

Seminar 1

Truth/Knowledge/Power (I): Evidence and Explanation in History

Outline and Key Questions:

The first seminar will introduce students to many of the module's core themes, problems and approaches. What do we mean by an 'historical film'? How does film use history? Why? In what different ways do film-makers present or represent history? What criteria dictate choice of style, form, genre or technique? What is the relationship between an historical film and the political social, cultural contexts in which it is produced? What role does, or should, audience reception play in our understanding of historical film? How does historical film interact with social memory and the public knowledge of history? What is the relationship between historical film and the structures of private memory? What is the relationship between historical film and scholarly history-writing? What does an appreciation of historical film tell us about 'conventional' processes of historical analysis, reconstruction and communication? What do we mean by a 'documentary' film? What do we mean by historical 'truth'?

Both the films you need to view for this seminar are complex works of art. Both call into question the notion of 'truth' and focus on narratives and their relationship to meaning and evidence. In particular, I've included links to numerous online texts which should help you gain some insight into the film *I, Pierre Rivière* and its relationship with the book of the same title, edited by French cultural theorist and historian Michel Foucault, on which the film is based. The book itself is a challenge to conventional history. The film, as you'll see, is a challenge to conventional film-making.

Kurasawa's film *Rashomon* is perhaps not, strictly speaking, an historical film, i.e. it does not seek to explore what is commonly understood as 'history' (but how do *you* define 'history'? what defines the events or phenomena that constitute the subject-matter of 'history?'), and revolves around a 'fiction' (but, as this film in particular and the module in general demonstrate, the line between 'fact' and 'fiction' is a difficult one to draw ...). However, it is an important film for historians to consider because it draws attention to key themes of historiography: the difficulties of evidence, the contingency of 'knowledge', the nature of testimony, the role of human subjectivity in the construction of 'reality' and the crucial significance of narrative.

Preparatory viewing:

All students should watch both films, but should focus their research and further reading according to their group (see last page of agenda for group allocation):

Group A: *I, Pierre Rivière* [*Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère...*] (René Allio, France, 1976)

Group B: *Rashomon* (Akira Kurasawa, Japan, 1950) [Note: VHS in Shakespeare St.]

Given the large number of students on the module, it would be helpful if participants in each group contacted each other in advance to organise collective viewings of these films. Don't forget the Hallward screening room – if you ask the Library staff when it's free, and arrange an appropriate time that suits everyone, I can book on your behalf.

Preparatory reading:

a) General issues

1. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995): Introduction; Part I (Chaps 1-2).
2. *The American Historical Review* forum on history and film, Vol. 93, No. 5, Dec. 1988. JSTOR. N.B. Chap. 1 of Rosenstone's book is the first article of this forum.

b) On *I, Pierre Rivière*

3. Film notes on *I, Pierre Rivière* from director Rene Allio (from Tartan DVD release, circulated with this agenda)
4. Mike Sutton, *I, Pierre Rivière* (Review), *DVD Times*, 11 April 2008, (<http://www.dvdtimes.co.uk/content.php?contentid=67452>)
5. *I, Pierre Rivière... An Interview with Michel Foucault* (1976), from Sylvère Lotringer (ed) (1996) *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*. USA: SEMIOTEXT[E]. (pp. 203-206):
<http://foucault.info/documents/pierreRiviere/foucault.pierreRiviere.interview.en.html>
6. Michel Foucault. Foreword to (the book) "*I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother...*" 1973:
<http://foucault.info/documents/pierreRiviere/foucault.pierreRiviere.foreword.en.html>

This and a preview of the first and last chapters of the book are on Google books:
http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=5uRVW_s6kbiYC&lpg=PA229&ots=PqpeXVCL7E&dq=pierre%20riviere&pg=PA9#v=onepage&q=pierre%20riviere&f=false

7. Egon Bittner, *I, Pierre Rivière* (Review of the book), *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Jul., 1976), pp. 256-260 [JSTOR]
8. Jean-Marie Alliume, *Review: The Rivière Beast, or the Unfinished Trial of the Creature Who Tortured Birds and Frogs* (Reflection on some of the books' central themes), *October*, Vol. 24, (Spring, 1983), pp. 63-82 [JSTOR]

c) On *Rashomon*

Essays on *Rashomon* from *The Criterion Collection: Online Cinemateque*:
Stephen Prince, March 25 2002: <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/195>
Akira Kurosawa, Feb 25, 2002: <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/196>
Alexander Sesonske, 25 June 1989: <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/920>

There are some interesting remarks on the philosophy and method of the film in Chapter 9 of Karl Kroeber, *Make believe in film and fiction: visual vs. verbal storytelling* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), available via the e-library.

For those who want to explore this work further for their essays or exam, there is an edited collection of essays (unfortunately not in our library): Donald Richie, ed., *Rashomon* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987).

Agenda:

- 15.10-15.30 Getting to know one another: tutor and student introductions
- 15.30-15.40 Getting to know the module: tutor's introduction to the module's structure, to learning and teaching methods, dynamics and expectations.
- 15.40-16.20 History/Documentary/Fiction: Group discussion of excerpt from *Reds* (to be shown in seminar) and general questions arising from Rosenstone texts and *AHR* forum articles.
- 16.20-16.30 BREAK
- 16.30-16.40 Brief introduction to the films
- 16.40-17.20 Groupwork (see below)
- 17.20-17.40 Feedback and whole class discussion
- 17.40-18.00 Tutor to meet with group leading Seminar 2.

Groupwork:

Group A (*I, Pierre Rivière*)

1. In the book, Michel Foucault and his team were trying to explore and represent history in a new way. What were the main ideas behind this approach, and how would you distinguish this method from that of 'traditional' historians?
2. How has director Allio sought to render Foucault's understanding of history and approach to historical analysis through the medium of film? Think about both the overall conception of the film and specific artistic and/or representative techniques (in relation to cinematography; plot structure and narrative; setting and mis-en-scène; scripting of characters and dialogue; casting and acting, etc.).

Group B (*Rashomon*)

1. What are the main ideas explored by this film? How has director Kurasawa rendered them through the medium of film? Think about both the overall conception of the film and specific artistic and/or representative techniques (in relation to cinematography; plot structure and narrative; setting and mis-en-scène; scripting of characters and dialogue; casting and acting, etc.).
2. Is this film a work of philosophy or history? What, if any, is the difference?

Both groups to consider, in relation to their assigned film:

3. How does this film differ from conventional films about history?

4. Do you think this film is successful (a) as a work of history-telling, and (b) as a film?

In your own time, think also about the following questions:

- In light of the two films and approaches to history discussed today, how do you think truth, knowledge and power relate to each other? (Foucault believed them to be mutually constitutive, i.e. each was a function, at least in part, of the others, and none has any discrete, absolute status ... do you agree?)
 - What do these films have to say about the nature, role and significance of *evidence* and *explanation* in history?
 - Think about how the representation of history in film differs from its written representation: what are the advantages and disadvantages of each medium?
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