If the Revolution Had Been Televised: The Productive Anachronisms of Peter Watkins’s *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*

Roxanne Panchasi

A critical analysis of the 1999 Peter Watkins film, *La Commune* (Paris, 1871), this article explores the politics of filmic reconstruction and reenactment as forms of historical representation. Situating the film in relationship to debates regarding the contemporary media’s versions of the past, the article argues that *La Commune*’s deliberate anachronisms are effective representational strategies rather than errors or shortcomings. In multiple ways, the film’s experiment works to interrogate assumptions about objectivity, authenticity and temporality that work to define History as a discipline.

Keywords: Peter Watkins; Anachronism; Reenactment; Authenticity; Paris; Commune; Film

The revolution will not be televised…
The revolution will be no re-run brothers;
The revolution will be live.

(Gil Scott Heron 1974)

In 1871, an uprising erupted in the city of Paris. In the wake of France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the government of the recently established French Third Republic attempted to disarm the capital. After months of living under Prussian siege, many Parisians, particularly the non-propertied and working classes, took a stand against the state’s capitulation to the enemy and its interference with the city’s defenses. Their resistance signaled a refusal of armistice terms that included the loss of
the northeastern French territories of Alsace and Lorraine, as well as the payment of war reparations. The rebellion also expressed a profound dissatisfaction with the existing social and economic order in France, a dissatisfaction intensified by the deprivations of wartime. Beginning in March, the ‘Communards’ of Paris formed their own, independent municipal government, one that ushered in radical social and economic changes. By the end of May 1871, just over two months after the revolution’s outbreak, French government troops defeated the Communards, killing between 25,000 and 30,000 people, arresting thousands of others, and sending many into exile (Rougerie 1995; Tombs 1999). Over the nine weeks that the revolution struggled to define and defend itself, two rival television stations broadcast live footage and commentary on the events of the Commune as they unfolded. Or did they?

Using the device of competing network coverage, British filmmaker Peter Watkins gathered together over two hundred participants in 1999 to reenact the Paris Commune of 1871 as if it were a ‘live-on-the-scene’ television event. In a creative experiment echoing the short-lived social democracy of the Paris Commune itself, Watkins’s cast and crew spent several weeks in an old factory space outside Paris, developing scenes and dialogue based on months of extensive historical research. La Commune (Paris, 1871) (1999), the film they produced, is almost six hours in length. It was and is a study in endurance, for the political and social revolution it attempts to restage on screen, for the participants who contributed their efforts to the project and for viewers who sign on for the experience.

Watkins’s film reconstructs the major events of the Paris Commune, dramatizing the revolution as it unfolded on the streets of the city, in cafés, homes and political meetings. Over the course of its six hours, the film depicts the vicissitudes of the Commune, from an initial stage of euphoria to the eventual triumph of French government forces over the revolutionary Communards. Early in the film, participants reenact the famous confrontation between Parisians and state soldiers who attempted to remove the canon protecting the capital. Journalists dressed in period clothing but equipped with microphones, and followed by video cameras, interview members of the crowd, recording the excitement of the revolution’s early days. In addition to revolutionaries eager to transform the social order, bourgeois witnesses also express their anxieties about the unrest in the city.

The camera is always on but the perspective it offers shifts from scene to scene. At certain moments, the images on screen are those supposedly broadcast by Télé Versailles Nationale (TVN), a network sympathetic to the government based in Versailles. TVN’s broadcasts appear throughout the
film in installments preceded by a typical newsflash jingle. The network’s anchor is a mustachioed caricature of an upper-class Frenchman whose disdain for and fear of the revolution is apparent throughout. In the film, the camera also follows Télévision Communale, a network funded by the Communards and supportive of their revolutionary cause. It is with this popular network that Watkins’s political sympathies clearly lie throughout the film. At the same time, the audience is given a sense of the challenges that arise for even this media organ ‘of the people’ in its attempt to represent the voices of ‘democracy’. As conflicts arise between the mass of the population and the Commune’s leadership, as well as among the political leaders themselves, the politics of the revolution have an impact on Commune TV’s freedom of access and expression. Finally, the camera in the film also tracks the progress of the reenactment itself, recording a ‘making of’ La Commune (the film) in 1999 at the same time as it reconstructs the Commune of 1871. This last angle on the action includes moments in which participants address the audience, and one another, directly. They do so as twentieth-century reenactors, politically engaged and self-conscious role-players in a reconstructive historical and film experiment.

The final scenes of the film dramatize the last stand of the Communards on the barricades and the execution of many of their numbers before firing squads of state soldiers. Standing against a production set wall, many of these figures declare ‘Vive la Commune!’ one last time as the camera moves in close-up past their exhausted faces. Soldiers cry out ‘Fire!’ and their fatal shots can be heard in the background. In the center of the room, a number of actors lie still, some piled on top of one another, playing dead. The faces and bodies of these participants represent in these moments the thousands of Communards killed during this last semaine sanglante or ‘bloody week’ of the revolution. André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri’s famous 1871 photograph of several Communards lying in their coffins appears on screen, confirming the scene’s reference to actual historical events.

La Commune engages past and present possibilities for radical social change through the processes and performance of historical reenactment. Reconstructing the 1871 Commune as a media extravaganza, the film is deliberately anachronistic in its incorporation of phenomena not indigenous to the historical moment it represents: video cameras, microphones and television sets. In its anachronism, the film is also an intriguing variation on ‘counterfactual’ or ‘alternate’ history, a form of speculative and imaginative thinking about the past that historians have considered more closely in the last decade. Using television, a technology that did not exist in 1871, Watkins’s film also explores the past as it might have been.
Its historical interrogation is profoundly counterfactual: What if the revolution had been televised?

*La Commune* introduces more than just television technology as a twentieth-century element ‘out of time’ with 1871, however. Breaking up the historical narrative with contemporary perspectives and voices, the film places the events of 1871 in complicated dialogue with the urgent concerns of present-day France, a nation mired in the inequalities of global capitalism and domestic exclusions. Throughout the film, connections to more recent political and economic issues blur the distinction between where reenactment ends and where the lives of the film’s participants begin. In a number of scenes, actors in nineteenth-century costume move in and out of character, articulating their perspectives on contemporary politics and the role of the mass media in representing and shaping historic events. The characters on screen present a panorama of historical figures: Communards; members of the National Guard; state troops; the working-class and bourgeois men, women and children of nineteenth-century Paris. The individuals who play these roles in the film also represent a cross-section of the population of France today: women and men of all ages and classes; the employed and unemployed; actors and activists; citizens and *sans papiers* (individuals living in France literally ‘without papers’). Underlining the movement between past and present, intertitles citing statistics and commenting on a range of current issues, from globalization to gender inequality, appear throughout the film as transitions between scenes, interrupting and suspending the action at key moments.

In the past two decades, historians such as Robert Rosenstone, Robert Brent Toplin and Natalie Zemon Davis have called for the critical examination of how films and television work to represent historical subjects and events. Rosenstone, for example, argues that ‘the historical film is already a way of doing history, if by “doing history” we mean seriously attempting to make sense of the past’ (2004, p. 29). According to Toplin, rather than reading ‘film as a mirror that reflects the conscious and unconscious values of the producers and their audiences’ at different historical moments, some of the most exciting work in this area ‘analyz[es]...broad questions about film’s potential for interpreting history’ (1988, p. 1210). While feature and documentary films have been the focus of most studies in filmic history, the more unconventional techniques of filmmakers like Watkins have also received attention from these authors.

Defying some of the basic narrative conventions of both the dramatic feature and the traditional documentary, *La Commune* raises a unique set of issues about how screens—large and small—represent the past.
In a number of purposeful and provocative ways, the form and content of Watkins’s film confounds clear boundaries between screen and audience, actors and characters, fact and fiction, historical and contemporary worlds. In doing so, it suggests broader epistemological, professional, and political questions: What does it mean to reconstruct the past? What representational tools are appropriate to the task? How can we use history to understand, even change, the world around us?

Throughout his film career Peter Watkins has explored historical themes in light of contemporary concerns. Born in England in 1935, Watkins attended Christ’s College, Cambridge, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London before he turned to film. He spent some time working as an assistant producer in advertising. This experience probably played a role in his eventual disillusionment with the media and consumer society, a recurrent theme of his films. In the late 1950s Watkins began making experimental documentaries dealing with historical events and characters. The success of these films helped Watkins to find work at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1963. During this period, Watkins also worked with other British filmmakers such as Kevin Brownlow. One of Brownlow’s own films, It Happened Here (1965), engaged the counterfactual by staging a 1940 German invasion of Britain that never happened there. The film’s alternate history relied on techniques borrowed from BBC-style radio and film documentary (Murphy 1997; Tibbetts 2000).

In his BBC-produced films Culloden (1964) and The War Game (1965), Watkins used the trope of television reporting to interrogate both history and the media. In the former, television cameras present live coverage of the 1746 ‘Battle of Culloden’ between the English and the Scottish. Film analyst Paul Arthur notes that in this film, as in La Commune, Watkins employed the device of ‘roving-reporter interviews with frontline participants’, providing the audience with ‘gut-wrenching history lessons in class oppression, aristocratic stupidity, and the slippery slope from military retribution to genocide’ (2004, pp. 59–60). In The War Game, Watkins made use of television once again to stage the anticipated effects of a nuclear attack on Britain. Set in a not-so-distant future, the film exposed the British government’s lack of preparation, as well as its public underestimation of the human consequences of such an attack. The War Game ignited a great deal of controversy after its completion. While it won an Academy Award in 1967 for ‘Best Documentary’ (despite the fact that it was a work of fiction), the BBC banned the film in Britain judging it to be an ‘artistic failure’. A number of observers (including Watkins himself) have insisted that political rather than aesthetic concerns drove the ban. Indeed, correspondence between the British Home Office and the BBC regarding
the controversial and sensitive nature of the film began before the film’s production had even started (Gomez 1979; Murphy 1997; Cook and Murphy 2000; Arthur 2004).

In 1998 Watkins met Paul Saddoun, a French producer working with 13 Productions based in Marseille. Together they imagined that a film reenactment of the Paris Commune could serve as a powerful way to engage issues of exploitation and inequality in the contemporary world. They also regarded the project as an opportunity to help rectify a generalized occlusion of this complex, radical episode in French history. After more than a year of searching, they managed to obtain funding from only one French television network, La Sept/ARTE (a network known for its arts and alternative programming). In addition to La Sept/ARTE, the Musée d’Orsay in Paris pledged 300,000 French Francs in support of the film. The museum later screened the film in conjunction with two exhibits on the Commune of 1871: ‘La Commune photographiée’ and ‘Courbet et la Commune’ (Watkins; Bajac et al. 2000; Des Cars et al. 2000).

Over half of the film’s 200+ actors had no previous acting experience. Many of them came from activist communities and were drawn to the film by an interest in history and a commitment to social change. Watkins and his collaborators (including his son Patrick) contacted different organizations in France in order to recruit participants who were likely to feel sympathy for the characters they might play in the film. They also organized screenings of Culloden where audience members received questionnaires asking if they might be interested in being a part of a similar film experiment. At the same time, Watkins gathered participants to play the roles of state officials and bourgeois Parisians who might not be sympathetic to the idea of any working-class revolution, historical or contemporary. To this end Watkins placed ads in the more ‘conservative’ press, including publications such as the French daily Le Figaro (Bas 2000).

Watkins asked participants in the film to research their roles and to reflect on the ongoing significance of the Paris Commune for the contemporary world. Once shooting began, the actors did not deliver their lines in the film from scripts in a traditional sense. Instead, the production took the form of a collective creative effort at ‘non-hierarchical’ filmmaking. Actors playing similar parts gathered in groups to share their thoughts on the respective interests of, for example, working women or soldiers in the National Guard. While shooting scenes, participants discussed their ideas with Watkins and the rest of the crew, coming to decisions regarding the dialogue and the action as a group (Bas 2000). Glimpses of these exchanges appear in La Commune itself. In a number of scenes, actors involved in the production break out of character to refer
directly to their roles in the film and the choices they have made regarding their portrayal of particular figures in the Commune.4

*La Commune* has received limited public attention since its release in 1999. The film’s length has certainly played a role in narrowing possibilities for its distribution. Television networks have been reluctant to pick up such an unusually long work. While Watkins originally intended to make a two-hour film, he decided to extend the length of the film in order to show the collective, complex processes involved in the historical Commune of 1871, its reenactment and its production as a film. Violating the norms and forms of the mass media, the length of *La Commune* is indeed a key to its portrayal of the history of a popular political movement. Pushing the boundaries of contemporary media representation, the film depicts the exhaustion of the revolutionary hopes of the Communards, as well as the fatigue of the actors who play their roles on screen. The challenge the film poses to audience attention span (and even levels of physical comfort) is yet another layer of the film’s complex meditation on sustainability. Network representatives at *La Sept/ARTE* did not see matters this way. After Watkins presented them with his six-hour epic, they demanded changes to the film’s length and content. When Watkins refused to shorten the film, *La Sept/ARTE*’s programmers decided not to show it during primetime. In May 2000, the network aired the film late at night (from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.), limiting the number of viewers in France for this ‘premiere’ screening (Bouquet 2000).

Watkins regards this episode as yet another instance of political and aesthetic censorship of his work, not unlike the BBC’s negative response to *The War Game* decades ago. He further maintains that the fate of his film in France is specific evidence of the marginalization of the history of the Paris Commune since 1871 (Watkins). At one point in *La Commune*, an intertitle signals a dedication to those filmmakers prevented, for various reasons, from representing the Commune on screen. Another scene in the film also highlights the lack of in-depth discussion of the Paris Commune in the French school curriculum to the present day.5

Since 1999 the film’s participants, interested in continuing the work begun during shooting, have gone to great lengths to promote *La Commune* and to encourage its distribution. ‘Le Rebond pour *La Commune*,’ the association they founded, has worked to organize screenings and to distribute the film in France. *La Commune* has also enjoyed some success in small, art-house and festival circuits elsewhere in Europe and North America over the past few years. Released in New York in early 2003, *La Commune* became something of an avant-garde film phenomenon after its premiere. The film has appealed to people interested in the revolutionary
struggle of the Commune, as well as to fans of Watkins’s work and of
documentary and experimental film more generally. Reviewed in a number
of publications including the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice* and *Film
Comment*, the film has captured the attention of audiences inspired by its
political and aesthetic resistance (Arthur 2003; Hoberman 2003; Kehr
2003).

Watkins sees the lack of more mainstream enthusiasm for *La Commune* as a clear enforcement of the ‘Monoform’, a label he uses to refer to the aesthetic and formal normativity of most contemporary media. Reflecting on his film projects, Watkins has been particularly critical of what he refers to as the ‘MAVM’ (the mass audio-visual media). In his formulation, the seamless, escapist narratives of the MAVM encourage nothing but passivity in viewers, excluding ‘any reflective, questioning, complex, participatory
process within TV and the cinema’ (Watkins). In *The Universal Clock: The
Resistance of Peter Watkins* (2000), a National Film Board of Canada film, director Geoff Bowie highlights this critique of the contemporary media as a central aim of Watkins’s work. The ‘universal clock’ of the documentary’s title refers to the shortened hour and half-hour (52 and 22
minutes respectively) of television programming that major networks and producers insist upon in order to allow for commercial advertising and promotion time. Bowie uses footage from the making of *La Commune* to explore the politics of accepted standards for film and television programming on the global market. The length of *La Commune* and Watkins’s habitual defiance of industry norms and standards serve as focal points for Bowie’s critical expose of the world audiovisual trade.

Employing and satirizing contemporary media practices in its engage-
ment with the events of 1871, *La Commune* speaks to debates regarding the relationship between film and history. The fictionalization and hyper-
mediation of historical events in *La Commune* throws into exaggerated
relief the inevitable politics of cinematic versions of the past. Academic historians often respond to film and television histories by criticizing the media (especially in its popular forms) for adding to and subtracting from
the historical record in ways that simplify or even misrepresent the past. As Robert Brent Toplin has pointed out, this skepticism is often warranted as many scholars ‘have seen history compromised, stretched, abused, and fabricated’ (1988, p. 1210). Robert Rosenstone has responded to this complaint throughout his work on film and history, insisting that film is a
‘visual form of historical thinking that cannot be judged by the criteria we apply to what is produced on the page’. According to Rosenstone, film ‘exists in a separate realm, one which relates to, comments upon and often challenges the world of written history’ (2004, p. 29).
As a filmmaker, Watkins takes seriously the idea of a conversation between cinematic and written versions of the past. In the early stages of the *La Commune* project, he drew on the scholarly work of historians Alain Dalotel, Jacques Rougerie and Robert Tombs in his research into the events of 1871 (Marrec 2001, pp. 51–55). As noted above, historical research continued to play a significant role throughout the production for both crew and cast. Watkins’s frequent use of intertitles, a kind of recurrent visual footnoting, also frustrates any clear binary between the written and the visual representation of the past in the case of a film like *La Commune*. Finally the ‘truth’ value of the film relative to written historical accounts is more complex than any frame to text verification or comparison might allow. The film does fictionalize historical events to some extent, re-imagining the Commune in various ways. At the same time, its six-hour treatment of the Commune can hardly be charged with reducing the past to a ‘sound bite’. Watkins is clearly uninterested in compromising historical detail for the sake of entertainment, let alone marketability. His adjustments to the historical record are choices motivated by his political and aesthetic aims as a filmmaker rather than any hope of profit.

Other narrative and technical features of the film render it a departure from more conventional histories on screen. Throughout *La Commune*’s six hours, the scaffolding of the film production itself is never masked completely. While the film’s cast and crew transformed their set to give it some of the appearance of the 11th arrondissement of Paris in 1871, the trappings of the production site (booms, production staff, etc.) are never completely outside either the camera’s or the reenactment’s frame. Walled enclosures on the set separate private homes from public buildings, streets and squares, but the boundaries between these spaces remain fluid in the film. And the entire film is shot *indoors*, in black and white. There is nothing picturesque about *La Commune*’s simple props and minimalist décors. The setting is a political one and the space is cleared for the action that counts in Watkins’s cinematic world: the human exchanges between actors and characters as they engage with the past.

*La Commune* reconfigures the notion of the historical ‘event’. The production of the reenactment is as much a subject of the film as the events of 1871, the reenactment and the ‘original’ past the project stages coexisting and interacting as narrative worlds and dramatic incidents worth recording. The doubled nature of the ‘event’ is evident from the opening scene of the film. The camera first pans past members of the film crew towards a man and a woman in period dress, each holding a microphone. Gérard Watkins and Aurélia Petit each introduce themselves as actors before identifying the roles they play in the film: Télévision Communale reporters
Gérard Bourlet and Blanche Capellier. Both actors/characters comment on the challenges they faced throughout the production. Petit/Capellier notes that it ‘was not always easy to smile’ through some of the events that transpired during the filming, her composure apparently shaken by the violence of the revolution itself, as well as the experience of its dramatic reenactment. The camera then moves on, taking the viewer on a tour of the set as it appeared on the last day of shooting. Watkins/Bourlet and Petit/Capellier describe the action that has taken place in these rooms over the weeks previous to this scene. Everything the audience is about to see has already happened here. From this beginning that surveys both the Paris Commune’s and the film’s end, La Commune’s plot and characters are always multiple, disrupting for the viewer any linear understanding of past, present and future.

In this and a number of other scenes, La Commune’s actors address the audience directly as actors, refusing the conventions of more traditional film narratives in which a universe on screen is imagined as wholly separate from that of the audience. The film’s representation of history is complicated throughout by this serious play with both story and character. This ‘breaking of the diegetic frame’, the ‘world of the film’, is a technique Watkins shares with both avant-garde theatre and what film scholars refer to as ‘Third Cinema’. In its democratic approach to production ‘Third Cinema’ further departs from Hollywood norms and forms in its use of improvisation and vérité techniques in cinematography and editing. These are all strategies that Watkins has employed in a number of his projects including La Commune (Wayne 2002).

In his work on historical replicas, the restaging of famous historical battles and the impersonation of key historical figures, British historian Raphael Samuel emphasizes the imaginary engagement and the preservationist impulses that stand at the heart of these types of historical reincarnations and reconstructions (Samuel 1994). According to Samuel, these forms of ‘living history’ make a ‘fetish of authenticity’, of the accurate and exact restaging of the objects and events of the past (p. 191). While Samuel focuses on living history in the British context, observers of popular historical culture in the United States have identified the Civil War as the exemplary case of American ‘resurrectionism’ (the term is Samuel’s). According to Dennis Hall, a professor of English at the University of Louisville, the reenactors of ‘the Civil War industry’ in the US ‘simulate history for the love of authenticity as they understand it, for, if you will, the pleasures of the text as lived’ (Hall 1994, p. 8). Hall, like Samuel, underlines the ‘nostalgic impulse’ of living history reenactments as ‘an effort to discover or manufacture an ever-fixed mark’ (p. 9). Hall also draws
attention to the ‘farb’ (a short form for ‘Far be it from me to tell him he’s wrong’), a negative label applied to reenactors who fail to live up to accepted standards of accuracy in historical reconstruction. Following Hall, Randall Allred defines the ‘farb’ as follows:

A ‘farb’ is a reenactor who is not authentic: that is to say, there is something about his ‘impression’…that is not ‘period’: something too modern, and which would identify him as a twentieth-century man. It might be a polyester jacket, a plastic or patent leather bill on his forage cap, or even a model of a rifle that was not in military use during the Civil War—or even in use by the regiment which his outfit is supposed to impersonate. A farb’s error might be in wearing glasses with twentieth-century rims, in wearing a jacket of an 1848 pattern, in wearing suede hiking boots, or eating a hamburger in camp.

(Allred 1996, p. 2)

In service of a critique of the contemporary world and the limitations of the media that represent it, Watkins refuses ‘the fetish of authenticity’ quite willfully in the film. While it reenacts a now legendary and mythological revolutionary moment, *La Commune* is decidedly not a ‘Merchant Ivory’ or ‘period’ film. The framing of the Commune as a historic revolution now televised is, at its heart, an ‘inauthentic’ anachronism like those of the ‘farb’ cited above. Watkins and his collaborators never allow the audience (or themselves) to forget that this staging of nineteenth-century events also takes place in the twentieth century. *La Commune*’s historical reconstruction thus refuses the nostalgic fantasy of more traditional historical reenactments in which attention to the aesthetic details of the past—its costumes and props—creates the illusion of ‘stepping back in time’ (Samuel 1994, p. 173). The project as a whole rejects simplified distinctions between accurate and inaccurate, historical truth and falsity, past and present.

This rejection is particularly striking at certain moments in the film. For example, early in the action Télévision Communale reporters Capellier and Bourlet interview a number of Parisians in the street, soliciting their reactions to the events in the city. Speaking with bourgeois and working-class women, as well as soldiers and political representatives of the newly elected government of the Commune, Capellier and Bourlet also come across a fellow journalist, ‘Joachim Rivière’ of the newspaper ‘Le Père Duchène’. Approaching Rivière, Capellier asks: ‘So, you are fictional?’ Rivière responds, ‘Completely fictional. If I appear in this film, it is to testify to the importance of the written press during the Commune’. The journalists then address the audience, reassuring us that ‘Le Père Duchène’ did, in fact, exist in the period. At this point, a frame of inserted text points
out that ‘Le Père Duchêne’ was an important publication during the French Revolution of 1789, and again in the period of the Commune. Rather than quietly folding in a fictional character, Watkins chooses instead to highlight Rivière’s presence in the film, despite his absence from the historical record. The film acknowledges, even celebrates, this refusal of the conventional reenactor’s so-called authenticity. Here, meaningful reconstruction happens via an intentional and transparent engagement with the past located squarely in the present.

In Samuel’s formulation, ‘living history’ seeks ‘to animate what would otherwise be inert’ to ‘resurrect’ the past, rendering it ‘palpably visible and present’ (Samuel 1994, p. 172). He also notes:

‘Living history’ is offensive to the professional historian. It shows no respect for the integrity of either the historical record or the historical event. It plays snakes and ladders with the evidence, assembling its artifacts as though they were counters in a board game. It treats the past as though it was an immediately accessible present, a series of exhibits which can be seen and felt and touched. It blurs the distinction between fact and fiction.

(p. 197)6

Resisting the norms of reenactment as traditionally defined, La Commune nevertheless engages in a form of ‘living history’. The film does this by refusing uncomplicated notions of authenticity and accuracy as the goals of historical reenactment. As filmmaker Charles Tashiro has pointed out, ‘[p]eriod details in themselves offer no guarantee of energizing history, though they certainly can guarantee quaintness’ (2004, p. 40). Watkins’s filmic representation is a history that achieves more of what Tashiro labels the ‘poetic accuracy’ of a reenactment in which ‘the overall impression succeeds in creating another world inspired by a particular period, but not adhering strictly to it’ (p. 40). La Commune’s anachronisms and period ‘disappointments’ are not exactly what Tashiro has in mind in his discussion of production design in historical films, but his thoughts do provide useful terms for considering the question of accuracy more broadly in relationship to Watkins’s reenactment. In violating the letter of the law of what happened in 1871, La Commune seeks instead to conjure the spirit of the revolutionary engagement and politics of the Paris Commune. The film’s presentist and anachronistic strategies are essential to this engagement.

La Commune (Paris, 1871) represents the Paris Commune as a keystone in the political, economic and social history of France by representing it in the lights, camera and action of its meaning for contemporary
struggles—from class and racial division in modern-day France, to the injustices of a now-global capitalism. It is, at moments, an exhaustingly didactic film that pushes, without apology or pretense of objectivity, the political messages of anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism and radical democracy. Pulling 1999 into 1871 in order to revive 1871 for the end of the twentieth century, La Commune disappoints viewers who might be hoping for a reconstruction of past events untainted by present concerns (or at least the illusion of such purity). At the same time, the film does bring history ‘alive’ in the present by exploring the events of 1871 and interrogating the meanings of that history over one hundred years later. In fact, the film goes further than this. It does not so much resurrect the Paris Commune as it refutes the death of this historical, revolutionary moment to begin with. Rather than reviving a past seen as fixed or pure, the politics and method of this filmic reconstruction insist upon a past that is still very much present, in memories, legacies and possibilities for the future. Guilty of profound presentism, the film risks offending Samuel’s ‘professional historian’. If professional history is understood in opposition to the ‘treat[ment] of the past as though it was an immediately accessible present’ cited above, La Commune violates the codes and standards of a discipline thus defined. The film’s representation of history does more than just set up a conversation between past and present; it renders ‘palpably and visibly present’, to use Samuels’s terms, the politics of troubling these temporal categories.

In its presentation of an alternative model of historical authenticity—an authenticity understood in terms of the coexistence of the past with the present—La Commune expresses a political sentiment shared by others who continue to engage with the Commune today. In La Commune de Paris aujourd’hui, for example, French contributors from workers’ associations and unions, student and anti-racism groups, reflect on the meaning of the Commune at the end of the twentieth century (Zwirn 1999). One of the volume’s entries is by Claude Willard, President of the ‘Amis de la Commune de Paris’, a group dedicated to the promotion of public awareness and commemoration of the Paris Commune. Willard concludes his contribution with a section entitled: ‘La Commune n’est pas morte!’ (‘The Commune is not dead!’). In his final comments, he highlights the ongoing significance of the events of 1871 for the late-twentieth century in France and beyond:

The work of the Commune remains extraordinarily relevant today because, viscerally democratic, it formulated and attempted to resolve (in the terms of the day) problems that still plague us today…. If
History ever does repeat itself, a people without memory is a people without a future.

(Zwirn 1999, p. 15)

In the final scenes of *La Commune*, Versailles troops arrive in the capital and the Communards prepare for the violent conclusion of the revolution on the barricades. A reporter approaches a crowd of people gathered in the street. ‘Do you know what is happening in Paris right now?’, he asks. The responses that follow illustrate the complexity of the ‘now’ in the film. An older man responds first: ‘I was at the barricades in 1944 at the Liberation and I’m ready to go again for my children’s freedom!’ The confusion is powerful. Is this man ready to go again in 1871? In 1999? When? The reporter asks a number of the individuals gathered: ‘Would you have gone to the barricades in 1871?’ Most reply in the affirmative. Only one man responds with a clear ‘No. I wouldn’t have gone and I wouldn’t go today either’. Another actor/Communard from the crowd refers to the events of May 1968 in Paris, an upheaval in which he (the actor) participated. In this scene as throughout the film, the ‘today’ invoked by participants is multiple, unstable, heterogeneous. It includes a range of historical moments leading up to and including the moment of reenactment itself.

In 2003, French historian Victoria Thompson reviewed *La Commune* on ‘H-France’, an Internet listserv for scholars interested in French history and culture. Thompson’s review evaluates the film favorably, suggesting it might be very useful in the history classroom for teaching about the Paris Commune, comparative revolutions and modern France. She expresses slight hesitation about the use of television cameras to depict the history of 1871, a device that, as she puts it, ‘risks confusing some students’ (Thompson 2003). Having shown the film in two of my undergraduate courses in History, I can verify the confusion and frustration the film can produce in the classroom. While a few students responded with enthusiasm to the film’s unusual form and content, the majority of them reacted negatively to the film’s confusion of past and present. They generally dismissed the use of television to depict nineteenth-century events as irresponsible tampering with the realities of the past, a silly gimmick. For many students, *La Commune* violated their codes of accuracy and objectivity, of what historical reconstruction and representation should and should not do. Most of my students labeled *La Commune* ‘bad history’ because of the film’s anachronism and presentism. The film’s low production values seemed to lessen its credibility even further. Accustomed to more mainstream images of historical reconstruction, my students wanted more lavish sets and costumes. They wanted to be transported less
uncomfortably and more ‘authentically’—that is to say seamlessly—to 1871 without the interference of contemporary issues and politics. They wanted, perhaps, a film starring Gérard Depardieu, a French actor who has become, for many film viewers, the face of ‘historic’ France on screen.\textsuperscript{7} 

In addition to what \textit{La Commune} reveals about the process and dynamics of revolutionary politics, the confusion and frustration that the film risks producing is actually a crucial reason to expose students (and teachers) of history to it. Just as the actors who researched their own roles worked as historians investigating the past, so too do the reporters on screen echo the historian’s interrogation of historical sources and subjects. While the discontinuity of placing television cameras and microphones on the scene in 1871 might seem like a bizarre device that only a filmmaker has the ‘poetic license’ to use, it is not so radically different from a type of representational desire historians know quite well, the desire to ‘hear’ the ‘voices’ of the past. This is particularly true in the case of historians seeking to represent marginalized groups whose interests and stories may be silenced or obscured by primary documents and secondary historical narratives that record, and even celebrate, the experiences and perspectives of the powerful.

Some of the most interesting moments of the film are those scenes in which its actors, in nineteenth-century costume, take on current events and issues. In one scene, participants speak in French and Arabic, referring to an Algerian uprising that took place in 1871 and was, like the Commune, crushed violently by the French authorities. The discussion in this scene moves with subtlety from the events of 1871 to a broader conversation about the legacy of French colonialism in the twentieth century. The conversation then moves to the plight of immigrants living in France without legal status today. An intertitle appears to close the scene. It refers to an incident involving 350 of these \textit{sans papiers} who occupied a French church in 1996. At the request of Church authorities, French police forcibly removed these individuals, rejecting their appeals to the principle of sanctuary and underscoring their exclusion from the most basic rights of citizenship. Juxtaposing a description of this recent struggle alongside discussion of a nineteenth-century rebellion in Algeria, the film reminds viewers that the legacies of the French colonial empire continue in the form of the exploitation and maltreatment of immigrants and their French-born descendants, subjected to discriminatory and unjust policies in contemporary France.

In this scene and throughout, Watkins’s film \textit{reconstructs} the history of the Paris Commune as inextricable from the continuing struggle for social justice in France and throughout the world. The film’s engagement with
the historical past is intimately tied to a set of political demands of its contemporary players and viewers, demands that are made through the experience and process of reenactment. Throughout, *La Commune* encourages its actors and its audience to explore the relationship between historical forms of subordination and resistance and the varied fields of political struggle and possibility in a contemporary France understood in global terms.

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests provocatively that ‘E.H. Carr’s question “What is History?” needs to be asked again for our own times’ (Chakrabarty 2000). Chakrabarty interrogates historical narrative and thinking by examining the ways that European assumptions about time, agency, subjectivity and objectivity are written into the very study of history and its disciplinary imperatives. His analysis raises issues that are useful for considering the temporal and narrative complications of a film like *La Commune*. Chakrabarty argues that ‘our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us—ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents—as a relic of another time and place’ is a form of anachronism central to historical thinking (p. 238). This sense of a break between the present of historical analysis and the past under analysis ‘maintains a subject–object relationship between the historian and the evidence’ (p. 108). The insistence on a clear divide and difference between past and present is thus a device that enables historical thinking in the first place. What Chakrabarty suggests as a supplement to this historicizing of events and actors ‘from the past’ is the notion of the ‘subaltern past’, a way of engaging with historical actors and events ‘and of seeing [them] as contemporary with the present’ (p. 108).

In the case of the Paris Commune of 1871, rather than distancing ourselves from the events of the Commune and explaining or understanding these as separate from our own lives, the subaltern past is the one in which historical Communards operate as ‘figure[s] illuminating a life possibility for the present’ (p. 108). *La Commune* places the problem of historical temporality at the center of a filmic experiment, staging and recording what Chakrabarty refers to as ‘the plural ways of being that make up our own present’ (p. 108). Rather than asking what historical agents did ‘then’ and why, and stopping there, Watkins’s film forces its participants to ask, ‘Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present?’ (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 108). In scene after scene, *La Commune* treats this temporal problematic as a manifesto for historical reconstruction on screen. In this collision of worlds on and off screen, of political struggles past and present, the question posed by reporters at
the end of the film persists: ‘Would you have gone to the barricades in 1871?’

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Notes

[1] Engaging with the historical past as it was not, a counterfactual history might, for example, explore the consequences of an ‘Axis’ victory in the Second World War, extrapolating the postwar world that could have emerged had the historical record differed in this crucial way. The example I am thinking of here is Philip K. Dick’s 1962 novel *The Man in the High Castle*. Historian Niall Ferguson is perhaps the most well-known author to consider the relationship between counterfactuals or alternate histories and more conventional historical narratives (1997). Most recently, philosopher Martin Bunzl has raised the issue of counterfactuals and the logic of historical explanation (2004). Bunzl has participated in an online discussion of his work that can be viewed online at the following address: http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/109.3/bunzl.html

[2] Indeed a number of film and television productions have included the participation of professional historians as consultants behind the scenes and as ‘talking heads’ or experts interviewed on screen. Both Rosenstone (1988) and Davis (1983, 2000) have commented on their work with film and television, considering the translation of written histories into visual ones, as well as the impact the media have had on their own thinking about academic history.


[4] These exchanges are most apparent in Geoff Bowie’s *The Universal Clock: The Resistance of Peter Watkins* (2000), a documentary film that includes footage of the making of *La Commune*.

[5] *La Commune* has been the subject of one *Mémoire de maitrise* (thesis) in France by Sonia Marrec, a student of historian Pascal Dupuy working at the Université de Rouen (Marrec 2001). Marrec notes the importance of Watkins’s aesthetic and technical choices in his representation of history. Focusing on the film’s portrayal of women, she does not linger on these questions. She does, however, cite the film’s use of anachronism, intertitles and improvisation as strategies that
'illuminate the class conflicts of the past in light of the present and vice versa' (p. 10). I am grateful to David Shafer for drawing my attention to her work following my presentation of an earlier version of this article at the Western Society for French Historical Studies in Newport Beach, California in November 2003.

[6] In this passage, Samuel is describing a view held by a number of historians. While critical of ‘living history’, Samuel’s own historical work shows an appreciation for the mass appeal and accessibility of various forms of historical reconstruction and reenactment.

[7] Apart from his roles as Danton and Napoleon, Depardieu has become the filmic icon of period films based on the classics of French literature including the works of Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Emile Zola and Alexandre Dumas. He has also starred as the ancient Gaul ‘Obélix’ in filmed versions of the famous ‘Astérix and Obélix’ comic books by René Goscinny.

References


