Shooting Back

In November 1849 Dr. George Parkman, a physician and scion of one of Boston's richest families, was allegedly beaten to death and dismembered by a Harvard professor of chemistry named John Webster. A week after Parkman's disappearance, the janitor of the Harvard Medical School discovered body parts hidden in Webster's laboratory. Webster was put on trial in a spectacle that drew tens of thousands of onlookers, as well as journalists from as far away as Europe. Webster was convicted and hanged. But his guilt is one of many uncertainties that have confounded those attempting to tell the story of the Parkman case for the past 150 years, including historian Simon Schama, who explored the case in his aptly named 1991 study, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1991).

Parkman's murder was nothing if not infamous. Edmund Pearson, the historian of homicide, called the Parkman case "America's most celebrated murder." Edward Everett, a president of Harvard from 1846 to 1849, said it was "the most painful event in our domestic history." And when Charles Dickens visited Boston in 1867, one of his first requests was to see the room where Dr. Parkman was murdered. Even by today's numbingly sensationalist standards, the grisly tale is shocking and disturbing.

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REWARD!

DR. GEORGE PARKMAN,

A well known citizen of Boston, left his residence No. 8 Walnut Street, on Friday last, he is 60 years of age;—about 5 feet 9 inches high—grey hair—thin face—with a scar under his chin—light complexion—and usually walks very fast. He was dressed in a dark frock coat, dark pantaloons, purple silk vest, with dark figured black stock and black hat.

As he may have wandered from home in consequence of some sudden aberration of mind, being perfectly well when he left his house; or, as he had with him a large sum of money, he may have been foully dealt with. The above reward will be paid for information which will lead to his discovery if alive; or for the detection and conviction of the perpetrators if any injury may have been done to him.

A suitable reward will be paid for the discovery of his body.

Boston, Nov. 26th, 1849. ROBERT G. SHAW.

Information may be given to the City Marshal.

One of the thousands of posters circulated by the Parkman family.

It’s a riveting story, but can it be a riveting documentary film? I hope so. For the past two years, my colleague Melissa Banta and I, along with Schama, have been developing a sixty-minute television documentary about the Parkman murder. (We are also designing an interactive Website, whose prototype is currently online.)

To our endless frustration, this most mysterious crime is made even more mysterious by a dearth of images: Parkman’s murder took place just a few years before the advent of popular photography. Fortunately, because the case was so celebrated, a number of woodcuts, maps, and other illustrations have survived. And some of the principal characters were illustrious enough to have had oil portraits painted of themselves. A search of the archives also yields a few later photos of some of the buildings—including the Harvard Medical School, where the crime took place.But a short stack of drawings, portraits, and photographs of buildings does not add up to a compelling film. Although I’ve produced documentary films for more than ten years, *The Murder of Dr. Parkman* is my first time tackling a subject that predates photography. And it’s led me to wonder: when the very building blocks of documentary film are images, is it even appropriate to make a documentary about a subject that has left behind only a tiny handful of visual traces?

Harvard Medical College c. 1850 (right), next to Mass. General Hospital

Thinking about *The Murder of Dr. Parkman* has also led me to take another look at how other documentary filmmakers have approached the problems of portraying pre-photographic stories. In my admittedly cursory survey, I've looked particularly at historical documentaries that rely on "reenactments"—putting people in costume and having them act out an historical scene or event. While reenactments share important conventions, they range widely in quality—and credibility.

Documentary reenactments are almost always shot without dialogue, through fog or haze, or in a shadowy half-light. The camera often focuses only on close up details—a hand on a quill; feet running through the woods; a sword being buckled on—and almost never on an actor's face. (The American Experience film, *George Washington, the Man Who Wouldn't Be King* [1992], by David Sutherland, is a good example.) Or, conversely, the reenactments are shot so wide that we see only a distant figure on horseback wearing a three-corner hat—à la Ken Burns's *Thomas Jefferson* (1996).

These visual cues send several important messages: that the reenactment is not *fictional* (if it were, there would be dialogue); that the reenactment is only a "suggestion" of what might have happened (signified by the ambiguous fog or haze); and that the actors are not portraying specific people so much as representing them (e.g., this pair of hands is not George Washington's hands, but hands that represent his; the figure on horseback *could* be Jefferson). Each of these devices, it bears mentioning, also saves money. Speaking roles require skilled actors and directing; scenes that portray actual events require sound stages, expensive locations, props, and costumed extras.

The trouble with reenactments that rely on the camera slowly panning across interior spaces where something important once happened and hazy shots of quills, weapons, and detached body parts is that they leave viewers feeling distanced from the action instead of closer to it. Too often reenactments come across as just what they are—halfhearted attempts to make history come alive in a dramatic way without using the elements that make for dramatic storytelling:

language, facial expression, bodies reacting in relation to one another. Burns's *Thomas Jefferson* is in many ways a thoughtful essay on a fascinating man, but is it really a film? Do the endless slow-moving images of Monticello, the pans across portraits and drawings, the tilts down documents, and the occasional distant figure on horseback really add up to something that is driven by visual images which in turn are supported by spoken words? I think it's the other way around—an illustrated lecture that could have worked equally well as a lavish magazine spread or coffee-table book.

> **The question of how to visualize the past—pre- or post-photographic—brings into sharp focus the central issue of putting history on film: is it entertainment or is it some form of serious inquiry?**

Do reenactments ever work? Sometimes. For dramatic moments like the fatal confrontation between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton in a recent American Experience documentary, *The Duel* (2000), reenactment works quite well because the filmmakers, Carl Byker and Mitch Wilson, actually break the PBS convention and let the camera dwell on the actors' faces. Rather than watching decapitated stand-ins we get to see complete human beings we can come to think of as Burr and Hamilton, even though we know the duelists didn't look quite like that. Some of the reluctance of documentary filmmakers to show actors' faces comes from the fact that in a documentary—unlike a feature film—portraits are usually included, so viewers can't help but notice the differences between the actors and the likenesses. But part of the fun of watching any film is suspending our disbelief long enough to be sucked into the story. After all, we know Elizabeth I looked nothing like Cate Blanchett, but is that the point?

A dramatic moment like the Burr-Hamilton shoot-out is so violent, passionate, and dramatic I could imagine it working as a reenactment in many different ways. But how can documentary filmmakers bring alive the important moments that are quiet and small but nonetheless crucial: for example, the inner struggle of a Revolutionary-era colonist deciding to become a patriot? In another departure from the increasingly hackneyed conventions of reenactments, Muffy Meyer and Ellen Hovde, co-directors of the public TV series *Liberty, the American Revolution* (1997), selected letters and diary or journal entries by well-known and not-so-well-known participants in the events, from Ben Franklin to Joseph Plumb Martin, then had actors perform the words of the journals and letters while looking directly into the camera. The use of letters and journals is certainly not new. But the usual convention is to have the letters read in voice-over, as Burns did, usually to great effect, in *The Civil War* (1991). Yet voice-over is always a trifle distancing, and particularly so when the language of the 1770s sounds so archaic to our ears today. Hearing Revolutionary-era letters in voice-over would have been simply a bore. But when a skillful actor is performing the reading, a smile or smirk, a pursed lip, a furrowed brow give the words flair and interpretation—in a word, drama! Although all depends on

the actors (and there are some duds), overall it's a successful device that brings some immediacy to the otherwise remote events surrounding the Revolution and stands out as a welcome breath of innovation.

Yet both reenactments and dramatic readings strike many people—some academic historians among them—as detracting from the seriousness of the material at hand and blurring the line between history and fiction. But where is that line, exactly? And more to the point, does it ever serve the purposes of historical inquiry to blur it—perhaps even to cross it altogether?

Prof. John White Webster, as depicted during his trial on murder charges.

This isn't simply a matter of stylistic approach. The question of how to visualize the past—pre- or post-photographic—brings into sharp focus the central issue of putting history on film: is it entertainment or is it some form of serious inquiry? Can it ever be both?

In his book *Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), historian Robert Rosenstone's critical but friendly look at historical documentaries, he tells an anecdote from his experience as a collaborator on *The Good Fight*, the 1984 documentary about the Spanish Civil War. Part of the story he thought was critically important was left out of the film because the filmmakers had no visual materials with which to tell it. Drawing from his own experience, Rosenstone concluded that history on film can never be analytical, theoretical, or critical; it is instead "history as homage."

He's absolutely right. But had I been the filmmaker behind *The Good Fight*, I, too, would have asked Rosenstone, "OK, but what will we be seeing?" It's a question that has become my mantra. Whenever I work with nonfilmmakers as collaborators I have to take time to get across the most obvious but not always appreciated fact of the medium: for every word uttered, there has to be footage on the screen. And not just any footage, but the right image. In fact, ideally

it is the image that will drive the words (this is, after all, filmmaking—not an illustrated lecture).

Rosenstone attempted to convince the directors of *The Good Fight* to include material on terrorism among the Stalinist Left—a complicated twist in the already complex story on intra-Left battles. The filmmakers told him there was simply no visual material and that getting into the issue would lengthen the film and slow down the narrative. I'm inclined to agree. In my own experience making films about the American Left of the 1930s, I've found that it's a big enough struggle first of all to convince viewers there ever was an American Left. Getting into the differences between the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Stalinists, and the Trotskyites is practically impossible. There are reels and reels of wonderfully evocative newsreel footage of the many street demonstrations of the 1930s, but, to modern viewers, whether the demonstrators are socialist or CP, Lovestonite faction or Browderites, it all looks the same.

Abstract points introduce even greater challenges. In a film I made about Jesse H. Jones, a little known financier who ran the New Deal's Reconstruction Finance Corporation, we had to explain issues of financing and credit (boring no matter what—even with images); why banks were afraid to make loans during the Depression (showing somebody NOT doing something does not work on film); and Jones's contradictory role as a staunch capitalist who also believed in activist government intervention in financial affairs (inherent contradictions are especially hard to convey on film—strong pictures do not often carry mixed messages). Abstract points again require "talking heads." But of course talking heads are widely known to bore viewers. Sometimes, inevitably, the best decision—the decision the directors of *The Good Fight* made—will be to skip the point.

Dr. George Parkman, one of Boston's richest men. known as The Pedestrian.

Rosenstone’s experience reminds us that, from the moment film is the format chosen for telling a piece of history, a huge act of selective storytelling has taken place. From that moment on, the process is a matter of jettisoning detail, nuance, and evidence in order to make the historical events fit the visual material available.

To an historian’s ears, “making the events fit the material” sounds like blasphemy, like doing history backwards. But I would argue that, on the contrary, the difficulties of making a satisfying hour or ninety minutes of history come alive on screen push filmmakers to find artful and inventive ways of presenting stories that—when they work well—rival the best written historical narratives (if not for completeness, at least for compelling storytelling).

One of the best examples of how well a mostly pre-photographic documentary can work is Ric Burns’s *The Donner Party* (1992). Though Burns uses the usual techniques—David McCullough’s narration, diaries and letters read in voice-over, maps, drawings and a few photos, and newly shot images of mountains and blizzards—the pieces come together into a riveting story that’s impossible to switch off.

But it is storytelling first and foremost. And while it could be argued that the story of the Donner Party is too atypical to be really useful in understanding the larger history of westward expansion, there’s no question that in its uniqueness it captures one small part of what drove people west and the price they paid to get there. Like so many historical documentaries *The Donner Party* can be accused of reducing history to a kind of ad hominem experience, or as Rosenstone says, history as homage. But film works best when it tells smaller stories about just a few people, and for that reason film or TV can never take the place of books and articles in serious history; the scale is usually too small and the tools are simply too blunt and imprecise for the job. Even when we’re lucky enough to have massive archives of photographs, newsreel, and film and video footage at hand, filmmakers start from a completely different premise than historians do. By choosing to use visual materials to convey information, the filmmaker is already jumping into history with one hand tied. Imagine writing a history book using only the most minimal one or two sentences of explication between the documentary selections. Tricky work, indeed, and probably a trickier read.

An imaginative version of the fatal encounter between John Webster and George Parkman from some years after the murder.

In making a film, it's only one kind of document—those we can *see*—that carry the weight of presenting evidence; the brief explications only make connections or transitions between subjects. And the explications can themselves be a problem, largely because most take the form of the dominant convention in documentary filmmaking: narrative voice-over. In most historical documentaries, expert talking heads intercut with archival film and photos, all stitched together by the omniscient narrator who provides transitions and keeps the narrative humming along with the occasional reenactment added for dramatic effect. This is not a format that easily provides room for divergent points of view, for messily contradictory evidence, or indeed even for important aspects of the historical events at hand that may not have obvious visual images connected with them.

So why bother? Because, despite these obstacles, history on screen simply does some things *better* than history on the page. Reaching the millions, for one. What history on TV and film does best is entertain and engage while issuing an invitation to the viewer to learn more. What it lacks in depth it makes up for in reach. Few books or articles will ever have the sheer impact of *The Civil War* series, nor even the audience of millions that will watch a reasonably popular American Experience offering. If for no other reason than this, putting history on film will always be worthwhile.

But there is another reason. Screened history can have a different kind of impact than most written history does. It hits us in a different place: someplace deeper, more emotional, more visceral. We feel—and remember—images differently than we do words. Moving images, in short, are moving. I don't think I ever truly understood the sheer cruelties of New World colonialism as well as I did after watching *Black Robe*, Bruce Beresford's 1991 movie of Brian Moore's historical novel about French missionaries in mid-seventeenth-century Canada. In this dark movie, the sun never shines on French Canada—all the events take place under oppressively leaden skies. Sure it's hyperbole as metaphor, but it's a potent example of what the power of images can achieve. After watching *Black Robe* I will forever associate the European conquest of the New World with chill gray drizzle, dampness, and death.

What story will we make visual in our documentary about the murder of Dr.

George Parkman? One that, we hope, will be as riveting as the first accounts of it to hit Boston newspapers in 1849. We're solving the footage problem by using actors in speaking roles—but we're cheating: all the action takes place through the imagination of historian Simon Schama, who also appears on camera. Is it history or drama? Does the fact that it comes from the head of an historian make it history? Does the fact that he's imagining make it fiction?

We're not sure ourselves. We only hope that it will be entertaining enough to keep viewers from switching the channel and, if we really do our jobs, intriguing enough to send them to a library.

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