

## **The Historian as Filmmaker: the challenge of film as history – the case of *Cissie Gool***

Gairoonisa Paleker

A key problem in the production of film as historical knowledge has been that of combining the dual role of historian and filmmaker. While the roles are not mutually exclusive, they have impacted in different ways the selection of material, foregrounding certain issues while minimising others, and the degree of creative treatment given to historical facts.

The film *Cissie Gool* is a component of a Masters thesis. A second component is a written paper that has served a number of purposes: firstly as a reflexive engagement with and comment on the film and secondly as a written complement which seeks to discuss and analyse aspects of the historical subject researched that could not be adequately discussed in the film. Some examples of these are Cissie Gool's work as a Councillor on the Cape Town City Council and her relationship with her mother. Documentary films, especially those that conform to the conventions of the expository mode, which the film *Cissie Gool* is, operate under the constraints of a "double tyranny".<sup>1</sup> The first aspect of this "double tyranny" is that film has to move at a rapid pace so as not to bore audiences and the second aspect is that documentary film especially seems to require a correspondence between the visual image and the spoken narration. The double tyranny has impacted the relative superficiality with which the film has treated Cissie Gool's work as Councillor and her relationship with her mother. This academic requirement of a written accompaniment to the film would seem to underscore Hayden White's point about the complementary role both written and visual representations of history can play.

**A significant challenge to the historian as filmmaker is the academic debate around film as history as opposed to film as source of history.** While historians are less reluctant to accept films as sources of history (what films can tell us about a period or event in history, as ideological evidence about the attitudes and values of a society, how film has been used to educate or shape public opinion), there is serious

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenstone, Robert, "History in Images/History in Words", p.1180

debate about accepting filmed representations of history. This reluctance is based on the fact that historians compare film with written representations. As a result of this comparison, film is analysed and critiqued in the same way as a written text, despite the fact that the two mediums are entirely different and are governed by very different codes and conventions of structure, style and mode of delivery, though they may be based on and comprised of the same sources; photographs, letters, archival documents, etc.

The debate around filmed history, specifically the documentary film, centres on the problem of “really putting history on film”.<sup>2</sup> That is, creating the kind of history that is full of the complexities of the subject matter, displays the nuances of interpretation, discusses methodologies and sources and addresses concerns of historians in the field. In other words, filmed representations of history fail the charge of comprehensiveness. Critics of film as history claim that film can at best only raise issues and questions or arouse an interest for further research. In and of itself, it cannot provide all the answers or research, because it is a poor medium for the exploration of detail and presentation of balanced information.<sup>3</sup> It has a poor information load.

While *Cissie Gool*, the film, has not been conceived or constructed with the idea of a point by point refutation of the key criticisms levelled at film, it has sought to engage with the broader debate in very specific ways. An often cited criticism is that film is a constructed reality achieved by the manipulation of visual material by the filmmaker. The documentary filmmaker “makes endless choices. He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not.”<sup>4</sup> **If film is a construction on the basis of this kind of mediation by the filmmaker, then the textual narrative is equally a construction by virtue of the same criteria.** And, as has been argued by Rosenstone (1988), Nichols (1981) and White (1988), written history can be critiqued for the same reasons that filmed history

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<sup>2</sup> Rosenstone, Robert, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film”, in *American Historical Review*, 93, 5, 1988

<sup>3</sup> Toplin, Robert Brent, “The Filmmaker as Historian” in *American Historical Review*, 93, 5, 1988, p1216

<sup>4</sup> Barnouw, Eric, *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film*, (Oxford, 1983), p.313

can, that written history “is a product of the processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, as Hayden White has argued in respect of forms of historical and fiction writing, the narrative form of both written and filmed representations is dependent on the principles of coherence and correspondence.<sup>6</sup> There is an internal logic that guides the narrative construction of each form of presentation. It is a logic that insists on ordering the historical facts into a coherent whole, on ensuring continuity, on progression of action and on the appeal to aesthetics of either the written word or the moving image. With film there is the added responsibility of correspondence between the spoken word in the narration and the visual image on the screen. In both instances the human role of the historian and filmmaker is pivotal to this construction and neither forms of presentation are able to escape the charge of subjectivity.

The key difference however lies in the transparency of each form. This paper would argue that film has the potential for greater reflexivity, or self-awareness on issues of subjectivity and mediation by the filmmaker than written narratives. **Film as a visual/aural medium arguably has a greater and more immediate impact than the written word.** Given this, the potential for the filmmaker to claim authorship, inscribe herself in the process of selection, ordering and final production can become more readily visible than in written forms. In *Cissie Gool*, this reflexive process is evident in the brief intrusions the filmmaker has made, specifically shots of the filmmaker scrolling through microfilm and sorting through newspaper clippings. Authorship is also made apparent in that the filmmaker is also the narrator. These instances have been included in the film to indicate the process of selection and mediation that has taken place in the process of production.

Reflexivity undermines the “universalising claims of academic knowledge” by making known the position of the filmmaker, how this position impacts on the

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<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty” in *American Historical Review*, (93, 5, 1988), p.1194

<sup>6</sup> White, Hayden, as quoted in Lynch, Michael & David Bogen, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings*, (Durham, 1996), p.67

knowledge produced, the relation of the filmmaker to the materials and process of production, and ultimately the broader social impact of this knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In *Cissie Gool*, the position of the filmmaker (and by position, one is speaking of the ideological and cultural-racial) is perhaps most evident in the voice-over narration. From this one learns the gender and the cultural-racial affiliation – the accent has identifiable traces of the “Cape Coloured”. Admittedly though, this identification can only take place when the credits roll, as the narration itself does not contain any first person references by the filmmaker. The ideological position vis a vis the subject matter is evident in a number of examples such as the opening sequence where a number of people compare Cissie Gool to notable women such as Rosa Luxemborg. The filmmaker establishes right from the beginning the legend of the historical greatness of Cissie Gool. This is further reinforced by the reading from a work of fiction that has Cissie Gool as its central female character, albeit with creative license.

**With this kind of self-inscription by the filmmaker into the body of the filmic text, *Cissie Gool*, as history, is a subjective representation that does not make any claims to objective truth nor does it present itself as an unmediated reality.** This is perhaps best reflected in one of the interview sequences with Amina Gool. She is framed in extreme close-up and because she is moving, her face is always only partially in the shot. The choice to include this sequence was made during post-production with two intentions; firstly, as a comment on the power dynamics of the interview situation – that the filmmaker through possession of the camera is not always in a dominant position. Secondly, it has been included to create visual dissonance and thus rupture illusion by creating visual discomfort. The human agency of the filmmaker is thus fore grounded.

The charge of subjectivity that is levelled at film and questions around historical ‘truth’ implicit in the criticism around construction in film is ironic given the very definition of documentary film. **Defining documentary film is admittedly a problematic in that definitions are fluid and constantly evolving, but the basic premise is that documentary film is based on objective fact and verifiable truth.** It is an objective historical fact, established through archival research, that Cissie

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<sup>7</sup> Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, (London, 2001) p. 130

Gool wrote numerous letters to the press. The film *Cissie Gool* has accessed this historical evidence by means of having a young woman reading excerpts from some of the letters. It is not Cissie speaking. Yet the creative treatment of this does not undermine the historical fact of her having written the letters. This creates a distinction between historical ‘truth’ and what Rosenstone has labelled as “filmic truth”. While Rosenstone may be making certain claims for the film and thus establishing a degree of authority for film, he is also arguing, I believe, for the integrity and logic of the filmic moment in and of itself.

*Cissie Gool* can be defined as an expository film.<sup>8</sup> Key characteristics of this form are the ‘voice-of-God’ narration by an invisible narrator, the use of newspaper headlines, reports and photographs or archival images to illustrate, describe and inform, and the use of ‘talking head’ interviews. This form argues most strongly for the documentary film as a document of objective historical truth. The invisible narrator is set up in a position of authority, as someone who knows all the facts and is therefore in a position to make the necessary comments and judgements between oral testimonies. The narration is addressed directly to the viewer and serves either to comment on the image on screen or provide information that the visual image cannot carry. The use of newspaper reports, headlines and other documents confers a similar authority in that they are used to verify and support the oral narration. Interviewee testimonies have a comparable authority because of their knowledge based on experience.

But, and as discussed earlier, it also has elements of the reflexive form in which the filmmaker makes her presence known. This reflexivity signals the mediation of the historian filmmaker. It indicates that the historical facts as presented in the film are based on deliberate choices and that the film is a construction of reality.

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<sup>8</sup> See Nichols, Bill, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary, (Bloomington, 1989) for a categorisation of the forms of documentary film. These are the expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive modes of documentary film.

Pull quotes:

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