

A special lecture for the students of the Department of History, DHWU was organized on “Film and History/History in Film”, delivered by Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor of History, West Bengal State University, Barasat, 24 Parganas (North), West Bengal, which was held on 3rd September, 2019.



This lecture titled “*Film and History/History in Film*”, delivered by Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor of History, West Bengal State University, Barasat, 24 Parganas (North), West Bengal was held on 3rd September, 2019. Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay began her lecture by mentioning an incident, i.e., “while watching D.W. Griffith’s classic *The Birth of the Nation* in 1915, the American president Woodrow Wilson, almost in amazement commented that ‘it was like history with lightning.’” She argued by citing other examples that it wasn’t only President Wilson, but other political leaders like, Lenin and Trotsky, or, much later, Goebbels, who sought to move people by recalling a useable past, were quick to realize how filmic medium could be used in narrating history. A number of genres including documentaries, historicals, and pageantry are thus made as popular forms of the representations of the past where the academic discipline of history often has the chance to meet with the popular notions of the past. For it, film became a device, through which incidents from reality could be re-visioned through moving images, as happened in newsreels or in documentaries, or, an impression of a real incident that happened in the past could be recreated, as it is done in historical feature films.



Dr. Mukhopadhyay thinks that despite this legacy of representing history on celluloid, it is only in recent times historians from academia have taken this narrative seriously. Perhaps the resurgence of historicals since the 1980s in Hollywood compelled historians to discuss the cinematic use of history in proper historical journals. Technological breakthroughs in communication and media at the turn of the 21st century further shortened the gap between the classroom teaching of history and film theatres. Indeed, using DVDs and video CDs of historical films and documentaries as visual aids became an accepted method to popularise the discipline. She pointed out that this is perhaps an interesting time that historian Robert Rosenstone has termed as the ‘post-literate age’, when despite literacy, people choose to learn from images, often moving images, which also enhanced the position of the cinematic narrative of the past in teaching history.



She stated that for a long time, professional historians have doubted the authenticity of the cinematic narrative of the past. They often accuse cinematic narratives of a distorted representation of history, where a romantic, fictionalized narrative is presented to allure the maximum numbers to produce commercial success. They have also objected to the evaluation of these representations at par with the written form of history as they indicated that, unlike the written scholarship, films don't reveal the sources or pieces of evidence and thus hinder the possibility of criticisms levelled against the narratives. Amongst these historians, however, a group has turned their attention towards films as a cultural artifact and explained their role in reflecting contemporary ideologies as mediated by 'the audience, money, and the state'. They argue that filmic representations thus constitute the images as 'crystals of time', where the present necessity of confronting the past articulates the representational process. So, these historians argue that the cinematic narrative of the past has a unique place in the public understanding of history. Politics behind the historical invocations guides the representations, whose conditions are much rooted in a wider socio-political and cultural matrix.

In her presentation, she presented in brief how film, as well as filmic narratives of the past, have been studied by historians. This study is crucial particularly in relation to history as a discipline, particularly when a shift can be located where the 'facticity' of history is gradually given away to the form of interpretive and analytical methods. She also demonstrated how film can be treated as a source, agent, and product of history. I would conclude by briefly discussing how this study is slowly taking shape in India. This exploration, I believe, is needed not only in the context of defining the relationship between film and history but also to assess the scope of history as a discipline in the future.

