

**THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE,
TEACHING HISTORY IN IMAGES,
HISTORY IN WORDS**

Richard A. Voeltz
Cameron University

The Return of Martin Guerre received rave reviews from historians and history teachers when it was first released in this country in 1983. The distinguished Princeton University historian Natalie Zemon Davis had acted as historical consultant to the producers of the film while at the same time researching and writing her book, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). Critics and historians especially praised the film for its sensitive renderings of daily life in sixteenth-century France, of the *mentalité* of the period, i.e., how people actually view their world. Therefore, if for no other reason, the film is a significant learning resource for students of history from secondary to upper-level college courses.¹ By acquainting students with the concept of *mentalités*, in this instance common reference points and symbols of an historical era, the entire concept of periodization in history, with its inherent artificiality, becomes a subject of suspicion to inquiring minds. And no era in history needs further reconsideration in terms of periodization than the Renaissance and Reformation.

An historical period is traditionally marked at the beginning and end by political, military, and intellectual events, but Renaissance may not be a proper term for a distinct era. Charles Homer Haskins wrote that everything that prevailed in the fifteenth century in Florence existed in the twelfth century in Paris, as opposed to Jacob Burckhardt's assertion that a sudden "shaft of light" destroyed the old, common ways of thinking.² Burckhardt reenforced a powerful, persistent image of the Middle Ages as an age of the untutored, and the irrational, of witches and burning stakes, of the Black Death, and of demons and hobgoblins ready to pounce on the ungodly. Burckhardt claimed that with the beginning of the Renaissance, all was light, and the great fermentation of unreason was finally conquered—an image that dies hard. Just witness the theme of a conference recently held at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, "The Year of the Renaissance—The Resurgence of Learning." Wallace K. Ferguson attempted to referee the dispute by declaring the age a "period of transition," while Joan Kelly-

¹ For a discussion of the use of the film in an advanced placement European history course see, Patricia J. F. Rosof, "Mentalité in the Advanced Placement Curriculum," *AHA Perspectives*, 30 (March 1992), 18, 20-21. My own experience using the film and book took place in an upper-division Renaissance and Reformation course taught at Cameron University, Spring 1990, and I would like to give special thanks to the students in that class.

² Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1928, 1970), is still a classic. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* still remains the last word on the concept of the Renaissance as being a time of great individuality, and of the Renaissance as a rebirth, but the perspective of the work is nineteenth-century.

Gadol questioned whether the term Renaissance, in its traditional meaning, applied in any way to women.³ But thinking in terms of *mentalité* forces students to confront the problem of periodization in history. The period of the Renaissance and Reformation may only be understandable if it is recast in terms of a set of shared assumptions by the people of early modern Europe—and we cannot understand that society until we understand these assumptions, or to paraphrase Robert Darnton, until we "get the joke."⁴

After the teacher introduces Renaissance art, both early and high, Petrarch, Lorenzo Valla, Castiglione, Pico della Mirandola, Machiavelli, and Leonardo de Vinci, the film *The Return of Martin Guerre* presents students with visual images of marriage, birth, death, agriculture, family structure, sexuality, consummated marriage, unconsummated marriage, *charivari*, missing husbands, returned husbands, fraudulent husbands, ideas of land ownership and loyalty, gender roles, village relationships, illiteracy, and the workings of the French legal system in the sixteenth century. For students in the 1990s who assume that the only *mentalité* that ever existed is the one they now share, such a materially and spiritually different world can come as a shock—and a much needed, healthy shock to one's cherished assumptions about how the world should be viewed.⁵

Thus, the film and the book can introduce students to the concept of *mentalité*. But the real purpose behind this paper is to go beyond this concept, and even beyond the debate about historical authenticity and what *Martin Guerre*—film and book—does or does not reveal about early modern culture,⁶ and to impress upon history students the idea that there may be more than one historical reality, and that truths conveyed in visual form may be different from truths conveyed in words. A very successful strategy for attaining this goal is to have students read Davis's book before they view the film. This should challenge them to think about the differences and similarities in the presentation of the story.

³ W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, (Boston, 1948); Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, *Becoming Visible, Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 175-201.

⁴ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 5.

⁵ The actual story of Martin Guerre upon which both film and book are based should by now be very familiar to anyone interested in early modern Europe so I shall not repeat it in the text. Most of the information concerning the case comes from a book, *Arrest memorable du Parlement de Toulouse*, written by Jean Coras, the judge who presided over the dramatic trial.

⁶ If one wants to develop further the notion of historical authenticity and the Martin Guerre story, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Yale Review*, 76 (Fall, 1987), 457-482. In a lively exchange in the *AHR* Robert Finley accuses Davis of "refashioning" the story of Martin Guerre by using interpretation to stray from the facts, and Davis then responds. See Robert Finley, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, "On the Lame," *AHR*, 93 (June 1988), 553-571, 572-603. For the use of these articles in teaching critical thinking, see Phylis A. Hall "Teaching Analytical Thinking through the 'AHA Forum' and the *Return of Martin Guerre*," *Perspectives* (January, 1990), 14-16.

The instructor will find many useful ideas in John E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact Video Compilation* (1988), which includes segments of *The Return of Martin Guerre* as the first of thirteen video selections. Designed to serve as a full course in making history students visually literate, the individual selections can be incorporated into appropriate courses. The accompanying *Guide to the Image as Artifact* contains a number of documents, interviews (including one with Natalie Davis), and recordings that support each selection. Also included are questions for discussion with hints on how to develop them, a sequence-by-sequence outline of the film, and then points for discussion based upon the sequence-by-sequence outline. Although more expensive, the laserdisk option offers the instructor much more flexibility and convenience than the VHS format. Of course, an instructor can develop individual strategies for getting the students to think about the differences between the book and the film, but *Image as Artifact* does a superb job in providing questions and hints for development.

What becomes apparent to most students is that the book presents characters as having more complexity. Bertrande de Rols is portrayed as much more independent in the book. Martin appears more sympathetic because of his youth and the fact that as a Basque he is an outsider in the village. Arnaud du Tilh, the imposter, is dealt with more critically in the book than the film, where the actor Gerard Depardieu literally charms the viewing audience with his performance. The visual media in general has difficulty presenting the complexity of personality, but film does provide vivid physical descriptions that far outshine any printed word image. Davis herself felt that working with visual media made her think differently about the past. According to O'Connor, "Davis comments in her interview that in researching the *mis-en-scène* (decisions about costumes, props, and dialogue) for the film, and in thinking about the ways characters would have reacted to one another, she was led to ask questions that had never occurred to her before as a historian."⁷ In the O'Connor guide instructors are urged to question their students about "historical truth," and whether the book is mightier, or more accurate, than the visual. Maybe factual details from the past can be proven or disproven. So what? History is not the past, it is not the sum total of all these details. Rather history is an interpretation of the past: "Therefore, whether in print or in film, history—the interpretation of the past—can only be said to be true to the interpreter. There is always room for another interpretation, another view that is true to some other perspective."⁸

Having now thrown them into the icy pool of historical relativism, I presented my students the follow-up assignment of reading Robert Rosenstone's provocative essay "History in Images/History in Words, Reflections on the

⁷ John D. O'Connor, *Guide to the Image as Artifact Video Compilation* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1988), 1-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film."⁹ Here Rosenstone raises a troubling thought for traditional historians: "To think of the ever-growing power of the visual media is to raise the disturbing thought that perhaps history is dead in the way God is dead. Or, at the most, alive only to believers—that is, to those of us, who pursue it as a profession."¹⁰ The number of "Biovids" or pop histories abound and are made universally available to everyone. While committing great "sins" against history, these pop histories (lives of Napoleon, Peter the Great, Mussolini, Sam Houston, Theodore Roosevelt, Gandhi, the *Winds of War*, *War and Remembrance*, and recently *The Chronicles of the Young Indiana Jones*) may well become the accepted "truths" for generations of kids who will never learn anything else about these subjects. Television "docudramas" and, now most provocatively, Oliver Stone's *JFK* all blend fact and fiction into heady brews whose potency has historians deeply concerned, or maybe just jealous. "Filmmakers make myths," Stone says without apology about his film *JFK*. And as David M. Kennedy, Professor of History at Stanford University whimsically noted in a recent editorial:

"Here we go again," they complain. Once more, the ramparts of historical accuracy will have to be defended against the slings and arrows of fabulists. Once more, the canons of scholarship will be invoked against the licentious romancers. Once more, like so many stiff-necked Savanrolas haranguing the Florentine mob, the guardians of historical truth must flourish the knout over the gullible, heresy-prone American public.¹¹

But Rosenstone is not so quick to dismiss visual history as some sort of pernicious fusing of myth and history. Indeed, written narratives are "verbal fiction," so visual narratives will be "visual fictions"—"that is, not mirrors of the past but representations of it." He continues, "This is not to argue that history and fiction are the same thing or to excuse the kind of outright fabrication that marks Hollywood historical features. History on film must be held accountable to certain standards, but these standards must be consonant with the possibilities of the medium. It is impossible to judge history on film solely by the standards of written history, for each medium has its own kind of necessarily fictive element."¹²

⁹ Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *AHR* 93 (December 1988), 1173-1185.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1175.

¹¹ David M. Kennedy, "Kennedy Assassination: Bonding a Generation," *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1991.

¹² Rosenstone, 1181. For those interested in pursuing further the controversy surrounding Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, see the *AHR*, 97, (April 1992), where the "AHR Forum" features articles by Robert Rosenstone, "JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film," Marcus Raskin, "JFK and the Culture of Violence," and Michael Rogin, "JFK: The Movie."

Rosenstone sees tremendous potential for films to recapture the power that narrative history once had. He calls for a "shift in perspective . . . to represent the world in images and words rather than in words alone, to touch history."¹³ Or as Natalie Zemon Davis put it, to create the "pastness of the past."¹⁴ For Rosenstone, "History does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values."¹⁵ Rosenstone—and I also—believes we live in a post-literate, post-modern, hypervisual culture that is changing the very character of our relationship to the past. Many cultures get along just fine without a rigorous, "scientific" history. There are numerous ways to understand and relate to the past. One legacy from the Renaissance is the primacy of history as word. Film is now battering down the walls of privilege held by the word, and "to acknowledge the authenticity of the visual is to accept a new relationship to the word itself."¹⁶ But did the word really ever recapture the past? The controversial historian Simon Schama writes that events did actually happen, but they "can't be very clearly determined even with the resources we have available." Since historians can never truly enter into a past world, Schama believes they "are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation." Schama sees humanity today as unavoidably remote from the historical subjects, and therefore suggests that "we are doomed to be forever hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot."¹⁷

So my students in Renaissance and Reformation, after their final essay in which I ask them to consider some of the complexities of interpreting the past through the word and through image, should come away with the understanding that history is indeed complex, multifaceted, a form of drama and analysis, that may not be scientifically knowable. All we can offer are different parts of historical truth, that conveyed in words, and increasingly that conveyed in visual images. But I seriously doubt if the latter is any more successful in hailing Schama's historical someone who has "just gone around the corner, and out of earshot."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1184.

¹⁴ *Image as Artifact*, 62.

¹⁵ Rosenstone, 1185.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Gordon Wood, "Novel History," *New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1991, 15-16. Schama caused a firestorm among historians when he created imaginary dialogue in his book *Dead Certainties (Unwarrented Speculations)* (New York: Knopf, 1991). Schama is quoted in the review of that book by Gordon Wood, 12-16.