

Walker: the dramatic film as historical truth .

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Among academic historians there is a general, if largely unarticulated, feeling that historical works done on film, particularly dramatized history, can never be as worthwhile or as "true" as historical works done on the printed page*. Such a notion seems to arise from a sense that words are able to provide a serious and literal past reality that film, with its supposed need to entertain people, can never hope to match. To combat such a shortsighted view of the possibilities of history on film, I want to show the ways in which a single historical film can create a past that is at once complex, important, challenging, and "true". My point: to see that one film can make a contribution to historical discourse is to admit that the visual media can be used seriously by those who wish to create and understand the meaning of the past.

The film I will discuss, *Walker* (1987, dir. Alec Cox) is unusual both in its seriousness about the past and its willingness to play with and against many of the canons of both traditional history and the standard historical drama¹. It is also, in my estimation, an important piece of history, one that successfully does the following: (1) performs a number of traditional historical tasks; (2) goes beyond these tasks to create new ways of visualizing our relationship to the past, and (3) provides a "truth" that can stand beside an the written version of William Walker's story that have appeared over the last 135 years. My basic argument is that, like any good historical work, *Walker* recounts, explains, and interprets events in the past, and then attempts to justify the way it has undertaken these tasks. Like any work of history, the film situates itself within a tradition of historical questions, which means it comments upon all the previous versions of Walker that have appeared. The film handles data and makes its argument through five particular strategies: *Omission and Condensation* (both common to written history), *Alteration* and *Invention* (common to visual history), and *Anachronism* (unusual in any sort of history). Taken together, the latter three strategies may be seen as an innovative and reasonable way of expressing historical "truths": within the possibilities of a visual medium.

THE STORY OF WALKER

Like any historical tale, that of William Walker may be told in a few words or in many. Both have been done. The longest work on Walker runs to 397 pages. Short, general histories of the pre-Civil War period dismiss him in a sentence or two. Here let me provide a mere outline of his life: Walker was a Nashville-born (1824) physician, attorney (New Orleans), and newspaperman (San Francisco) who, in what may be considered an extended gesture of Manifest Destiny, led a small band of adventures into the state of Sonora, Mexico, in 1854 with the aim of creating a "free" country. Defeated by terrain, weather, and lack of support from home, Walker returned to the United States. A year later, he entered Nicaragua at the head of an army of 58 men -dubbed "the Immortals" by the press- supposedly to help the Liberal Party in an ongoing civil war. By October 1855 he was commanding general of the Nicaragua army; by July, 1856, President of the Republic. During his time in office, Walker was an activist President who, among other things, instituted Negro slavery in Nicaragua and annulled the lucrative charter of Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Company, which controlled the chief route from the East Coast of the United States to California. Ten months later, after suffering severe military defeats at the hands of armies from all over Central America, and after being cut off from fresh recruits and military supplies from the U.S., Walker torched the capital city of Granada, surrendered through the offices of a U.S. Naval Captain, and returned home, a hero to a goodly number of Americans. Twice more in the next three years he attempted to land in or near Nicaragua at the head of troops. In September, 1860, he was captured and shot by the Honduran military. To his captors, he identified himself as "William Walker, President of Nicaragua."

Walker's story has been told and retold many times in both English and Spanish. The first account, written by his friend, William V. Wells, appeared in 1856, even before Walker became President; the second, by Walker himself, was published four years later, just before his death. Since then, Walker's life and exploits have been subject of at least six book-length historical works in the United States and several in Latin America; he has also been treated in chapters in several other works

devoted either to U.S. diplomacy or to offbeat American adventurers and imperialists and in a number of scholarly articles².

To assess *Walker*, the film, it is important to underscore the following: virtually all the essential details that we know about Walker in Nicaragua today appear in the earliest accounts, including the books by Walker and Wells. Which is to say: all the studies of Walker utilize the same facts and recount essentially the same details concerning the who, how, where, and what that occurred when the Americans invaded Nicaragua. This is true for Walker's own actions and for the broader political-economic-social context in which he acted, the complicated economic and diplomatic maneuverings of both private interests and the governments of the United States, Great Britain, and various Central American countries. Yet if the details are clear, evaluations of the causes and the meanings of Walker's actions -for Walker, or for his supporters, or America, or the world- have shifted and changed over the decades. In short: for 140 years there has been no dispute over the facts of Walker's actions or the dimensions of both his successes and his failures. The only real differences between historians surround such questions as the following: Why did he do what he did? What were his personal and political aims? Did his actions help or hurt the cause of America, or of "civilization"?

STAGE OF INTERPRETATION

During his own time and throughout the late nineteenth century, books on Walker generally took him on his own terms as an unqualified hero, a man striving to spread the benefits of American civilization to those less fortunate residents of Central America, a man thwarted by short-sighted American politicians who refused to extend economic aid or diplomatic recognition to his fledgling regime. This approach survived into the 20th century in a work such as E. Alexander Powell's, *Gentlemen Rovers* (1913), written as a tribute to forgotten heroes, men who were important in expansion of United States, men who "stoutly upheld American prestige and traditions in many far corners of the world."³

Criticism of Walker began in the second decade of this century. The earliest found problems less with the mission than with the man. In *Filibusters and Financiers* (1916), William O. Scroggs depicted a Walker whose shortcomings of character and inability to understand human nature ruined a good chance to help mankind. In this version, his followers are depicted as heroes, fine pioneers who had developed the "supreme civilization in California"⁴. By misleading them, Walker destroyed a splendid opportunity to regenerate Central America. In the 1930's, writing on Walker took an antifascist turn. William Green's *The filibuster: The Career of William Walker* (1937) reeks with suspicion of Walker as a "ruthless dictator", a little man who aimed solely at power⁵. This judgment is not matched with any parallel concern for the rights of Central Americans. The author is overtly contemptuous of all Latins, who are described in terms of traditional stereotypes -as a passionate, fickle, and treacherous people who cannot be trusted.

More recent treatment of Walker provides an equally contemporary gloss on the man and his times. Albert Carr's *The World and William Walker* (1936) takes an approach that suits the decade, the Sixties, in which it was written. At once anti-imperialist and psychoanalytic, the book portrays Walker as harbinger of 20th Century American relations with the world. The personal part of the volume focuses on Walker's sexuality accounts for the man's will to dominate, as well as his career in Nicaragua. The public part of the book details the larger sphere in which Walker moved -the anti-slavery controversy that was to tear the United States apart; the detailed competition between American and British diplomats and military men. Here, Walker the ideologue of Manifest Destiny is portrayed as semi-witting stalking horse of a larger strategic and economic interests. The most recent book on Walker, Frederic Rosengarten's *Freebooters Must Die* (1976), takes what one might call the multicultural interpretation. Making much of that fact that Walker is remembered in Central America as "a devil", the work claims that his mission to regenerate Central America would have instead created a slave empire, one that would have built and controlled a strategic canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the process, Walker would have destroyed the precious Spanish-American cultural heritage and replaced with a ruthless Anglo-Saxon autocracy.

Despite these widely different interpretations, all the books provide a similar picture of the historical context in which Walker acted. All point to the Gold Rush, the Mexican American War, the increasing acrimony between North and South over the extension of slavery, and the acquisition of California as factors that helped to fuel the expansionist midst "Manifest Destiny" and see it as not just a

simple rationale for economic interests, but a peculiar national task, an odd sort of democratic imperialism, a sense that it was America's god-given mission to regenerate a benighted mankind. All detail the doings of Walker's economic counterpart, Cornelius Vanderbilt, who vigorously promoted and protected his monopoly over the lucrative sea-and-land route through Nicaragua.

The picture of Walker, the man -or at least of his personal characteristics and habit- is also remarkably consistent across the decades. All books agree that he was fearless, heroic, and financially incorruptible, a leader who was absolutely worshipped by his men. All show him as a stickler for discipline, a man who treated his own troops as harshly as natives over infractions. All portray Walker as a Puritan ascetic who did not drink or smoke, who ate moderately, and almost never laughed. (Concerning his sexual proclivities and activities, there are some sharp differences of interpretation. Some see Walker as asexual, some hint at possible homosexuality, and some suggest he had a discrete affair with a Nicaraguan woman of noble birth. The one thing that is clear is that his sexual practices, whatever they were, disturbed contemporaries and have continued to disturb most historians, except for Carr, the only author to link sex and the drive for power). As with larger historical issues, the only disagreements over Walker, the man, come largely over the sorts of matters which an appeal to data cannot solve: Why did he develop from a democrat into a dictator? Where did he really stand on slavery? Why was he first so successful in Nicaragua and then why did he fail so miserably? Why did he burn down the capital city?

WALKER AND THE TASKS OF HISTORY

Anyone who has seen the film will already be familiar with many of the above details of Walker's foray into Nicaragua. But the question of *Walker* as a piece of History -that is, of the film as a contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the past- must be answered not merely by pointing to the existence of data but by assessing the way the data is utilized to create a historical world. My contention is that *Walker* as a work of history takes the data familiar to all who have worked on the topic and, using a particular late Twentieth Century sense of historical awareness (quasi Marxist) and aesthetic sensibility (very loosely, postmodern), creates a William Walker suited to a contemporary historical consciousness. Certainly the mode of the film may be seen as a kind of black farce (closer at times to Monty Python than Eric Hobsbawm). But despite (because of?) its humor and his undertakings, and does so in part by fulfilling four very traditional historical tasks -by recounting, explaining, and interpreting the events of the past, and then justifying its portrayal.

Recounting: The William Walker whose story is recounted in the film is a figure whose complications mirror larger issues in the American character, then and now. He is portrayed as the emblem of Manifest Destiny -self -centered (especially after the death of his fiancée), single-minded, cold, fearless, ruthless, and absolutely convinced of the righteousness of his personal vision and actions. Unlike all written accounts, which seem unable to explain his increasingly ruthless actions, the actor who plays Walker (Ed Harris) presents us with a character whose mystical and sincere, if demagogic, democratic vision is corrupted by the taste of power (an eroticized power) he increasingly acquires in Nicaragua. The broader context of the "history" is provided by scenes which depict the way in which Walker's democratic imperialism clashes with the overtly economic imperialism of Cornelius Vanderbilt. The latter imperialism is static -as if capital is capital and always acts in its own interest.

Explaining and Interpreting: The film shows both economic and democratic imperialism as both born out of the boundlessness of nineteenth century America. (Let one image suffice: When Walker and Vanderbilt meet face-to-face and one of the commodore's minions insists on the vast amounts of land available in Nicaragua, the men are all sitting in a Southwestern U.S. landscape virtually void of humanity for as far as the eye can see). If part of the explanation is quasi-Marxist, the work also suggests the existence of another, more personal form of imperialism. *Walker* may show capital utilizing the democratic impulse as an ideology to cover whatever illegal or immoral actions it uses to make profits, but it also depicts Walker's personal corruption as of another sort -less economic than moral, an inevitable corruption of the spirit when it is exposed to too much power, a corruption bound to wreak havoc and cause tragedy.

Justifying: Since motion pictures lack scholarly apparatus (footnotes, bibliography, appeal to authorities), this is always the most difficult historical task for a film to undertake. *Walker* makes its attempt in part by appealing to the historical Walker's real writings, used as voiceovers. More

importantly, it appeals to the audience's knowledge (or sense) to how America has repeatedly intervened in Latin America and is clearly doing so in 1987, at the time the film is being made. Emphasizing this are certain anachronisms which point directly to contemporary American military troops (Zippo lighters, coke bottles, Marlboros) and Walker's overt statements to Nicaraguans, "We have a right to rule you. We will never leave you alone." The point is driven home by TV images beneath the final credits -President Reagan talking about Sandinistas; American troops on maneuvers in Honduras; dead and wounded Nicaraguan peasants who have been caught in attacks by Contra rebels.

STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTATION

To create a Walker for our time, the film utilizes a number of strategies for rendering history: *Omission* and *Condensation*, *Alteration*, *Invention*, and *Anachronism*. The first two are integral to all forms of history, written, oral or filmed, for no matter how detailed any portrait of the past, the data included is always only a highly selected and condensed sample of what could be included on a given topic: *Walker* tells us nothing of its subject's childhood, family, or schooling (save that he is a doctor and a lawyer); only hints at his medical and newspaper career in New Orleans and California; omits anything about the Mexican War, or the complicated international diplomatic maneuverings between Great Britain, the U.S. and the Central American countries over regional issues; barely touches the North-South slavery debate; and never specifies Walker's beliefs beyond the simplest level of exposition: "I hate slavery". Or "I'm social democrat" (a remark which also belongs under *Anachronism*).

The strategies of *Alteration* and *Invention* are alike in that both depart from the norms of written history; indeed, both "create" historical fact (or incident) as a way of summarizing historical data that either cannot be expressed through visual images or whose expression in such images would be so inefficient that the (dramatic) structure of the work would be impaired. The two differ in that *Alteration* changes documentable historical fact by relocating or restructuring incidents or events (altering time, place, participants), while *Inventions* freely creates characters and incidents. (Note: What I refer to here are major sorts of inventions, for as I have argued elsewhere, the most "accurate" works of dramatic history on film will always contain huge doses of what we might call small invention, acts of creation which historians who work in words will call fiction. Because the camera demands more specificity than historians can ever know, all historical sittings are what might be called "proximate" fictions. Similarly, costume, dialogue, gesture, action, the very use of dramatic structure -all these are full of small fictions used, at the best, to create larger historical "truths", truths which can be judged only by examining the extent to which they engage the arguments and "truths" of our existing historical knowledge on any given topic.)⁶

All of the major *Alterations* in *Walker* can be seen and justified as ways of expressing metaphoric or symbolic historical truths. For example: By opening the film with a battle in Mexico and misplacing (or re-placing) his fiancée's death after that battle, the film makes us focus immediately on the relationship between Manifest Destiny and violence that are its very historical core, and portrays Walker (as do written works) as a man once torn between the personal and the political until her death turned him into a wholly public man. By having Walker march forward on foot dressed in a (historically documentable) black suit during horrendously violent battles rather than riding (as he did) a horse, the film provides an indelible image of the man's fearlessness and unshrinking determination described in all contemporary accounts. By collapsing two Nicaraguan political figures into a single leader, whom Walker first sets up as a puppet President and, later, executes, the film underscores the irrelevancy of actual Nicaraguan to Walker's ventures and policies. The same point is underlined when Walker has trouble remembering the names of the Nicaraguan leaders or when his soldiers complain there seems to be no difference between Liberal Nicaraguan, for whom the fight, and Conservatives, their enemies.

The Inventions of the film also work as apposite, symbolic historical assertions. For example: By making Walker's chief lieutenant a Black American, the film underlines his original anti-slavery beliefs and shows that his later introduction of slavery into Nicaragua was neither easy nor foreordained, but rather the result of the perceived necessity to obtain both a labor pool and the support of Southern American states. By showing his affair with the aristocratic Dona Yrena, the film suggests how easily the democratic Walker climbed into bed with the Nicaragua's upper classes. Her subsequent attack on him with a pistol becomes an apt rendering of how quickly and angrily this unnatural alliance fell apart. (Through the skilled acting of Ed Harris, the film is able to suggest multiple interpretations of Walker's

sexuality; the affair shows him as sexually inexperienced, while other scenes subtly suggest homoerotic attachments, masochism, or the sublimation of sexuality into the quest for power. In such visual hints, which work to suggest that multiple interpretations may *a// be true*, the film achieves a sort of simultaneous interpretive complexity that would be difficult to attain with the written word.)

No doubt the most important of the inventions is the meeting between Walker and Vanderbilt. Historically, the two men never met face to face, yet their angry encounter in an obviously mythic space - alongside a railroad track in Arizona, decades before trains came to the West- is crucial to the meaning of the film. In this clash between powerful individuals, the two sorts of American imperialisms -economic and democratic- stake out the terms of their debate with each other and with the larger world. Their exchange reveals the clash of greed and self-interest, the fervent if misplaced idealism, and the hidden complicities which have fueled American expansionism for a hundred and fifty years. To portray this same conflict, the historian who works in words would have created this encounter on the page, by outlining the ideology or mindset of each man. That ideas compete in neat paragraphs on a page is no less a "fiction" than the onscreen meeting between Walker and Vanderbilt. The difference is that this sort of written "fiction" has become an unquestioned convention of history. Needing an image film works in a different way. Yet each technique of rendering this quarrel merely utilizes a suitable way of using a particular medium to talk about the past.

To make this assertion is to run the common but mistaken (public) notion that the historical film somehow provides an accurate window onto the world of the past. Elsewhere I have argued that film cannot ever do this, for it is always a construct that points to the world of the past by providing proximate images of vanished realities.⁷ *Walker* makes certain that it cannot possibly be taken for a window onto history by the overt and creative strategy of anachronism. The Zippo lighter, coke bottles, and Marlboros used by Walker's troops, the *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines with his picture on the cover, the hip contemporary language, the occasional glimpses of Mercedes or computer terminals, and the final evacuation of the Americans from Granada in helicopters -all these gestures point to the inevitable interpenetration of past and present.

Beyond destroying the surface "realism" of the film, they demystify the pretensions of professional history, cast into doubt notions of historical distance and objectivity, and insist that the questions we take to the past always arise from our current concerns; that, in fact, it is impossible for us to see the world of Walker, or any historical realm, without images of automobiles, helicopters, and computer terminals in our minds.

Walker's use of *Alteration and Invention* is shared -less consciously, to be sure- by all historical films. Indeed, its use of *Anachronism* may be its major contribution to the vocabulary of the genre. Yet to this innovation one must add the film's creative use of the soundtrack, one that reaches toward historical complexities unobtainable to the written word. *Walker* opens with upbeat Latin dance music that is wholly at odds with the images of violent death and destruction during a battle in Sonora, Mexico shown on the screen. For the rest of the film soundtrack continues to play against image to provide a double vision of historical reality. Or is it a multiple vision? Joyous music at odds with destruction provides not only a critique of war itself, but also of a long tradition of historical films which use music to make battle glamorous and heroic. Another contradiction between sound and image comes in the voiceover narration, taken in part from Walker's memories, in which lofty, idealized descriptions of the expeditionary force are repeatedly undercut by action onscreen. The voice tells us that Americans are greeted by cheering Nicaraguans, but we see empty streets and a few sullen faces; we hear of cultural reforms and see natives being flogged; we hear talk of regenerating a nation and watch degenerate American soldiers drinking, fighting, stealing from natives and assaulting females of more than one species ("The colonel says it's a democracy", shouts one soldier, as he climbs into a sheep pen and lowers his pants.)

The contested vision presented by playing sound against image points to the perennial gap between history and behavior, official rhetoric and experience, the language utilized by the scholar and the realities it purports to encompass. By highlighting such contradictions, *Walker* directs us to the problems of all historical representation and understanding. Quite consciously, the film delivers a story at once invented and, I would argue, true. A story that comments on our past and present and never let us forget that the two always interpenetrate. Breaking with normal Hollywood conventions, the film creates a multilayered discussion of the past. Not only does *Walker* say a good many things that a single-line

narrative could never get across, it also points to the difficulties of achieving all historical knowledge and to the partialities of the knowledge that we do achieve. Clearly such a work is not part of a project of knowing the world in order to control it. As a piece of history, *Walker* ultimately suggests the following: That the knowing that what we know is only one way of knowing. That the possibilities of historical knowing are inexhaustible and never complete. That no book, film, lecture, or person can ever tell you fully what the past is and how it means. That ultimately you as subject are bound up with the burden of making historical meaning from what remains of the past.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(*) This article will be published in a forthcoming book that the author is preparing: *Revising History: Filmmakers and the Construction of the Past*. Princeton University Press. So, the copyright remains in Robert A. Rosenstone.

(1) In the United States, *Walker* is distributed in 35 mm by Universal, and has been released on video by MCA Home Video

(2) The basic works from the period are: WALKER, WILLIAM *The war in Nicaragua*. New York: Goetzl, 1860. Facsimile edition-Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona, 1985. WELLS, WILLIAM V. *Walker's Expedition to Nicaragua*. New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1856. Book-length accounts of Walker in English include the following: ROCHE, JAMES J. *The Story of the Filibusters*. London: Unwin, 1891. SCROGGS, WILLIAM O. *Filibusters and Financiers*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. GREENE, LAWRENCE *The Filibuster: The Career of William Walker*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963. GERSON, NOEL B. *Sad Swash buckler: The life of William Walker*. New York: Thomas Nelson, 1976. ROSENGARTEN, FREDERICK *Freebooters Must Die*. Wayne, PA: Haveford, 1976. Books with chapters on Walker include: POWELL, E. ALEXANDER "The King of the Filibusters", *Gentlemen Rovers*. New York: Scribner's, 1913. ABDULLAH ACHMED, "William Walker", *Dreamers of Empire*. New York: Stokes, 1922. FOLKMAN, DAVID I. *The Nicaraguan Route*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah., 1972. MAY, ROBERT E. *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1973. Spanish-language sources on Walker are rich, and include the following: MONTUFAR Y RIVERA MAESTRE, LORENZO *Walker en Centro América*. Guatemala: Tipografía La Unión, 1887: 2 Vols. HURTADO CHAMORRO, ALEJANDRO *William Walker: Ideales y propósitos*. Granada: Centro América, 1965. GUIER, ENRIQUE *William Walker*. San José, Costa Rica: Tipografía Lehmann, 1971.

(3) POWELL, *Gentlemen Rovers*, ix.

(4) SCROGGS, *Filibusters and Financiers*, p. 396

(5) GREEN, *The Filibuster*, p. 117

(6) "Historical Film and Historical Understanding", in KRAMER, LLOYD et al., eds. *Learning History in America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, forthcoming

(7) *Ibid.*

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