

Mason Kamana Allred

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Re-Membering the Past: Historical Film and the Embodied Viewer

Mason Kamana Allred

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Figure 1. *MADAME DUBARRY*, arte, Projektions-AG Union © original copyright holders

In 1895 the Edison short, *THE EXECUTION OF MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS* (USA 1895) staged a fully “fleshed out” historical beheading on film. By putting members and flesh onto otherwise mental images of historical figures, the film showcased the new medium’s ability to combine the distinct elements of visualizing history and appealing to the human body. After decapitating the stand-in dummy, the masked executioner lifts the queen’s dismembered head triumphantly for the full view of the camera. The ‘visceral’ potential of historical film was already evident at its inception. It is no surprise that nearly 25 years later Ernst Lubitsch ended his feature length film of the French mistress, *Madame Dubarry*, with her gruesome execution at the guillotine.

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In the final scene of *MADAME DUBARRY* (D 1919) a matte shot parts like a curtain and the camera positions the audience in an iconic relationship with the yelling masses on screen. The platform of the guillotine is, like the screen in the cinema, slightly elevated and the clear center of attention. Despite her strenuous resistance, Dubarry (Pola Negri) is strapped to the death machine and the film cuts to a long shot of the blade plummeting down the frame. The blade drops, closing the contraption's cavity for a head and recalling the fact that "guillotine" was also the name of the drop shutter in some 19th century cameras¹ and that the technical term for an executioner even became "photographer."² Putting these elements into motion the film continues, cutting from the blade to a long shot of the executioner, or photographer, retrieving Dubarry's head from the platform. He then tosses the severed head to the ecstatic crowd and a final close up reveals the head, captured by living hands and the magic of film.

Such depictions of historical bodies in grave and sensational settings constituted a qualitatively new mode of history that appealed to modern embodied viewers. Whereas traditional historicism should edit the human body out of the historical process through "Selbstausschöpfung" (the extinguishment of self for objectivity), film functioned precisely by appealing to the emotions, movements, and experiences of audience's bodies.³ Surpassing historical theater, history on film's fragmentation and "cutting" of the human body engaged audiences in their material reality—in their "skin and hair."⁴ By fleshing-out the past on film, its subjects could be effectively dis- and re-membered, while cutting into the bodily experience of modern viewers. And this was the carnally charged history reaching audiences across the globe and eclipsing novels, monographs, and magazines.

For more critical viewers such portrayals of the past were difficult to accept as history. In his 1947 assessment of Weimar German film, Siegfried Kracauer described Ernst Lubitsch's history films, as "nihilistic." For Kracauer, Lubitsch's "cynicism and melodramatic sentimentality . . . characterized history as meaningless."⁵ It is true that the type of history produced by Lubitsch could certainly be construed as soft, weak, or even meaningless history, yet it is the very "spectatorial experience that resists co-optation by meaning" that can in turn produce a radically modern type of history.⁶ Recognizing the potential threat of what appears under the lens of historicism as "soft" history, it is nevertheless worth investigating the experience of such a metaphorically textured approach to the past, especially considering the international reach and ubiquity of history films.⁷ Navigating that dilemma, I want to use the reception and event of *MADAME DUBARRY* to explore the modern, cinematically structured historical experience that historicism methodologically neglects.

What follows then is not an attack on historicism and its emphasis on narrative and information. To be sure the presence of historicism or other strands of academic history are necessary as reflective structures to orient the present in empirical ways. However, as Paul Ricoeur insightfully concedes, although "history can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory [and film] regarding the past; it cannot abolish it."⁸

1. Daniel Arasse traces these and further parallels between portrait photography and the guillotine in *The Guillotine and the Terror* (Lane, 1989), 139. I am gratefully indebted to the brilliant Gertrud Koch not only for alerting me to this source and connection but also for stimulating conversations regarding this essay and the Lubitsch film.

2. Ibidem, 140.

3. Cf. Leopold von Ranke [1875–90], quoted in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*: Vol. 4: 1800–1945, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Maiguashca, and Attila Pók (Oxford et al., 2011), 42.

4. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New Jersey, 1997), xvii.

5. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (New Jersey, 1947), 52.

6. Christian Keathley uses the intensity of "cinephiliac moments" as his starting point to unearth historical viewing that is ignored by traditional historiography in *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington, 2006), 9.

7. Cf. Günter Riederer, "Film und Geschichtswissenschaft", in *Visual History*, ed. Gerhard Paul (Göttingen, 2006), 102.

The precise way, in which historical films came to engage the human body for experiencing what is “historical” helps to highlight the construction of a cinematic regime of historicity. The technological and historically specific mode of address suffusing this experience produced a new remembering of history, by updating historical reception through the cinematic medium. Accordingly, it is helpful to revisit Kracauer’s trepidation toward photography and history, before his damning analysis of Lubitsch’s films after World War II. Coupling Kracauer with film phenomenology, I hope to reveal how Lubitsch’s history of *MADAME DUBARRY*, as a typification of the genre of history film at the time, may have been cynical and even sentimental, but made historical sense, specifically for modern embodied viewers.

Thawing Historicism

Kracauer’s valid concern with the photographic medium was that it only offers surface and thereby buries history “under a layer of snow.” Because of the ontological realism of the camera this blizzard effect would be the inevitable result if only Lubitsch-type history films were linking present to past. For Kracauer these couldn’t do real history since the historian’s task, as he later articulated it, lies in “penetrating [the past’s] outward appearance, so that he may learn to understand that world from within.”⁹ Even though photographic media showed more, society came to know less. Whereas Kracauer’s concern with Lubitsch’s films in 1947 was narrative implication, his interwar reflection was based on the medium itself. This is an important distinction in the effort to describe historical experience rather than the “meaning” of historical accounts per se. The problem preceding narrative was that although the blizzard effect created an opportunity for new encounters with nature the unacceptable trade-off was surface, a mere “spatial continuum.”

And yet the historicist tradition, stemming from the Enlightenment, precipitated its own blizzard effect. As Dutch novelist Nicolaas Beets put it, “the temperature decreased from that of human blood to that of frost. It literally snowed big ideas. It was a fresh but, in the end, uncomfortable cold.”¹⁰

This chilling historicism of the 19th century banished the experience of the past in favor of objectivity and distinction. Beets’s conception of the Enlightenment and historicism is a cold, scientific, negative disenchantment of the world, whereas Kracauer’s photographic snow was the loss of depth and distinguishing traits concealed under a “jumble that consists partially of garbage.”¹¹

Both Beets’ and Kracauer’s forecasts, while revealing the limits of each mode of representing the past, were metaphorical polarities devoid of carnality, experience, and sensation. Where photography required no human intervention, historicism privileged logical thought over affect. Both poles extracted the warmth of sensing bodies in the historical process.

Set against the freezing pole of historicism, Frank Ankersmit has recently explored what he terms “subjective” and “sublime” historical experience. He explicitly states his aim as replacing “the intellectual bureaucracy of ‘theory’” with a “romantic” notion of experience. By turning away from a focus on narrative and textuality, Ankersmit celebrates the way the historian, as an

8. Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 1st ed. (Chicago, 2004), 498.

9. Siegfried Kracauer and Paul Oskar Kristeller, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, (Princeton, 1995), 84.

10. Nicolaas Beets, quoted in Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, CA, 2005), 11.

11. Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography”, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Levin, (Boston, MA, 1995), 51.

“oracle” of sorts, works through personal historical experience to produce historiography. Ankersmit’s work, while representing a major shift from his earlier narratological studies, helps validate subjective pre-reflective experience as a mode of history. Although he clearly does not have film in mind, with silent historical film, an increasingly international audience was experiencing historical drama enacted before their eyes (and bodies). As the growing primary means for the public to engage the past in meaningful ways, cinematic historicity became a regime in itself—one that informs structures of thought and feelings about the past and requires its own historicization.

In order to more closely examine this process of silent film inflecting historical understanding at work, Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological film theory proves illuminating. Sobchack’s emphasis on the body as the site of cross-modal sensory reception helps reconcile Kracauer’s mere surface (of the photographic medium) with his recognition in 1960 that “film images affect primarily the spectator’s senses [...] engaging him physiologically before [...] intellectually”¹² and his conviction that “[t]he film experience involves ‘not so much [the spectator’s] power of reasoning as his visceral faculties,’ his ‘sense organs’.”¹³ In this theoretical light Lubitsch’s *MADAME DUBARRY* stoked the human body and blood to make historical sense through sensory experience. Embodied audiences were furnished with opportunities to have “subjective historical experiences” in Ankersmit’s terminology, which offered something of the feel and look of the past, including its spatial configuration and texture. The shift from textual to textural not only describes this theoretical framework but the film’s rendering of the past.¹⁴

Despite its focus on texture, texts are certainly not absent in *MADAME DUBARRY*. 13 times the screen is filled with a historical document functioning as a title card. On a formal level, the living historical characters enter the screen from these texts only to subsume them with their hand, pocket, or even bosom. The technique is brought to a sensual climax during the initial encounter between King Louis XV (Emil Jannings) and the commoner Jeanne, before she becomes Madame Dubarry. After gazing at Jeanne’s cleavage the king discovers a rolled up document between her breasts. Once he has removed the document, we read the petition through the King’s point-of-view, he then signs and returns it to the same “historic” breasts. At this point, the document visually fades into the human figure. The conventional object of historicism (text) is subsumed with sexual overtones into the living historical figure (sensual, sensing, and sensory image). This also exemplifies the translation of historiography into the increasingly universal language of film and into a new regime of historicity, one that is wrapped up with the photographic medium and understands history in its visibility and texture.

This qualitative shift in the experience of history moves our focus from that document’s narrative implications to the viewer’s ability to, like the giggling and wiggling figure of Dubarry on screen, feel, sense, and perceive something instead of just reading the text. Of course, there is no tangible document slid from and returned to the viewer’s chest. However, the audience is visually invited to feel the text as texture in a diffused sense, “on the rebound.”¹⁵ The feeling on screen in its visibility returns the audience to feel their own physical presence and embodiment, to feel themselves feeling. The experience of the

12. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 158.

13. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, 2011), 268.

14. For sustained “textural” analysis of film see Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, 2009).

15. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, (Berkeley, 2004), 76.

scene also encapsulates a fleshy wearing of history as it becomes inscribed onto the body through sensual mediation.

Although I am resisting the urge to summarize the film, let me at least state that narratively this was fitting subject matter, since it was precisely, as Georg Lukács observed, “the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a mass experience.”¹⁶

There also exists, of course, a visual connection between spectacle in the 18th century and cinema spectatorship in the 20th. As both were able to offer “history in the making” for a mass audience, their confluence further underscores the significance of revolution as spectacle. And in early Weimar the French Revolution was already loaded with varied political, historical, and cultural meanings, and therefore ripe for present use. But the film’s reception at home and abroad indicated the development of another revolution a media revolution in the popular experience of history.¹⁷

Inspired by his viewing of *MADAME DUBARRY*, the Austrian journalist and theater critic Egon Friedell linked the film’s representation of a historical revolution to mankind’s development of new understanding and action through the ability to finally grasp the importance of just such a revolution. Through temporal and visual distance the filmic form could forge a revolutionary understanding of the intellect (upon reflection) as well as the nerves and body. This was the power of film to finally bring our bodies up to speed. Friedell wrote about the reaction,

*the novelty, we might say, has not yet made its way through all the parts of the body; and it often takes generations until it does. There are a bunch of things we think we don’t believe in with our intellect, but our being still believes in them, and it is always the more powerful part.*¹⁸

Here, Friedell not only anticipates Walter Benjamin’s collective instruction through shocks, but also Kracauer’s understanding of the “role of cinematic movement, speed, and multiple and rapidly changing viewpoints in updating human consciousness and the sensorium to the level of technology.”¹⁹ With filmed histories the deeply ingrained corporeal sense of the past would be produced in cinemas and should then “catch up” with the mind. While the reflective spectator could question, wonder, and learn from such experiences the body itself was learning to cope with the new history.

Feeling the excess

A primary means to create historical sense through sensation was achieved through the deployment of temporal, as well as material excess. Without the elephants of *CABIRIA* (I 1914) and *INTOLERANCE* (USA 1916), Lubitsch turned to other means of signifying excess. The casting of *MADAME DUBARRY* with Emil Jannings and Pola Negri already conferred gravity upon the historical figures they embodied and the film brought them both international fame. In 1919, it was already recognized that films were “wrapped around their stars like custom-made clothing.”²⁰ And these attractive stars were just as impressively wrapped in costuming, which showcased historical attire in

16. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London, 1962), 23.

17. Reinhart Koselleck also described the “forcible experience of the French Revolution, which seemed to outstrip all previous experience” as part of the larger shift in temporalized history; cf. Reinhart Koselleck and Keith Tribe, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York City, 1985), 38.

18. “[...] die Neuigkeit, möchte man sagen, hat sich noch nicht in den andern Körperteilen herumgesprochen; und es dauert oft Generationen, bis sie sich herumspricht. Wir glauben mit unsrem Verstand von einer Menge Dingen, dass wir sie nicht glauben; aber unser Organismus glaubt noch an sie, und der ist allemal der stärkere.” (Transl. M.A.) Egon Friedell, “Dubarry,” *Weltbühne* 17 (1921): 277.

19. Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 259.

20. Joseph Garnicarz, “The Star System in Weimar Cinema”, in *The Many Faces of Weimar: Rediscovering Germany’s Filmic Legacy*, ed. Christian Rogowski (Rochester, NY, 2010), 120.

motion. Lubitsch, as the son of a tailor and director of several “fashion farces,” was as qualified as any to literally fill the screen with sumptuous textures of the past. The visual magnitude of historical dress displayed like so many swatches in motion, signified an abundance that was tied to temporality itself. Thus the “temporal magnitude” in *MADAME DUBARRY* was “constituted not only by the ‘big’ presence of stars but also by literal quantity.”²¹ Excess in *MADAME DUBARRY* visually realized, for perceiving bodies, the “culturally sedimented” conception that “history is made literal and material through scale.”²² Which also happens to be great for international export.

Beyond the meticulous attention to clothing *MADAME DUBARRY* made the French Revolution historical through its excess of bodies and sets. British critic Caroline Alice Lejeune remarked “Lubitsch had a way of manipulating his puppets that gave multitude [...] No one before had so filled and drained his spaces with the wheeling mass, rushing in figures from every corner to cover the screen.”²³ Such effects caused the *New York Times* to suggest, “In ‘Passion’ the photoplay reaches its limits of excellence.”²⁴ History films seemed to reveal the potential and edges of the medium by reaching beyond the frame materially. The sensory impact of this excess urged the audience’s consciousness to reach beyond their own temporal frame.

History on Repeat

An extension of temporality was also created through repetition, that feature of all history. *MADAME DUBARRY* repeated history by “standing the test of time” for its revival two years later in New York,²⁵ creating the “German Invasion” into Hollywood, and intertextually through title cards that repeat the narrative in word before its visual enunciation. Building on Ricoeur’s articulation of repetition as that “aspect of narratological form most responsive and responsible to our phenomenological sense of time as ‘historical,’” Sobchack sees such rhetorical repetition as serving “to ‘extend’ the temporal sense between the immediate and prereflexive ‘preoccupation’ we have with time as ‘now’ and the deeply reflective sense we have of the transcendent unity of ‘all times.’”²⁶ Repetition manufactures phenomenological relations between bodies and temporal horizons by emphasizing the repeatability of the historical film’s form. Additionally, as Robert Burgoyne has noted, the use of several genres for historical stories works so well in film since generic conventions comprise what Mikhail Bakhtin termed “organs of memory.”²⁷ As a romance, tragedy, or melodrama history films could reach audiences viscerally and echo former uses of the genre, thus forging a bond between past and present.

Enduring Duration

Focusing on the temporality in Lubitsch’s history films brings their convoluted plots and dramatic volatility into relief. The excessive ups and downs of abridged history, usually including death and battle, were in some measure due to duration. While Lubitsch’s other films (primarily comedies) produced

21. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 36.

22. *Ibidem*.

23. Caroline Alice Lejeune, quoted in Kracauer, *Caligari to Hitler*, 55.

24. “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1920, 21. *PASSION* is the Lubitsch film’s alternative title (ed. note).

25. Cf. *The New York Times*, June 26, 1923, 14.

26. Vivian Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Austin, TX, 2007), 38.

27. Robert Burgoyne, *The Epic Film* (New York City, 2011), 1.

during the same time period were generally 2,000 to 4,000 feet in length, his historical films ranged from 7500 to 9800 feet and they progressively lengthened.²⁸ One of the aspects of these films that helped convey history was the increased tendency to write history on the audience's posterior, as Sobchack has termed it.²⁹ The swelling length challenged physical bodies to sit through, endure, and experience duration on screen. Length was a double-edged sword. While it could inflict boredom, it also forced a bodily experience of temporality and allowed narrative extension.

While all these conventions speak to the specificity of the medium to engender carnal historical experience, Lubitsch's so-called "touch" also colored the reception of *MADAME DUBARRY*. His idiosyncratic style is illustrated in *MADAME DUBARRY*'s play with vision. Like many other such instances, a court official sees the scene mentioned above (of the king and Jeanne with the document) through a keyhole. This attention to vision also has direct consequences for the phenomenological experience of history on film. This is once again a repetition—a multiplication of what might be pigeonholed as merely self-reflexive cinema. However, when this is visually emphasized and linked with historical representation the film marries Sobchack's "objective seeing subjective seeing" with Ankersmit's subjective historical experience. The film doubles the gaze and takes the audience through the cinematic keyhole into imagined historical spaces to see and cross-modally smell and feel the meticulous detail as 'impure' vision. *MADAME DUBARRY* then served to literalize and embody the craft of the historian: historical visualization.

In making space for the cultural work of softer history, we might focus on experience instead of instrumentalized or nationalist narratives. In carnal ways, *MADAME DUBARRY* created a valid experience of history by fragmenting the body in close-up and cutting between shots of surface to cut into the depth of human experience. The filmic medium's blizzard of surface worked on a neglected yet significant sensory level. It also evaded a historicist avalanche of facts and footnotes that would sublimate bodily experience to cognition. Viewing Lubitsch's film in this theoretically embodied light, between the two historiographical blizzards, reveals an early moment in the development of the cinematic sense of history. This sense, abounding with sensation, worked against "scientific knowledge" of the past, which had "shift[ed] the center of gravity of experience, so that we unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel."³⁰

28. Cf. Robert L. Carringer and Barry Sabath, Ernst Lubitsch: A Guide to References and Resources (Boston, 1978).

29. Cf. Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor," 38.

30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York City et al., 2012), 229.