Introduction: Is the Past a Foreign Country?

Cinema is part of history, namely a discourse on the past. But what is the past? ‘The past is a foreign country’, is an answer which immediately appears in my head. These words, opening L. P. Hartley’s novel, *The Go-Between* (Hartley 1953: 9), were repeated or paraphrased by so many historians (see, for example, Lowenthal 1985, 2007; Judt 1992; Hobsbawm 1997; Fuchs and Cosgrove 2006) that they became a cliché. And yet, they require scrutiny, because they are ambiguous and therefore their meanings divide contemporary historians. Explaining their meanings will also allow me to locate my book within a number of debates concerning the status of history and its relation to cinema.

Past and present, history and memory

One way to approach this sentence is to treat it as a methodological directive. Some historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm, whom Alun Munslow describes as ‘reconstructionists’ and ‘constructionists’ (realist, empiricist, positivist) (Munslow 1997: 18–19 and 36–56; 2006: 216–18) regard it as a warning against projecting current ideas and views onto the past, for example attributing contemporary concepts of nations and states to ancient civilisations, as reflected, for example, in the recent dispute about the name of Macedonia (Hobsbawm 1997: 7). For Hobsbawm, past events, institutions, structures and people should be analysed in their original context, as elements of a complex web making up distant societies and cultures. Other historians, however, derive an opposite conclusion from the premise about the foreignness of the past: rather than trying to access the past ‘as it really was’, they postulate to treat the past as if it was similar to the present or even as if it was a version of the present, openly introducing current views and insights into their
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studies. For such historians, grouped together as postmodern or deconstructionist, many of them influenced by Jacques Derrida (1996) and Michel Foucault, especially Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) (whose work *Cahiers du cinéma* described as a systematic attempt to restore to light what lies forgotten in the black archives of the ruling class), there is no single, objective past, past which is not ‘historiographically uncontaminated’ (Munslow 1997: 25–6 and 57–75). Past, as we know it, is already a text, existing in relation to other texts. Consequently, there cannot be a single, objective history, there are only histories written according to different discursive regimes, in different, ultimately untranslatable languages, and competing for space on library shelves, in the university curricula and on the desks of film and television producers (Jenkins 1997; Munslow 1997). This is also a view to which I subscribe.

In historical practice or historiography, however, the difference between these two camps is not as radical as it appears. Historians from the first group frequently, albeit tacitly, judge past events using current political ideas and moral standards. This refers especially to the events which, if they happened today, would offend our sensibilities, such as slavery and acts of genocide. On the other hand, few deconstructionist historians try to construct discourses in the way which is radically different from those proposed by their colleagues belonging to the reconstructionist school. Equally, it often requires some effort to decide whether a given historical book is written from a reconstructionist or deconstructionist perspective, as the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘truth’ tend to appear in the same chapter.

Alongside those who occupy themselves with creating the best methods to discover or construct the ‘foreign land of the past’, we should mention those who maintain that the past ceased to be foreign or at least is no more foreign than the present. Fredric Jameson claims that in our times of consumer capitalism the present changes into the past so quickly that we lose a sense of both the past and the present, becoming schizophrenics, unable to differentiate between different moments of history and our own biography. The main responsibility for this situation lies with the media, especially film and television. As he puts it, ‘One is tempted to say that the very function of the media is to relegate such recent historical experiences [as the age of Nixon and Kennedy] as rapidly as possible into the past’ (Jameson 1985: 125). A similar argument is proposed by Pierre Nora, who begins his essay ‘Between Memory and History’ by saying ‘The acceleration of history … An increasingly slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear – these