

‘Grappling with the present by writing about the past’

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Abstract

The following paper addresses some of the primarily methodological and terminological questions that need to be considered before commencing an analysis of film from the viewpoint of film history. The issues that are discussed here include the definition of the genre and the (im)possibility of accuracy and authenticity in its depiction or rather interpretation of history. Finally, a more specific topic – national identity, the role of history in its construction and the suitability of film as the material for its analysis – is touched upon and considered in the light of the above-mentioned aspects of the genre.

Keywords: history, myth, national identity, historical film, film history

From the earliest days of their artistic practice, filmmakers have engaged in the centuries-old tradition of grappling with the present by writing about the past.

(Grindon 1)

1. Introduction

The media in general, and film in particular, represent a small sample of the cultural matrix in which, according to Edensor, national identity is redistributed and which also includes popular culture (2002). Edensor emphasises that while historically it was the codified body of what was recognised as high culture that was formulated in order to both represent and reinforce the sense of nationality, “once the nation is established as a common-sense entity,

under conditions of modernity, the mass media and the means to develop and transmit popular culture expands dramatically, and largely escapes the grip of the state, being transmitted through commercial and more informal networks” (4). Before commencing any study of national identity, it is useful to bear in mind Edensor’s claim that, as it is impossible to grasp all its aspects in their totality at once, it must be approached through concentrating on “a few selective, symbolic dimensions” to suit the purposes of those attempting to study national identity (5).

Rather than simply serving the commercial and entertainment purposes for which they are no doubt produced, “historical fiction films interpret and comment on significant past events, as do historians; this interpretive role places historical films in a context of historiography and enables them to have an impact on the public that often exceeds that of scholarship in range and influence” (Grindon 2). In this sense they, too, try to form, as Hobsbawm puts it, “continuity with a suitable historical past” (1).

Closely related to this concept is the creation and perpetuation of myths which, according to Smith’s (1999) proposed structure of national identity constituents, fall into the same category as historical memories. The word ‘myth’ has multiple meanings, ranging from magical narratives about gods and heroes to anything that is questionable, irrational and uncritically accepted. Manová, however, acknowledges the fact that official historiography as well as the myth are but two ways of remembering the past (10). In McCrone’s words, myth “is not to be taken as a history lesson in the sense that it is an accurate account of the past (although its authors clearly intend this to be the case). We might characterise it as ‘myth-history’ in the sense that it sets out to celebrate identity and associated values” (263–264) and the way in which they are experienced as a part of collective memory of a particular community.

In his book *Writing History in Film* (2006), Guynn addresses, among other issues, the role of historical cinema in “managing collective memory” (165), which he understands as “a kind of metaphor in which memory, the individual faculty for reviving images of things past, is extended to an abstract collectivity existing in historical time” (168). He agrees with historians who believe that “filmic representation has such power that it overwhelms other forms of recollection by imposing indelible images of the past on the public imagination” as a result of which “historical fictions . . . tend to replace the real documents of events in the public imagination” (165) or indeed real memories of those events¹. Historical films therefore both reflect the popular historical memory as well as modify it by creating and perpetuating certain conceptions about the past, which makes them relevant material for analysis as contemporary presentations of the past in general and of national histories and myths that take part in the construction of collective identities in particular.

2. Defining Historical Film

When trying to establish the criteria for the selection of films for such an analysis, one inevitably stumbles upon the problem of how to define the genre in question. There may even be certain doubts among scholars whether historical films constitute a separate genre at all. Quinn and Kingsley-Smith suggest that there might be more ways of understanding and applying the term ‘historical film’. The more general one is frequently used as “an umbrella term equally applicable to all films set in the near or distant past” (172). In

this sense, historical film could hardly be considered as a separate genre since, as Monk observes, "the many sub-categories implied by the shorthand 'British period screen fictions' are both extremely diverse and inclined to overlap and blur in ways which make a mockery of neat categorization" (176). These would include literary adaptations of contemporary works set in the past, films and television dramas depicting events set in a distant past or within living memory, portraying events and persons real or imaginary.

Some of the above-mentioned types of films belong to the genre of costume drama, defined by Hayward as "set in an historical period but do not, like historical films, purport to treat actual events. They refer in general terms to the time in history through the costumes which, by convention, should be in keeping with the time" (75). These are often referred to as period films; however, this term "can be used to refer to costume dramas and also to more contemporary times but where dress-codes and setting are clearly of another period" (75). The boundary between the two genres appears to be a very thin one, depending on the precise localisation of 'more contemporary times' on the time axis. Moreover, both a costume drama and a period film can at the same time be an adaptation of a literary work.

Clearly, there is more than one way of approaching historical film and defining it. It may be used by some as an umbrella term for any film set in the past, while others may adhere to a more limited definition, excluding the above-mentioned kinds of films. Still, a film set in the past and depicting a recognisable historical period and a real-life person or persons may at the same time be classified as comedy, drama and potentially any number of other film genres. In their analysis of Kenneth Brannagh's film *Henry V*, for example, Quinn and Kingsley-Smith show how a single film may, depending on the chosen point of view, be at the same time considered a historical film, a heritage film, or even a 'Shakespeare film', provided one agrees to recognise the latter as a separate category of films.

For the more specific use of the term, implying a film genre, a more specific set of criteria is necessary. According to Hayward, for example, the main attributes of a historical film appear to be the following: focus on a real, though at the same time highly fictionalised, person or event from the past; bringing out heroic qualities of the character or characters, emphasising their 'greatness'; preoccupation with national history aimed at the members of that particular nation whose history is depicted through the deeds of great men and women, striving to teach the indigenous audience about their collective past; the appearance of authenticity achieved by paying meticulous attention to details and providing the audience with the type of lavish visual spectacle expected of a historical film (Hayward 185).

Quinn and Kingsley Smith, similarly looking for a definition for the more narrow use of the term, include:

the presence of title cards and voiceovers which establish a historical context for the narrative; the tendency of characters to understand themselves as being 'in history'; the overt 'quotation' of historical sources; the recurrence of particular stars; an often 'theatrical' *mise-en-scène* entailing spectacular long-shots; episodic and strictly chronological narratives; a concern with the nation and national identity; a pronounced interest in royalty and government; and a mythic ritual propensity to explore questions of duty and sacrifice. (163)

It can be argued that while some films meet all the criteria, whether they can be considered historical in the narrow sense of the term may be disputable. A certain degree of invention is necessary for the sake of the plot and the narrative. Even in films depicting real life events and characters, there is, as Guynn says, “an alternation between the known events of history that serve to time the plot and the private lives of individuals, the ‘holes’ of history that the film maker fills up with documented dialogue, imagined events and inauthentic descriptive detail” (4). Popular Robin Hood films, for example, are usually set in a very specific historical era, with a number of well documented historical characters; however, the existence of Robin Hood himself is questionable at the very least. Considering the most recent take of his story – *Robin Hood* (2010) – even the actual historical events, such as those surrounding the signing of Magna Carta, sometimes take a rather unexpected turn.

On the other hand, in his study of *Master and Commander: Far Side of the World* (2003), Chapman considers this film, based on episodes from several of the popular series of novels by Patrick O’Brian, to be a historical film despite its entirely fictional story and characters since it is “intricately rooted in historical discourses” (“This Ship” 64). Film adaptations of literary works clearly cannot be safely boxed away as costume films, even more so since some of them can and do portray factual events and characters. *Becket* (1964), for example, is a highly regarded film, chiefly due to the outstanding performances of both the leading actors, narrating the well-known conflict between the King of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Yet vast majority of its dialogue is based directly on a play by Jean Anouilh, which inevitably involved considerable condensation of the story and its simplification, subject to the aspects the author wished to focus on.

In his work *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), Rosenstone argues for a broader recognition of film as a legitimate way of approaching history and, inevitably, also touches upon the definition of this genre. He too begins by dividing what he considers historical or history films from costume dramas, which, in his view, “use (and misuse) the past as a mere setting for tales of adventure and love” (12), citing *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Gladiator* (2000) as notable examples.

Unlike Hayward’s above-quoted definition, rather than simply using the past as a fancy background, Rosenstone applies somewhat stricter criteria, labelling as costume dramas even those films which feature actual historical events, but which fail to go beyond romance and adventure or to engage in historical discourse by “posing and attempting to answer the kinds of questions that for a long time have surrounded a given topic” (45). Rosenstone presents a view similar to Chapman’s, saying that even if a film is based heavily on fictional characters that are, however, set in specific historical circumstances, this might not be to the detriment of the film provided that the characters represent specific types of people or viewpoints – that is to say, help to visualise the situation and to address the pressing issues and questions related to the topic (Rosenstone 44).

3. Accuracy, Authenticity and Interpretation

Hayward’s above-mentioned definition of historical film is listed under the entry ‘historical films/reconstructions’. It is of course questionable whether the two terms mean the same thing, whether every film more or less meeting the criteria of being ‘historical’ can

also be considered a reconstruction, bearing in mind the whole spectrum ranging from attempted reconstructions of historical facts and events to films loosely based on these and making more use of artistic license. Hall claims that

within the sphere of historical reconstruction in the fiction film, it is necessary to distinguish between *accuracy* of detail and *authenticity* of impression. The latter is less a matter of strict fidelity to the recorded historical facts than of the achievement of dramatic verisimilitude – that is, a convincing illusion. This verisimilitude may depend upon one or more of the following: the fulfilment of viewers' expectations through adherence to established representational conventions; the reinvigoration of conventions which had appeared to be exhausted; or seeming to break through 'convention' to a more direct apprehension of (what we imagine to be) 'the truth', which may in itself lead to the establishment of a new set of conventions. (116)

Authenticity, or the appearance thereof, is one of the attributes of historical film as a genre as listed by Hayward. This authenticity is, in her words, the key term "at least in terms of the production practices" (185).

In her study of monarchy films, McKechnie points out the inappropriateness of criticising these historical films (and perhaps it is possible to generalise this statement to any historical films) for their inaccuracy and failure to strictly adhere to facts. "There can only ever be versions of history," she says: "the narrative has needs that hardly ever conform to historical developments; a history film tells us more about the time in which it was made than about the time in which it is set" (218). In the effort of the filmmakers and the expectation of the audiences to 'get the things right' on the screen, the visual aspect of the film takes a leading role, having to conform to the already established visual image the audience has of the period or the person in question, usually acquired from period portraits but also from other films (218).

Denning points out, when comparing several film portrayals of the same historical events, that "it was their purpose to be inaccurate. They could not say what they wanted to say without invention" (23), the intended message changing with different decades and now, it must be admitted, largely gone. "The images of mind of the millions who saw the film in its immediate cultural context are gone. Our own images are cluttered with sixty years of experience in-between" (34), he says about a film made in the 1930s and offering a different interpretation of an actual historical event than later renditions of the same topic.

It is therefore authenticity which is vital – not only to visualise the historical periods that none of the contemporary audience could ever have seen, but also to fit into the broader picture of the audience's expectations based on their previous encounters with such visualisations. In Grindon's words, however, the function of authenticity is often misunderstood as a reproduction of the past and becomes a standard by which the quality of a historical film is evaluated. He, by contrast, considers interpretation, rather than authenticity, crucial. "When art joins history and fiction, the play of interpretation becomes more expansive and explicit" (4). Central to this interpretation of history is the concept of historical cause – "the representation of the significant forces producing social change" (5).

Rosenstone, in his already quoted work that argues for the recognition of historical films as relevant material for academic study, states:

Dramatic films are not and will never be ‘accurate’ in the same way as books (claim to be), no matter how many academic consultants work on a project, and no matter how seriously their advice is taken. Like written histories, films are not mirrors that show some vanished reality, but constructions, works whose rules of engagement with the traces of the past are necessarily different from those of written history. How could they be the same (and who would want them to be?), since it is precisely the task of film to add movement, colour, sound and drama to the past? (37)

The director of a historical film, he emphasises, is bound by the demands and conventions of the medium of the film and of the genre and the dramatic form, which inevitably means “to go beyond ‘constituting’ facts out of traces of evidence found in books or archives and to begin inventing some of them” (38). From this point of view, historical authenticity appears to involve more than mere visual correspondence with period reality, this much being doubtless expected from costume films as well. It means engaging in ‘historical thinking’, that is “coming to grips with the issues from the past that trouble and challenge us in the present” (Rosenstone 162).

This task of making the past meaningful can be approached in three ways – by ‘visioning’ history, that is, making it come alive on screen; by ‘contesting’ history, which means providing “interpretations that run against traditional wisdom, to challenge generally accepted views of particular people, events, issues, or theme” (Rosenstone 118); and finally by ‘revising’ history, showing the past in new and unexpected ways, “towards the end of making the familiar unfamiliar and causing the audience to rethink what it thinks it already knows” (118). For the latter, Cartmell and Hunter come up with the term ‘retrovision’ to describe how some historical fiction, whether in film or literature, offers an interpretation of history that presents a counter myth to what has been officially accepted and in so doing, attempt to demythologise the past (1–2). Films can therefore reinforce already existing myths, contribute to the creation of new ones or offer a new way of seeing a myth long established in the historical memory of a community.

4. Analysing Historical Film

Several of the above-quoted scholars outline the debate which led to the present day scholarly study of film in general and historical film in particular, showing that in recent decades, historical cinema has been accepted as relevant material for historians. “In terms of popular presence also, the study of film is significant” (1), says Hughes-Warrington in the introduction to her work *History Goes to the Movies* (2007). Moreover, whether it is the actual footage of more recent events or filmic reconstructions of a more distant past, “we see image as history and recall history as image. Much of what we know of the past, in other words, we access through the vast archives of the cinema” (55).

As noted already, Rosenstone argues that it has been and still is necessary to consider historical films in other terms than the accuracy of all the facts they present. “Even those who do not accept the position that metaphor is central to historical understanding have come to realize that works of history cannot literally recreate the past but only enfold its trace into a verbal construction” (161). While Rosenstone defends the inevitable differences between the two modes of discourse, others focus on the similarities. Guynn, for

example, argues that “history – written or filmed – is narrative; therefore, there is a fundamental kinship between factual and fictional storytelling” (98), while for Barta, “there is no Great Net, representing a unified historical narrative, for historians in any medium. Our screening of the past, inseparable from our ways of apprehending the world, is scarcely less complex when we digitize it on the page” (3). Still, there are several ways of looking at film as a primary source of research.

According to some historians, as Guynn points out, “though a film cannot be an instrument for representing the past, it can, passively, bear material witness to the historical period in which it is produced, like any other sphere of the vast field of cultural production” (6). Others, on the other hand, do not think historical films are merely testimonies to the period of their production – even though, as suggested already, that can be and is a part of their message and an interesting source of information. Rosenstone believes that films should be perceived primarily “in terms of whether their overall portrait or vision has something meaningful and important to say about our past” (49). Film, Villarejo believes, “shapes history as much as it reflects it” (55), speaking not only about the most obvious example of propaganda films, but also about the much less direct and more subtle influence of commercial ones.

The attitudes of those engaged in the study of historical films therefore range from focusing on addressing their historical accuracy to the interpretation they offer and the possible motivation behind omissions or additions; from seeing the narratives of the past as ways of talking about the present to, again, analyses of forces behind historical events and contributions to the larger debate of historiography. Yet another issue at the heart of this debate is which films represent suitable material for such study.

From what has been said about Rosenstone’s approach to the genre of historical film and the criteria he applies, it seems that not all of the films commonly considered ‘historical’ would be fortunate enough to be recognised as such and not to fall within the category of costume drama. On the other hand, other scholars might have applied different criteria and found the films they chose to analyse equally relevant. Hughes-Warrington, for example, challenges the opinion that some films are more historical than others and concludes that “an expanded and more historical embedded notion of ‘history on film’ is needed” (28). Undoubtedly, both approaches are relevant, since the selection of films would, to a considerable degree, depend on the topic one wishes to analyse. One such topic frequently addressed is the presentation of national identity.

5. Historical Film and National Identity

One tends to assume, somewhat automatically, that a large number of historical films, if not the majority, deal with national history. Perhaps it is because we tend to think about history as the history of a particular nation, never simply as history as such. The way we are taught this subject at schools no doubt reinforces this perception, as we study ‘our’, ‘national’ history and then ‘European’ or perhaps ‘world’ history. What Smith refers to as ‘retrospective nationalism’ (*Cultural Foundations* 49), and our tendency to incorporate ethnic history in national history, also play a role. Whatever the event or person, they still form a part of some nation’s history; however, the debate and certain controversy surrounding this issue

within the area of film history and film studies addresses the legitimate question of whether it really is a relevant aspect to be studied in historical films.

Chapman sees historical films as closely tied to the issue of national identity, writing that

That the historical film should provoke such controversy suggests that there is more at stake here than just the issue of historical accuracy. The historical film raises questions such as whose history is being represented, by whom and for whom? The theme of identity is central to the genre: class, gender and specifically national identities are among its principal concerns. The historical film is not merely offering a representation of the past; in most instances it is offering a representation of a specifically national past. National histories are fiercely protected and contested. Nothing better illustrates this than the hysterical reaction in the British press to Hollywood films that distort the historical record of 'our finest hour'. (*Past and Present* 6)

Hughes-Warrington is of a different opinion than Chapman, pointing out that "the transnational dimensions of historical film production, promotion, reception and scholarship make them ill-suited to be lenses for national analysis" (10). The debate involves not only historical films as such, but also the broader issue of national cinema and whether such a concept can still be used or should ever have been used. Villarejo observes that "all national cinemas recycle, adapt, translate, and otherwise incorporate elements from other sources. To speak meaningfully about the history of film and the role cinema plays as and in history, we must nonetheless invoke places and people of the cinema in specific delineated ways" (80).

Films in general, including historical films, which are typically extremely costly co-produced projects, are often made by foreign personnel, written by foreign scriptwriters, feature foreign stars (which, as is a common source of criticism in cases of the portrayal of Scottish history, do not speak with the right accent), and typically aim at international audiences. Still, the historical events they depict naturally belong to what is perceived as national history of and by a certain group of people. Their perception of the film and its message therefore may be and often is different from that of 'the others' or even from what the filmmakers claim to have or not to have wanted to say, as Chapman's words about the perceived distortions of history confirm.

6. Conclusions

Bearing in mind these arguments, it is possible to draw several conclusions for the analysis of this theme in film. Whether small independent projects or major international ones, films can and do depict actual events that some nations consider not only a part of their history in its broadest sense but often also of national myth-history, which is an aspect that cannot be disregarded in this debate. Sometimes these portrayals are heavily fictionalised, while in other cases they adhere more strictly to facts and try to offer new perspectives in seeing and considering the events they portray.

Secondly, even those films that make use of elements of national myth-histories can either be produced primarily for the national audience without being distributed and promoted abroad – or if so, only in a very limited way; or they can be, as mentioned already,

international projects trying to attract an international audience. One might wonder about the reasons for their appeal to viewers worldwide, if the stories they present are clearly highly nationalised. The most likely answer would be that it is the romance and adventure that stands behind their success more than any other message they convey. After all, according to Grindon, generic features of historical film are romance and spectacle (15), or, more generally, drama and spectacle, negotiating and maintaining the balance between personal forces (represented by the former) and extrapersonal ones. Still, the fact that the outright nationalist message of many of these films does not seem to put off foreign audiences might also be attributed to the universal nature of Smith's elements of national mythology², easily recognisable by members of other nations, who might therefore find it easy to identify even with this aspect of the story.

The other side of the coin in this case is the audience, who, even though perhaps not 'domestic' in terms of the production of the film, nevertheless sees its national myth-history presented by someone else. It can be debated whether such representation has any value for them or must be discarded and heavily criticised, as Chapman has pointed out, as a Hollywood distortion. In other words, the question that needs to be asked is whether only the former type of films, the 'domestic' ones, can be deemed relevant material for the purposes of the analysis of visual presentation of identity.

In a volume devoted exclusively to the notion of national cinema, *Cinema and Nation* (2000), Higson names three ways of looking at the movement of films across national borders and its possible influence. First, it may cause anxiety about the effects of 'cultural imperialism' and the ultimate destruction of national cultures (62). When talking only about historical film, it might translate as fear of distortion of national history and a simplified, often stereotypical image of a nation that is presented not only to its own members, but also abroad. Second, positive effects of such films might be acknowledged, such as the potential expansion of understanding of genres and new inspiration (62). In the case of historical films, it is possible to appreciate their interest in events or persons so far neglected or forgotten by the general public, their contribution to historical discourse as explained by Rosenstone, or, as is frequently the case, their popularisation of a particular tourist destination. Finally, the third way of looking at the transnational movement of films is their interpretation by local audiences "according to an 'indigenous' frame of reference", their translation to local idioms (Higson 62).

Historical films, if attuned in their presentation of local myth-history to their popular resonance³, may be accepted by the locals as 'theirs'. After all, the most popular 'Scottish' film of all times by popular vote is *Braveheart* (Smith, C.), which McArthur understands as both a classical narrative film located in the "border country between history and myth" and "an event in Scottish culture" (167), the latter perspective moving away from the film itself and turning to its cultural impact. With both types of films, 'national' as well as 'international', it is, of course, necessary to bear in mind the diversity of each audience, which, just like the national community itself, does not respond to films in the same way, different notions and versions of national history being present and contested within each community.

Notes

¹ Thomson also talks about “constant negotiation between... private and public memory” (78). The reason for this lies in the desire of individuals to feel comfortable and accepted within the society and its public memory. This leads, as shown in his study of the creation and re-shaping of the Australian Anzac myth, not only to accepting the publicly mediated versions of distant historical events but, in case of the First World War veterans, to reconsidering their own memories. Thomson observes how the life stories as narrated by the veterans are reminiscent of film scripts, since the films depicting the events seen as the birth of the Australian nation became the major source of public memory and a model to internalize and to adjust to for the people whose authentic memories did not fit the picture.

² See Smith, A.D. (1999 and 2008).

³ Addressing the well-known thesis on the invented nature of many supposedly age-honoured national traditions, Smith (*Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 2009) believes that “cultural nationalists were intent on recreating vernacular culture and history that would meet the two basic criteria of historical plausibility and popular ‘resonance’” (71), which implies that a complete invention would have been useless. “The ‘inventions’ of modern nationalists must resonate with large numbers of the designated ‘co-nationals’, otherwise the project will fail to mobilize them for political action” (*Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 198).

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