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“Surge and Splendor”: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic

“And what do you call an epic?”

“You know, a picture that’s real long and has lots of things going on.””

THE HOLLYWOOD HISTORICAL EPIC has been despised, if not completely ignored, by most “serious” scholars of American cinema and historiography.² Its aesthetic extravagances seen as essentially in bad taste and its historical depictions as essentially anachronistic, the genre is generally regarded as a suspect form of both *cinematic* and *historical* representation. Indeed, for those who have been culturally trained to value asceticism, caution, and logic, there is something uncomfortably embarrassing about the historical epic’s visual and aural excessiveness, about the commercial hype that surrounds its production, about its self-promotional aesthetic aura, its fuzzy and emotional content, and its spectatorial invitation to indulge in wantonly expansive, hyperbolic, even hysterical acts of cinema.

As a film genre, the historical epic emerged with the medium itself. First realizing its “spectacular” possibilities in Italian silent cinema, it was subsequently elaborated upon by Americans D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, reached its apogee in Hollywood productions of the 1950s and early 1960s, and then—for complex reasons both economic and cultural—entered its present period of decline.³ For those viewers who remember the Hollywood historical epic of the 1950s and 1960s, or for those who have more recently seen the restored and rereleased *Gone with the Wind* or *Lawrence of Arabia* in a theater, the genre calls up grandiose visions—those of the modern period literally inflated by Cinerama, Cinemascope, and 70mm.⁴ It evokes “casts of thousands” and the assertively anachronistic punctuation of its historical representation by major Hollywood stars. Playing “great” historical figures from Antony and Cleopatra to John Reed and Louise Bryant as passionate livers, lovers, and major historical agents who destroy and build empires (whether Roman or Red), stars both dramatize and construct Hollywood’s particular idea of History—lending the past a present stature, attributing its production to select individuals (most of them Charlton Heston) and (T. E. Lawrence aside) providing the literal “embodiment of Hollywood’s faith that historical events rise to the occasion of exceptional human romance.”⁵

The Hollywood historical epic also makes one think of portentous calligraphy introducing us to History writ in gilt and with a capital *H*, of prologues usually beginning, as George MacDonald Fraser in *The Hollywood History of the World* remembers, with the words “In the Year of Our Lord,” followed by “a concise summary of the War of the Spanish Succession, or the condition of the English peasantry in the twelfth century, or the progress of Christianity under Nero.”⁶ And, if the prologue was not written, its function of authorizing History was accomplished by a less literal but more sonorous—and patriarchal—“Voice of God” narration. Maps often accompanied these historicizing voices—punctuating the text; simultaneously promising the viewer epic scope, empire building, and adventure; and signaling the pastness of the past and its safe history-book distance from the present. As Fraser puts it, “In the heyday of the historicals there were few things more exciting, yet at the same time, more tranquilising in their effect on the front stalls on a Saturday afternoon than a good map, Olde Worlde for choice.”⁷

The Hollywood epic also defines History as occurring to music—pervasive symphonic music underscoring every moment by overscoring it. And it evokes spectacular, fantastic costumes—particularly gold lamé ones with underwire bras. Indeed, the Hollywood epic shows us that the people—most particularly, the women—living History almost always wore extravagant clothes and spent a good deal of History changing them. Although no one in the audience is inclined to such accountancy, we are nonetheless told that Linda Darnell in *Forever Amber* (1947) wears “eighteen evening gowns, twenty daytime dresses, three negligées, and a wedding gown as part of the effort to recreate the seventeenth century England of King Charles II.” Or that *The Prodigal* (1955), starring Lana Turner, “had more than 4,000 costumes,” with “292 costume changes for the principals alone”—one of the latter, according to MGM sources, involving apparel made for Turner “entirely of seed pearls, thousands of which were handsewn.”⁸

This sartorial extravagance is fully matched by an extravagance of action and place. There are all those chariot races, all those stampedes and crowd scenes, all those charges and campaigns on land and battles at sea, all those horses and slaves and Christians and wagon trains. There is also the vastness of deserts, plains, and oceans, and the monumentality of Rome, the Pyramids, Khartoum, and Babylon. Monumental productions regularly produced historical monuments—massive Albert Speerish sets mythifying the mundane and quotidian into “imperialist” and “orientalist” fantasies of History.

At first, the purpose of all this hyperformalism seems significant only as a perverse and inflated display of autoerotic spectacle—that is, as cinema tumescent: institutionally full of itself, swollen with its own generative power to mobilize the vast amounts of labor and money necessary to diddle its technology to an extended and expanded orgasm of images, sounds, and profits. Thus, however seriously the historical epic presents itself to us or however pleurably caught up

we actually are as we watch it, upon reflection we find its excesses and our pleasure embarrassing—and tend to make disclaimers about our indulgence in such cinematic experience. In sum, the Hollywood historical epic seems hardly subtle or substantial enough to invite much in the way of semiological and cultural analyses from those scholars interested in exploring the nature and function of various forms of historical representation. Indeed, viewing all this extravagance and excess, one wonders how it is possible to take the genre seriously and what in the world it has to do with what we think of as “real” historical interpretation.

Nonetheless, in that it engages human beings of a certain culture at a certain time with the temporally reflexive and transcendent notion that is History, the Hollywood historical epic is as “real” and significant as any other mode of historical interpretation which human beings symbolically constitute to make sense of a human—and social—existence that temporally extends beyond the life and times of any single person. Indeed, I would suggest that the Hollywood historical epic is as central to our understanding of what we mean by the “historical” and “History” as any work of academic scholarship. Obviously, its modality is different from the latter. In contrast to the reflective, highly specialized, “disciplined” mode of representation that stands in our culture and time as the site for theoretically comprehending the opaqueness of past others, the Hollywood historical epic is prereflective, popular, and “undisciplined.” As well, despite its superficial exoticism, it presumes the transparency of past others, pretheoretically apprehending their human sameness in time rather than their difference. However, in that both the work of academic scholarship and the Hollywood historical epic construct interpretive narratives formulated around and foregrounding past human events as coherent and significant, both are temporally reflexive and both respond—if in different ways and through different experiences—to the same central and philosophical question: *how to comprehend ourselves in time*. Whereas the reticent and opaque work of academic histories is the objectification and projection of *ourselves-now* as *others-then*, the expansive and transparent work of Hollywood’s epic histories seems to be the subjectification and projection of *ourselves-now* as *we-then*. However, both kinds of historicizing are cultural productions of a certain mode of temporal consciousness, and both produce their history effects for model readers and spectators through formal and narratological devices that are conventional. In sum, although academic history enjoys an institutional legitimation that the Hollywood epic doesn’t, neither mode of historicizing, of creating History, is “truer” than the other. As Sande Cohen puts it in his major attack on academic historiography in *Historical Culture*: “There is no *primary* object or complex that warrants calling forth the signifier ‘history.’”⁹

Thus, I want to begin this phenomenological exploration of the Hollywood historical epic not by establishing or debating definitions of the “epic” and the “historical,” nor by testing the genre’s “truth claims.” Rather, my project here is to describe, thematize, and interpret an *experiential field* in which human beings

pretheoretically construct and play out a particular—and culturally encoded—form of *temporal existence*. Since my aim is to “isolate the history effects” of the Hollywood historical epic, but to do so “as they pertain to an *audience*” and “the manufacturing of public life,”¹⁰ my object of study is not so much the films “in themselves” as it is the rhetorical and semiological *praxis* surrounding the public experience of them—expressed in the prereflective or “ordinary” language used in our particular culture to delimit and describe what is commonly perceived as an “extraordinary” mode of filmic representation.¹¹ Phenomenological analysis of this ordinary language of experience, listening to the sense it makes to embodied subjects, may help us better understand the appeal of the Hollywood historical epic to both the carnal and temporal consciousness of its model audience—however such carnality and consciousness can be variously lived and culturally conceived by those in the audience who belie the model. In sum, counter to the totalizing descriptions that emerge from a transcendental phenomenology, the descriptions of the experiential field of the historical epic I offer here are highly qualified—meant to unpack the sense and sense making of a particular form of representation and its discourse which is *in* “history” as well as *about* it.¹²

I

*It makes you realize what God could have done if He'd had the money.*¹³

The advertising rhetoric that sells the Hollywood historical epic to its American, middle-class, Caucasian, consumer audience provides us with the most blatant and compressed invocation to the genre's prereflective significance. Consider the following litany: “They Slashed and Stormed and Sinned Their Way Across Adventure's Most Violent Age!” (*The Vikings*, 1958); “An Epic Film That Sweeps Across the Horizon of Ancient Times” (*Sodom and Gomorrah*, 1961); “The Mightiest Story of Tyranny and Temptation Ever Written—Ever Lived—Ever Produced!” (*The Silver Chalice*, 1954); “The Glory That Was Egypt! The Grandeur That Was Rome!” (DeMille's *Cleopatra*, 1934); or simply, “The Power The Passion The Greatness The Glory” (*King of Kings*, 1927).¹⁴ This kind of exclamation, generalization, and hyperbole is not necessarily dated. Indeed, a recent ad announcing the availability of *The Last Emperor* (1987) on videocassette reads: “Emperor. Playboy. Prisoner. Man. An Adventure Like This Comes Along Only Once in 10,000 Years.” In more detail and smaller print, it gathers together nearly all the elements that somehow have come to be associated with epic and historical screen narrative: “This is the extraordinary true life story of Pu Yi. An epic adventure full of warlords and concubines, conspiracy, seduction and intrigue. In 1908 he toddled to the Imperial Dragon Throne to become China's last emperor. And the rest, as they say, is history.”¹⁵

An interesting tag line here—particularly for what it tells us about the relation between, on the one hand, the extraordinary plenitude of adventure, action, and detail that characterizes the “spectacular” nature of the epic film and, on the other hand, the “rest”—the something “they say” is “history.”¹⁶ This latter seems to emerge from the accumulation and sedimentation (or coming to rest) of adventure, action, and detail, and is characterized as *excess*—a cultural remainder (“the rest”) left over as the effect of the already amplified spectacle we see on the screen. Indeed, there is the suggestion here that History emerges in popular consciousness not so much from any *particular accuracy* or even *specificity* of detail and event as it does from a *transcendence of accuracy and specificity* enabled by a *general and excessive* parade and accumulation of detail and event.

Thus, in reviews of the genre, one generally finds praise not for its historical accuracy or specificity but rather for its extravagant generality and excess—of sets, costumes, stars, and spectacle, of the money and labor that went into the making of such entertainment. One such review tells us of the 1951, 171-minute-long *Quo Vadis?*: “Colossal is just one of the superlatives trumpeting the size and scope of this mammoth drama about Romans, Christians, lions, pagan rites, rituals, and Nero. Roman soldier Robert Taylor loves and pursues Christian maiden Deborah Kerr. It's Christians versus Nero and the lions in the eternal fight between good and evil. The sets, scenery, and crowd scenes are nearly overwhelming. Peter Ustinov as Nero is priceless.”¹⁷

Conversely, another such review chides the 1971, 183-minute-long *Nicholas and Alexandra* for being *too* historically particular and specific: “This is an overlong, overdetailed depiction of the events preceding the Russian Revolution until the deaths of Czar Nicholas . . . his wife . . . and family. Some of the performances are outstanding . . . and the sets and costumes are topnotch. However, the film gets mired in trying to encompass too much historical detail.”¹⁸ Apparently, then, despite the “lots of things going on in it,” the phenomenological significance and discursive power of the Hollywood historical epic is not to be found in the specificity and accuracy of its historical detail. Too much specificity and accuracy, this reviewer suggests, “mires” the film—bogs it down in the concrete and disallows the emergence of something that, through generalization and extravagance, *exceeds* and *transcends* the concrete.

In a paradoxical way, the suggestion here is that the Hollywood historical epic is not so much the narrative accounting of *specific historical events* as it is the narrative construction of *general historical eventfulness*. This is perhaps why the genre is popularly conceived as such an admixture of different kinds (and not merely periods) of past events: mythic, biblical, folkloric, and quasi- or “properly” historical. Thus, Fraser can point out that Hollywood’s “Ancient World” takes place in “the Egypto-Biblo-Classic era, since threads from all three were often intertwined in its productions.”¹⁹ This is precisely the kind of categorical and theoretical sloppiness scholars despise and try to clarify and clean up—and that popular

audiences don't mind at all.²⁰ It also could be argued that this sloppiness is profoundly functional—and that it is by means of iconographic expansiveness and formal excessiveness that the Hollywood historical epic creates a field of temporality experienced as subjectively transcendent and objectively significant. The importance of the genre is not that it narrates and dramatizes historical events accurately according to the detailed stories of academic historians but rather that it opens a temporal field that creates the *general* possibility for re-cognizing oneself as a *historical subject* of a particular kind.²¹ Thus, counter to the judgment of most film scholars and historians who have ignored or scoffed at the genre as “heavy-handed” cinema or “lightweight” history, I tend to side with the *London Times* reviewer who, attending the world premiere of *How the West Was Won*, wrote of the historical epic: “It has a surge and splendor and extravagance not to be despised.”²²

My agreement, however, is perverse. That is, I would suggest the Hollywood historical epic not be despised *lightly*. Indeed, rather than cursorily dismissing the “surge and splendor and extravagance” of the genre, we should recognize its excessive elements as essential to the genre's functional capacity to construct a discursive field in which the American, middle-class, white (and disproportionately male) spectator/consumer could experience—not think—that particular mode of temporality which constituted him or her as a historical subject in capitalist society before the late 1960s.²³ To use Hayden White's characterization, the “content of the form” of the Hollywood genre is its *mimetic* and *onomatopoetic* modes of representation and rhetoric, together constituting a representational excess that yields a particular “history effect.”²⁴ That is, the genre *formally repeats* the surge, splendor, and extravagance, the human labor and capital cost entailed by its narrative's *historical content* in both its *production process* and its *modes of representation*. Through these means, the genre *allegorically* and *carnally* inscribes on the model spectator a sense and meaning of being in time and human events in a manner and at a magnitude exceeding any individual temporal construction or appropriation—and, most importantly, in a manner and at a magnitude that is *intelligible as excess* to lived-body subjects in a historically specific *consumer* culture. Thus, it is through its multileveled and repetitive discourse (and politics) of *excess*—not only within but also without the movie theater and cinematic text—that the Hollywood historical epic has what Maurice Merleau-Ponty identifies as the primordially philosophical capacity to “elevate to a supreme degree that question which we are in our being, that attempt to seize hold of ourselves, to gather ourselves together, and to comprehend ourselves”²⁵ as a temporal “spread staggered out in depth.”²⁶ This elevation and transcendence of individual temporality through excessive repetition creates a “perception of history.”²⁷ However, although one might have philosophical justification to argue that a sense of temporal excess is universally necessary to constitute a “perception of history,” it is important to emphasize that precisely what *signifies* temporal excess is not uni-

versal but culturally and historically determined. And, in the case of the Hollywood historical epic, temporal excess tends to be encoded as *empirically verifiable* and *material excess*—entailing scale, quantification, and consumption in relation to money and human labor.²⁸

Consider the rhetoric of a press book memorializing the production and release in 1962 of Hollywood's first narrative film made in Cinerama: the 155-minute historical epic *How the West Was Won*.²⁹ The hardcover volume opens with the presidents of both MGM and Cinerama introducing us to a "new era" and "milestone" in the "world of entertainment" through a statement that compares the transcendent magnitude of past events in American History with those of the new process of cinematic production. They write: "Never has so vast a chapter of our American heritage been seen by motion picture audiences; never has any film process encompassed such grandeur of sight and sound." They also tell us: "Thousands of creative men and women and skilled technicians combined their talents to make this motion picture a reality." And this statement appears on the same double page along whose bottom runs a panoramic shot from the film of a crowd of people with baggage ready to set out for the West, its caption reading: "They came by the thousands from everywhere, for to them the West was the promise of the future." A correlation is clearly established here between the present events of the film's production and the past events it is intended to represent. As well, a peculiar temporal equivalence is made between the "new era" of entertainment ushered in by the "futuristic" technology of Cinerama and the "promise of the future" the West held for past Americans. It is hardly surprising, then, that on the next double page (a vaguely drawn map of the United States punctuated by iconic figures signaling the film's representation of events from 1839–1889), the legend below the film's title quotes Walt Whitman in what, in context, seems a generalized paean to the protagonists of both the "winning" of the American West and the conquest of motion picture technology: "Moving yet and never stopping, Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

With the same strategy, the book goes on to tell us "The MGM Cinerama Story." Historical adventures of epic quality, quantification of the scope and magnitude of hardships and obstacles that had to be endured and overcome, heroic perseverance, appeal to national pride—at each rhetorical turn, these elements equivalently mark both the winning of the West and the achievement of its *appropriate* cinematic representation. The laborious struggle entailed by the film's production *formally repeats* the laborious struggle of the American pioneers—even in its direction. "Fleets of trucks" moved Cinerama's headquarters from Oyster Bay, New York, to the MGM Studios in California, and a section entitled "A Monumental Production" tells us: "Filming the fully definitive story of the winning of the American West was one of the most demanding projects ever undertaken. This was never attempted before." Location experts "traveled through the his-

toric Ohio River Valley, once a water highway to the West, and into the heart of the proud Rocky Mountains. They rode over unused paths and roads as long as four-wheeled vehicles would carry them, and by foot along trails where there were no roads. They took thousands of photographs and sent them back to the studio as often as they could get to a post office." Production notes give us endless numbers: how many buffalo, horses, extras, pairs of shoes, yards of homespun ordered from "ancient looms in India"; actual American Indian tribes participating; pounds of hay, grain, food, and crew—and how arduous all this gathering and deploying was and how long it took. All, apparently, to achieve historical accuracy, yet stressing *labor* and *quantity*: "The research alone filled 87 volumes which were cross-indexed for easier reference." The end goal is *authenticity*, a word appearing frequently throughout the text in reference to—and equating—both the filmmakers' and spectators' experience of the production as "truly" historical.³⁰

In between the lengthier portions of text that equate and apotheosize both the *history of production* and the *production of history* (and imply their reversibility) are sections organized around photographs. First are "The Stars" presented by their Hollywood names—their identity as characters subordinated in smaller print underneath their pictures.³¹ Next are the production stills from the film, marked by individual captions that focus on a seeming specificity of character and event. Throughout, small black-and-white engravings—"old" and "authentic" pieces from the Bettman Archives—contrast with and complement the color photographs, serving both as their pale models and "authenticating primary documents."³² As well, in large and boldface type, on many of the double-page layouts appears a suggestive and quasidocumented quotation that abridges and iconographically generalizes the specificity of the photographs, subtending the film's family romance narrative that spans three generations. Above all, the quotations lend intertextual "historical" and "literary" significance to the photos and seem selected particularly to emphasize the narrative's largess of scope and action. From William MacLeod Raine's *Guns of the Frontier* comes: "The West was won by the pioneer. He blazed trails, gutted mountains, ran furrows, and planted corn on the prairies." Whitman is repeated: "Through the battle, through defeat, Moving yet and never stopping, Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address tells us: "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." Horace Greeley is cited: "A million buffalo is a great many, but I am certain that I saw that many yesterday." And finally, accompanying and elevating photographs of bandit attacks and "blazing gun battle," is a quote from Daniel Webster: "Those who break the great law of Heaven by shedding man's blood seldom succeed in avoiding discovery."

The press book concludes with an illustrated and quasitechnical explanation

of the Cinerama process, asserting that the scope of such a form of representation begins “a new motion picture era—and age where the audience can live a real story on the screen,” and this is followed by a description and critical assessment of the “glittering world premiere” of the film in London, before, among others, bejeweled British royalty.³³ At the conclusion of this “overwhelming” spectacle, we are told: “London’s critics went off to seek new adjectives to describe *How the West Was Won*, predicting it would run for ten years, stating it was one of the most monumental entertainments ever conceived.” In addition to *overwhelming* and *monumental*, some of these supposedly “new” adjectives included *giant*, *spectacular*, *splendiferous*, *rich*, *sprawling*, *star-studded*, and *immensely stirring*. The *London Daily Mirror* said the film was “a thundering, ear-splitting smasher of a spectacle.” Praising it for showing us “not only the landmarks of America, but the famous faces of Hollywood,” the *London Evening Standard* reported the film “makes good history as well as eye-popping hyperbole.”

II

*One can only conclude that its scale put it beyond the normal critical reach; in a way, it is rather like criticising an elephant.*³⁴

I have spent some time describing the discursive field of the Hollywood historical epic for three reasons. The first has been to emphasize how easy it is to laugh at the language in which it is expressed, how entertaining to trash the naiveté and excesses of both the rhetoric and its objects, and to feel superior to what seems their debased project. The second has been to foreground the complex way in which this seemingly laughable and naive kind of hyperbolic language is commonly used not only to describe but also *mimetically* to elevate the epic film into an *historical eventfulness* that exceeds its already excessive screen boundaries—accomplished by creating equivalence and reciprocity among the epic’s “historic” cinematic production, its historical narrative content and histrionic form, and its “historic” reception. The third has been to provide the experiential basis for further unpacking and thematizing the “content of the form” of the genre—those structures that are the objective correlates of a certain subjective mode of temporal being and that, in the cinematic experience, mark their sense on and make their sense to an *embodied* spectator.

In this regard, Paul Ricoeur’s complex observation that the existential relationship between narrativity and temporality is a “reciprocal” one is of great importance here. He tells us: “I take temporality to be the structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent.”³⁵ I would further argue, however, that this reciprocity is possible only because narrativity as a structure of

language and temporality as a structure of existence find their *common ground* in bodily being, in a *carnal reckoning* with time and space that precedes the accountability of objective reckoning and, as Ricoeur points out, is thus “not an abstract measure” but “a *magnitude* which corresponds to our concern and to the world into which we are thrown.”³⁶

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, both this “carnal reckoning” with time as a magnitude of value, and our existential “thrown-ness” into a world always already culturally formulated and expressed *before* as well as *for* us, together provide the prereflective grounds for that further reflexive focus on temporality we call “historical consciousness.” In *The Visible and the Invisible* he writes: “Coming after the world, after nature, after life, after thought, and finding them constituted before it, philosophy indeed questions this antecedent being and questions itself concerning its own relationship with it.”³⁷ From our existential and bodily presence to the world both temporally *after* and *before* others and their actions emerges a sense of being not merely immanent *to* time but also transcendently *of* it. More specifically, a consideration of our existence as always *in medias res* directs us not only to the future of human being but also toward its past. Thus, there is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a “wave of transcendence which springs up in the carnal opening.” When this reflexive—but not yet reflective—turn on temporal experience is reflected upon and made symbolically explicit, it is constituted as History. The immediate, pretheoretical sense of temporal transcendence is re-recognized and reinvested in temporal *theory*, in “cultural figures, which . . . become sedimented in a cultural opening and become a kind of acquisition, belonging henceforth not only to a particular individual’s horizon but to that of all possible individuals.”³⁸ This is, on the one hand, an ontological (and therefore universalizing) explication of how human being is always already temporalized *in transcendent excess* of any personal and present being. However, on the other hand, the ontological nature of this primary and prereflective sense of temporal transcendence is always already epistemologically qualified by the secondary, reflective sense of temporal transcendence that is symbolically signified in delimited and specific *cultural figures* that are *in* time as well as *about* it.

These phenomenological interpretations of the emergence of and relations between narrativity and temporality suggest that if the “content of the form” of the Hollywood historical epic is the *mimetic and onomatopoetic representation* of antecedent human actions, then the “theme of the form” is *temporal magnitude*—extended and elevated to its highest existential degree as intelligible within a particular cultural framework. Recognition of both the content and theme of the genre’s form moves us to an apprehension of its deep structure—that is, the “form of its form.” The Hollywood historical epic is a *reflexive* structure founded in *repetition*.

It seems no coincidence that of all kinds of commercial cinematic repre-

sentation, the Hollywood historical epic—through repetition—calls the most explicit, reflexive, and self-authorizing attention to its own existence as a *representation*. Mentioned earlier, the most obvious example is the frequent written or spoken narration with which the majority of historical epics begin and which later punctuate their dramatic action. Such narration not only chronologically locates the present viewer relative to a past event that, by reflexive authorial focus, is foregrounded as *retrospectively* and *now* historically significant. It also *repeats* the dramatic representation in a reflexive and reflective mode—creating an additional textual level that *temporally extends* the emplotment of the story from the past to the present and confers significance on the story from the present to the past. As Pierre Sorlin points out, “Historical films are distinguished by something we could call . . . the *double exposure* of time, with the superimposition of symbolic time on other forms of time.”³⁹ Janet Staiger also notes the repetition entailed by such narration and so necessary to its “history effect”:

Because framing information is a “separate” text, at a distance and not part of the enclosed story, it can easily take on an authenticity in comparison to that which it embeds. Yet this voice-over of masculine authority assures (or perhaps reassures) us of the educational value of this true story—*doubling and redoubling* its claims. Thus the voice-over narrator acts . . . in a subtle way as a textual device of *compulsively repeating*, “this is, as ‘I’ say, a true story.”⁴⁰

At times, this temporal repetition is graphically introduced into the text—its often exotic calligraphic presentation both invoking “the past” in visual onomatopoeic reference to antecedent forms of writing, to “original” documents, and claiming the anonymous authority the written word has secured in our particular culture. At times, the repetition is oral. While voice-over narration also performs the function of doubly exposing time, its authorizing power is different. The narrators entailed by the genre to establish, repeat, and elaborate upon the dramatic representation call particular and reflexive attention to their own personal (if cinematically derived) authority as a means of further authorizing and “authenticating” the dramatic material. Their offscreen voices are especially male, highly sonorous, and distinctively recognizable, marking these narrators of History as literally transcendental—significant stars of such “celestial” stature they, like the face of God, must not be seen. John Huston, for example, narrated *The Bible*;⁴¹ Orson Welles narrated *The Vikings*; and Spencer Tracy, whose distinctive vocal presence signifies “integrity” as well as authority, narrated *How the West Was Won*. In the aforementioned press book, under Tracy’s photograph as one of “The Stars” (he is wearing a Western cowboy hat) reads this caption: “The Narrator. Although this famous star, one of the few ever to be honored by two Academy Awards, does not appear in the film, his magnificent speaking voice has the important role of narrating the stirring drama of the winning of the West.”

Standing in for the institutional voice of historiography, Tracy's trusted persona lends received ideas a particular credibility, while his absence from the screen secures them a transcendental space outside the drama from which they can assert a privileged validity.⁴² In sum, a significant actor retelling the story over and "above" its visible, dramatic representation gives us *two* levels of narrative, temporality, and significance—and spans the space *between*.

Most Hollywood historical epics not only repeat the narrative *within* the film through a doubling narration but also repeat that narrative *outside* the film—if within its cinematic discourse. That is, the genre often formally and/or literally celebrates and represents the historic struggles under which it produced itself as a *mimetic imitation* of the historical events it is dramatizing. This extratextual and elevated repetition of historical events is not only evident in such commemorative volumes as the *How the West Was Won* press book. It is also evident in television accounts of "The Making of . . .," picture magazine coverage of production hardships, and the like—reflexive and repetitious narratives of the historical epic's own repetition of historical narrative. This extratextual repetition can itself be quite dramatic. Movie stars other than Liz and Dick have made headlines while working on a film, but consider how Taylor and Burton's illicit extratextual romance—and their magnitude as stars—mimicked the historical situation of the text in which they were imitating Cleopatra and Antony and extended the produced History of the past into the present moment of historical production. Additionally, as Fraser notes of *Cleopatra*, "The 1963 production by Twentieth Century-Fox became a byword for extravagance, crisis and disappointment"⁴³—the troubled production history of the film popularly perceived and written about as isomorphic with the narrative shape of the popular conception of Antony and Cleopatra's emotional and political history. I don't mean to suggest here that Liz and Dick's romance was consciously planned so as formally to "repeat history" in an excess of temporality that transgressed the boundaries of the film they were making, or that *Cleopatra* was a financial disappointment on purpose. Rather, I mean to foreground how important extratextual discourse about the production of the film is to the construction of the Hollywood historical epic's temporal field. In its elevation of elements of the film's historical narrative to yet another discursive level, the genre expands and extends the temporality of "ordinary" textuality into an extensive and excessive temporality which literally transcends the film frame, the text, and the time of the spectator's immediate presence to the film in the theater.

This extension of temporality is also one of the functions, I would suggest, of casting highly recognizable stars to represent historical figures. Perhaps laughable, certainly distracting, and possibly reprehensible to those who seek in the historical epic cinema the physical anonymity of an "underdetermined" body to paradoxically signify both the physical specificity and the vagueness of half-

known historical persons, stars people the represented historical past with the present. Their “overdetermined” presence in a film punctuates the representation of the past and stresses the representation as repetition, as imitation of previous events, and thus, like the narration, doubles the film’s temporal dimension. As well, their presence functions as a sign of *temporal transcendence*: Elizabeth Taylor outlives the end of History as it was writ by Cleopatra. Charlton Heston outlives not only El Cid but also Moses. And Peter Ustinov will perpetually be in temporal excess of Nero. Thus, stars not only exceed the representation or “re-presenting” of past historical figures to remind us that the representation is a repetition, but additionally serve to *generalize* historical specificity through their own *iconographic* presence. Stars are cast not *as* characters, but *in* character—as “types” who, however physically particular and concrete, signify universal and general characteristics. Thus, while not embodying historical figures in any way that could be called “accurate” by a historian’s standards, stars nonetheless contribute to an expansive, excessive, and multileveled temporality that can be experienced by the spectator as subjectively transcendent and objectively significant. Indeed, the very presence of stars in the historical epic mimetically represents not *real historical* figures but rather the *real significance* of historical figures. Stars literally lend *magnitude* to the representation.

This kind of *conceptual* mimesis—that is, the representation or imitation of a general idea rather than a specific person, event, or thing—paradoxically often takes the most *literal* and *material* form of imitation, creating at the formal level of representation what I choose to call cinematic *onomatopoeia*. Thus, temporal *magnitude* is constituted not only by the “big” presence of stars but also by literal *quantity*: an extravagance and accumulation of detail, horses, moccasins, battles, jewels, and Christians. Similarly, the *existential weight* of historical “being-in-time” that is culturally sedimented as the thought that is History is made literal and material through *scale*: in the concretely “big” presence of monumental sets and landscapes. Within this cultural context, one can better understand too how the existential feeling of “being caught up” in the turbulence of a time and social formation that exceeds and buffets the stability of one’s being “merely present” or “merely living” in time plays itself out in the Hollywood historical epic’s massive surges of movement from buffalo stampedes to revolutions to the Exodus. And how excessive symphonic music repeats and underscores this sense of temporal turbulence by extending, elevating, and emplotting it at an extradiegetic level—outside the story, but within the text.

If History is subjectively understood as an excess of temporality over any individual’s participation in and comprehension of it, then the Hollywood historical epic constructs a “field of historicity” by objectively mimicking temporal excess—although it does so in an enculturated way informed not only by empirical literalism and capitalist materialism but also by the conceptual apparatus of

Enlightenment discourse.⁴⁴ Hence, the genre's creation of History as literally and materially *spectacular*—in a cinematic form that is not only necessarily and sufficiently visible but also emphatically “to be looked at” in its excessive and expansive physical presence. As Staiger says of historical cinema's general strategy: “The film implies that what's historical is a physical reality. It is the *mise-en-scène*, the props, the costumes and the people that are historical.”⁴⁵ What shall count as the historical is not merely verified but also constituted through the visible and in material evidence. The Hollywood historical epic gives us “more” to look at and “more” material evidence than the shorter and smaller and less elaborated historical film; the history it attempts to “realize” is stressed as temporally transcendent, as writ with that capital *H*.

Thus, the genre also constitutes its historical field as literally and materially—onomatopoeically—extended and expanded. An excess of temporality finds its form in, or “equals,” *extended duration*: films far longer than the Hollywood norm. Correlatively, an excess of space finds its form in, or “equals,” *expanded space*: Cinemascope, Cinerama, Superscope, 70mm. Indeed, if one were looking for a Bakhtinian chronotope to characterize the historical epic—that is, to identify the essential and inseparable time-space relationship that generates and makes visible its particular form, action, and character—one need go no further than Cinemascope or Cinerama or Vistavision.⁴⁶

In this regard, however our particular culture may qualify it, it is crucial to remember that our sense of historicity and its further sedimentation and objectification into History begins first not in our reflective existence as historical objects but in our reflexive existence as *embodied subjects*. It is as carnal as well as cultural beings that we presently sit in a movie theater to see a representation of past events and somehow get caught up in a comprehension of time—not only the temporal movement of the movie and its narrative but also a prereflective and imaginative field in which to sense ourselves as temporal beings who transcend our present presence. Thus, there is a paradoxical, yet culturally apt, logic to the fact that most Hollywood historical epics are a great deal longer than are other films—their running time well over the two-hour length usual for other kinds of commercial movies. It takes, for example, 222 minutes for the South to go in *Gone with the Wind*. At 180 minutes the title of the World War II epic *The Longest Day* has a double resonance. *Reds* finds 199 minutes of screen time the extravagant equal of *Ten Days That Shook the World*. And, at 188 minutes, *Gandhi*'s patience must be matched by the spectator's. On the one hand, experiencing this extraordinary cinematic duration, the spectator as a body-subject is made more presently aware than is usual of his or her bodily presence—indeed, is “condemned” to the present and physically “tested” by the length of the film's duration. On the other hand, however, *enduring* the film in the present imprints the body with a brute sense of the possibility of transcending the present,—of the literal and material

capacity of human being to be tested and *to continue and last through* events represented as a temporal “spread staggered out in depth.”⁴⁷ This writing on the body by experience, I would argue, provides the carnal and subjective grounds necessary for the constructed abstract and objective premises considered sufficient to historical reflection. However, insofar as the body is always already an acculturated body, the inscription of experience upon it makes a specific kind of cultural sense and has a particular logical intelligibility. Physiological sense cannot be amputated from sociological or psychological sense. Thus, writing on the body of the model American spectator/consumer, the Hollywood historical epic is *trans-coding* the culture’s emphasis on literalism and materialism into specific carnal terms, and reprinting its version of History not only for posterity but also on our posteriors. This is, philosophically and carnally, a profound form of repetition.

In his complex and persuasive discussion of the relations between narrativity and temporality, Ricoeur stresses the necessity and function of *repetition* in the constitution of historical consciousness. Indeed, he questions “whether we may go so far as to say that the function of narratives—or at least of some narratives—is to establish human action at the level of genuine historicity, that is, of repetition.”⁴⁸ This question is relevant here—as is Ricoeur’s emphasis on repetition as that aspect of narratological form most responsive and responsible to our phenomenological sense of time as “historical.” In this regard, the Hollywood historical epic can be considered as the form best able to represent the subjectively lived time of its particular cultural moment as objectively “historical.” This is not merely because the ostensible “content” of the genre refers to and repeats events culturally agreed upon actually or likely to have happened and to have had, in their happening, some present significance for the future. It is also because the formal discourse of the genre foregrounds, multiplies, and elevates the conventions of *repetition* that culturally produce the experience of time as historical. Qualified by the specific codes of its particular cultural context, the Hollywood historical epic thus intensifies the existential (and arguably universal) function of repetition: to *extend* the magnitude of our temporal sense between the immediate and prereflective “preoccupation” we have with time as “now” and the deeply reflective sense we have of the transcendent unity of “all times” which, given our personal sense of finitude, has something to do with death.

In this linking of past, present, and future, repetition suggests a temporally transcendent structure—one that connects origins and ends by reflexively turning on and revisiting itself. As a rhetorical device, repetition foregrounds configuration rather than linearity, circularity rather than teleology. Thus, when “historical events” are taken as its object, repetition works against their objectively known “finishedness,” their “overness,” their “pastness.” It is through repetition that “the past is retrieved” in anticipation of the project of its recirculation, and one may become aware of “the endlessness of historical time” while sensing the finite structure of one’s own individual temporality.⁴⁹ In effect, repetition serves

as a formal recirculation of signs that, when put to the service of linear and teleological “content” such as the chronology of historical events, does away with chronology and teleology and institutes a sense not of “being-in-time” or “being-toward-death” but of “being-in-History.”⁵⁰

Both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, while philosophizing about temporality and history in universal terms, recognize the universal is always already qualified by the particular and contingent. Human beings may be universally aware of themselves as temporal and historical beings, but, insofar as it is always already culturally encoded, that awareness is specifically inflected and expressed in ways that may differ and conflict within a single culture, from culture to culture, and from time to time. Thus, historical consciousness is itself historicized. Merleau-Ponty tells us of his existential turn from Husserl’s attempt philosophically to “reduce” phenomena to their *eidos* or “essence”: “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a *complete* reduction.”⁵¹ In short, there is no History with a transcendental, capital *H*—except in the qualified sense that human beings in particular cultures fix and secure it as such. Summarizing Merleau-Ponty on the relation between lived temporality and historical consciousness, Gary Madison says:

If it can be said that *temporality* is subjectivity itself qua continuous advent of Being, it must be said that *historicity* is personal subjectivity qua reappropriation, sublimation, and reinvestment in symbols and institutions of this same upsurge of Being. What characterizes history is that it represents and is the accumulation of the transformation man effects on his existential situation; it is like the sedimentation and gathering together of man’s attempts to understand himself in his carnal relation to the world and others and to transform into an open and available meaning the indigenous meaning of his . . . existence.⁵²

This is a resonant passage in relation not only to the cinema in general—arguably the medium best able to represent both the *carnality* of human being and its *dynamic* relations and *transformational* effects in contingent situations—but also to the Hollywood historical epic in particular. In medium and form, the genre simultaneously conveys to model spectator/consumers *both* the signifying “upsurge” and becoming of Being, its “continuous advent” or “adventure,” *and* its accumulation, sedimentation, and reinvestment into culturally specific and significant “event” and “institution.” Thus, through the “content of its form,” the Hollywood historical epic sets up a transparent dialectic—one that allows its spectators a prereflective experience of the dual nature of *historicality* as both the *making* and *being* of History. The genre entails the spectator in the *carnal labor* through which filmmakers, actors, and spectators alike transform the “advent” of provisional human “gesture” into the archetypal “adventure” of the *geste* into the institutionalized “events” of History. Thus, the phenomenological experience of the Hollywood historical epic is less one of the particular, specific, and “objectively accurate” *representation of a past event* than it is of a general, concrete, and “subjectively authentic” *representation of the production of History*. Qualified, however, by

their lived value and cultural and historical situation, the concepts of both “production” and “History” have particular and delimited meaning.

III

Many of the people you meet today, who are responsible for seeing that movies get made, have scope the width of a TV screen and a historical consciousness that extends to last year's reruns.⁵³

It is particularly telling that there have been so few Hollywood historical epics made for theatrical release in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁴ Partially as a response to television and its obvious lack of magnitude, the screen genre peaked in production and box-office reception during the 1950s and 1960s. Briefly, the early 1960s bring us to the end of the corporate hegemony of the Hollywood “studio system”—firmly institutionalized by the 1920s and, among other things, based upon the presumption and construction of a homogeneous, white, patriarchally informed, middle-class model audience. In the mid 1960s, both the economic hegemony of the studios and the cultural homogeneity of the audience as constructed by the industry fell apart.⁵⁵ Antitrust suits finally broke the hold of the major film corporations on production, distribution, and exhibition—and until the industry diversified its production base, corporately allied itself with television and the music industry, and became fully incorporated by multinational corporations, Hollywood's economy was in turmoil.

The peak period of the production of historical epic cinema in Hollywood also coincided with a culturally homogenizing Cold War politics and entered its decline as the United States entered Vietnam and a period of mass political and social fragmentation. Given these “coincidences,” it would be fruitful to speculate on the relationship between such politics and the “political unconscious” symbolically enacted within the culturally qualified structure of cinematic “excess” I have described here as phenomenologically constructing a particular and contingent sense of “being-in-History.”⁵⁶

In this regard, Allen Barra, looking for explanations for “The Incredible Shrinking Epic,” quotes both British critic Paul Coates—and Walter Benjamin. Coates maintains: “True film epics can only be made [and properly received by audiences] at a time when a country's national myths are still believed—or, at best, at a time when a nation feels itself slipping into decline, which produces a spate of nostalgic evocations of those myths. Afterward, a period of cynicism sets in, in which the myths are presented in a revisionist manner”—meaning, Coates says, “that curious hybrid of the last 20 years, the anti-epic.”⁵⁷ Benjamin sees this revisionism less as cynicism than as an assumption of responsibility: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was. . . .’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . In every

era, the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."⁵⁸

The era of the Hollywood historical epic from its beginnings in the early 1900s through its decline in the 1960s can be characterized as informed by those cultural values identified with rational humanism, with bourgeois patriarchy, with colonialism and imperialism, and with entrepreneurial and corporate capitalism. It was in the 1960s that, for a variety of reasons, these ideological values were placed in major crisis. The Civil Rights, youth, and women's movements; the explicit failure of American political and military might in Southeast Asia and the civil war at home; the rise of foreign economic power and the emergence of multinational capitalism; the pervasive spread of electronic media throughout the entire culture and a correspondent devaluation of the mechanical and the visible labor of men and machines the latter entails—these events not only made explicit what had theretofore been ideologically transparent but also radically challenged and transformed the dominant culture's "rational, humanist version of the subject as a unified speaking self, cohering in mind, body, and speech."⁵⁹ In its particular representation of the "production" of History, the Hollywood historical epic depended upon a celebration of rationalism, humanism, the unity of historical agents, the progress, continuity, and coherence of a centralized "production" process availing itself of labor's surplus value to produce excessive temporality as a fixed commodity, a stable and coherent narrative: History.

In 1938, a Hollywood press release about MGM historical epic *Marie Antoinette* unselfconsciously, indeed proudly, went public with the information that "fifty women were brought to Los Angeles from Guadalajara, Mexico, to sew on thousands of sequins and do the elaborate embroidery used on many of the 2,500 costumes."⁶⁰ Fifty Mexican women may illegally cross the border today and end up sewing costumes, but it is highly unlikely that such colonial exploitation of cheap labor would be quite so blatantly celebrated in what, in the era of the epic, functioned as a transparent repetition of historical events.

One could also argue that, on various levels, the Hollywood historical epic's formal construction of historical consciousness in the 1950s and early 1960s has been coopted and, by now, radically transformed by television and the miniseries, which has given us such epic equivalents as *Roots*, *The Winds of War*, *War and Remembrance*, *The Jewel in the Crown*, and *North and South*. To some, this has caused a formal debasement of the genre—as measured by what one can expect for one's money in consumer society. (Television, after all, is perceived as "free.") Thus, Barra laments: "The audience for *War and Remembrance*, with lowered expectations, will allow old newsreel footage of air combat; an audience going to see a modern war movie would expect completely reconstructed air forces and fleets for its money." However, he notes, on the positive side, the television miniseries has "given rise to an army of technicians and production assistants"⁶¹—although this army, unlike its cinematic predecessors, tends to remain publicly uncele-

brated as signifying an apotheosis of labor. Like the computer casing that hides the already invisible work of electronic mediation, the television miniseries transforms the extravagant labor spent in the production of History into something less visible.

The miniseries also transforms the Hollywood historical epic in a more profound way—formally altering its temporal field, and thus its construction of History. Indeed, *miniseries* is a revealing nomination. It suggests that the spatial displacement from cinematic to electronic representation has changed the existential sense and terms of epic excess, and that the electronic medium's new mode of episodic and fragmented exhibition has changed the sense and terms of the expansiveness, movement, and repetitiousness of epic—and historical—time. In this regard, we might see this move and transformation of the historical epic to television as one symptom of our own cultural move into a period conceptualized less in terms of the explicit, economically extravagant displays of corporate capitalism or of the unifying imperatives of World War I, World War II, and Cold War ideology than in terms associated with the *electronic*, the *postindustrial*, and the *postmodern*. Contemporary critics have argued that our situation and practice within a culture marked by multinational capitalism, high technology of an electronic kind, and a heightened cultural awareness and consumption of images have radically altered the value and meaning of *antecedence*—and what formally constitutes its adequate representation. In the electronic era of the television and the VCR, temporality is transformed. Repetition means reruns, and one can materially and literally manipulate time to construct various versions of “history” (which no longer are weighty enough to bear a capital *H*).

Characterized negatively by what Fredric Jameson calls an “inverted millennialism,” the narratological structure of postmodern representation has a severely *weakened* existential sense of connection to both the historical past and the future, and is caught up in an intensified present—a “within-time-ness” marked by a sense of “the end of this or that”⁶² and characterized by the *fragmentation and mixture of temporal modes* in a schizophrenic manner, by *temporal pastiche*, and by nostalgic *temporal scavenging*. Certainly the miniseries—not only fragmenting its own temporal continuity across a week but also interrupting it with advertising—stands as transparent testimony to this characterization. As does the current nostalgic fascination with restoring and recycling “old” Hollywood historical epics.

On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon characterizes postmodern representation more positively.⁶³ It is, she insists, resolutely historical and has a *heightened* existential sense of the present's connection to the past and future. Although still using *repetition* as the content of its form, this more conscious kind of postmodern representation—unlike the Hollywood historical epic—uses it *parodically*, that is, with a critical distance that produces irony and undermines its own assertions and truth or reality claims. This postmodern representation, Hutcheon argues, frac-

tures the totalizing power of History into a heterogeneous dialogism of histories and a heightened awareness of their inscriptions, investments, and conflicts.

At this cultural moment, then, there seems no place between these two versions of postmodern temporality for the production of the kind of historical consciousness that the Hollywood historical epic once created through its particular discourse and politics of temporal excess. As a culture, we seem to be too self-conscious, too image-conscious, and too aware of our social heterogeneity to find any but nostalgic appeal in the directed temporal force of the genre, in its creation of a prereflective sense of "being-in-History." Indeed, the current restoration and reissue of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Gone with the Wind* in first-run theaters speaks to both the present cultural impossibility of writing History in the Hollywood epic manner and—in keeping with the Jamesonian characterization of postmodernism—a popular nostalgia for the unity and fixity of Hollywood epic values that stand against mass apprehension of shifting, heterogeneous histories engaged in contestation.

In this regard, what Leslie Berlowitz says of the American tendency to construct History rather than histories is relevant to the Hollywood historical epic and its popular appeal:

Since the 19th century the struggle over identity and origins has distinguished the political and cultural life of all major nations. This potentially dangerous struggle has been particularly problematic for Americans, who fear that they have had no past, no patriarchal traditions or customs in the European sense, no feelings of permanent rootedness and stability. Americans have often responded to this "fear" of pastlessness by making rigid assertions about the founding myths and symbols and by insisting upon the constancy of certain values which, they have argued, constitute the moral code of America. Adept leaders, from Lincoln to Reagan, have recognized this tendency and exploited it for social and political purposes.⁶⁴

This is the stuff of which the Hollywood historical epic was made. Since the late 1960s, however, "rigid assertions" about America's "founding myths and symbols," and the "constancy of certain values" that are unified as an American "moral code," have been challenged by many Americans—most of them marginalized in relation to dominant culture but some of them speaking—if only for a short while—within the American mainstream. Indeed, Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970, 150 min.) and Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975, 159 min.) both use the inflated and extravagant epic form to deflate the power of founding myths and symbols and show America with no moral code whatsoever. (Altman further theorizes the construction of History in his 1976 box-office flop, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians; or, Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, which runs a contained 120 minutes.) Nonetheless, since the few American mavericks making countercultural "mainstream" films in the 1970s as a response to the history lessons of Vietnam, there has been little in the way of an American cinematic critique of the dominant mode of producing History. Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981, 200 min.), well intentioned and

“leftist” as it means to be, still buys into the formal and ideological repetitions of the Hollywood genre—playing out the “great man” theory of History outside as well as within the text, with Beatty producing, cowriting, directing, and starring as John Reed.

Thus within the last *decadē* (nostalgically noted by Barra as the time of “The Incredible Shrinking Epic”), it is two non-Americans who most significantly contest the Hollywood historical epic by entering into specific formal and ideological dialogue with its temporal construction. In different ways associated with the differences marked by Jameson and Hutcheon’s characterizations of postmodernism, both Alex Cox’s *Walker* (1987) and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987) are explicitly aware of the rhetoric and politics of excess that informed the Hollywood genre, and both use this knowledge critically.

Made by the same director who gave us *Repo Man* and *Sid and Nancy*, *Walker*, in its depiction of the leader of an army of American irregulars who invaded Nicaragua in 1855, financed by railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, stresses the schizophrenic gap between rhetoric and action and seems to illustrate the temporal mode of Jameson’s version of postmodern representation. The historical content of the film’s subject matter affords its only use of representational repetition—but it is a repetition that, in its retelling the contemporary intervention in Nicaragua through the representation of a previous and obscure intervention, directs us “back to the present” rather than to the past or future.⁶⁵ The content of the film’s form, however, is not the multileveled and isomorphic repetition that creates the sense of excess temporality and temporal significance in the Hollywood historical epic. Rather we have its opposite: *formal disparity* among its levels. The film is short in duration and long on the span of its narrative. Its music is contemporary *salsa*, while its costumes are historically “accurate.” The same disparity and anachronism begin increasingly to encroach on the narrative’s visible *mise-en-scène* and temporal cohesion—with *Time* magazine, modern automobiles, and even computers forcing the present into what was initially represented as the past. Clearly, *Walker* is not directed toward antecedence; indeed, if it constructs any excess of temporality, it is an excess of the existential present that very purposefully *debases* the significance of the past. As one reviewer has said, the film “keeps our attention focused not on the hollow heroics of the past but on the bloody farce of the present.”⁶⁶ *Walker* is a text in which one history interrogates another.

The Last Emperor in many ways is both the saddest and most profound of contemporary attempts to deal with historical representation in epic form. Unlike *Walker*, it does use the formal repetitions of the Hollywood genre. Textually full of surge and splendor and extravagance, it also surrounded itself with extratextual discourse about its own historic, costly, and arduous production in mainland China. Nonetheless, all that repetition, all that excess temporality that accumulates and circumscribes an expansive field for “being-in-History” is *ironically* put

to the service of a history from which both the central protagonist—and the spectator—are excluded. Contained in the Forbidden City, contained in Manchukuo, contained in Mao's reeducation camp, China's last emperor, Pu Yi, struggles to *make* History and not merely to be *of* it. All the surge and splendor and extravagance of the historical epic cinema is paradoxically centered upon a historical figure—a “great man”—who seems to have little historical agency. As spectators of this particular spectacle, we are not engaged in a temporal field that allows us prereflectively to experience the possibility of temporal transcendence but rather are left to reflect on our own *lack* of agency and our own restricted immanence in the movie theater—particularly since we, like Pu Yi, only get glimpses of the “significant” historical events we thought we were going to see. Thus, in a paradoxical and profoundly ironic reversal of temporal direction more characteristic of Hutcheon's postmodern representation than Jameson's, *The Last Emperor* gives us a historical figure who repeats, mimics, and foregrounds the antecedence and presence not of past historical agents but of the cinema *spectator*—someone who, if at all, sees History at a distance and yet nevertheless, like Pu Yi, is *presently* responsible to and accountable for its construction.

Notes

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1. Dixon to Mildred in *In a Lonely Place* (1950, Nicholas Ray); cited in Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London, 1984), 13.
2. While Britain and Italy have always been involved in the production of historical epics, and Hollywood often has engaged in international coproduction as a way of keeping costs down, nonetheless it is Hollywood—as institution, industry, and a set of narratological structures and cinematic conventions—that is primarily responsible for constructing both the epic's standard market and (at least in scale) its standard model. Thus, the term *Hollywood* used throughout this essay is meant to convey a conceptual framework more than a geographical one.
3. For general discussion of the reasons surrounding this decline, see Allen Barra, “The Incredible Shrinking Epic,” *American Film* 14, no. 5 (March 1989): 40–45ff.
4. *Gone with the Wind*, originally released in 1939, achieved its epic scope within the traditional aspect ratio of the 1930s and 1940s (the screen's relation of height to width was 1.33 to 1), while *Lawrence of Arabia*, originally released in 1962, used wide screen.
5. David Thomson, *Warren Beatty and Desert Eyes: A Life and a Story* (New York, 1987), 409. Thomson, in relation to Beatty's epic *Reds* (1981), is specifically referring here to *Gone with the Wind*.

6. George MacDonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World: From One Million Years B.C. to Apocalypse Now* (New York, 1988), xi.
7. *Ibid.*, 80.
8. Edward Maeder, "The Celluloid Image: Historical Dress in Film," in Maeder, ed., *Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film* (Los Angeles, 1987), 11–12.
9. Sande Coheñ, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley, 1986), 21; italics mine.
10. *Ibid.*, 13; italics mine.
11. A parallel project exploring the significance of popular critical response to *The Return of Martin Guerre* insofar as it relates to "how this fictional narrative" was "secured as a tale of the historical real" can be found in Janet Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative as a Tale of the Historical Real," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 393–413.
12. My phenomenological allegiance, therefore, is not to the transcendental phenomenology derived from Edmund Husserl and bent on describing eidetic essences. Rather, it is to the existential and semiological phenomenology derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenology whose "reductions" are never fully final or "essential," but are always qualified by the partial vision and finitude that marks human being.
13. Attributed to James Thurber in Fraser, *Hollywood History*, xii.
14. Elley, *Epic Film*, 1.
15. *TV Guide* (San Francisco Metropolitan Edition), 1 October 1988, A-4.
16. It is of particular and parallel interest that Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," rhetorically "parses" a similar critical statement by Vincent Canby about *The Return of Martin Guerre*: "This is, as they say, a true story." Her focus is on the function of the "they say"—a "gesture provoking intertextuality" as she sees it, referring less to a "specific group of people" than "to a set of texts in circulation in the social formation that give authenticity to the notion that 'this' is 'a true story'" (399).
17. Mick Martin and Marsha Porter, *Video Movie Guide 1988* (New York, 1987), 674.
18. *Ibid.*, 644.
19. Fraser, *Hollywood History*, 7.
20. It is interesting to note here that Elley in *Epic Film* conservatively focuses on epics beginning with biblical history and ending with early medieval history—indeed, defining the historical epic by the historical *distance* of its temporal content from the present. Thus, epics of the American West and more contemporary historical events are considered only in passing. Writing in a more nostalgic mode, Fraser's *Hollywood History* is more encompassing in its categories and more attuned to their phenomenological function. Fraser groups his discussion of the historical accuracy of Hollywood into "seven ages": the first is "The Ancient World," the second is "Knights and Barbarians," the third is "Tudors and Sea-Dogs," the fourth is "Romance and Royalty," the fifth is "Rule, Britannia," the sixth is "New World, Old West," and the seventh is "The Violent Century."
21. This issue of historical generalization is taken up by Pierre Sorlin in *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford, 1980). He writes:

The cultural heritage of every country and every community includes dates, events and characters known to all members of that community. This common basis is what we might call the group's "historical capital," and it is enough to select a few details from this for the audience to know that it is watching an historical film and to place it, at least approximately. In this way

every historical film is an indicator of a country's basic historical culture, its historical capital. . . . Behind the common knowledge, we can detect what is much more important: the underlying logic of history. (20–21)

22. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Cinerama Present "How the West Was Won"* (New York, 1963), n.p.
23. It is no coincidence that the decline of the Hollywood historical epic in the mid 1960s coincides with the transformation in Hollywood business practice from corporate capitalism to multinational (or "late") capitalism in the late 1960s and thereafter. Its decline also coincides with the social upheavals of the late 1960s, and Vietnam's deconstruction of the myth of American colonial power and benevolence.
24. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), ix–xi.
25. Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, Ohio, 1981), 259.
26. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill., 1968), 186.
27. *Ibid.*, 188.
28. Although relating such material excessiveness to intertextuality as the basis of authentication of story as "history," Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," makes a comment relevant to popular critical stress on props, sets, costumes, lighting, etc.: "The *physical* world of the film has been described as authentic and consequently true; its visible world has been pointed to and fixed as specifically historical. What has been used by the film and its contextualizing discourses to authenticate its claim to be a 'true story' is, as one reviewer put it, 'a surface sheen.'" Speaking of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Staiger goes on to disclose her "subtext": "Even if one could say that the film in some sense really did represent completely the physical or visible world of the 1500s, it would be said within an ideology that *what is visible is what is real*" (401; italics mine).
29. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Cinerama Present "How the West Was Won"*; subsequent references are to this volume, which is unpaginated.
30. It must be emphasized that *authenticity* and *accuracy* are not synonymous terms in relation to the Hollywood epic's system of equivalencies intended to generate a "history effect." This becomes particularly apparent when one turns to discussions of hairstyles or costumes such as those in Maeder's *Hollywood and History*. For example, we are told that "Max Factor supplied Twentieth Century-Fox with 4,402 period wigs 'authentic to the last curl,'" (69). However, this authenticity is transparently invoked in an essay specifically indicating that women's wigs in Hollywood historical epics were *never* accurate representations. Similarly, we find out that perceived authenticity of costume depends only on *partial* accuracy: "While costumes deviate from authenticity in silhouette, fabric, and other aspects, they often include extremely precise reproduction of certain key details" (15).
31. This subordination of history to stardom is also noted in *ibid.*:

When a star was cast in a period film, the studio faced a dilemma. While it was desirable that movie goers believed the historical image presented on the screen was indeed authentic, it was economically vital that the star's image was not sacrificed to history. In looking at how Hollywood movie makers reconciled these two conflicting demands, one can see a systematic approach to the way they handled makeup and hair, combining stars' modern images with illustrations of historical accuracy" (58).

32. Discussing historical authenticity and intertextuality, Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," notes in critical responses to *Martin Guerre*:
- Ten of the reviewers consider this film authentic in part because it reminds them of other representations created in the same period. Such a proposition derives from the notion that somehow Brueghel, La Tour, and Flemish paintings should be considered reasonably authentic representations of the people of the sixteenth century because of the adjacent date of their manufacture. Since we do not assume that early Egyptian paintings faithfully mimic real Egyptians, our assumption that Brueghel's or the Flemish paintings might do so must result from our pointing to other texts: discourses on art history. Brueghel is, "as they say," a "representational" painter. . . ." This film and its adjacent texts promote spectatorial activity of reference to other "authentic" texts, hoping to secure for a fictional narrative the status of being a tale of the historical real, of fixing it as a coherent representation, and a return of the bonding of the body of the past and its name. (400–401)
33. It is telling that the authority held by British royalty is called upon to "authorize" an American text about the West emphasizing "democratic" values and intending a "history effect." Given (for this country) the historically originary relation between Britain and the United States, it is as appropriate as it is also superficially bizarre.
34. Fraser, *Hollywood History*, 10.
35. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago, 1981), 165.
36. *Ibid.*, 169; italics mine.
37. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 123.
38. Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 261.
39. Sorlin, *Film in History*, 60; italics mine. Sorlin also discusses various semiotic possibilities of narration in historical films: no asserted narrative voice; delayed narrative voice; narrative voice opening the film and then disappearing; narrative voice distributed throughout the film; double narrative voice (see 53–54).
40. Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," 402–3; italics mine.
41. Huston did play a part in *The Bible*, but one clearly separated from his role as godly Narrator. Indeed, his Noah provided one of the few comic performances in the only comic sequence of the film.
42. It is useful in this context to recall that *persona*—while deriving its meaning from the face mask used by actors to portray assumed characters—also secures meaning from the actor's voice: "through sound."
43. Fraser, *Hollywood History*, 15.
44. In this regard, my own philosophizing descriptions here enjoy no special privilege. To talk metaphorically about temporality as a "field" would not be possible or intelligible without Enlightenment philosophy. However, insofar as phenomenology was a reaction to and critique of certain tendencies of the "European sciences," it can at least be considered a mode of description that attempts to understand and redress the limitations of the latter's particular forms of "objectivism," "empiricism," "positivism," and "psychologism."
45. Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," 404.
46. See M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist (Austin, Tex., 1981), 84–258.
47. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 186.
48. Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 176.

49. Ibid., 178.
50. Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," deals with the function of repetition in relation to narrative and the constitution of history by way of reference to Freud. Toward the end of her essay, she writes: "If I were to ask then, 'who needs narrative?' Freud would, I think, say, 'everyone.' The drive to narrativize the past and to secure the fictional tale as pointing to that historical real is understandable as a repetitious desire to fix, to halt and cure. It is the death instinct aligned with Eros, a signal anxiety in our time" (411).
51. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London, 1962), xiv; italics mine.
52. Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 257–58.
53. Peter O'Toole, quoted in Barra, "Incredible Shrinking Epic," 60.
54. Barra, *ibid.*, makes the point that there were some epics made in the 1970s and 1980s, but most were not historical in emphasis.
55. Prior to the early 1960s, there were very few commercial theaters and distribution circuits that identified and catered to discrete elements of this mass homogeneous American audience. The breakup of the Hollywood studio system, the influx of foreign films, the social fragmentation of American society and its articulation into demographic units based on age, sex, race—all led to a perception of the audience as heterogeneous and to the concrete expression of this perception in the segmentation of very large movie theaters into smaller halls and the emergence of multiplex theaters with a seemingly diversified product.
56. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1981).
57. Quoted in Barra, "Incredible Shrinking Epic," 43–44.
58. Quoted in *ibid.*, 45.
59. Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," 406.
60. Maeder, "Celluloid Image," 34–35.
61. Barra, "Incredible Shrinking Epic," 42.
62. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984), 53.
63. Linda Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," *Textual Practice* 1, no. 1 (1987): 10–31; and "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," *Cultural Critique* 5 (1987), 179–207.
64. Leslie Berlowitz, quoted in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 April 1989, A-18, from Denis Donoghue et al., eds., *America in Theory* (New York, 1988).
65. The connection between repetition and parody emerge when we note that Elliott Abrams's assistant for Central American affairs is named William Walker. This "lattice of coincidence" (a term used by Miller in *Repo Man*) evokes a strange euphoria provoked by that sort of irrational cohesion that characterizes the Jamesonian model of postmodernism.
66. Michael S. Gant, "Filibustering Farce," *Sun* (Santa Cruz, Calif.), 28 April 1988, 25.