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論 文

'Sometimes You Have to Create Your Own History': *The Watermelon Woman* and Historiographical Theory

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Introduction

Feminist film studies, beginning with Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical interpretations of mainstream Hollywood movies (Mulvey 2009 [1975]), have provided a critical evaluation of the gendered dimensions of film—a field of research that has been growing exponentially in the past two decades. In addition to critiquing male-dominated mainstream film industries and productions, feminist filmmakers around the world have produced noteable films that elaborate themes of both gender and sexuality. One of the most sucessful, Jane Campion's award-winning film *The Piano* (1993) cast these themes in a historical perspective, with the amorous and psychological development of a 19th century settler woman as its main character. Her struggle and liberation served as a metaphor for a heterosexual feminist history that may also be read as a coming-of-age tale regarding feminist consciousnes itself. Like *The Piano*, the independent film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996; dir. Cheryl Dunye) tells a feminist story of gender, sexuality and history in film. Unlike *The Piano*, it does so by moving its plot in a contemporary timeframe, and by explicitly enacting, presenting and discussing through its characters issues of race, gender, homosexuality and history in the diegesis of the film. An independent film that does not resort to metaphor, *The Watermelon Woman* directly engages the audience in discussions regarding intersecting categories of marginalisation, as well as the silences and invisibilities produced in filmmaking, the history of film, and history-writing in general.

The Watermelon Woman has been a unique addition to cinema in many ways. While previous films and documentaries on sexual minorities have sought to undo the spell of the phallic heterosexual order, or have focused upon the stories of subjection and struggle for liberation among ethnic and racial minorities, none have attempted the historiography of a racial and sexual minority at the same time. Standing 'uncomfortably alone' in cinematic history (Zimmer 2008: 41), Cheryl Dunye's film has been the subject of numerous analyses which can be divided and categorised within three frameworks: 1) it was analysed within ***cinematic history*** as black film on the one hand, and lesbian/gay film on the other (Keeling 2005; Zimmer 2008); 2) it has been examined as a contribution to the discourse of ***identity politics,*** engaging with black, feminist, queer studies (Sullivan 2004; Keeling 2005; Foote 2007) and psychonanlysis (Winokur 2001); and 3) from the perspectives of ***film theory, autobiography and technology,*** it has been lauded as a prime example of reflexive film and mock documentary (McHugh 2001; Foote 2007; Zimmer 2008; Reid-Pharr 2006). Lucidly discussing the interconnection of all three frameworks within the film, Thelma Foots's article, 'Hoax of the Lost Ancestor' (2007) stands out in providing a multivaried analysis of the film's major themes.

This paper builds on such research that places and discusses Dunye's film within the realms of cinematocraphic history, identity politics and film theory/technology. However, it approaches Dunye's film from yet another angle, one that takes historiographical theory as its major referential matrix.

This paper situates the film within an array of some of the major theories of history, namely those provided by Leopold von Ranke and Max Weber and their concepts of the premises and aims of historical and scientific writing; as well as more recent developments in historical theory as provided by Jörn Rüsen and Reinhard Koselleck who proposed a functional model of historical writing. Moreover, I situate Dunye's film within the most crucial discussion in historiographical writing since the so called linguistic turn: that of the relationship between history writing and creation/imagination. This discussion was provided by Hayden White and Richard Evans among others and has been further and provocatively developed by feminist historians such as Joan W. Scott to include emotion, madness and desire as ubiquitous elements of historical imagination. This paper takes historiographical theory as the starting point and examines what Dunye's film signifies for history writing as an academic discipline. The slogan cited in the title of this paper, 'Sometimes you have to create your own history,' appears at the end of *The Watermelon Woman*, just before the film credits—thereby revealing the film's theme of the historical documentary as a hoax. However, I argue that while the film plot presents the audience with canonised methodologies of historical inquiry, it also comments on the relationship between history writing and creation/imagination, between facts and fiction and on the necessity of both.

Dunye's film is composed in the verité style of a docudrama, featuring a young Afro-American lesbian aspiring documentary film maker named Cheryl who is played by film director Cheryl Dunye herself, and her research on an Afro-American actress from the 1930s. The only thing the main protagonist/director Cheryl knows of the Afro-American actress, called the watermelon woman, is that she played the black housekeeper of a white mistress, fashioned in the typically racist mammy style of a Southern melodrama. Incidentally, the black actress is found to have been a jazz singer called Fae Richards, as well as a lesbian who had lived in a partnership of twenty years with another black woman, and who also had a romantic relationship with the white female film director of the melodrama in which she appeared. In this paper, I discuss the historical and theoretical implications that play out in this film and connect them to some of the major historiographical discourses on the premises, methodologies and functions of history writing. Approaching a work of popular culture from a historiographical perspective provides a unique avenue for discussing metahistorical questions in the field of memory and history production.

A Critique of Historicism

Historian Jörn Rüsen (1989: 12) defined the term historicism (*Historik*) in the sense that we must look at the narrative production of meaning in history writing as a social fact. He maintains that we need to consider the relationship between the science of history and the daily lives, routines and practices of the writing historians. In sum, he suggests, we must interrogate the connections between the creation of a historical text and the individual, social and political use of historical knowledge because history as a science cannot be understood as neutral with regard to such questions. In much the same vein, feminist historian Joan Scott (2011: 22) recently noted that 'the thinking of the historian is an object of inquiry along with that of her subjects'. Indeed, the feminist inquiry into the motives that inform historical research pose the challenge of reflecting upon the preconditions of this search and the intellectual riddles that we confront today. In a unique way, these and other historiographical ideas and challenges are both vividly illustrated and cinematically dramatized in Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman*.

The main strand of the film's plot is formed by the research into historical sources about a black actress that is conducted by Cheryl, the documentary's main character/director. The featured historical research is varied, with Cheryl probing into textual, cinematographic and oral sources, visiting archives, examining 1930s movies where the black actress appeared, exploring photographic evidence, and interviewing contemporaries and audiences, including her own mother. Apart from this historical research, one additional and intimately related strand of the film plot is configured to portray the personal story of black lesbian director-cum-researcher Cheryl who 'in real life', i.e., in the narratives's second strand, begins

a romantic relationship with a white woman. Taken up within this second strand are racial and cultural tensions, as well as the complexities of identity politics and interracial sexual desire, arising from this liaison within the social environments of both women (who eventually break up their relationship). The daily life, the routines but also the desire and the politics of the 'researcher' Cheryl are interwoven with the documentary, i.e., the historical text she is creating.

At the very end of the film, the audience is made aware that the watermelon woman, whose history had been the aim of the research, never existed as a historical person—and that the search for the past of this black lesbian actress was therefore fictional. The historical research on the part of the main character/film director/Cheryl proves to have been a construct—a means of this character to assert her black lesbian identity by means of history—and an invented history, at that. Film director Cheryl Dunye thus tells a story through her main character/director Cheryl, wherein she lets the audience partake in a documentary and archival search for *how it really was,* only to reveal in the end that the story was fiction; a game; a mere possibility of *how it could have been*.

'How It Really Was'

With this film, we can display and discuss different understandings of essence, form and functions on the part of historiography. What instantly comes to mind is the paradigm of traditional positivist historiography as it was formulated by the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) who formulated the much cited ideal of a neutral reconstruction of the past—of 'how it really was' (von Ranke 1874: VII).[1] This justification and view of historical science is based in the convention that within modern societies, claims for truth are founded in scientific observation, rationality and objectivity. In positivist historical writing, the presentation of past events as they have actually happened were identified with the contents of historical records and sources that were to be extracted through scientific and methodological rigour (Rüsen 1998: 26). Thus fetishizing official documents and facts, positivist history has in effect placed history writing in the service of the nation-state and the status quo. Feminist historian Bonnie Smith (1998) critically discusses how the discipline of history has developed historically under the positivist preconception of representing, finding and collecting 'facts'. She also argues that facts and men, as well as professionalism and service to the nation-state, were coupled within this methodological premise during the 19th century as they developed against and through the defining negative image of the amateur labeled as 'feminine'. Even in the 1990s, therefore, questions of history that focused on ethnicity, sexuality and gender were discarded as superficial and lacking in depth.

Not reducing the search for historical truth to written documents, the film *The Watermelon Woman* shows how the zeal to find out 'how it really was' is nevertheless performed on multiple levels. The director of the film also acts within her documentary as the main character/director Cheryl, thereby reinforcing the image that this is a documentary about historical research—and therefore a reflection of 'reality'. She leads the audience on a journey to find traces of the past, thereby igniting and also apparently satisfying the expectation to find out 'how it really was' on the part of the audience.

In her performance and double identity of film director and main character/documentary director, Cheryl Dunye conveys on the one hand the impression that this is objective research she is doing, while on the other hand letting the main character Cheryl discuss her personal interest in doing this research for a documentary about black women: '[B]ecause our stories have never been told.' Thus, the documentary impulse to tell the story of people marginalised with respect to both gender and race introduces the thematic concern with identity politics.[2]

Revealing personal motivation for the epistemological interest in and choice of a particular

[1] All translations from German originals by the author.

[2] See also Foote 2007. The question of identity politics is too vast to cover here. In conjunction with history writing and the formation of the collective subject it has been discussed by a range of cultural anthropologists such as Stuart Hall and James

object of historical inquiry, however, also connects to an older discussion within scientific discourse. It was Max Weber who posed the question of objective knowledge in the social sciences in 1904, arguing that the choice of research object was dependent and framed by the interests of the researching subject within the cultural sciences: 'W h a t, however, has meaning for us, is of course not traceable through a "non-preconditioned" examination of the empirically given, rather, the setting of this meaning forms the precondition for something to become the o b j e c t of research.'[3] Nevertheless, rationality and absence of moral judgement in scientific knowledge were central for Max Weber, who argued against a 'mixing' of scientific analysis with moral or value judgements (Weber 1973: 157). Reinhart Koselleck (1977) and Jörn Rüsen (1998: 32), in their work on historicism, stress among other things the perspectives of historical writing. According to them, historical knowledge fulfils a major function in providing orientation for one's own existence in this world (*Daseinsorientierung*), while knowledge constitutes itself according to the specific interests vested in social orientation. Rüsen also defines these interests as needs for orientation within contemporary historical time (*zeitliche Orientierung*). Such contemporary interests influence and form the questions we have and the perspective we take towards the past—which Rüsen terms 'leading ideas' (*Leitideen*) or 'leading perspectives' (*leitende Hinsichten*) (Rüsen 1976, 1986: 9). In *The Watermelon Woman,* these questions are repeatedly formulated and spelt out by the main character herself. The leading perspectives in the (re) search she pursues, as well as the functions that this (re)search fulfils in terms of orientation for one's own existence in this world (*Daseinsorientierung*), are expressed and mirrored within the construction and composition of the contemporary story regarding a mixed-race lesbian love relationship on the part of the documentary director.

What Rüsen (1986: 9) calls the disciplinary matrix of the historical sciences seems to be comprehensively expressed and performed in the film's composition, entailing the above-mentioned need for an orientation in time, and leading ideas and functions of orientation for one's own existence in this world. Moreover, it includes forms of presenting methodological procedures of empirical research that are performed in the film, as in the depiction of archival work in the 'CLIT archive', whose (volunteer) director is actually played by historian Sarah Shulman (Wallace 2004: 459). Research methods include hermeneutic text interpretation of diverse written sources (letters), visual history in the excavation of photographs in the archive, expert interviews with a black film studies scientist and a cultural history scholar (also played by cultural history scholar Camille Paglia using her real name) and *oral history* in the depiction of interviews with contemporaries from the 1930s, including the main character's mother. Taking the fictional archival work even further—beyond the film itself, in fact—a 'photo archive' of the fictional character Fae Richards was constructed by utilizing a cast and crew to stage events from Richard's life. The photographs were then used to 'document' Richard's life in the archival search for her past in Cheryl Dunye's film. These photos have been reprinted in Lisa Bloom's edited volume *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* as 'The Fae Richards Photo Archive' (Leonard and Dunye 1999).

Such archival and oral history inquiries into the past represent methodological procedures that are presented to ensure a critical distance to and reflexion on historical difference. They are, at the same time, accompanied by strong lines of identification, the attempt to overcome this difference and to understand historical protagonists through empathy. This is visualised in a brief scene when Cheryl, the director of the documentary dresses partly like the watermelon

Clifford, the former working through Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's work. In the wake of deconstructivist discussions that pointed to the unstable nature of seemingly fixed identities, both Clifford and Hall defend certain notions of identity and history as politically and historically indispensable—reconceptualising them in the form of never completed and contradictory processes of 'identification' (Hall 1996: 2-3) and the historical creation of 'peoplehood' through 'traditions' (Clifford 2000: 97).

[3] 'W a s aber für uns Bedeutung hat, das ist natürlich durch keine "voraussetzungslose" Untersuchung des empirisch Gegebenen zu erschließen, sondern seine Feststellung ist Voraussetzung dafür, daß etwas G e g e n s t a n d der Untersuchung wird [original emphasis]' (Weber 1973[1904]: 175–176).

woman in the film, with a handkerchief on her head like a mammy figure, posing in front of the camera and mimicking the voice and gestures of the black 1930s actress. As Thelma Foote (2007) lucidly observes, the danger and spell of over-identification with the object of inquiry is broken with regard to these scenes when Cheryl rips the handkerchief from her head and casually blows mucus from her nose into it—thereby delivering a 'parody of a parody, a performance of a performance,' while executing 'discursive mastery' over the mirror of distortion that the mammy model presents from a racist and sexist past. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has explored two modes of relating to differences about the past: the mode of *identity* wherein difference is 'congealed or concealed,' and its opposite mode, *proximity*, where difference is 'neither reified nor erased, but negotiated' (Chakrabarty 2002: 140). In the above-mentioned scene where Cheryl mimes and parodies the mammy figure of the watermelon woman, Dunye plays with both modes of relating to historical difference by performing identification, while at the same time neither reifying nor erasing but disrespectfully, humorously and casually disrupting it.

Facts and Fiction

As for the ending of the film, and the revelation that *The Watermelon Woman* was fiction, we are able to witness the performance of the postmodern *linguistic turn* discussed within the historiographical metahistorical works by Hayden White. His argument holds that historiography is not primarily a reconstruction of historical reality or truth (albeit an interest-laden one), but a poetic construction produced by a particular historian bound to his or her time (White 1978). Although White does not negate the need for and the question of empirical study, his focus lies exclusively on the poetic forms of language and thought that pre-configure and limit the written histories of all classical historians. White does not go as far as to completely render obsolete the function of transmitting historical truth on the part of historical texts (Koselleck 1986: 6). Nevertheless, he holds that the choice of perspective and the strategies of interpretation that historians used to explain and justify their view of history are ultimately moral and aesthetic rather than epistemological (White 1991: 12 f.). In the filmic climax of the above-mentioned provocative motto of Dunye's movie—namely, that one must sometimes invent one's own history—the director of the film *The Watermelon Woman* points to the poetic und creative-artistic element of 'historical imagination' that White (1991: 16) identifies as crucial in the composition of classical historiographical works.

The expression 'to create your *own* history' reflects the drive for the black lesbian filmmaker in her undertaking, namely, the necessity to have a history in order to develop a consciousness regarding one's own identity, as well as for identity formation and for an orientation within contemporary society. Moreover, an additional crucial point is stated in the beginning of the film, when aspiring filmmaker Cheryl tells the audience that she was 'totally shocked' to find that black actresses were often not even listed in the credits, and that she wants to make a film about a black woman 'because our stories have never been told'. This points toward what is haunting black lesbian women's history: the absence of representation within mainstream media, and their invisibility in American society (Sullivan 2004: 213; Wallace 1990). Kathleen McHugh (2001: 274) sums this up succinctly, stating that the film's 'insinuation of fiction within a "documentary" of black women's stories testifies to the truth of their representational absence in history, in industry cinema, in mainstream cultural narratives more forcefully than any "truthful" account could have done.' Postcolonial historian Homi Bhabha has argued for the need to 'recognize the disjunctive, "borderline" temporalities of partial, minority cultures' (Bhabha1996: 56). Drawing on Bhabha and writing on diaspora, James Clifford (1994: 317) acknowledged that '[e]xperiences of unsettlement, loss and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities—broken histories', or in the words of Dunye's film, stories that 'have never been told'.

Conveyed in the development of the film plot, then, are the difficulties that the main character/director encounters in her (re)search of the black lesbian actress, which highlight the difficult search for one's own history. Such obstacles point to the burying, loss or blurring of historical evidence through the three-fold and interlocking marginalisations as a

black person, a woman and a lesbian. Highlighting the troubles, difficulties, and taboos of this blurred or lost history, the film presents a negative answer to structuralist theories such as those of Charles Collier (1981) who assumed a quasi-natural process wherein only those stories/values that are historically relevant *per se* will be historically conveyed to and preserved for descendents: 'The documents, monuments and records that by the "will of history" have been handed down to us are *ipso facto* the ones with the greatest permanent claims to cultural and intellectual significance' (Collier 1981: 164). And this, he claimed, also holds for the more ephemeral transmissions: 'Expressions of cultural values that do not last [...] are [...] to be suspected of lacking true historical significance. Where, however, such expressions do endure, we have prima facie grounds for attributing them to a genuinely historical culture' (Collier 1981: 154). Siding with Arthur Schopenhauer who discusses 'fame' attributed to someone as a confirmation of his intrinsic worth in and for history, Collier parts with Friedrich Nietzsche who noted that historical renown and true greatness are more often than not antidotes (Collier 1981: 165-166). In contrast to Nietzsche who had acknowledged that historical transmission is also profoundly infused with and conditioned by 'passion, error, and lust for power and honour'[4] and who criticised the 'idolisation of success and historical power',[5] Collier's combination of historicist narrative and structuralist approach presents an example of how the missing consideration of discursive power relations between historical actors can lead to the confirmation and re-enforcement of exclusivist positions, while representing and reifying a form of epistemic violence in historiography.

What about the facts, developments, processes and characters that appear in the film and have obviously been invented, since Dunye confesses in the end that the entire work was fiction? Since its existence, modern historiography has propelled questions of historiography's disciplinary belonging or primary affinity, whether to the sciences or to the arts. In the same vein, differentiations between that which could be 'found' in the archives, in historical ruins and historical research—and that which was poetically invented—have followed major lines of historiographical discussion. White would no longer accept this categorical and divisive differentiation in his metahistorical approach to the underlying structures of historical narrative. In Dunye's film, the individual characters and places are fiction, while its descriptions of black-cast cinema and archival footage of old Philadelphia (Zimmer 2008: 64), as well as the broader historical context and its racial, social, gendered and sexed conditions, are 'realistically' reflected and historically accurate.

What about feminist history writing? The claim to enable, through a feminist perspective, a more accurate representation of the past 'as it really happened' forms a continuum of international women's and gender history research beyond all existing cultural differences. While neither women's nor gender history has relinquished the claim on empirical validity, they have posed far-reaching questions with regard to the selection of historical objects, perspectives, methods, and conclusions within the historiographical field. As history writings are literary recontructions of the past, they feature poetic visionary dimensions in addition to informative qualities, while also fulfilling functions in the production of meaning. In his metahistorical treatise, White elaborates on the classical historians Michelet, von Ranke, Tocqueville and Burckhardt; and on the history philosophers Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Croce—arguing that the model character of their works does not primarily derive from the form or content of the facts and theories that they present. That they have been deemed exemplary models for historical narrative and terminology depends rather on the consistence, coherence and enlightening power of their respective view of the historical field, and in particular on the pre-linguistic and specifically poetic nature of their view regarding history and historical development (White 1991: 17).

Lastly, with regard to a critical notion of history writing as a form of identity politics, historian Joan Scott's latest contribution to feminist historiography argues in a similar vein that 'fantasy' is a neccessary

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[4] 'Leidenschaft, Irrthum, Gier nach Macht und Ehre' (Nietzsche 1988: 321).

[5] 'Vergötterung des Erfolgs und der historischen Macht' (ibid.). Nietzsche' s misogynist, essentialist and dehistoricising views on gender, of course, reveal that he himself had his share of blind spots with regards to historical power.

concept for historical analysis, insofar as it undermines any notion of 'fixed identity, infuses rational motive with unquenchable desire, that contributes to the actions and events we narrate as history' (Scott 2011: 5). Such 'unquenchable desire' is not restricted to actions and their narration, but also to reception. As McHugh (2001: 274) points out for *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye compels the spectator to experience the desire to find out 'how it really was,' even when it becomes clear that the story was fiction—thereby articulating within the film as a whole 'the brilliant interplay of history and desire.' Desire and fantasy, or passion and madness, are found on both sides of the analytic process, writes Scott (2011: 22), and need to be taken into account insofar as they propel actions and are integral elements of both narration and reception.

Conclusion

The question of authenticity, of course, does not need to bother a filmmaker, as film and mock-documentary would belong to the arts; and the assertion of 'truth' does not need to submit itself to historiographical testing or challenge. The essence of the arts and fiction one might argue, is rather the creativity by which it projects a representation of this world. Scientific discourse, on the other hand, is to a certain degree shielded from invention through the methodological imperative of a critical inquiry that deals with historical sources in a way that acknowledges difference from the present and from the writing historian. It does so through rules for verification that were first established by von Ranke and subsequently developed in various important ways.

A pre-condition for the possibility of historical representation, however, is the realisation that historical science working with and through the medium of language is, in part, always produced through particular historical and cultural conditions; and that its insights are therefore linguistically and culturally conditioned by these premises. In my view, the 'epistemological crisis' into which historical sciences have found themselves thrown by the postmodern challenge of the linguistic turn since the 1980s—wherein questions regarding the possibility to gain objective knowledge, the fleeting and relative dimensions of truth, and the difficulty to distinguish between facts and fiction (Evans 1997) have been raised once again—can in turn lead us toward a deeper and increasingly self-reflective understanding of the field.

Scott does just this when she affirms the need for critical history writing to give other historians 'the extraordinary pleasure that comes [...] from exposure to brave and courageous ideas, transgressive acts, and bold and irreverent behavior,' as well as 'the need to puzzle over these things in order to understand them in the difference of their historical moments' (Scott 2011: 148). While the fictional medium of film cannot substitute historical research and inquiry, the consideration of Cheryl Dunye's film and its provocative motto can be intrumental in visualising, outlining and thematising crucial questions as they arise within the production of historical writing. As such, I would recommend her film as important viewing not only in film classes but also in history classes that attempt a reflective and critical evaluation of historical writing and historigraphical theory.

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‘Sometimes You Have to Create Your Own History’ : *The Watermelon Woman* and Historiographical Theory

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Abstract

The independent film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996; dir. Cheryl Dunye) tells a feminist story of sexuality and history in film by enacting, presenting and explicitly discussing through its characters issues of race, gender, homosexuality and history. Composed in the verité style of a docudrama, the film features a young Afro-American lesbian as an aspiring documentary film maker and her research on an Afro-American actress from the 1930s. The film directly engages the audience in discussions regarding intersecting categories of marginalisation, as well as the silences and invisibilities produced in filmmaking and the history of film. Connecting these issues to older and contemproary developments in historiographical theory, this paper discusses not only what history means in and for film and identity politics, but also what this film signifies in turn for history writing as an academic discipline. While the film plot presents the audience with canonised methodologies of historical inquiry, it also comments on the relationship between history writing and creation/imagination, between facts and fiction and on the necessity of both.