even in a dramatic film, becomes a way, imaginatively, not only of confronting the past, but of predicating the horrible reality of the Holocaust.

In *The Zone of Interest*, however, a radical turning away from vision as the dominant channel of information distinguishes the film. Instead of vision, other senses are emphasized, especially hearing, but also touch, taste and smell, sensory messages that are conveyed synesthetically by the camera. In the film, we are bombarded with the constant noise of heavy machinery, barking dogs, the barking of orders, gunshots, screams, trains, and the sound of marching boots. But the film's use of sensory channels other than vision extends beyond the sonic landscape it sets forth. The dense smoke that we see pouring out of the chimneys of the ovens functions both as an optical sign and as an olfactory one. The softness of the furs and the lingerie stolen from the Jewish women in Auschwitz becomes a distinctive tactile sign. The sensory impressions of touch, smell, taste, and hearing are brought into sharp relief in the film.

I would like to call this a "corpographic" rendering of history. A term invented by the historian and geographer Derek Gregory, "corpography" (2014) is a concept he developed to explain the sensory awareness of the soldiers in war, and how they navigate the battlefield, which frequently involves smell and touch, in addition to hearing. The sensory awareness employed by the soldier on the battlefront goes well beyond the sense of sight. Although sight may be privileged in ordinary discussions and representations of war, which abound with references to reconnaissance, surveillance, and cartography, vision is not the most important sensory mode for the

[2] In his pioneering studies of the historical film, Robert Rosenstone has devised three main categories of historical representation in film: those that "vision" the past; films that "contest" history, and those that "revision" the past.

[3] In a very short essay discussing Cinemascope, Barthes describes the stretched out frontality of the widescreen image as "the ideal space of the great dramaturgies … Imagine yourself in front of the *Battleship Potemkin*, no longer stationed at the end of a telescope but supported by the same air, the same stone, the same crowd: this ideal *Potemkin*, where you could finally join hands with the insurgents, share the same light, and experience the tragic Odessa Steps in their fullest force, this is what is now possible; the balcony of History is ready. What remains to be seen is what we'll be shown there" (1999).

soldier in the battle zone. In actual battle, the field of vision is diminished, so there is limited information to be gained through sight. If you can see the enemy, you can also be seen—and become a target.[4]

Extending the idea of corpography to the historical film provides a critical approach that can augment the strictly optical indexing of the past in much of the scholarship on the genre, allowing other kinds of critical observations to emerge. In *The Zone of Interest*, for example, we never see the victims of the death camp, we never view the interior of the camp at all. The punishments, executions, and disposal of the bodies are all evoked through other sensory channels, such as touch, hearing, taste, and smell, sensory registers that here carry historical meaning.

For example, the importance of the sense of touch is represented in the touching and holding of the soft clothing taken from the Jewish women in the camp, which is passed around by the German wife of the camp commandant, Hedwig, or Mrs. Höss, and her Polish friends. They admire the clothes and the jewellery and comment on how fine they are, wasting no time in distributing them among themselves. In the pocket of a fur coat stolen from a Jewish woman, Hedwig finds a lipstick. After first smelling it, she applies it to her lips. This intimate gesture is surprising: she has no qualms about applying the lipstick of a Jew to her own lips, nor does she hesitate to wear the fur coat, or to put on the jewellery. The scene hints at a weird kind of masquerade, an odd psychological turn that is difficult to interpret, but that is unlike anything I have seen before in a film about the Holocaust. It is strangely vampiric.

[4] Derek Gregory describes “corpography” in the following: "By ‘corpography’ I mean a mode of apprehending, ordering, and knowing the battle space through the body as an acutely physical field in which the senses of sound, smell, taste, and touch were increasingly privileged (over the optical-visual register of cartography) to produce a somatic geography or a corporeality.”

Hedwig applies lipstick taken from an internee at Auschwitz in *The Zone of Interest* (2023)

A very different response to tactile contact with the Jewish victims of Auschwitz is registered by her husband, Commandant Höss. About midway through the film, he is fishing with his children in the river when a human bone, perhaps a jawbone, bumps against his leg as he is standing in the water. He is panic-stricken. He hustles the children out of the river. Later they are aggressively scrubbed with lye soap to remove the "contamination." Upset by this tactile contact with death, with the bone of what is presumably a dead Jew, Höss reacts in a surprising way. He is the commandant of the camp, and no doubt is aware that some Jews were drowned by the guards in the river. He obviously sees the piles of corpses on the grounds of the camp. This obsessive washing of the body also occurs after he has had sex with a young Jewish girl, who is brought to his office to service him. Directly after we see her removing her shoes, the film cuts to Höss in a dingy basement room at a sink, aggressively washing his body. The foregrounding of the sense of touch in these scenes suggests a pathology that is both overt and subtle, rendering in a new way a historical world that is now almost impossible to re-imagine or re-enact.

Hearing is consistently emphasized in the film, as well. As we listen to screams, gunshots, barking dogs, shouted orders, and the grinding, heavy sounds of unidentifiable machinery, the sonic register seems to fill out the picture of horror that the film resolutely refuses to show. The sounds represented in the film extend to one of the Höss's two sons mimicking the sound of gas whistling through a nozzle. The older son has locked the younger boy into the family greenhouse, where he stands outside and hisses. A fledgling member of the Hitler Youth, surely, he has visited the camp and heard the sound of the gas as it entered the killing chamber.

Smell is frequently foregrounded in *The Zone of Interest*. For example, the smell of the flowers in Hedwig's garden is vividly represented, foregrounded, as when Hedwig introduces her young baby to the roses she grows. The smell of the bodies being incinerated serves as counterpoint. When Hedwig's mother comes to visit, she remarks on the smell, which is ever-present. She coughs continuously from the smoke of the incinerators.

Even taste carries a historical message. The taste of the food taken from the camp and the taste of the vegetables the family grows, which "the children love," brings home a rather sinister point. The vegetables, the film suggests, are fertilized with the ashes of the murdered Jews.

In this essay, I have focused on aspects of some recent films that challenge the critical schematics that I have employed in the past to analyze the history film. Firstly, I query the idea that historical films must be anchored to documentable historical events. In the first two films I discuss above, the historical pasts the films set out to communicate are not defined by the known or actual events of the past. Instead, both *Killers of the Flower Moon* and *The Bikeriders* portray a historical milieu in which the conventions of historical representation, the emphasis on causality, on agency, on the delineation of a certain period, on teleology, recede into the background. In the third film I discuss, *The Zone of Interest,* I question the priority of optical signs of pastness in historical representation in film, focusing on the foregrounding of other sensory modes, such as hearing and touch, a style I call a corpographic rendering of history. In the recent Holocaust film, *The Zone of Interest,* our sense of the past, our re-experiencing of the historical world, is principally achieved through the bypassing of optical evidence, ordinarily a kind of imprimatur of truth in historical filmmaking. Instead, *The Zone of Interest* evokes a sense of synesthesia, where optical signifiers suggest sense impressions in other registers.

Two new critical ideas have emerged from these lines of questioning: the possibility of extending concepts of historical meaningfulness beyond the horizon of historical events; and the potential of a corpographic engagement with history, where senses other than vision are evoked to trigger a new, enlarged sense of historical experience and meaning.

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism," in *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 10-59.

Barthes, Roland. "On Cinemascope." Translated by Jonathan Rosenbaum. http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/vol3i3/barth.htm. 1999. The essay was originally published in *Les lettres nouvelles*, February 1954.

Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. 2008.

Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2000.

Evans, Tony Tekatoniaki. "How Returning World War II Vets Helped Establish America's Biker Clubs." *Inside History*. A&E Television Networks. 2021. https://www.history.com/news/motorcycle-gangs-origins-wwii-veterans. Accessed 15 October 2024

Grann, David. *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage murders and the Birth of the FBI*. New York: Doubleday, 2017.

Gregory, Derek. "Corpographies." 2014. http://geographicalimaginations.com/2014/07/16/corpographies. Accessed 15 May 2015.

Jefferson, Margo. August 31, 1994. . Books of the Times: The New York Times.

Klein, Chrisopher. September 1, 2018. "The FBI's First Big Case: The Osage Murders". HISTORY https://web.archive.org/web/20240210111532/https:/www.history.com/news/the-fbis-first-big-case-the-osage-murders. Accessed 15 January 2024.

Lipsitz, George. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1997.

Morson, Gary, and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Nelson, Kim. *Making History Move: Five Principles of the Historical Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024.

Nichols, Jeff. June 24, 2024. "The Bikeriders: Myth, Men and Motorcycles." Interview, 1A, WAMU: NPR.

Rosenstone, Robert, editor. *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton University Press. 1995.

Spicer, Edward H. "The Nations of a State." *Boundary 2*, 19, no. 3. 1992, pp. 26-48.

Willeman, Paul. "Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male." *Framework* 15/17, 1981, p. 16.