Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Hans Staden by Luiz Alberto Pereira; Ivan Texeira

How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman (Como era gostoso o meu frances) by Luis Carlos Barreto; Nelson Pereira dos Santos; Cesar Thedim; Humberto Mauro

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Song reminds its audience through Ying's mouth that it is victors who write history. In a parallel way, *The Emperor's Assassin* shows Ying eliminating everyone who knows about his past. It seems obvious that both film directors share the postmodern cynicism about the possibility of finding historical truth and authenticity.

But the two films also differ from each other in important ways. First, the overall color tone of Zhou's film is dominated by black, gray, and brown, effectively conveying the tough, uncouth, military spirit of the Qin state. Despite the director's provocative remark that his film is intended to annoy historians, he was almost fastidious in his efforts to recreate the authentic visual feel of the state that unified China, insisting on using real wood and linen for set, props, and costumes. In contrast, the pigment of Chen's film is much more brilliant and pompous, conveying Qin's glory and grandiosity. The different color tones represent more than just aesthetic variations; they suggest contrasting visions of Chinese history in the era leading up to unification.

Second, in terms of characterization, Zhou's Ying may be ruthless, cunning, and determined, but he is never comical. Indeed, there is even a slight sense of tragedy toward the end, when he loses his beloved daughter, fails to win Gao's cooperation, and is left alone, kneeling before the overbearing sacrificial urn, a symbol of state power. The exaggerated contrast between the tiny body of the first emperor and the huge urn suggests the insignificance of the individual, however great he is, in the long run of history. In contrast, Chen's film blends comic and even farcical elements into his historical drama, showing Ying as a neurotic, hysterical, and sometimes childlike individual who often conducted himself in a less than dignified and kingly manner.

Like most historical dramas, both *Emperor's Shadow* and *The Emperor's Assassin* have more to do with China's recent political history than with the country's distant past. Although Chen and Zhou have both rejected the view that their films are political allegories, at least in public statements, it is almost impossible for audiences not to see the explicit and implicit links between the past events and personalities on the screen and those of twentieth-century Chinese experience. Despite their public denials, both film directors have clearly made a deliberate effort to connect the first emperor and Mao Zedong. In one passage in Chen's film, Ying describes to his officials his vision of the future of China under one ruler, when people all over the country would enjoy peace and prosperity. As he speaks, the soundtrack carries an echo of a loudspeaker in the background, an unmistakable reference to the era of the Cultural Revolution, when utopian vision, thought control, and propaganda were commonplace. Similarly, Zhou's characterization of the first emperor as a man who disregards rigid rules and conventions also seems to be informed by the numerous biographical writings about Mao that have surfaced in the last two decades.

Historians have rarely found dramatic or cinematic representations of history satisfactory. But neither have they come up with a convincing and an effective defense against the postmodernists' charge that historians' own reconstruction of the past is no less biased, imaginative, and inaccurate. It is perhaps both "old-fashioned" and pointless to fault these two cinematic representations on the grounds of historical accuracy. After all, their true historical significance lies in the fact that they represent a new understanding of China's past, apparently one widely shared among this generation of Chinese. Besides, for practical purposes, one can always use these films as useful teaching tools in a class devoted to historical theories and methods, even if they are not suited for a course on ancient Chinese history.

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HANS STADEN. Produced by Luiz Alberto Pereira and Ivan Texeira; written and directed by Luiz Alberto Pereira. 1999; 92 minutes; color. Brazil. Distributor: Riofilme.

HOW TASTY WAS MY LITTLE FRENCHMAN (*Como era gostoso o meu francês*). Produced by Luis Carlos Barreto, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and César Thedim; directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos; written by Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Humberto Mauro. 1971 (video released 1995); 80 minutes; color. Brazil. Portuguese with Tupi dialogue. Distributed by New Yorker Films.

The Portuguese colonization of Brazil was slow and uneven. For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Brazil remained a politically contested region. João de Cabral first landed off the coast in 1500, but a Portuguese policy of settlement did not develop until three decades later, and they only established a general royal government in 1549. In the southeast, the French created short-lived colonies between 1555–1560 and 1612–1615. In the northeast, the Dutch laid claim to Bahia from 1624–1627 and, further north, to the captaincy of Pernambuco from 1630–1654. Different Tupi-speaking indigenous groups scrambled to adjust to the new political reality, often waging wars against certain European invaders while forging alliances with others.

Unfortunately, much of what we know of the South American natives comes from published accounts of Europeans such as Jean de Lery (1600), Andrewe Thevet (1568), Anthony Knivet (1591), and the German Hans Staden (1557), who described local customs and practices while documenting European interactions with various Tupi-speaking natives. Staden's account, *Warhaftige Historia und Beschreibung eyner Landtschafft der wilden, nacketen, grimmigen Menschfresser Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelegen* (1557), chronicles his life in captivity among the

Tupinamba, one of the Tupi-speaking indigenous groups who practiced exocannibalism, and inspired the films *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (1971; recently released on video) and *Hans Staden* (1999). Both films center on a European protagonist but also provide insights into the political economy of early colonial Brazil and on the customs of the Tupi people, particularly their practice of cannibalism. Yet both films follow contrasting formats, agendas, and aesthetic visions, giving students of history different ways of thinking about the past.

Hans Staden, which was filmed in Brazil and Portugal, has all of the pitfalls and the advantages of a film whose central role is didactic. Much care has been given to remain faithful to the historical documents, including recreating historical scenes, customs, and conversations as they would have occurred in the sixteenth century. The dialogue, for example, is mostly in Tupi, which Staden apparently spoke not only with the natives but also with other non-German-speaking Europeans. All the natives and Staden himself appear nude in the film, lending a sense of verisimilitude (despite the fact that the natives seem a little too European-looking, many obviously played by non-native actors painted with red dye).

The film relates Staden's story with very little drama or suspense. We learn about the life of the Tupinamba village through the eyes of the titular protagonist, but the events are relayed in such a way that the audience witnesses them from a distance. Viewers thus never really feel any empathy for either the captors or their captive.

The film can be divided into three sections: Hans Staden's life among the Portuguese, his capture and toils among the Tupinamba, and his eventual departure. In the first part, Staden, who served as a gunnery instructor at the Forte de Bertioga in the captaincy of São Vicente, prepares to return to Europe. After realizing that the loyal slave who worked with him at the fort had not returned from a fishing trip, he sets out to look for him. In his search, Staden comes to a cross at the edge of the river, a symbol that the Portuguese used to call their allies, the Tupininquin. Firing his rifle to summon them, he is caught off guard when their rivals, the Tupinamba, appear and make him their captive. He is taken to their village, where they plan to devour him.

Part two chronicles Staden's life among the Tupinamba from his initial resistance and rage to his slow assimilation into the tribe. He shaves and dresses like them, develops relationships, and eventually participates in group activities such as fighting and hunting, although apparently not in the cannibalism. The final section focuses on how Staden avoids being eaten and how he leaves the village, culminating in his eventual escape. Staden's desire to escape is a constant theme throughout the film, as he modifies his strategies from first pretending to be a Frenchman to later posing as a medicine man and fortuneteller with special powers.

The film presents cannibalism as central to the daily life of the Tupinamba. This was Staden's preoccupation. Despite the many jokes about eating, director Luis Alberto Pereira underscores the ritual nature of cannibalism. One scene recreates a particular ritual that culminates in a "meal" while documenting Staden's apparent disgust and fear.

The film, however, like the memoir, remains silent on many issues and does not use the freedoms of the cinematic genre either to give us insights into Staden's turmoil or to make the story more compelling. To what extent did Staden assimilate? Did Staden partake voluntarily, or was he forced to participate in the tribe's activities? Did he participate in the cannibal rituals? In telling this story, Pereira remains, for the most part, faithful to Staden's text. Yet, because of this, the film begs for the excitement or the passion that a decisive interpretation would engender. What does the director want to say about Brazil? About captivity? Or even about Staden and history? These questions are not explored.

Nelson Perreira dos Santos's *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, on the other hand, is saturated with symbolism and political statements at every turn. In the early 1970s, when Pereira dos Santos crafted this film, he was as concerned with the present as he was with history. For dos Santos, working under the military dictatorship of the period, cinema represented an instrument of struggle in the attempt to transform Brazilian consciousness.

Like *Hans Staden*, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* chronicles the capture and assimilation of the protagonist, but it ends in his final consumption rather than his escape. While loosely basing his story on the life of the historical figure Hans Staden, dos Santos invents as his central character a French explorer (of the sort Staden pretended to be in his early encounters with the Tupinamba). Because he cannot prove that he is French, he is eventually devoured by the tribe.

Dos Santos adds plausible historical scenarios to this fictional tale to comment on war, violence, and the meaning of group fidelity. The Frenchman receives from his Tupinamba captors a wife, Sebiopepe, with whom he forms a special bond, and he eventually participates in many of the tribe's activities. As in the film *Hans Staden*, he shaves his head and sheds his clothes, eventually integrating himself into the tribe, although the desire for escape again remains a constant. The film comments on the changing relations between Europeans and natives, from the natives' fascination with small tools and trinkets to their desire for gunpowder. The Frenchman becomes important in securing the latter, which allows him eventually to gain respect from Cunhambebe, the leader of the tribe.

Although the Frenchman's desire to escape never fades, when he finally has the opportunity, he loses it by returning to take Sebiopepe with him. It is ironic that she is the person who explains to him how he will be killed and eaten by the tribe. Indeed, the film ends with this ritual, followed by an ambiguous dream-like shot of Sebiopepe devouring her husband's flesh.

As a member of the politically committed *cinema novo* movement, dos Santos utilizes a number of techniques to inform and question the viewer. In addition to employing a documentary-like quality, he interjects narrated voice-overs and quotes from various sixteenth-century texts, including Staden's, underscoring the death and destruction caused by war and inhumane practices. Yet at the center of the film is a native group that practices cannibalism, creating, at the very least, ambiguity. This is not an anthropologic study of Tupi, but Dos Santos contextualizes the cannibalism while exploring the savagery of rival European groups who were competing for souls and riches of Brazil in the sixteenth century.

The director is also interested in perception and how truth about history is revealed. In the very first scene, the narrator promises the "latest news from Terra Firme" (South America). Thus, from the film's opening scene, the director dialogues with the audiences of the 1970s. Moreover, as this scene progresses, the viewer quickly realizes the contradiction between what is said in the official letter being read and the images that supposedly document what is actually is transpiring.

Viewers of this film also experience the events with a certain aloofness, and there is a distinct farce-like quality (as evident in the title). As in *Hans Staden*, this prevents viewers from developing empathy for any of the characters. Many of the actors representing natives are also painted. Despite these complexities, we understand the film's broader message. *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* constitutes a provocative, however symbolic, recreation of sixteenth-century Brazil, but it is also a powerful document of the *cinema novo* at a time when Brazilian authorities routinely censored films.

Both *Hans Staden* and *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* provide rich visual reconstructions of colonial Brazilian history and comment on the multilayered meaning of native practices of cannibalism. The former remains more faithful to the historical texts creating a linear, traditional account. The latter distorts history while challenging viewers to broader discussions.

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THE TRENCH. Produced by Steven Clark Hall; written and directed by William Boyd. 1999; 98 minutes; color. Great Britain. Distributed by Somme Productions.

In 1916, a British filmmaker named Geoffrey Mallins made and released a one-hour film of life in the British trenches entitled *The Battle of the Somme*. It captured the imagination of the British public at the time with a host of memorable images, the most enduringly famous of which—the back view of a line of British soldiers advancing through barbed wire and into mist—Mallins famously staged behind the lines.

Of all the filmic interpretations of World War I, it is Mallins's film which is most closely referenced in William Boyd's account of life in a British trench in the days leading up to that battle. A filmmaker identified as "Geoffrey" actually appears at one point to record the appearance of a colonel in the trench to illustrate the caption: "Senior Officer addresses the men on the eve of battle. Morale is high." More than this, Boyd's black-and-white opening shot of a single soldier advancing into close-up through mist seems like an alternate angle of Mallins's famous Somme shot, as if to say that his film will show the faces and the individuality of the men who are anonymous in earlier film. The intention of "fleshing out" archival images is reinforced by a credit sequence made up of photographs of the daily life in the trenches. The last of these dissolves into live action and color. The final advance in *The Trench* is also consistent with the Mallins's depiction of the event, although we are now privy to both the piercing green of the grass and the whistle of bullets as the line of troops moves forward.

Although making his directoral debut, novelist and screenwriter Boyd is no stranger to the representation of the Great War. His novel *An Ice Cream War* (1982) dramatized that conflict in Africa. Here, Boyd recreates the last days in the life of platoon of British fusiliers as they await slaughter on the first day of the Somme offensive (July 1, 1916). The film is made more poignant by the fact that the sergeant (Daniel Craig) and lieutenant (Julian Rhind-Tutt) have a fair idea of the fate that awaits them. The narrative follows an eighteen-year-old recruit, Billy McFarlane (Paul Nicholls) and freezes at the moment of death. Other characters include a braggart corporal and a tragically devoted batman, the latter of whom insists on following the lieutenant into action so that he can make him a "nice cup of tea" behind the German lines.

Boyd is unflinchingly realistic in imagining the conversation of these soldiers. They neither debate the causes of the war nor the merits or flaws of their superiors; rather, they pass around pornography, discuss the possibility of "love at first sight," and use the work "fuck" a lot. There is a matter-of-fact discussion of a comrade destroyed so thoroughly by a shell that his remains could fit in a sock. Some try to seem tougher than they really are, others to conceal their evident virginity. The banality of this dialogue is strangely moving. These are not war poets—just ordinary conscripts—but their humanity is as real as that expressed in one of Wilfred Owen's sonnets.

Boyd is emphatic that there is no poetry here. As if to define himself against the poet's war, his wan lieutenant opens a slim volume of Tennyson, but then tosses it aside in favor of a hip flask. There is no sweeping heroism here either; one character quotes ironically from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In this war, the men require first whisky and then a pistol point to encourage them into combat. One abuses a German prisoner; another clearly has sexual designs on young Billy. Boyd builds a picture of a war that is ninety-five