

Heston & the Historians

'Film Has Become Archival,' the Actor Says

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CHICAGO—Scholars from around the world congregated here over the weekend to debate the past and contemplate their future at the 106th annual meeting of the American Historical Association.

Actor Charlton Heston, a film historian of sorts, was the star Sunday night, appearing for a screening of his 1965 movie "The War Lord," a medieval tale of knights and feudalism. "History is not only the most important subject but the only subject," Heston said.

When asked about the treatment of history in film today, Heston said, "For better or worse, film has become archival." It's either in the hands of "propagandists" such as Oliver Stone, director of "JFK," or Kevin Costner, of "Robin Hood" fame, "a 20th-century environmentally conscious liberal" who "imposes 20th-century ethics on medieval settings," he said.

Why did he come? "I take members of your profession more seriously than you take members of mine," Heston said.

In his remarks to the gathering Saturday, William E. Leuchtenburg, outgoing president of the association, addressed the role historians should play in everyday life.

Leuchtenburg, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, placed himself firmly in the activist camp, advocating that professionals use their knowledge and perspective to help shape public policy.

History professors "do not have to remain behind campus walls," he argued, adding, however, that scholars should take care to avoid the pitfalls of hasty interpretation.

Leuchtenburg, true to his position, has played a vigorous role in contemporary issues, particularly the civil rights arena.

On the other side are those who believe that the role of the historian is pure research and scholarship.

As for the eruption of democracy and the death of the Soviet Union, Leuchtenburg expressed astonishment that the recent upheavals have had so little impact on the American intellectual community so far.

He says he believes that many intellectuals were caught off guard by events, that they felt some "comfort in the Cold War agenda."

More than 750 historians, including 47 from abroad, attended the gathering, which offered 140 sessions on subjects ranging from medieval film to Christopher Columbus, immigration and the Spanish conquests of Latin America.