14 The History of Film on Film

Some Thoughts on Reflexive Documentaries

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Abstract
The history of cinema is an object of study in numerous academic publications, which seek to recount and explain the filmic past. This chapter focuses on how non-fiction films perform the same operation by narrating the history of the medium with its own tools, namely images and sounds. Using two reflexive documentaries as key case studies, Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (1984) and Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), the author aims to investigate how the formal parameters of these works determine the historical explanations that arise from their respective portraits of Marlene Dietrich and Alexander Medvedkin. In addition, she discusses how the aspect of self-reflexivity in historical film-making invites a more complex and contextual approach to the filmic past.

Keywords: historical documentary, film history, self-reflexivity, historical explanation, media archaeology

Introduction

Writing the history of cinema is an enterprise riddled with a series of formal, philosophical, and ideological assumptions that are rarely discussed in the open. Like any other type of history, books on cinematic history aim to provide an account of the medium's past by identifying its fundamental determinants and organizing them into a temporal, spatial, and causal order. Thus, a long list of films, film-makers, actors, technological innovations, and production and exhibition practices are embedded in written historical narratives that, on the one hand, appear primarily to present "what really happened" in cinema's past, while explaining, on the other, how and why

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things happened as they did. This double function of written histories was first pinpointed by Hayden White in his monumental work *Metahistory* (1973), where he defined the historical work as "a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*."[1]

This often latent process of explaining the past will be the focus of this chapter with a slight modification; instead of investigating how books on film narrate its historical past, I will look at how non-fiction films perform the same function. Specifically, I will discuss how two reflexive documentaries, Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (1984) and Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), could qualify as pieces of film history with particular historical and philosophical explanations. My argument is twofold: firstly, I maintain that historical documentaries about the cinematic past, depending on their formal arrangement, are capable of expressing the same explanations as written histories of cinema. Secondly, the reflexive documentaries, in particular, thanks to their self-conscious form, are able to accommodate explanations about cinema's past that have not been dominant so far in written historiography. As I will explain shortly, *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik* are two cases that can help us unravel the standard assumptions of written histories and allow us to glimpse the possibility of a more complex and contextual approach to the filmic past.

Histories on Paper/Histories on Film: Their Shared Philosophical Assumptions

Any research into the filmic, or more broadly, the audiovisual histories of the cinema should begin by taking into account the corresponding historical accounts in written form. In other words, the historiophoty[2] of the medium should be viewed in close relation to the historiographical strands that developed in the course of almost a century now. According to Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, the first histories of the cinema in the United States are found in Robert Grau's *Theatre of Science* (1914) and

1 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2, emphasis in the original.

2 Hayden White coined the term "historiophoty" to define "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" in order to indicate its significant correspondence to the concept of historiography. Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Winter 1988): 1193.

Terry Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* (1926). Therein, one can note some of the elementary principles of film historiography that would persist for decades, such as the idea of progress towards cinema's technological and aesthetic perfection, the importance of discovery and innovation as well as the focus on "great men" as primary agents of change and success.[3] Film history books steadily flourished after the Second World War, while a surge in publications was witnessed in the 1970s when the study of film became increasingly institutionalized. Writing in 1977, Charles F. Altman astutely observes the following: "During the past decade the literature on the nature and history of the American film has more than doubled. Major new books now appear once a month, rather than once a year as they did during the fifties, or scarcely once a decade as in the twenties and thirties."[4]

The growing terrain of film historiography may comprise numerous studies on all of cinema's dimensions (aesthetic, technological, economic, social) but the underlying assumptions of these historical accounts are not necessarily as varied as one would assume. In fact, metahistorical approaches on the history of film have noted that throughout the twentieth century historical research has largely fallen into three or four categories.[5] According to David Bordwell, who surveyed the history of film style in particular, there are four distinct historiographical schools categorized as follows: (1) The Standard Version of Stylistic History found in the works of Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, which regards film history as a linear development toward the revelation of cinema's inherent aesthetic nature; (2) the Dialectical Programme pioneered by André Bazin, which seeks to explain aesthetic change and continuity through dialectical tensions that ultimately serve cinema's fundamental purpose, namely the tendency towards greater realism; (3) the Oppositional Programme of Noël Burch, which accounts for stylistic change through the opposition between mainstream and experimental film practices and makes room for the impact of politics and ideology on film form; and (4) other recent programmes, such as "Piecemeal History," which emphasize the close scrutiny of early cinema

3 Richard C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 54.

4 Charles F. Altman, "Towards a Historiography of American Film," *Cinema Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 1.

5 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *Cinémas: revue d'études cinématographiques/Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (Spring 2004): 75–117; Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

and revise a series of established hierarchies and long-held assumptions of all the three previous schools of thought.[6]

Even though Bordwell's metahistorical account openly concentrates on the history of film style, a similar blueprint of film historiography results when Thomas Elsaesser switches the focus to digital cinema. In the latter's take, it is digital cinema that may serve as the pivotal moment to rethink the history of the medium. His recent publication *Film History as Media Archaeology*: *Tracking Digital Cinema* (2016) is a collection of ideas and suggestions that he developed over the years in order to surpass the deadlocks of traditional historiography. In Elsaesser's work, the great divide initially lies between Old Film History and New Film History, a term that emerged among film historians in the mid-1980s.[7] Specifically, New Film History was put forward as a reaction to "traditional (or 'old') film history's tacit assumption of linear progress," which came in the form of "a chronological-organic model (e.g. childhood-maturity-decline and renewal), a chronological-teleological model (the move to "greater and greater realism"), or the alternating swings of the pendulum between (outdoor) realism and (studio-produced) fantasy."[8] Even though Elsaesser does not adopt the same terminology as Bordwell, the correspondences between their historiographical maps are evident. New Film History is what Bordwell includes in the recent programmes, and particularly "piecemeal history," while both scholars maintain an openly prescriptive tone in their writings. In other words, they not only seek to chart the various strands of film historiography but they also aim at offering suggestions about the ways film history should be written in the future. Their insights for prospective historical research will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, as we now need to dwell a little longer on the history of film history and the underlying assumptions of the three, or even all four, aforementioned historical traditions.

Despite the passage of time and the changes in film form, economics or technology, the writing of film history maintained a steady level of Hegelian undercurrents, according to both Elsaesser and Bordwell. In fact, the latter explicitly characterizes the first three schools as "Hegelian," as they all base their observations on an underlying teleology that supposedly guides cinema's progress in the course of time. For instance, Bordwell writes, "In significant ways Bazin is even more Hegelian than his predecessors. He recasts the history of art in the light of the advent of cinema, tracing

6 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 12–139.

7 Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History," *Sight and Sound* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 246–51.

8 Elsaesser, "New Film History as Media Archaeology," 80.

photography back to ancient impulses that only now find fulfilment."[9] And then, when it comes to Burch, he notes, "Despite his explicit desire to overturn 'idealist' historiography, Burch sustains the research tradition in important ways."[10] Similarly, Elsaesser criticizes Old Film History for its linearity, its clear-cut chronology, its search for origins and teleology, while he appears to be troubled by New Film History as well. As he puts it, "Wherever the New Film History charts its longue durée accounts around 'multimedial,' 'immersive,' 'panoramic' or 'haptic' media experiences, it also serves to legitimate a covert but speculative and, in all likelihood, transitory teleology."[11] In other words, Elsaesser feels that the pitfalls of Hegelian thinking, i.e. the need to interpret the past according to a higher logic, are endemic even in the New Film History.

The philosophical arguments of film historians that both scholars identify and criticize in a century-long film historiography demonstrate that the written history of cinema so far has been predominantly of an organicist kind. "Organicism" is a term that White introduced in his poetics of history in order to describe one of the four philosophical arguments that underlie any historical writing, the others being formism, mechanism and contextualism.[12] According to White, historical works not only describe "what happened" but also seek to explain—openly or not—"why it happened" by appeal to general laws of causation. In the case of organicism, history is viewed as an organic process that integrates the events into a higher-level entity. When a historian subscribes to this tradition, they are inclined to depict the particulars of the historical field not as unique occurrences but rather as components of synthetic processes.[13] Idealists like Hegel are exemplary in this practice, as their search focuses less on the details of the historical facts and more on the general ideas and principles that appear to govern the historical process. Likewise, narrating the history of cinema as a series of events that build up to a greater purpose, whether you call it "maturity," "realism" or "binary oppositions," reveals an organicist form of explanation that is constantly seeking to unearth some integrated entity whose importance is greater than the sum of the individual historical elements.

9 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 74.

10 Ibid., 112.

11 Elsaesser, "New Film History as Media Archaeology," 89.

12 White, *Metahistory*. White formulated the four historical arguments (formism, contextualism, organicism, and mechanism) employing Stephen Pepper's taxonomy of philosophical systems or world hypotheses. For a full account of these four world hypotheses, see Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

13 White, *Metahistory*, 15.

What I find intriguing is how the majority of the historiographical approaches in the case of cinema belong to the organicist tradition whereas, when it comes to general history, organicism is only the exception. According to White, among academic historians the option to explain history in organicist terms tends to be regarded as "unfortunate lapses from the proper forms that explanations in history may take" or as "a fall into the nefarious 'philosophy of history.'"[14] And yet, the history of cinema opted from the beginning for an approach that singles out historical objects, such as stylistic devices, film-makers, films, or technological innovations not for their unique occurrence (formist argument) nor for the ways they interrelate in particular historical fields (contextualist argument) but for their capacity to confirm a particular cinematic essence or a linear progression towards an ideal or a destiny of sorts. One possible explanation for this crucial digression of film historiography from general historiography may be related to the inextricable ties between film history and film theory. The fact that the very object of film history, the cinema itself, was not (and still is not) fully described and settled at an ontological level has been creating a special conundrum for historians, whether they acknowledge it or not. The historical accounts have been struggling with the question "What is cinema?" as much as they have with the question "What happened in the cinema?" Unlike general historians, who are free to take ontological matters as givens (for better or worse), film historians are constantly bound to encounter problems with the shifting boundaries of the cinematic medium, while the temptation to fall into the nefarious philosophy of film is only too great.

This is also probably why the organicist view of film history persists even when we switch from film history on paper to film history on film, which is the main focus of this chapter. My concern here is to discuss the complex relation between these two modes of history and raise the following two points: firstly, film history in the documentary form carries similar philosophical presuppositions as the bulk of the written accounts, and, secondly, documentaries on the history of cinema are able to accommodate other types of arguments, which could, in turn, pave the way for new approaches in the written form. This two-way relationship between historiography and historiophoty of cinema that I outline here, admittedly, presupposes a level of equivalence between the two forms of history that is far from given, especially among traditional academic historians. Indeed, the very notion of historiophoty is still open to debate as well as a series of issues, such as its relation to historiography, its forms, its genres, and its philosophy. All these will be briefly sketched out below.

14 White, *Metahistory*, 19.

First and foremost, I do not consider the filmic representation of the past to be inferior to its written counterpart. As I extensively argued in *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (2018), doing history or "historying,"[15] as it is often called, signifies the act of narrating the past according to certain epistemological principles, regardless of the materiality of the historical discourse. Whether in words or in images, our access to the past is bound to be mediated and the modality of this mediation does not guarantee either accuracy or truthfulness. And yet, the capacity of the cinematic medium to represent the past, despite being present from the very beginning,[16] is far from being recognized as equally legitimate as that of written language. It has only been a couple of decades that scholars, such as Robert Rosenstone and Robert Burgoyne, have made a case for taking history on screen seriously and have provided insights as to how this could be achieved.[17] In my effort to carry this discussion further, I argued that we can best understand the potential of cinema to approach the past not by separating history on film from history on paper, as has been the tendency so far, but by looking closely at their shared poetics. In fact, I meticulously drew on White's poetics of history, as laid out in *Metahistory*, for the analysis of a number of films, both fiction films and documentaries, and I investigated how the poetics of written history relate to historical poetics, i.e. the various forms and shapes of films that have developed over the years.[18] From this large-scale project, I would like to focus here on the historical documentary in order to see how documentaries about the history of cinema relate to the historiographical perspectives that we can find in written form.

Historical documentaries may not be the same as historical books but, depending on their formal construction, they are able to articulate the

15 The term "historying" was popularized by Alun Munslow in his effort to unveil the diverse epistemological assumptions of practicing historians and to break the unity and opacity of the term "history." See Alun Munslow, "Genre and History/Historying," *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015): 158–76.

16 Jonathan Stubbs traces the interest of the cinema in the depiction of the past back to its kinetoscope years. Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62.

17 Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Rosenstone, "The History Film as a Mode of Historical Thought," in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 71–87; Robert Burgoyne, ed., *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

18 Eleftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

same philosophical arguments about the meaning of history. Particularly, documentaries that are cast in the expository or the interactive mode are likely to host organicist arguments about the historical process. The terms "expository" and "interactive" are borrowed from Bill Nichols' typology of the documentary, and each of them describes an ensemble of formal and narrative elements.[19] For instance, expository documentaries rely on a voice-of-God commentary, which addresses us as viewers and guides us through a certain topic of the historical world. In expository films the nonsynchronous sound of the voice track dominates over the visual elements; images serve either as illustration or counterpoint for something that has been verbally expressed in the soundtrack. The meticulous assembly of images and their careful visual orchestration around a dominating commentary are more likely to accommodate arguments that focus on clusters of elements and favour synthesis. The specificity of each person or moment documented is often surpassed by the general logic that binds all evidence together. In most cases, this synthesis breeds generalizations causing the argument to veer towards the organicist side. For instance, in *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War* (Becker, 1998), Martin Sheen's voice in the commentary narrates the history of the combat film, intertwining three different forms of history: the general political history, the history of cinema, and the historical representations in particular films. As a result, the combat film is presented as following all the linear stages of traditional historiography: gradual maturity, greater realism, and a progressive step towards a better understanding of the American nation.

On the other hand, interactive documentaries that contain several individual interviews may also present organicist arguments of history. Like written micro-histories, they give voice to the individuals and take note of their particularities—often not in order to stress their uniqueness but to generate safer generalizations about the historical world. As Carlo Ginzburg explains the purpose of micro-history, "Evidence must be collected according to an agenda which is already pointing towards a synthetic approach. In other words, one has to work out *cases*, which lead to generalizations."[20] When we watch a documentary like *Visions of Light: The Art of Cinematography* (Glassman, McCarthy, and Samuels, 1992), to have

19 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

20 Carlo Ginzburg, "Our Words, and Theirs: A Reflection on the Historian's Craft, Today," in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, ed. Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 113.

another example, the tendency to build a general argument about the nature of cinema quickly becomes obvious. The film-maker has carefully selected a series of talking heads who, with the help of film clips, begin narrating the history of cinematography in a chronological order, singling out all the standard masters and masterpieces, while rehearsing arguments, such as "the camera being free in the silent days" or "now in the 1990s, just like in the 1950s, we have the technology to be innovative again." In other words, the documentary replays all the typical arguments of traditional historiography in an oblique effort to understand the inner logic of the cinematic medium.

This orthodoxy breaks, however, when we look at reflexive documentaries. The reflexive mode of representation in Nichols' typology is an inclusive category that contains all those documentaries that employ self-conscious narrative devices and draw attention to the process of representation. In these films, the presence of the film-maker is exceptionally felt not as a means of interaction with a chosen subject, as is usually the case in the interactive mode, but, rather, as a play aimed towards the audience. As Nichols explains, "Whereas the great preponderance of documentary production concerns itself with talking about the historical world, the reflexive mode addresses the question of *how* we talk about the historical world."[21] Therefore, the intriguing question that arises is: How applicable is the choice of the reflexive mode for the presentation of issues pertaining to the history of the cinema? Admittedly, when it comes to history, *any kind of history*, the reflexive mode is a difficult choice for film-makers and viewers alike, as both ends need to face head-on serious epistemological questions and address the complexity of historical knowledge.[22] However, when reflexive documentaries do rise to the occasion, they challenge critics and theorists to rethink their categories and expand their vocabulary. Such is the case with the two historical portraits found in *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik*. Looking closer into these two biographies helps us to better understand how this form of cinema can accommodate a different approach to historiography, one that exchanges organicism with contextualism and

21 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 56–57.

22 In historical studies, this discussion entails the workings of "experimental history" and it is not surprising that it is led by historians like White and Rosenstone (Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* [New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006], 103–6). However, experimental history remains to this date a particularly marginal form of history, as the majority of professional historians tend to adhere to the principles of empiricism in order to write about the past. To acknowledge the interference of art, philosophy, and ideology in the historical profession would jeopardize the mechanisms of power entailed in the production of knowledge within academia (Thanouli, *History and Film*, 229–49).

opens up to the possibility of a cinematic history unburdened by the search for a unique essence or spirit.

Case Studies: *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik*

Marlene is Schell's creative struggle to portray the life and personality of Marlene Dietrich in a way that reconfigures all the historical elements that have become known through most traditional histories of cinema. Dietrich, a film legend across the world for many decades, features prominently in various historical narratives, whether they focus exclusively on her life or they embed her into wider developments in Hollywood film-making, national politics, acting and stardom, cinematography and lighting, to mention a few. The burden of this long and wide-ranging discussion surrounding her career, however, does not seem to weigh down on this new effort. Schell's portrait does not aim to unify all the documents and all the testimonies under one concrete idea of who Dietrich really was; instead, it is through dispersion, self-consciousness, and contingency that he seeks to build a powerful historical presence that is equally revealing, if not more, than any previous biography.

In this documentary the interview becomes the main investigative tool. Dietrich, at the age of eighty-three, agrees to be interviewed in her apartment in Paris but she refuses to be filmed. This critical obstruction compels Schell to evoke her presence only though photographs, scenes from her films and a few stand-in actresses while it also gives him the opportunity to discuss head-on the problem of representation and historical truth. Unlike interactive documentaries, where the interview functions as objective testimony used to build generalizations, in this highly reflexive portrait, Marlene's stubborn refusal to appear on camera keeps our ears constantly on the ground and traps us in a situation where what we hear and what we see are often in direct contradiction.

In *Marlene*, Schell openly parodies traditional historical accounts that follow a linear chronology and claim to reveal the objective truth about the past. He also underlines how Dietrich's complex personality could not possibly be contained within a single film or a book. In fact, when it comes to books, the interview regularly dwells on how most of her numerous written biographies have gotten various facts wrong whether about her films or her personal life. Painstaking accuracy is not the point in the documentary either. Instead, the goal is to capture Dietrich in a very specific moment in time and space and give her the opportunity to think back on her

immeasurably rich life in order to reinvent it once more. In a sense, Schell and Dietrich work together and against each other, trying to do history while defying the principle elements of traditional historiography. Her past, her career, her films, and her songs are re-assembled in a historical narration that constantly undermines itself. Through the tug of war between film-maker and subject and between archive and memory, *Marlene* becomes a very synchronic biographical portrait that communicates abundant information about its subject, without integrating it, nonetheless, into a greater whole of any kind.

As in most reflexive documentaries, Schell deploys Dietrich's absent presence in order to emulate the very quandary of historical cinema or even historiography in general, namely the need to build a narrative out of elements that are long gone. It also reminds us that knowing what *really* happened is nothing but a chimera; we are bound to re-imagine the past just as much as we are to discover it. Yet, this predicament does not discourage us as viewers nor does it discourage Schell as a historian. Through a relentless antagonism with his defiant subject, through endless contradictions or disagreements even about the "hard facts" of her life—such as the existence or not of a sibling—Schell convinces us that the effort to get to know Marlene Dietrich was truly worth it. By employing a wide range of formal tools, such as complex chronology, ironic juxtapositions of images and sounds, as well as graphic editing, Schell builds a remarkably rich portrait of Dietrich that denies us, however, both closure and causal clarity.

A similar predicament is found in the case of *The Last Bolshevik*, an equally intriguing piece of film historiophoty. Chris Marker's biographical documentary about the Russian film-maker Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin is a fascinating example of how an artist's life can be explored for all the ways it relates to the powerful historical events surrounding them. Marker crafts a highly reflexive account of Medvedkin's inextricable ties to the history of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century. This demanding task is even further complicated by the fact that Medvedkin's career and several parts of Soviet history are not so widely known. Whereas the expository mode would have ensured a more customary introduction to Medvedkin's trajectory in Soviet cinema and politics, Marker decides to plunge us into an unknown territory, which we have to figure and refigure all at once.

The film begins with an intertitle bearing George Steiner's words: "It is not the past that dominates us. It is the images of the past."[23] Then, the

23 The intertitle says in French "Ce n'est pas le passé qui nous domine. Ce sont les images du passé."

opening sequence sets the rules of the game: *The Last Bolshevik* will focus on Medvedkin as a historical figure and a prominent film-maker, who is simultaneously connected both to a wider historical reality (the Soviet Union) and a very specific individual (Marker himself). Marker's authorial intervention in the project is firmly established and amply justified not only because of their personal relation but also because of his own distinct aesthetic, philosophical, and ideological preferences. We know that this is going to be a reflexive documentary, which will bear the traces of Marker's authorial signature and it will craft a highly mediated portrait of a complex personality.

The reflexivity of the form in this documentary takes on many shapes; the personal tone of the commentary and its self-conscious treatment of the subject matter, the discordance between the visual material and its aural accompaniment, the manipulation of the images with freeze-frames, colours, or superimpositions, the repetitions, the direct address at the camera, and the constant mixture of factual with fictional elements. Just as in the case of *Marlene*, all these expressive strategies reiterate the initial premise, namely that images are our key access to a vanishing past, while their inherent malleability blocks us from ever having a single true and definitive version of it. Unlike an expository biography, *The Last Bolshevik* presents Medvedkin as an enigma; on the one hand, he was a sensitive and kind idealist who fought for his country and for a better world. On the other hand, the reality of Stalinist communism was relentless. Marker documents the poverty, the purges, the censorship, and, ultimately, the suffocating fear of the communist regime. The question that Marker does not seem to resolve is how Medvedkin chose to comply with that reality until the very end. In this audiovisual posthumous letter to Medvedkin, Marker prefers to refrain from a conclusive judgement on his friend's personality. The formal reflexivity allows him to attribute to his subject a high level of complexity and to maintain a tenuous connection between Medvedkin and Soviet history, a connection that can be visited over and over again.

However, complexity should not be confounded with ambiguity. As I argued in *History and Film*, the reflexive mode and its scepticism about the status of truth and objective knowledge tend to generate arguments of the contextualist kind.[24] This means that the historical argument in *The Last Bolshevik* is synthetic and dispersive; it traces a considerable number of historical elements but refuses to integrate them in larger historical clusters. With communism as a topic and Medvedkin as a film-maker,

24 Thanouli, *History and Film*.

Marker could have easily veered towards organicist views about human nature and happiness or Soviet cinema and ideology. Yet he keeps pointing to the immanent character of individuality and ideological beliefs, rejecting their hierarchical positioning. As Ilona Hongisto observes, "*The Last Bolshevik* proposes a non-hierarchical 'flat ontology' between Medvedkin and cinematic characters, between cinematic fables and the history of the twentieth century. This allows the documentary to rewrite the memories of Alexander Medvedkin and his era in film."[25] Marker explores the triangle "Cinema–Medvedkin–Russian history," moving from one point to another without ever being able to rise to a greater truth. Medvedkin's biography is scattered with movie fragments, newsreels, political figures, fellow filmmakers, friends, and relatives, each giving away a piece of the puzzle and, yet, knowing that many of those pieces will never appear. Not because they are hidden or difficult to discover but because the very idea of reaching the essence of a person or a historical moment is not pertinent. Like Schell's *Marlene*, *The Last Bolshevik* builds a meticulous biography of Medvedkin and situates him in a very specific historical context, acknowledging the limitations of the enterprise as well as the power of invention that it entails.

Conclusion

Viewing the history of cinema through reflexive documentaries like those presented above generates a different perspective on the past of the cinematic medium. By replacing narrative realism with reflexive mechanisms, these works seek to explain the historical process in novel terms. Instead of pretending to discover the essence of history, they focus on specific historical events or personalities for the fragmentary and contingent traces they have left behind. This means that the organicist explanations of history that dominate in film historiography and historiophoty (expository or interactive documentaries) are exchanged with a contextualist explanation that is open to multiple mappings and provisional conclusions.

But let us unravel the contextualist argument a little more. The principal characteristic of a contextualist view of history is that a historical event cannot be examined autonomously from its context; instead, we need to examine every historical occurrence in conjunction with other events and agents in the historical field and to reveal the specific relations between the diverse participants in

25 Ilona Hongisto, *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 54.

the scene that have rendered the event possible. Thus, contextualism stresses the significance of particular historical elements not for their unique existence but for the ways these elements interact with each other to produce certain results or fulfil specific functions. At the same time, however, the detection of these results or functions does not make the next step to formulate general goals as in the case of organicism. Contextualism refuses to integrate every circumstantial historical observation into a greater interpretative scheme. It chooses to remain particular and dispersive. As Pepper[26] puts it,

> Contextualism is accordingly sometimes said to have a horizontal cosmology in contrast to other views, which have a vertical cosmology. There is no top nor bottom to the contextualistic world. [...] There is no cosmological mode of analysis that guarantees the whole truth or an arrival at the ultimate nature of things.[27]

The ultimate truth about the past, viewed from a contextualist point of view, will never be revealed. What we have is a "here and now" and we can make approximations as to what may have happened. Our analyses are never definitive truths; they are investigations that begin and end in a rather arbitrary manner and they are open to change and revision, whenever new elements come into the picture. Of all the historical arguments, contextualism is the only one that can handle disorder and tolerate the idea that the "whole truth" or the "essence" of this world may not be attained.[28]

This great divide between organicism and contextualism can be further understood through Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," despite the differences in the terminology. Even though the focus of this long article falls on Leon Tolstoy's view of history, Berlin identifies two broad categories of thinkers and observes the following:

> For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in

26 It is often useful to return to Pepper's original work in order to clarify White's use of these terms.

27 Pepper, *World Hypotheses*, 251.

28 White, *Metahistory*, 18.

> some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.[29]

Organicist historians are hedgehogs, while contextualists are foxes; the former know one big truth, whereas the latter know many little ones. In fact, the Greek proverb, on which Berlin bases his metaphors, goes like this: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." This probably means that, for all its cunning, the fox is defeated by the hedgehog's one defence.[30]

As it turns out, the Greeks were right, at least when it comes to the history of cinema. As we have seen so far, the organicist views on film history continue to dominate the field, although the promise of a different perspective put forward by reflexive documentaries should not be underestimated. Not only because works like *Marlene* and *The Last Bolshevik* are important in their own right but also because influential film scholars like Bordwell and Elsaesser seem to advocate a paradigm shift in the writing of history, too. Going back to their metahistorical accounts, with which I opened this chapter, we can trace two prescriptions for future writings of the history of cinema, both of which could be classified as contextualist or as foxes, despite the lurking dangers. Bordwell, on the one hand, with his focus on film style calls for a problem/solution model of historical causation, one that "does not commit itself to a neat outline of overarching change" and that does not guarantee "a rise and fall, a birth or maturity or decline."[31] The task of the historian of style should be the reconstruction of a "choice situation" as a "node" within a "hypothetical network" of agents both individual and collective, both human and material. In this historical reconstruction, what matters is the particularity of the historical agents (human/non-human) and the interrelations we can trace, without obliterating the possibility of errors, unintended consequences, or decisions that cannot be fully fathomed.[32] Bordwell's scheme is carefully laid out in direct dialogue with the previous organicist approaches to the history of film, trying meticulously to transform their integrative impetus into a dispersive force. Elsaesser, on the other hand, adopts a broader scope and asks the historian of cinema to become a media archaeologist who occupies "a placeless place and timeless time […]

29 Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 436.
30 Ibid.
31 Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 156.
32 Ibid.

when trying to articulate, rather than merely accommodate, these several alternative, counterfactual or parallax histories around which any study of the audio-visual multi-media moving image culture now unfolds."[33] Elsaesser's vision is thus more radical than Bordwell's; he replaces film history with media archaeology, bringing in several of Foucault's arguments against the teleology of traditional historiography and emphasizing the role of contingency and alternative pasts. Whether this idea could be better explored by a film-maker like Schell or Marker is hard to tell. What matters is that, whether on paper or film, the past of the cinematic medium can be narrated in a wide range of forms and can be explained with a wide range of philosophical arguments. Which forms and which arguments dominate at different times is a matter worth investigating further, particularly by bringing in several other parameters, most notably the institutional and ideological factors that affect the process of historying whether within academia or the film-making business.

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33 Elsaesser, "New Film History as Media Archaeology," 112–13.

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