

## 6. On the Past Coming into Our View: January 23-25

A few weeks ago it occurred to me how much our relationship with the past has changed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to photography first, then by film, and more recently, by all the technological advances and refinements the digital revolution has made possible. Let me illustrate. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Napoleonic Wars were about a century in the past; virtually no one was still alive who had a direct, personal memory of them. However, they were very much a part of the consciousness of the general public in the West; they had not slipped into semi-oblivion or reduced to legend or near-legend. Masses of written contemporary records were available, ranging from the private and semi-private such as personal correspondence and journals (some of which had their eye on eventual publication) to the public such as official correspondence, reports (both military and civilian) and other documents usually held in government archives, as well as later composed memoirs and historiographies. Then there was the rich visual record consisting of paintings, prints, and drawings coming from all the countries drawn into the conflict. Fast forward to the American Civil War. Again, vast quantities of written records of all sorts of provenance, perhaps even more than of the Napoleonic Wars. But now also a new visual record: photography in all its awesome amplitude of visual accuracy and vividness, which engraved those terrible years and events onto the consciousness of the American people which the old written and artistic media could not have accomplished.

The newsreels of the First World War added a totally new visual experience of movement and momentum to our perception of war and thus leapt into the eye of the viewer. The much advanced film technology seen in the newsreels of WW II heightened the impact on the viewer's experience even more. I like to think that thanks at least in part to these technologies, we, standing now at a distance of three to four generations in time from these world-shaking events, are in an especially favoured position to take a good measure of them. Since WW II, technical progress has continued and even dramatically accelerated as film moved beyond the movie-house into television and, within the past few decades, into the digital age with the hundreds of millions (if not billions now) of home computers and internet phones, and the wholesale creation of so-called virtual realities. As I have made clear in the preceding two essays, I share some of Ellul's scepticism about the intrinsic benefits of all this progress, and I think that now, more than ever, it is necessary, for a while at least, to step outside this endless cascade of technical innovations and to take stock of what really matters for the good life, simply for the purpose of making a mindful use of what technology can best offer us.

The movies can also take us to the more distant past not recorded by photography and film. Here, of course, it must turn to fictionalization just as is done by historical novels; indeed, many such a movie is based on such a literary work. Already during the era of the silent film, there were numerous movies set in ancient civilizations, with a strong preference for the Greco-Roman world, often in combination with the story of the New Testament and Christianity. The supreme example is undoubtedly the 1925 movie *Ben Hur* based on the novel of the same title by Lewis Wallace. A few decades later, during the 50's and the first half of the 60's Hollywood turned out a spate of such

movies, which included the classic, indeed magnificent remake in 1959 of *Ben Hur*. In all these movies great liberties are taken with history, the least jarring ones, at least in my estimation as a classicist, in *Ben Hur*, *Spartacus*, and *Cleopatra*. The same liberty characterizes the more recent *Gladiator* (2000), although I must admit it is splendidly produced and the roles of the (fictional) general Maximus, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, and his son Commodus are memorably played.

Over the past dozen years, two notable film series made for cable television, *Rome* and *Spartacus*, have appeared, the former running for two and the last (and more recent) for four seasons. The story of *Rome* is set in Rome of the rapidly declining and spiralling out of control late Republic and pivots on the persons of Julius Caesar and Octavian (later Augustus). This portrayal of Rome on film is not perfect but it is certainly the best I have ever watched. The length of the series permits it to cover in depth and detail more than ten years of political intrigue and outright civil war, as no movie made for the cinema could be expected to accomplish. Its portrayal of all strata of Roman society, from slaves to consuls, is commendable for its realism. The meticulous attention to historical detail and accuracy makes it a pleasure for me, ever on the lookout for such fidelity or lack thereof, to watch. For instance, in virtually all movies set in the ancient world interiors are too brightly lit to be possible by oil lamps and candles, with well-concealed electric lights supplying the anachronistic brightness; there is none of this in *Rome*; this fact alone makes *Rome* the most realistic portrayal I have ever seen of what living must have been like in the (by our standards) dimly lit interiors. The *Spartacus* series is surfeited with graphic violence and sex—so much that often realism morphs into surrealism, with computerized outré special effects obviously intended to feed the appetites of many of today's viewers. However, the series is redeemed by its suspenseful and stirring portrayal, in its third and fourth seasons, of the actual slave-revolt itself; in this, I would say, it surpasses the *Spartacus* movie of decades earlier. Most touching, too, and in keeping with present-day more accepting attitudes, is the portrayal of a romantic relationship between a young and an older gladiator.

The Greek half of the Greco-Roman world has received less attention from Hollywood, and usually with very mixed results. The 1955 movie *Alexander the Great*, although it starred the redoubtable Richard Burton in the title role, was in one crucial aspect a travesty from both a historical and psychological point of view since it completely elided Alexander's homoeroticism and the erotic nature of his relationship with Hephaestion—very understandably, of course, in the sexually repressive 50's. The 2004 movie *Troy* also comes to mind in this respect; not only does it almost completely depart from Homer's *Iliad* (although, unlike a few of my Classics students at the time, I can be indulgent here because the ancient Greeks, too, toyed a great deal with the story of the Trojan War in their legends, art, and literature), but the erotic fire of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is completely kept out of sight just as in the 1955 *Alexander* movie. In contrast, the movie *Alexander* of the same year, directed by Oliver Stone, is completely forthright about Alexander's passionate friendship with Hephaestion, and in general it benefits greatly from having the highly respected classical scholar Robin Lane Fox as a historical consultant. It is most regrettable for this reason that the movie received a very lukewarm reception from the critics and did

not do well at the office-box. Among all the Hollywood movies inspired by the ancient Greek world, two from the 70's amply deserve special praise, namely *Iphigenia* and *The Trojan Women*, directed by Michael Cacoyannis, for they are beautifully produced and superbly acted; their gripping emotional impact is not surprising since they are adapted from two of Euripides' greatest tragedies, both of which draw on the legend of the Trojan War.

In closing, let me return to the more recent, non-fictionalized past. Photography opened up in the nineteenth century a radical new way of making a visual record of reality. Hitherto only the traditional visual arts of painting, drawing etc. had been the instruments with which to do so, and only a well-to-do person or family had the means to commission a painted portrait of themselves which had a good chance of standing the test of time over the centuries. By the end of the nineteenth century, easy-to-operate mass-produced cameras had become so affordable that photography became a truly democratic medium. A professional photographer might still be called for when a meticulously rendered formal portrait was called for but, but anyone with a cheap Kodak or the like was free to take as many snapshots as he or she pleased. This is also true of the photographic record of my own family over more than a century. I have in an album an obviously formal photo of my great-great-grandfather Bernard Verstraete, born in 1836, and his wife Jansje née Vach; I suspect it dates from around 1900. I prize equally a formal photo taken in 1945 of myself at the age of one (and very photogenic then with my blonde curls), my father Christiaan Verstraete, my grandfather Beert Verstraete, and my great-grandfather, Christiaan Verstraete Sr. I have in my photo collections a host of snapshots and the very occasional formal photo, all in black and white until the 70's, of family, friends, and myself, going back to the 1920's. The introduction of the digital camera did not change anything in this regard, although the photos are more likely now to remain digitalized and stored in my computer. Most of my family and friends are equipped now with internet phones, which also permits them to record live-videos. I have not gone as far (as yet?) and am not a habitual photographer; still, I hail the humble camera as one of the greatest inventions of all time.