

Adventures of a Postmodern Historian: Living and Writing the Past

By Robert Rosenstone

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Reviewed by Roger Hillman

ADVENTURES OF A POSTMODERN HISTORIAN: LIVING AND WRITING THE PAST IS BY Robert Rosenstone, Professor Emeritus of History at the California Institute of Technology, which is renowned for its strengths in the Sciences and Engineering. This is not to imply a marginalisation of the disciplines (History and Film) within and across which Rosenstone both taught and continues to research. Rather, this latest book from an author who will be known to many *AHR* readers represents the strengths and innovations yielded from working at the threshold of two vital Humanities disciplines.

The book is a memoir arranged chronologically. Bookended by a brief prologue and epilogue, the organisation of its four chapters reflects the shifting geography of the author's concerns as a historian: Spain, the Soviet Union, Japan, and Hollywood. Each chapter relates to a major monograph, so that the memoir serves as an ideal entry-point to his oeuvre, but also as an invaluable self-reflection by a forever enquiring author. The first three focal points reflect U.S. encounters at key historical moments, as well as providing substantial fieldwork sites for Rosenstone the evolving historian. His earlier works, in which crucial historical developments radiated out from central individuals, made arresting choices: the Lincoln battalion (U.S. volunteers) in the Spanish Civil War; John Reed's transit from U.S. counter-culture to political counter-culture in the early years of the Soviet Union; and three U.S. citizens working in late nineteenth-century Japan. The Hollywood phase, scene of his collaboration with Warren Beatty on the film *Reds* (1981), ushers in the author's pioneering work on film and history. This is characterised by a breakthrough volume on their interrelationship, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Ideas of History* (1995). Here he wears that hat for which he is best known to Humanities scholars, and for which he has an occasionally controversial reputation (alongside kindred spirits like Hayden White) among History colleagues.

Rosenstone continues to be a most unusual historian. Appearing in the year he turned 80, this book signals another under way, one which embarks on nothing less than addressing the question: 'How do pasts live on in our relationships and ourselves?' (Rosenstone, *Adventures* 191). The framing of the question promises a further development of what *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian* begins, namely a personalised contribution to memory studies, and a historicised approach to (auto-)biography. So, the current memoir is only provisional, and the intellectual battles and ferment he has engaged in are ongoing.

Why might these 'adventures', as the title puts it, be of particular interest to readers of a Humanities journal? In his works cited above, and particularly in the turn to film, Rosenstone's approach to history has had much in common with representations of history by cultural historians in Literary and Screen studies. Precious few of the latter, writing on subjects like the historical novel or Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927), have had historical expertise matching their background in literary or film studies. Rosenstone's work not only bridges disciplinary borders, but also goes beyond them, given that his academic scholarship has been supplemented by three works of (historically informed) fiction, and—surely a rarity for an academic historian—a volume of poetry. When Rosenstone graduated from UCLA with a major in English, his wish was to become a novelist. Ahead of graduate years, which in turn followed a stint in journalism, he had taken a single course in history. What distinguishes his output are innovations more familiar to literary scholars, less so to historians contemporary with the appearance of his earlier publications.

The structure of the present work is enriched by inclusion of a series of 'letters' from female correspondents prominent in the author's life at the time of the events detailed in the relevant chapters. The author signals variations in content, but not (he claims) in tone from the originals. While a personal space is intimated, a kind of privacy is ultimately preserved, one that is continuous with an earlier generation of academic writing, but was rarely acknowledged there, not just by historians. While never short-changing History as a Social Science, Rosenstone celebrates it as a key humanities discipline. The conceit of letters from former lovers that are threaded throughout the memoir provides a high point of the memoir.

These 'letters', then, are a healthy injection of the erstwhile epistolary novel, rather than documentary glosses on this historian's personal history. They are also a key aspect of '*living*' the past of the subtitle, an aspiration more frequently left to biographers or diaries. It is part of a quest within the writer's own life for understanding 'how the personal has inflected the historical and vice versa' (Rosenstone, *Adventures* 2). This location of a life within a discipline, and vice versa, extends to synthesising changes at the outer historical and the inner

personal level in eras of flux, such as U.S. campus life in the late 1960s. Implied throughout is the bridging of three temporal arches that span: 1) the historical event in real time, 2) its subsequent analysis by a historian, and 3) that same author's reflections on both event and earlier analysis from a still later vantage point. The insertion at key points in the chapters of some of his own journal entries from earlier fieldwork makes the temporal web more complex.

The film-history link is of course a two-way one. Film's potential for innovative perspectives on history may have been an epiphany for the historian Rosenstone, but conversely, film studies and cultural studies more generally have gained considerably from the impulses of history in the hands of this author. History is the subliminal subtext of all we do, and all we teach. Student essay howlers I've encountered include a late sequence of *The Third Man* supposedly being set in the sewers of Venice, or *Gallipoli* being a key campaign of World War II. The situation of Harry Lime's post-War Vienna was historically surreal in the formative stages of the Cold War. The plot details themselves are not paramount in these extreme examples of a sense of history that is not always sufficiently developed in the very best film students. But at stake is the fact that historicity matters, contesting the 'whatever' to which a postmodern approach can tend. (In Rosenstone's title, the term 'postmodernism' is one of inconvenience, applied with wry distance.) To draw on this reviewer's experience, an informed and thoughtful Californian exchange student just ten years ago reacted to a screening of Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) with a horrified: 'Did we do that?' Heavily filtered news, in this case of the nuclear end to Japan's involvement in World War II, is even less tangible than fake news.

A reader unfamiliar with Rosenstone's work on film might well start with the following self-quotation, one of a (small, well-chosen) number taken from his earlier work: 'Film thus points towards new possibilities for representing the past, possibilities that could allow narrative history to recapture the power it once had when it was more deeply rooted in the literary imagination' (*Adventures* 180). Here we find a summary of what was elaborated in far more detail in the earlier work, namely the inroads made into the discipline of history by Hayden White and others, not least by Rosenstone himself, once the rhetoric of history-telling was acknowledged. Less startling to Humanities scholars than to historians a quarter of a century ago, and with close kinship to New Historicism's polyphony of complementary discourses, the essential link between film and history becomes a Bakhtinian site of heterogeneous discourses, to the enrichment of both disciplines. Because of this cross-fertilisation, Rosenstone's laments for his own discipline are also a salutary comment on the other scale in the balance. On his initiative the venerable *American Historical Review* briefly introduced film reviews, whose historical emphasis of course made them distinct from those in film journals. But surely a continuum exists in

criticism, too, and terms in the following could profitably be reversed: 'given the fact the visual media are playing an increasingly large role in the culture, maybe it was time for historians to learn to do so [i.e. 'write about film']?' (*Adventures* 193). Film scholars, however ahistorical in their own estimation, cannot fail to be writing about history, far beyond film history.

Midst their documentation and musings, these 'adventures'/memoirs that generate stories in and about specific places qualify as something of an adventure novel. For example, after a particularly frustrating encounter with the Soviet bureaucracy, Rosenstone had an unexpected Cold War coup during a cultural thaw in the early 1970s, when the very archive he had vainly sought access to suddenly ensured that he was the recipient of 2000 photocopied pages. Later he responded to an approach from Warren Beatty to be historical advisor on the film *Reds*. Whatever one thinks of that film, the inside Hollywood picture furnished by the author of a book about John Reed is intriguing and highly illuminating. In earlier works, vignettes of life in Spain, the Soviet Union or Japan had underlined the cultural outsider status of the author, but again, that perspective is tacitly played off against any notion of an omniscient (historical) narrator.

In these memoirs, 'living the past' is never living in the past. Central to encounters with the past, and with the divergent cultures of Spain, the Soviet Union and Japan, is the gradual process of enculturation and its modification of prior conceptions. Creating a Russian doll effect, 'writing the past' becomes an ongoing process of self-reflection about a constantly shifting object, and attempts to render those shifts.

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