



Nietzsche's Approach on History and The Great Gatsby's Historiographical Performance

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Abstract

For Nietzsche, history creates the dull illusion of past. The constructed nature of the historiography that narrates the past through the perspective of the present drains the vital energy of the past and transforms it into a carcass. For the cure, Nietzsche suggests incorporating the artistic approach into the practice of historiography. He explains that art has the opposite effect of history in terms of vitality. In his consideration, if history transforms into a pure piece of art than it would involve and be able to transmit the vital energy of past. The artistic approach to historiography would recreate the sensation of the past hence the representation would sustain the vital energy. Nietzsche's suggestion towards the artistic execution of historiography provides a fruitful field to discuss the historiographical performance of the diegetic historical film. Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby's* (2013) will be analyzed through in the presentation with such perspective.

Keywords: Nietzsche's Approach on History and The Great Gatsby's Historiographical Performance

Introduction

The Great Gatsby directed by Baz Luhrman in 2013, narrates Jay Gatsby's story that takes place in 1920's New York. The film represents the period of time through its cinematography and artistic design. Through this perspective the historical representation practiced in Luhrman's *Great Gatsby* could be discussed in the field of historiography.

In order to further my study on the historiography of *The Great Gatsby* first I will effort to interpret the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche in *On the Use and Abuse of History* (2010) (The book is first published in 1873). After I will analyze the historiographical performance of the film.

In *On the Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche addresses the meaning of history and its necessity for life. According to him, the knowledge of past would be a rewarding tool to generate prospects for the future activities and interpreting the present when approached with a hint of critical distance. In his words "History is necessary to the living man in three ways: in relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffer and his desire for deliverance" (Nietzsche, 2010; 5).

For these necessary utilities of history he signifies a distinguishing terminology as the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical history (ibid). The history in its monumental utilization refers to the knowledge of the past in use to set an example in front of mankind (ibid). When the guidance of some kind of wisdom is demanded and wouldn't be spotted among the contemporaries, the cognition of past would be useful as a monument to interpret the present. Nietzsche attributes the antiquarian cognition of history the approach to perceive the past, present and future as a coherent whole (ibid, 7). In this cognition, the knowledge of the past signifies the progress of mankind. History functions as a bridge between past, present and future highlighting the continuous progress in each of them.

On the other hand acknowledging the history as a fixed bulk of knowledge towards a past event accomodates the risk of restricting the perspective of oneself. In his expression this excessive appreciation and dependence to history would weaken the personality and destroys the vitality of the present. A critical perspective towards history would be the shield to prevent the man from the encapsulation of the discources that mould in history (ibid, 8). He signifies that looking at the knowledge of the past in a critical way would dismantle the constitution by putting a knife to its roots to reveal the components. The unhistorical perception that would be formed through the critical perspective for Nitzsche would best be balanced with the super-historical understanding to to constitute the dynamic relation towards the knowledge of the past (ibid, 29).

In his critical approach, Nietzsche discusses the key concepts of objectivity, narration and the historiographer's perspective in the practice of historiography. I will effort to explain Nietzsche's critical approach to history by interpreting them with E. H. Carr's ideas on historiography in his book *What is History?* (1990).

Nietzsche acknowledges the practice of historiography as the artistic composition of the past events (ibid, 15). Signifying the narration as the fundamental component of the historiography, he asserts that the history is the work of the dramatist that links the events in causality to form the coherent presentation of the past. The practice of historiography inevitably incorporates narration in order to express the knowledge of the past. Information or an idea as an abstract form cannot exist as pure substance and moreover transferred to the minds of others. The communication whether in verbal or written modes occurs through the expression of the sentiment of the idea. This depends on the selection and placement of the words and of course, on the utterance. Narration would then be defined as the process of selecting, ordering and accentuating the words in an order to transfer the meaning. Next thing about narration in historiography would be the attribution of causality in the order of events. Carr mentions that historians constantly endeavor to arrange the past experiences of human by attaching the cause-and-effect relationship to them (1990, p.88). Based on this idea, Carr defines history as a constitution composed of organizing the incidents of the past in an order that involves cause-and-effect relationship.

The practice of organizing the past through cause and effect relationship would inevitably involve the exclusion of some historical data that would become irrelevant in the narration. In the practice of historiography, Carr underlines the rejection of irrelevant data about past when composing a logical and rational historical document (ibid, 147). For Nietzsche this practice of selection corresponds to the annihilation of the vitality of the past (2010, 17). The judgment of the historiographer on which historical event to include and exclude damages the atmosphere of the past as a once dynamic field. Therefore any historiographical attempt would fail to express the whole meaning of the past even it is practiced with a pure heart. On the other hand, for Nietzsche any historiographical attempt that would struggle to avoid narration in terms selecting and marshaling the events in an order would lose its creative instinct to represent the past event. Consequently, history shall be understood as a narrative that is constructed through the perspective of the historiographer. Accordingly Nietzsche addresses his critical approach to the objectivity of the historiographer.

Nietzsche considers the conception of objectivity in historiography fundamentally problematic due to the process that flows from the present towards the past (ibid, 14). In the process of the formation of a historical document, the event belongs to the period of time it occurred but the action of documenting is practiced at present.

Therefore, the cognition and interpretation of that previous event is inevitably done through the eyes of the present. Carr explains the notion of the contemporary formation of history asserting that the past can only be viewed and comprehended through the eyes of the present (1990, 24). The eyes of the present refer to a cognition that is shaped through the tendencies of the present society. The perspective of the historiographer cannot be evaluated free from the society the historiographer belongs to. The social tendencies of the society would inevitably shape the cognition of the historiographer towards the past event. Carr claims that in order to understand the work of the historian, the place s/he stands and the root of that standpoint within the social environmental circumstances should be analyzed (ibid, 40). Therefore a historical fact could not be acknowledged as an objective and autonomous entity free from the interpretation of the historian and the interpretation of the historian is bound to the tendencies of her/his society.

For Nietzsche, history creates the dull illusion of past (2010, 17). The constructed nature of the historiography that narrates the past through the perspective of the present drains the vital energy of the past and transforms it into a carcass. For the cure, Nietzsche suggests incorporating the artistic approach into the practice of historiography. He explains that art has the opposite effect of history in terms of vitality. In his consideration, if history transforms into a pure piece of art than it would involve and be able to transmit the vital energy of past. The artistic approach to historiography would recreate the sensation of the past hence the representation would sustain the vital energy.

In my perspective, Nietzsche's suggestion towards the artistic execution of historiography provides a fruitful field to discuss the historiographical performance of the diegetic historical film. In the rest of the paper I will effort to explain the historiographical performance of the diegetic film in order to analyze *The Great Gatsby's* (2013) historiography towards the 1920's. The explanation towards the historiographical performance of the diegetic film grounds on the studies I practiced on the field for my MA thesis.

The historical representation in historical films would be included in historiography once the historiography is acknowledged as a constructed practice of historical representation. As I have discussed above, the historiographical practice is based on the selection and marshaling of historical facts towards the intended narration. Through this perspective the filmic representation of history would fit in the field of historiography. However I find it useful to place the separation between the diegetic

and non-diegetic practices grounding on the sensual experience the diegetic practices transmit.

As Hayden White suggested in *Metahistory* (1975), historiography is a narration that performs the representation of the past and if so, it may not be appropriate to limit the historiographical performance to written practices. In this respect, historiography comes to include other mediums that perform historical representation. Around this climate of comprehensiveness towards other mediums to perform historical representation, I distinguish the forms of the practice as diegetic and non-diegetic historical representations. I locate the distinctive point between the diegetic and non-diegetic representations of historiography, rather than to the medium referring to written or filmic practices. All historiographical practices are composed of narration and they include historical facts in their historical representations. However, the diegetic representation of history generates a sense similar to experience over the historical event the narration represents.

The diegesis in a narration is the sphere where all the events occur, it is the genuine world design generated for that narration. The diegesis possesses its own rational consistency within itself in means of building a sphere of actuality that the events occur according to the causality within the rules of diegetic gravity. The rational consistency of the events in the narration is bond to the diegetic gravity hence the plot is legitimized in its own space of actuality independent from the restrictions of reality.

The process of making sense out of a diegetic film is in the experiencing of it rather than in the watching. Film medium is acknowledged as a conductive device that transmits the discourse to the spectator by the Apparatus Theory grounding on the sensation it generates on the field of experience. The closural continuous narration, the identification and the inner coherence of the narration are the main elements of diegetic narration in film. Through these structures, the spectator attaches to the narration. The film makes sense through the attachment established with the inner structures of diegesis. The diegesis operates via its own gravitational rules and the comprehension depends on the acceptance of these rules. Therefore, the act of comprehending a film demands the shift in the base of plausibility according to the inner coherence of the diegesis.

When a historical event is represented through a diegetic structure, that event transports to an area that is free from the laws of historical accuracy. In spite of the fictive representation of the historical event, the plot establishes on the historical conscious via the comprehension of the historical event through the sense of

experience. Consequently the sense of experience that diegetic practices locate their process of comprehension differentiates the effect of diegetic practices of historiography from the rest. Diegetic historical films operate on the field of experience through the identification they form between the spectator and the narration.

The diegetic historical films reproduce the experience of the past and thus the audience experiences the sensuality of the past in the present. In *Persistence of History* Vivian Sobchack asserts that experiencing the past in the present through the diegetic historiographical practices transforms history into a phenomenon that happens at present (1996, 7). For Sobchack the historiographical performance of the diegetic practices abolishes the temporal space between the present and past by the sensual experience they transmit. This occasion creates a blur in the cognition of history by dragging the meaning to the field of simultaneity. In her expression "Today history seems to happen right now – is transmitted, reflected upon, shown play-by-play, taken up as the stuff of multiple stories and significance, given all sorts of 'coverage' in the temporal dimension of the present as we live it" (Sobchack, 1996; 5). The sense of experience generated for an historical event through the historiographical performance of the diegetic film transforms the perception of history to a sensation of the present. The conception of history mutates into a conception that is produced and described from the present, therefore the whole temporal sensation dims in a broad sense.

Through the discussions I tried to express about the historiography of the diegetic film, the historical representations practiced in Baz Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby's* could be acknowledge as a historiographical performance. Produced in 2013, the film is an adaptation from the novel with the same name written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925. The novel narrates a story that takes place at 1922, which is almost the same time period it is published. Luhrmann's filmic adaptation that is coherent with the novel on the other hand is practiced in 2013. The time difference between the creation of the original story and its filmic adaptation generates the necessary practice of historical representation at the first place.

The Great Gatsby narrates the dramatic love story of Jay Gatsby who is a rich young entrepreneur living in New York City in 1922. Accordingly the film performs the historical representation of New York City in 1920's as an urban space. As it is introduced in the opening sequence of the film, it is the time, which Wall Street reaches to the pick levels dazzling the society with the sparkling opportunities of the stock market. The crowded streets of the city darkened through the shade of the

skyscrapers represented in the film with Luhrmann's vivid cinematography and editing style. Another exquisite historical representation practiced by the film would be the portrayal of the entertainment culture of the period. The governmental banning on the alcohol production and distribution that forms the social practices of entertainment reflects on the representation of the public spaces as hidden clubs. The hedonistic lifestyle of the bourgeois society represented in the film through the various party sequences in detail.

In order to perform a more detailed study on the historiographical performance of the film I will focus on the sequence, which Gatsby and Nick goes for a lunch in the city. The sequence opens with the scene where Gatsby takes spins around Nick's house to invite him to a tour to the city with his brand new car. The art direction in broad could be acknowledged as the most powerful tool of filmic practice of historiography, which recreates the vital atmosphere of the past. The design towards the interior of the house from the plates that tremble with the vibration of the car engine to the architecture of the exterior express the 20's visually along with costume and props. Their road trip describes the urban settlement of the period signifying the texture of the roads and the road signs along with many more. The establishing shot of the road that reaches to the city with Gatsby's car on it through a bird's eye angle exhibits the gross crevasse between the residential and the industrial areas of the city. In this shot the medium specific visual narration gains prominence once again in terms of the representation of urban space. In the diegetic sphere of the film, we experience the sight of New York City as it was in 1920's through an extreme long shot. As the camera travels down to the level of the car, it introduces the audience to the chaotic settlement of the streets with the upper railroads where the trains pass by. Gatsby and Nick enter the local where they have lunch together from a barbershop. The entrance of the local is masked with a barbershop due to the alcohol ban practiced in the period. This portrayal is as an attempt towards the socio-political representation of the period. The wide shot of the local exhibits a dark crowded club covered with smoke from the cigarettes where the sweaty dancers perform a swing routine on the stage dressed in the stage fashion of the period. There they came across with the commissioner of the city dancing on a table with a few women who are just as tipsy as his. The corruption of that period that wraps around the city from the trade activities to the politics is represented in Nick and Gatsby's local scene.

Nietzsche's suggestion of practicing historiography with an artistic approach in order to maintain the vital energy of past seems to fit in place considering the film's

medium specific audio-visual capacities for historical representation. The Great Gatsby's filmic representation reproduces the atmosphere of 1920's in the most possible alive way. The historiographical performance of the film transmits the sensual experience of the period through the attachment bound with the diegesis. Nevertheless Sobchack's criticism on the diegetic representation that diminishes the temporal space sustains its validity. Through the diegetic historiography of the film, the audience experiences the sensuality of 1920's in the present that pastes the perception of the past into the field of the present smashing the temporal cognition.

On the other hand, I propose that the choice of songs in the soundtrack of The Great Gatsby may function as a distractive element to prevent the abolishment of the temporal space. The director Baz Luhrmann who also produces the soundtrack selects and brings together some of the most popular recent artists and their songs to compose the musical scores of the film. The songs in The Great Gatsby have an important role to express meaning as we often came across in Luhrmann's cinema (Strictly Ballroom (1992), Romeo & Juliet (1996), Moulin Rouge (2001)). Jay Z, Beyonce, Fergie, Lana Del Rey and Jack White perform the original songs in The Great Gatsby along with some other popular names. One of the leading songs in the soundtrack is the cover of Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* by Beyonce. Some of the songs are established in the film in its original composition while some others re-orchestrated to incorporate jazz or swing rhythms of the era.

I grasp a distraction in the transmission of the sensual experience of the period represented in the film constituted through the unquestionable recency of the popular songs. The utilization of the recent popular songs cracks the consistent structure of the diegesis that performs the historical representation. Through the distraction, the bond with the diegesis fractures along with the transmission of the sensual experience towards the past event. In my perception, the recent soundtrack could re-establish the temporal distance that dissolves during the sensual experience of the past in the present. In other words, the distractive effect of the soundtrack in The Greta Gatsby may pose a function to reveal the constructed nature of the historiography practiced in the film.

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