

**Historians and Hollywood:
The Clash of Professional Ethos?
Setting the Stage**

L. M. Stallbaumer-Beishline
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Essential Questions Driving Course

1. What are a historian’s obligation to be accurate in his/her interpretations? How do they achieve credibility (i.e. professional ethos)?
2. What are a filmmaker’s obligations to be accurate in his/her interpretations of history through film? How do filmmakers achieve credibility with their audiences (i.e. professional ethos)?
3. Do filmmakers have the ability to shape collective, public memory about a past event or person?
4. What are the limits and possibilities of filmmakers to teach audiences about past events and persons?
5. What have you learned about your expectations/criteria for watching and recommending historical films and documentaries to friends and family?

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“The fact is this: historians believe the past belongs to them, that their training in the graduate school and acculturation into a profession has given them a unique understanding of the human adventure over time. And so it has. But they (we) confuse ‘unique’ with ‘only possible.’”

~Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), xviii

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Goals for reading Robert Rosenstone,
Visions of the Past (1995)

Distinguishing features between a costume drama and historical film	Why filmmakers must invent. Distinction that Rosenstone makes between "true/false" invention.	"Hollywood" Tradition and how it will impact filmmakers' portrayal of history. Are film makers historians?	What are the limits and possibilities of watching historical films?	Why historians find fault with Hollywood? Why do historians, even Rosenstone, feel that they may be violating their professional ethos?	Film-making vocabulary: compression, alteration, displacement, condensation, metaphor	How does written history compare to movie versions?
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To introduce students to a potential middle ground upon which professional historians and filmmakers might find agreement.

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Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*

Essential Vocabulary of the filmmaker that you need to learn and use when "reading" or evaluating historical films:

- Compression or condensation (verb: compress or condense)
- Displacement (verb: displace)
- Alteration (verb: alter)
- Dialogue (verb: create dialogue)
- Characters (verb: create characters)
- Drama (verb: dramatize)
- Metaphor

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"I am saying that a historical narrative or argument selects only certain traces, and those traces which are chosen become the designated 'facts' as they are used as part of the historical work. For the director of the dramatic film, who must create ... a past that fits within the demands, practices, and traditions of both the visual media and the dramatic form, ...this means inventing some of them."
 ~Robert Rosenstone, *History of Film/Film on History* (2006), 43.

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**Historians and Hollywood:
The Clash of Professional Ethos?
Doing History**

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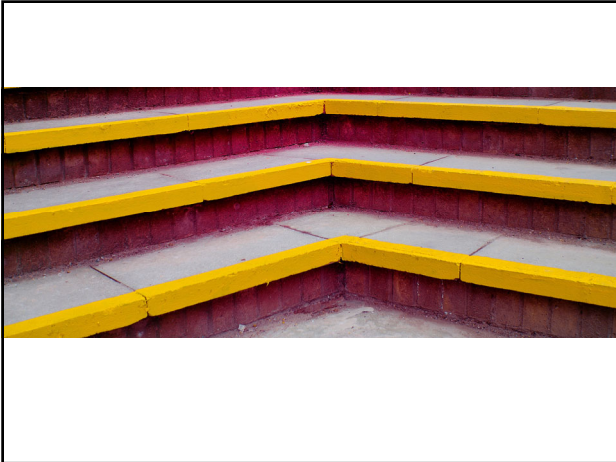
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What does it mean to “do history?”

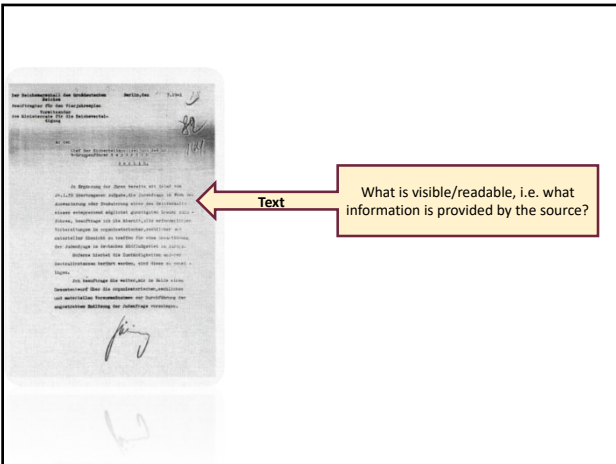
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Historiography

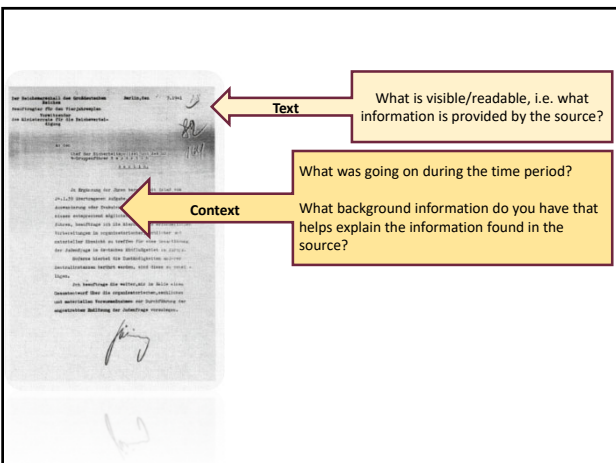
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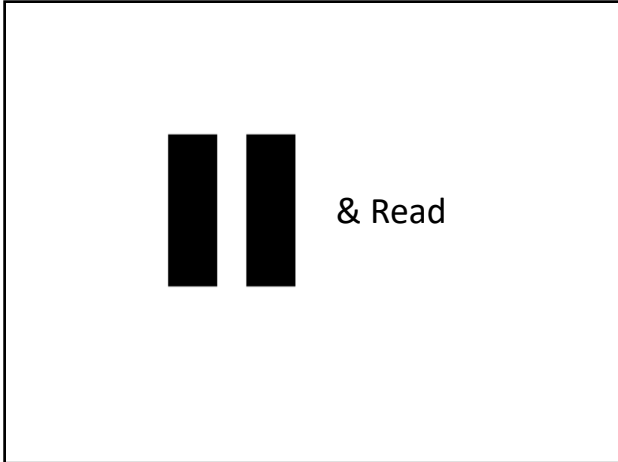
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Where we stand determines what we see

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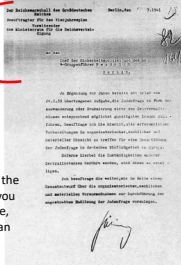
Berlin: July 31, 1941
The Reich Marshal of the Greater German Reich Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan,
Chairman of the Ministerial Council for the Defense of the Reich
[Hermann Göring]
To: the Chief of the Security Police and the SD
SS Major General Heydrich, Berlin:

As a supplement to the task which was entrusted to you in the decree dated January 24, 1939, to solve the Jewish question by emigration and evacuation in the most favorable way possible, given present conditions, I herewith commission you to carry out all necessary preparations with regard to organizational, substantive, and financial viewpoints for a total solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.

Insofar as other competencies of other central organizations are affected, these are to be involved.

I further commission you to submit to me promptly an overall plan showing the preliminary organizational, substantive, and financial measures for the execution of the intended final solution of the Jewish question.

//signed//Göring



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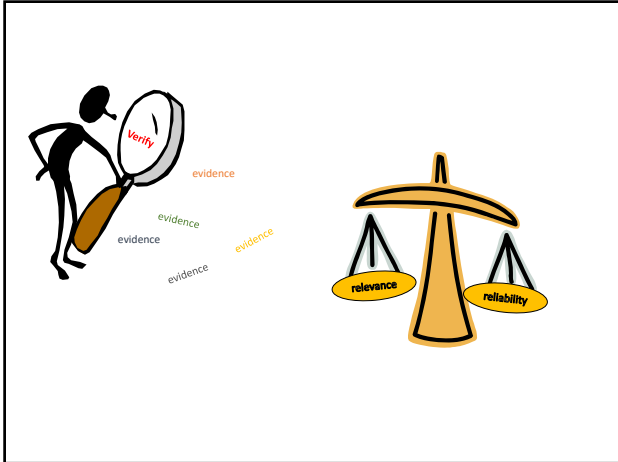


Hundreds

Thousands

MORE!

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Historians' Ethos and Practice

1. Historical understanding is **not easy** to come by.

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Historians' Ethos and Practice

- 1. Historical understanding is **not easy** to come by.
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- 3. **Multi-causal, complex** explanations more plausible and convincing.

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Historians' Ethos and Practice

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- 4. Explaining events through the actions of **a few or a single individual** usually leads to **oversimplification**.

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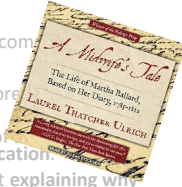
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5. Not just chronicling what happened but **explaining why and how**.
6. Show the **interplay** between individual lives and broad social movements.



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Historians' Ethos and Practice

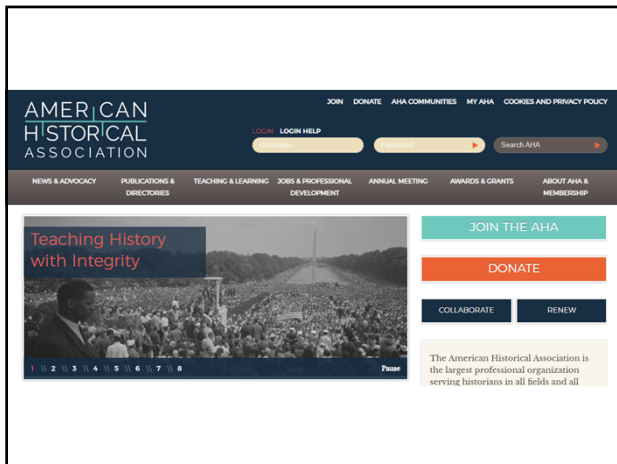
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8. Not seeking **absolute truth**, yet some interpretations are more plausible and more convincing than others.
9. **Publishing our interpretations** is meant to **contribute to a dialogue, not reach a consensus** because multiple interpretations are plausible.

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Standards of the Professional Historian

1. Avoid making conclusions without **sufficient/available evidence**
2. Make plausible inferences when the evidence is lacking
3. Do **not ignore evidence** that could contradict our interpretations
4. Do **not invent evidence**
5. Utilize a **variety** of accounts and **diverse** types of evidence
6. **Corroborate** by a variety of independent accounts or pieces of evidence
7. Understand the past according to its own terms, i.e. **context**

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Historians infer

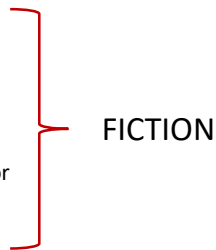
when the evidence is lacking, ambiguous, uncertain



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Unlike Filmmakers, Historians **Do NOT**

1. Invent situations
2. Invent characters
3. Combine numerous historical figures
4. Do not compress events or change the order or sequence of events



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