

# Films, Facts and History:

## Interpreting the Past

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On 16 May 2011, the *Today* newspaper in Singapore published a commentary by its principal correspondent Paul Gilfeather on the filmmaker Oliver Stone (b. 1946), who had given a talk at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and his interview with the acclaimed American director. Stone had revealed to a packed auditorium that he was making a ten-part documentary series called the *Untold History of the United States*, which he called “the most important thing I have ever done.”<sup>11</sup> Stone said that his new series would “re-examine the likes of the Japanese in WWII and Russian tyrant Joseph Stalin (1878 – 1953) more sympathetically than ever before.”<sup>12</sup> When the interview ended, Stone told Gilfeather to “be careful on the history quotes... get them right for me.”<sup>13</sup>

A few days later, a Singaporean historian wrote to the same newspaper and pointed out that if a famous filmmaker like Oliver Stone were to make a documentary series with the premise of challenging traditional history, it would draw considerable interest.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Stone’s documentary series was based on the work of a professional historian, Peter J. Kuznick (b. 1948) of The American University in Washington, D.C. But it was Stone who gave the talk in Singapore, not Kuznick. The point that the historian was making was that when a leading film-maker positions his work as history, “it sets off alarm bells”<sup>5</sup> because to the less informed, his work would be accepted as historical truth. The Singaporean historian’s letter was discussed a few days later in another letter from a member of the public who argued that Stone deserves more credit than to be called a “film-maker” and that history is ultimately subjective and interpretative.<sup>6</sup> Indeed these discussions raise the question, who should interpret the past?

### Facts about the past versus historical facts

The work of historians shares many similarities with film-makers in that the historian is “able to manipulate time and space in ways they could never manage as normal people.”<sup>7</sup> But there is one key difference: “artists don’t normally expect to have their sources checked. Historians do.”<sup>8</sup>

When historians write about the past, the facts presented must be accurate and reliable. This is the same for anyone using information about the past. However for the historian, their work does not stop at having their sources checked for historical accuracy. The historian E.H. Carr (1892–1982) reminds us in his book *What is History?* that to praise a historian for his accuracy “is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, the historian can call upon an architect for his views on building timbers, or an archaeologist for his data if the building timber was part of an ancient structure.

The work of antiquarians emphasises historical accuracy. The historian, on the other hand, deals with the use of facts about the past. It is the historian “who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order,”<sup>10</sup> because facts do not speak for themselves.

On the other hand, not all facts about the past are historical facts. There are, according to Carr, “facts about the past” and “historical facts”. The former is a collection of events that took place in the past while the latter are events that historians regard as historically significant. He gave the example of Roman general Julius Caesar’s (100–44 BCE) crossing of the Rubicon River in 49 BCE, which marked a point of no return in Caesar’s route to power, as a historical fact, whereas the millions of people who crossed the stream before and after Caesar represent a fact about the past that is ignored by historians.<sup>11</sup> The historian therefore decides which sources and facts to use to influence his account of the past.

### The writing of history

In Singapore, the distinction between facts of the past and historical facts is not often well understood. Paul Cohen’s (b. 1934) book *History in Three Keys* can help to illustrate the issue better. The writing of history, according to Cohen, can come in three forms; history as an event – a particular reading of the past; as experience – a reconstruction of the past based on the collective experiences of individuals who made up the history; and as myth – a selective reading of the past.

A historical event, according to Cohen, is a coalescence of individual experiences in the past.<sup>12</sup> A participant's account or recollection could at best provide a vivid idea of what the past was like, but it cannot, however, give us the past. The historian's role is central in the process of transforming individual experiences into a historical event. E.H. Carr uses a more simple analogy: the historian's working material is like "a fish on the fishmonger's slab [and] the historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style that appeals to him."<sup>13</sup> What historians reconstruct from the "fishmonger's slab" then becomes a framework – a historical event that enables other historians to further analyse "what happened".<sup>14</sup> Once fixed, historical events, however, can serve many purposes.

"History as experience", as the term suggests, involves the examination of experiences of individuals from a particular time period or event. An understanding of events in history is achieved through analyses of the recollections of individuals, giving historians and students of history an idea of "what happened" in the past. A good example of Cohen's "history as experience" is found in the work of Australia's official historian of the First World War, Charles Bean (1879–1968), who examined and used the Australian soldiering experiences at Gallipoli and on the Western Front to reconstruct war narratives in the official Australian histories of the First World War.<sup>15</sup> Bean believed that the history of Australia in the Great War should be told by the narratives of the men who fought it.<sup>16</sup> And he achieved it by putting the experiences of the ordinary soldier in his "official history"<sup>17</sup> and by providing names and biographical footnotes to the accounts of the 8,000 soldiers<sup>18</sup> whom he had included in the text.<sup>19</sup>

What Bean had created was a war narrative genre that had been described as "a personalised history written in a distinctive style."<sup>20</sup> This was a marked departure from traditional war narratives that were "shorn of critical comment, devoid of controversy and describing events from the single viewpoint of the high command".<sup>21</sup> Bean's methodology and characteristic style of writing have been

adopted subsequently by Australian historians commissioned to produce Australia's official histories of the Second World War. His methodology and style is also found in recent war films like Steven Spielberg's (b. 1946) *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010) where the soldiering experiences in the Second World War in Europe and the Pacific were central in the grand visual narratives about the war. The style was also found in Philipp Kadelbach's (b. 1974) film *Generation War*<sup>22</sup> (2013) where the wartime experiences of young Germans were told through five characters from 1941 to 1945. *Generation War* was criticised, however, for pushing Nazism and death camps far into the background. But the criticism levelled at Kadelbach's work bears out Cohen's third key, "history as myth".

According to Cohen, a mythologised past often begins with an assumed understanding or notion of the past that is not unlike a romanticised version of a historical event, an individual or groups of individuals. In other words, "mythologisers" begin with a conclusion that they sincerely believe to be "correct" and work their way back to create or recreate a sequence of events that look like history but may not be necessarily such. In other words, "history as myth" is a reconstruction of the past, seldom based on the actual experiences of those who experienced it, but on an assumed idea of the past to satisfy a reading of the present. In the case of the film *Generation War*, the historian Nicholas Stargardt's (b. 1962) work on the war in Germany, *The German War*,<sup>23</sup> indeed showed that Germans suffered and survived the war with Nazism and death camps in the background of their lives.

## The Singapore context

To use a similar wartime example in Singapore's context, in 1995 a book on the wartime experiences of local people in Singapore was published. Its title was *The Price of Peace* and the book inspired the creation of a top-rating Chinese drama series shown on Singapore television in 1997 titled *He Ping de Dai Jia* (*Price of Peace*). Ten years later, it was re-screened on television in Singapore and

again, it was popularly received. Institutions in Singapore have gone one step further by making *The Price of Peace* an authority on the war in Singapore. The book is listed in the National University of Singapore Library's *A Sense of History: A Select Bibliography in the History of Singapore*, a bibliography that also included works by notable historians. In 2002, Singapore's Nanyang University of Technology placed it in an exhibition that showcased the value of National Education in a national crisis.<sup>24</sup>

When historians took a closer look at the book, the accounts featured were problematic. The Battle of Singapore is a historical event that took place from 8 to 15 February 1942. In one battle account featured in the book, on 6 February 1942, a group of local Chinese volunteers defending Jurong Road was hit by machinegun fire and "a fierce battle erupted as Japanese troops charged towards us [and] both sides suffered casualties".<sup>25</sup> The fighting continued well into 9 February and together with the Australians, the volunteers launched a combined counter-offensive that broke the Japanese morale and chased the enemy back "for a good five miles".<sup>26</sup> The problem with this account is that no Japanese troops could have been on Singapore on 6 February; they landed on 8 February and well away from Jurong Road.<sup>27</sup> The Australian unit's war diaries on 9 February record that the Diggers was re-establishing a new line of defence after withdrawing from the initial main Japanese assault.<sup>28</sup> None spoke of a counter-offensive that chased the Japanese five miles all the way back to the coast. Yet such narratives in the book would command widespread popularity in a country looking for authentic local eyewitness accounts during the defence of Singapore in its search for historical identity. The positioning of *The Price of Peace* as an authoritative historical text demonstrates "history as myth". Indeed, "history as myth" is not too dissimilar to Whig history and post-colonial national histories that emphasise the contrast between a nation's colonial past with political, social and economic achievements after independence. It bears out Cohen's "history as myth" when a version of the past is reconstructed from a set of events to "serve the political, ideological, rhetorical, and/or emotional needs of the present."<sup>29</sup>

There is no professional historians' association in Singapore and as the last newspaper letter discussed at the beginning of this article suggests, it appears that in Singapore, anyone can interpret the past. The increasingly voiced anxiety over development works in Singapore that may impact historical elements of a site would better illuminate the question of who should interpret the past in Singapore. The heritage versus development conundrum is a common one across the world, and one that often influences changes in society. In Hong Kong for example, in 2006, the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier to make way for land reclamation to expand the waterfront saw large public demonstrations in protest against the development. Although the demonstration did not save the historical landmark, it led the Hong Kong administration to review its policy and processes, and created greater public awareness and appreciation of Hong Kong's built heritage.

On a related note, on 31 March 2004, Singapore's first National Library building along Stamford Road was demolished. Opened in 1960, this was a historical landmark that held many different fond memories for more than two generations of Singaporeans. This incident led to greater popular awareness of Singapore's heritage even if some of it was underpinned by nostalgia. This historical event in 2004 has since led to efforts by the government and the community to document the histories of various sites and structures across Singapore, bearing out the notion in Singapore that anyone can interpret the past as history.

In November 2012, Oliver Stone released his ten-part documentary series, *Untold History of the United States*. The series re-examined the United States' history from the First World War through the Cold War and concludes with the Obama administration. It was accompanied by a 750-page companion book written by Stone and Kuznick, whose work was featured in the series. The series presented a revisionist perspective of the time period that argued that the United States did not end the Second World War in Europe (the Soviet Union did) and President Harry Truman's (1884–1972) decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan was to impress

the Soviet Union. The United States was also responsible for starting the Cold War.

The series received much praise and criticism. The historian Ronald Radosh (b. 1937) criticised Stone and Kuznick for manipulating evidence and ignoring evidence that does not fit their predetermined thesis, a thesis that had already appeared in print as early as 1952.<sup>30</sup> The historian Sean Wilentz (b. 1951) also pointed out that there was nothing “untold” about the series because the interpretation presented “have appeared in revisionist histories of American foreign policy written over the last

fifty years”<sup>31</sup>; the series was at best “a skewed political document” not a work of history.<sup>32</sup> However, the series also received much praise from reviewers, with one calling it “solid, highly watchable (thanks to all the terrific archive material), thought-provoking, necessary and in the end [with the soundtrack]... rather moving.”<sup>33</sup> It was probably a good thing that Stone did not follow-up with a sequel to the series to make a film on the Fall of Singapore in 1942. Perhaps the Singaporean historian who started the debate in Singapore in May 2011 would have said, “I told you so.” Well, “I told you so.”

## Notes

1. *Today*, 16 May 2011
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Today*, 19 May 2011
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Today*, 21-22 May 2011
7. Gaddis 2002, p. 17
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18
9. Carr 1986, pp. 10–11
10. *Ibid.*, p. 11
11. *Ibid.*, p. 11
12. Cohen 1997, pp. xi–xv
13. Carr 1986, p. 9
14. Cohen 1997, p. 65
15. Charles Bean started out as a journalist before he became the official historian.
16. *Winter* 1992, pp. 1–2

17. Thompson 1994, pp. 144–145. Charles Bean faced opposition from the military who did not agree with his style and sought to bar his work from being an 'Official History' of the war.
18. Thompson 1994 gave the figure 8,000 but Winter 1992 stated there was "6,550 of them and each with a footnoted biographical sketch", p. 2
19. Thompson 1994, pp. 144–145
20. Winter 1992, p. 2
21. Ibid., p. 1
22. Known in Germany as *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, translated to mean "Our mothers, our fathers".
23. Stargardt 2015
24. *NTU Library Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 2 & 3, November 2002, pp. 6–9
25. Hu 1995, p. 267
26. Ibid., p. 272
27. Frei 2004, p. 82
28. War Diary Australian 2/29 Infantry Battalion, AWM52-8-3-29-007, Australian War Memorial
29. Cohen 1997, p. 213
30. *The New York Times Magazine*, 22 November 2012
31. *The New York Review of Books*, 21 February 2013
32. *The New York Review of Books*, 21 February 2013
33. *The Guardian*, 11 July 2013

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