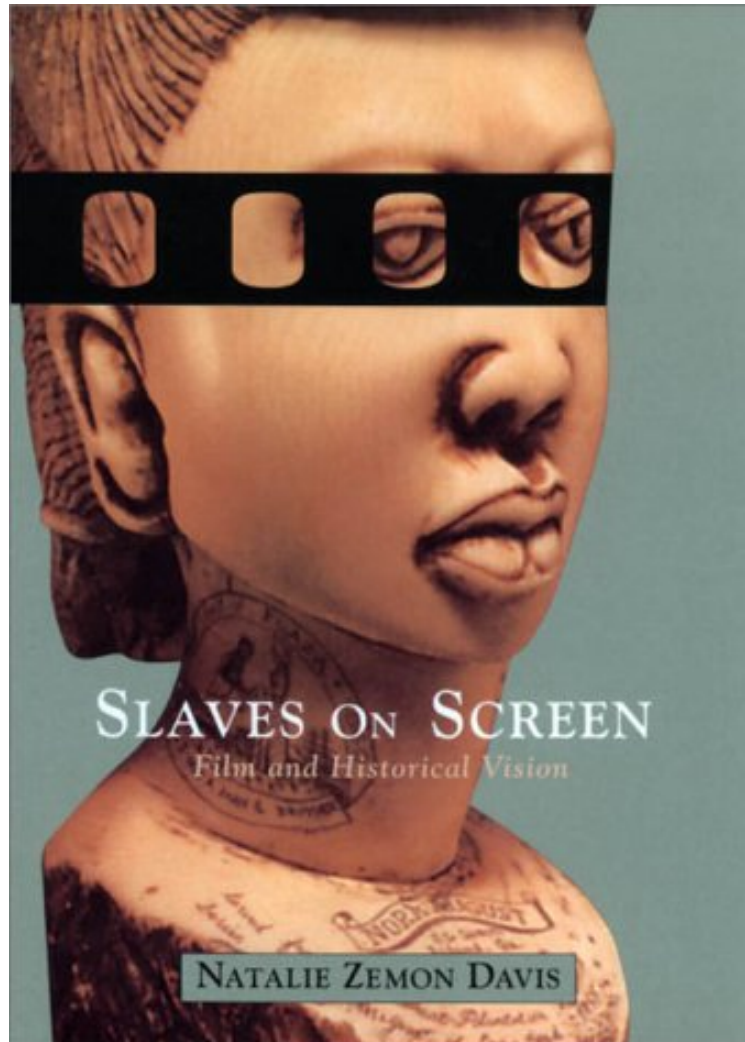


Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision

Natalie Zemon Davis

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Natalie Zemon Davis : Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Excellent analysis By TammyJo Eckhart But choosing five mainstream feature films, Davis has allowed the average reader into the rather closed world of film criticism and historical analysis. A historian herself, Davis applies performance theory to examining how feature films do and can be an educational vehicle for history. Five films are examined: Spartacus, Burn!, The Last Supper, Amistad, and Beloved. The last four all deal with slavery in the "new world" of the Americas. Davis points out incidents where historical fact has been replaced with fiction, where events have taken on a modern twist, and how film-making has hindered or aided in connecting the past to the modern audience. None of the five films are perfect but Davis feels they are good

overall because their goals are all to make the audience feel what the slaves or freed felt so that we can form a better understanding of a social institution that currently is frowned upon in most of the developed world. It would have been better if she spent more time on the history of the period and events each movie covered but for an early attempt at using performance theory in history, it is an excellent start.

The written word and what the eye can see are brought together in this fascinating foray into the depiction of resistance to slavery through the modern medium of film. Davis, whose book *The Return of Martin Guerre* was written while she served as consultant to the French film of the same name, now tackles the large issue of how the moving picture industry has portrayed slaves in five major motion pictures spanning four generations. The potential of film to narrate the historical past in an effective and meaningful way, with insistence on loyalty to the evidence, is assessed in five films: *Spartacus* (1960), *Burn!* (1969), *The Last Supper* (1976), *Amistad* (1997), and *Beloved* (1998). Davis shows how shifts in the viewpoints of screenwriters and directors parallel those of historians. *Spartacus* is polarized social history; the films on the Caribbean bring ceremony and carnival to bear on the origins of revolt; *Amistad* and *Beloved* draw upon the traumatic wounds in the memory of slavery and the resources for healing them. In each case Davis considers the intentions of filmmakers and evaluates the film and its techniques through historical evidence and interpretation. Family continuity emerges as a major element in the struggle against slavery. *Slaves on Screen* is based in part on interviews with the Nobel prizewinning author of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison, and with Manuel Moreno Fraginals, the historical consultant for *The Last Supper*. Davis brings a new approach to historical film as a source of "thought experiments" about the past. While the five motion pictures are sometimes cinematic triumphs, with sound history inspiring the imagination, Davis is critical of fictive scenes and characters when they mislead viewers in important ways. Good history makes good films.

From Publishers Weekly A history professor at Princeton University, Natalie Zemon Davis (*The Return of Martin Guerre*; *Women on the Margins*) is also a seasoned critic of historical film. With *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, she discusses how movies represent history differently than books do. Can narrative films achieve the accuracy and authenticity that writers can? "Can there be lively cinematic equivalents to what prose histories try to accomplish in prefaces, bibliographies, and notes and through their modifying and qualifying words 'perhaps,' 'maybe,' and 'we are uncertain about'?" In order to answer these questions, Davis looks at a handful of films that have attempted to capture themes of slavery, struggle and rebellion (*Spartacus*, *Burn!*, *The Last Supper*, *Amistad* and *Beloved*) and analyzes the devices they've used to convey history, as they understand and wish to express it. It is her hope that "with patience, imagination, and experimentation, historical narration through film could become both more dramatic and more faithful to the sources from the past." (Harvard Univ., \$22.95 176p ISBN 0-674-00444-2; Sept.) Given that Shakespeare is one of the world's most famous interpreters of history, it seems fitting that the 14 academics whose essays form *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Si?cle* believe that the recent surge of Shakespearean films (*Shakespeare in Love*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*) reflects modern man's association of millennium-sized issues with the Bard himself. Edited by Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (respectively, a reader and a lecturer in English at Queen's University of Belfast), the volume tackles such topics as advancing technology, families at risk and cultural intolerance. Included among the provocative pieces is a gem of an interview with Kenneth Branagh. (St. Martin's, \$42 272p ISBN 0-312-23148-2; Aug.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Davis (history, emeritus, Princeton Univ.) branches off from her central studies on 17th-century French and women's history to assess the historical truths of five films on slavery: *Spartacus*, *Burn!*, *The Last Supper*, *Amistad*, and *Beloved*. Here, slavery itself serves as a springboard for a larger consideration: respect for the historical record vs. a need for dramatic effect. Davis argues convincingly for the historical film as a source of "thought experiments" about the past rather than pure presentation of fact. Although brief, this monograph is a fitting companion volume to the library of film history works, including Robert A. Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past* (Harvard Univ., 1995) and Robert B. Toplin's *History by Hollywood* (Univ. of Illinois, 1996). Recommended for all film studies collections. D Anthony J. Adam, Prairie View AM Univ. Lib., TX Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Davis, a historian with a concentration on people outside traditional power centers, explores the treatment of slaves on film from a historical perspective. She analyzes five films: *Spartacus* as an example of resistance and survival, *Burn* and *The Last Supper* as reflective of ceremony and revolt, and the more contemporary films *Amistad* and *Beloved* as witnesses of trauma. In each topic area, Davis sets up the complex interplay between historically supportable fiction and imagination. Clearly, each of these films reflects strong foundations rooted in historical research. Yet the various film applications merit different responses. As in much of "history," much in films is unknown. That is due to the filmmakers inclination to embellish through speculation and imagination; but the historical alterations that take place, Davis advocates, should be acknowledged to film viewers so that they may distinguish between historical fact and fiction. This short work should be very informative for those interested in an analysis of the historical treatment of slaves in American films. Vernon Ford Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved