



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire by Pennee Bender, Joshua Brown and Andreas Ades Vasquez: A World on Display: The St. Louis World's Fair of 1904 by Eric Breitbart and Mary Lance

Review by: John Drabble

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Oct., 1996, Vol. 101, No. 4 (Oct., 1996), pp. 1168-1171

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2169652

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



Oxford University Press and *American Historical Association* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Historical Review*

This content downloaded from
88.255.99.20 on Thu, 01 Oct 2020 10:51:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Yet the wars themselves (and their inevitability) are just as necessary as our heroes' escapes: for all their flirting with historical fact and fiction, *Pocahontas* and *The Scarlet Letter* ultimately tell a story about the origins of our late twentieth-century selves. Smith and Pocahontas, Dimmesdale and Prynne, are presented as our Adam and Eve, transcending a violent historical legacy of racism, patriarchy, and prudery to found our more enlightened age.

In 1564, John Hawkins added a "demi-Moor" to his coat of arms to celebrate his slave-trading voyages. Centuries later, his biographer dismissed any moral evaluation of Hawkins's actions with just four words: "different times, different opinions" (Gosse, *Hawkins*, 9). Even that casual nod to the pastness of the past is infinitely more sophisticated than the way these two films tackle history. Gosse sought to exonerate Hawkins by making the past seem inaccessibly foreign; the makers of these two films seek to exonerate us by making their heroes starkly modern. Locating the origins of contemporary American gender and race relations in seventeenth-century New England and Virginia is nothing new; it was already old when Alexis de Tocqueville did it in the 1830s. But films like *Pocahontas* and *The Scarlet Letter* are sobering reminders that the story is still up for grabs.

Jill Lepore *Boston University*

Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire. Produced by Pennee Bender, Joshua Brown, Andreas Ades Vasquez, and Stephen Briar for the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, the City University of New York; directed by Pennee Bender, Joshua Brown, and Andreas Ades Vasquez; written by Pennee Bender. 1995; color; 30 minutes. Video distributor: American Social History Project, Inc. (212) 966–4248.

A World on Display: The St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. Produced by Eric Breitbart and Mary Lance; written and directed by Eric Breitbart. 1994; color; 53 minutes. Video distributor: Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019 (800) 723–5552.

Since the early 1970s, encounters between anthropologists and historians have confirmed a common interest in the problem of the authority of the text. The linguistic turn in the philosophy of history and literary criticism has influenced debates about the possibilities and difficulties inherent in interpretive close readings of cultural practices and historical sources. Hayden White has argued that historical "facts" are a function of the meaning assigned to events, that the choice of story type and its imposition on events endows them with meaning. (He discusses this argument with reference to film in "The Modernist Event," in Vivian Sobchack, ed., *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* [New York, 1996], 17–38).

The documentaries under review provide an opportunity to confront official commemorations (efficacious narratives of progress) that shaped knowledge production a century ago. As politically engaged presentations, they also provoke analysis of their own impositions. The filmmakers treat similar subjects but use very different strategies and techniques to create a usable past. Alternative interpretations of the period are thus proposed and alternative meanings for the events constructed. The viewer is left with distinct historical memories.

Savage Acts decries "imperialism" as a phrase that, like "the city on a hill," "manifest destiny," and "the frontier," was used to celebrate a new phase of inevitable, righteous, and heroic expansionism. This linkage has been detailed by Western art historians, and historians of

This content downloaded from
88.255.99.20 on Thu, 01 Oct 2020 10:51:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

American foreign policy have also incorporated it. (See, for example, William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* [Washington, D.C., 1991]; Diane Shaver Clemens and Richard F. Allen, eds., *The Forging of America 1492–1904: A Cultural Diversity Reader* [New York, 1993]). *Savage Acts* declares that the acquisition of the Philippines was deemed necessary due to a need for markets in an industrializing economy at a time when the United States was threatened with social conflict. Imperialism was hence a solution to the closing of the frontier. Yet, because the only agent in this story is "the United States," this explanation is overly simplistic. Historians will demand a more detailed account of how particular economic interests (sugar and cotton producers or the National Association of Manufacturers) influenced foreign policy.

Subtle irony is communicated through quotations from the imperialist/anti-imperialist debate of the period: imperialists such as Theodore Roosevelt and Albert Beveridge linked the necessity of acquiring the Philippines to the glorious conquest of the North American continent. Anti-imperialists and Filipino nationalists, on the other hand, denied that the venture was in keeping with America's revolutionary tradition as embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Thus the filmmakers have adopted the narrative of their villains but inverted their value judgments. The Filipino adoption of America's revolutionary ideals is celebrated, and the denial of American aid to Cuban revolutionaries in 1896 is reproved.

Although I share these sentiments, there is a significant misrepresentation of the American Federation of Labor's anti-imperialism. It was, after all, informed by a racist, gendered version of class solidarity: Asiatic "coolies" threatened to undermine wages and hence the ability of American workers to keep white women from the "enslavement" of prostitution. Historians should certainly celebrate the nineteenth-century labor movement but not uncritically. An opportunity to discuss the construction of "whiteness" and masculinity in nineteenth-century culture and politics is thus ignored in favor of celebrating those who "built America." (Susan B. Anthony and William Jennings Bryan are quoted but not contextualized.)

This is unfortunate, because such a discussion would fit perfectly with a theme the filmmakers explicate particularly well. Reference is made to the anti-imperialist contention that the nation would be burdened with another "race problem." The institutionalization of Jim Crow and the pervasive lynching during this period is contextualized with the assertion by Frederick Douglass that America's only "race problem" was the moral failure of white Americans to live up to their own Constitution. This is in turn is related to letters from average soldiers likening the brutal counterinsurgency campaign in the Philippines to a "rabbit-shoot," congressional testimony on the use of water torture in Samar, the fascinating saga of black soldier David Fagan's defection to the Filipino nationalist cause, and editorials in black newspapers. That American insecurity was ameliorated and social unrest contained through discourses of racial hierarchy is the most compelling analysis provided in this film.

The world's fairs of the period are presented as attempts to ease social disruption: "The U.S. conquered distant lands, and at the same time, conquered doubts at home." The fairs provided a "new image suitable to the role of empire . . . , promoting industrialization and international trade and glorifying western culture" while depicting Filipinos as savages or children. Attention is paid to black and Native American demands to "publicize their accomplishments" and demonstrate their "advancement" in the main exhibition hall rather than the anthropological exhibits, effectively communicating the hegemony of the ideology of progress in American culture.

The narrative of *Savage Acts* is accomplished by the arrangement of an impressive compilation of primary documents, which provide a useful archive for the historian unfamiliar with the period. Primary quotations illustrate important linkages between the brutal repression of peoples of color both abroad and at home at the turn of the last century and the cooptation of a gullible public through spectacle. Most important, the protest of Filipinos is included, effectively forcing the viewer to reject the ideology that deemed them either vicious savages or "little brown brothers in need." Like other narrative documentaries, however, *Savage Acts* "compresses the past into a closed world" by presenting its texts as self-evidently illustrative of a single linear story with an uncomplicated interpretation. It elides complexities of motivation or

This content downloaded from
88.255.99.20 on Thu, 01 Oct 2020 10:51:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

causation; the narrator's trenchant tone "banishes subtlety" and thus tends to "suppress rather than raise questions." (Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* [Cambridge, Mass., 1995], 22, 11).

Many radical scholars committed to understanding, analyzing, and explicating the relations and structures of power in, through, and against which ordinary people live their lives are currently reconsidering the nature of the ethnographic and historical texts they create. This has stimulated critiques of literary devices and self-conscious examinations of their "embeddedness within the very structures and relations they attempt to understand" (William Roseberry, "The Unbearable Lightness of Anthropology," *Radical History Review* 65 [Spring 1996]: 6). Concurrently, historians interested in non-narrative forms of historical presentation have asserted film's potential for constructing postmodern visions of the past. The best of them, as Robert Rosenstone has pointed out, tell the past self-reflexively, in terms of what it means to the filmmaker historian. They personalize, emotionalize, and recount it from a multiplicity of viewpoints, showing not just what happened in the past but what it means to us (*Visions*, 61–64).

A World on Display questions the pretense that the screen can be an unmediated window onto the past. This film meditates on its own construction and raises questions about the evidence on which its knowledge of the past depends. The narrator deconstructs the anthropological gaze in the photography left over from the St. Louis World's Fair: photographers and anthropologists had their subjects pose for the camera, but they neglected to name individuals, choosing instead to present them as representative of racial "types." Entertainment entrepreneurs, ripping ritual out of cultural context for the sake of entertainment, went so far as to have Pueblo dwellers perform a Hopi snake dance since actual Hopi were not available.

Interviews with Americans who visited the St. Louis fair as children provide an opportunity for the viewer to confront the relationship between individual memories of these events and the "history" of them. Memory is called into question, as recollection is fused with its own contemporary interpretation by the subjects being interviewed; an implicit assertion is conveyed that the present is the site of past representation. The filmmaker, in an implicit rather than pedantic critique of the fair, refuses to create a hierarchy of his "texts." Thus one subject's memory of butterflies and boatloads of flowers, another's of the wonders of electricity, and a third's of dog-eating Igorots are given equal time. The obvious revulsion for Igorot diet that this last fairgoer continues to have is not condemned, forcing the viewer to acknowledge his or her own possible reactions under the circumstances.

Eschewing the exclusive use of omniscient narration, *A World on Display* combines these interviews with commentary from historians Robert Rydell, Niel Harris, and Zeyep Celik and anthropologist Ted S. Jojola. Rydell and Harris also avoid simple condemnations of historical actors, asking us to "imagine" what it would have been like to have been a fairgoer a century ago and encouraging multiple readings of the text. The academic experts are allowed sufficient time to develop complex readings of the 1904 fair: as a commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase centennial, a celebration of empire in the Pacific, an advertisement for American corporations and their technological prowess, boosterism for St. Louis in its competition with Chicago for control of the interior market, an indication of the process by which Americans were transformed from customers into consumers, and an anthropological spectacle narrating the civilizing process.

Rosenstone has observed that, in film, several things can occur simultaneously: image, sound, language, and text elements can both support and work against each other in order to render a realm of meaning (*Visions*, 15). When voiceover narration is used in *A World on Display*, it is not accompanied by music, allowing the viewer to concentrate on what is being said and not imposing an atmosphere. In one particularly interesting move, the editor uses the same recollection twice, once presenting the fairgoer in his living room, the second time presenting his recollection as a voiceover to photographs that were deconstructed earlier in the film. This simple yet effective device lays bare the means by which a filmmaker can impose readings of historical texts.

Visuals can also impose meaning on their own: a zoom-in to the eyes of a Filipino woman in a photograph from the fair forces the viewer to confront her gaze, which seems to this viewer to be one of both sadness and condemnation. Quotations from Geronimo's diary relating his experience of the fair provide a hint of how the people on display felt about it. Additional

This content downloaded from
88.255.99.20 on Thu, 01 Oct 2020 10:51:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

material of this type would have made the film even stronger, as ultimately it is by resurrecting and reconstructing the voice of "the other" that we may most effectively critique the excesses of imperialism, racism, and the anthropological gaze.

A World on Display is primarily about Western modes of representation, however; and, like the fair itself, it fuses entertainment and education. The entertained and educated viewer is compelled to examine his or her own education. Such examinations are especially important for historians if we want to maintain our status as mediators of past events. As 1998 approaches, interpretations of "democratic" or "progressive" imperialism and commemorations of the centennial of the war in the Philippines will probably be constructed with reference to debates that are again central to American concerns: trade policy, diplomacy, economic development, immigration, race, and cultural heterogeneity. These two films provide us with, on the one hand, a documentary archive of official responses to these questions a century ago and, on the other, a thoughtful investigation of how visual media have been, and might be, used as vehicles for thinking about our relationship to the past.

John Drabble *Koc University, Istanbul*

The Tuskegee Airmen. Produced by Bill Carraro; directed by Robert Markowitz; screenplay by Trey Ellis, Ron Hutchinson, and Paris Qualles. 1996; color; 110 minutes. Distributor: HBO Pictures.

In the last decade or so, World War II has passed from history into something like myth. The American public, most of whom were not even alive during that conflict, nonetheless have vivid images of Omaha Beach, Japanese kamikaze pilots, and General George "Blood-and-Guts" Patton, not to mention the bombing of Dresden, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the flight of the Enola Gay. Adding to the mythic quality of this conflict are the villains. Fifty years later, it is still rightly impossible for any reputable historian or filmmaker to say something good about the Nazis.

The Tuskegee Airmen, an HBO film treatment of the all-black combat fighter squadrons (the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302d, later grouped into the 332d fighter group) of the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II, taps into the war's mythic aura, with period music, aircraft, automobiles, steam trains, and official racism. The question such historically based films pose is how much "playing" with history should be accepted for dramatic effect, to make a tighter story line, or just to keep the interest of a general audience that wants lots of action against its Glenn Miller background.

Some such "playing," however, often results from the filmmakers' ignorance, and *The Tuskegee Airmen* is no exception. Throughout the film, the characters speak of the "Army Air Corps" well after that service had become the U.S. Army Air Forces in June 1942 and before the Tuskegee airmen entered combat. The film shows the first Tuskegee pilot being shot down over North Africa; he was actually lost over Italy. Indeed, although the bulk of the film's action takes place in North Africa, the majority of the real operations were from Italian bases.

The characters portrayed in *Tuskegee Airmen* also present some serious problems of stereotype. We see a raving racist major (Chris McDonald) welcoming the black rookie cadets: "This isn't your country. Your country has apes, gorillas, missionaries, and malaria." He continues to harass the cadets throughout their training. But he never existed. In reality, the racists at Tuskegee had to mute their feelings. Official policy was that the Tuskegee airmen were to receive training, treatment, and equipment identical to that of white cadets. This position was not only consonant with *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, it also protected the military; if the Tuskegee "experiment"

This content downloaded from
88.255.99.20 on Thu, 01 Oct 2020 10:51:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms