

HISTORICAL FILM RECEPTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC FOCUS BEYOND
ENTERTAINMENT

by

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Drawing upon theories from folkloristics, history, and audience studies, this thesis analyzes historical films, their reception, and the importance of history and film in everyday life. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I demonstrate how a folkloric perspective may contribute to and strengthen the study of historical films by emphasizing the attributes of narrative and belief at the vernacular level of reception. With an ethnographic and qualitative focus on the informal, common, and everyday film viewing habits of specific individuals in relation to historical belief, this project provides

empirical evidence that is necessary for a more accurate understanding of the function and reception of historical films. This study also re-examines the formal aspects of historical films in relation to historical re-construction, the definition and categorization of such films, their reception, their function beyond entertainment, and the need for an integration of new research in both audience studies and folklore studies.

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For my sister Donna, simply the strongest person I know.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the media saturated culture of the United States, it is crucial to study the impact of historical films since such films have become a pervasive and influential medium for attaining historical knowledge and multicultural awareness. In addition to historical films, television programs including the various history channels, PBS specials, or even cable miniseries (e.g., *Band of Brothers*, *The Pacific*, *The Tudors*, *Rome*) are popular and appealing alternatives to the historical monograph. In recent years, scholarship has increased regarding historical films and their re-construction and representation of history. Leading this charge are a few academics, mostly historians, across disciplines who attempt to take such films as serious cultural artifacts, yet the examination of historical films is currently more of a pastime to history scholars than a field or subfield. The scholarship on historical films convolutes the genre with variously defined terms: cinematic history, historical films, docudramas, biopics, heritage films, epics, nationals. Although few historians acknowledge the function films may have for audiences beyond a level of *mere* entertainment, this is not the general view among scholars. Obscured by the common assumption that historical films are merely entertainment is the fact that historical films are a *type* of entertainment that attracts audiences through historical content and various elements of realism.

Most importantly, current scholarship rarely considers historical films' reception beyond textual analysis, popular reviews, or simple speculation. The research that does exist often states that historical films manipulate the facts, present stereotypes of past cultures, or serve as propaganda. Although films may clearly promote nationalistic agendas, propaganda, or misconstrued history, the current scholarship presumes the viewers' reception of these agendas without delving into the ability of audiences to accept, negotiate, or resist these presentations. Moreover, while some historians note the importance of audience reception studies, no method has been proposed to distinguish just how much impact historical films have on audiences' historical consciousness or to determine how individuals use such films to satisfy their historical or multicultural curiosity.

In this study I re-examine the formal aspects of historical films in relation to historical re-construction, the definition and categorization of such films, the reception of historical films, and their function beyond entertainment in order to expand our understanding of the reception and function of such films at the vernacular level. In contrast to the majority of scholarship on historical films noted above, I claim that historical films should be divided into four subgenres based on their use of fiction: 1) *historical entertainment* films (*A Knight's Tale* [2001], *Timeline* [2003]); 2) *period* films (*The Last Samurai* [2003], *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]); 3) *faction* films (*Gladiator* [2000], *The Patriot* [2000]); and 4) *biopic/eventpic* films (*Alexander* [2004], *Miracle* [2004]). By using these subgenres in conjunction with a framework I have developed for audience ethnography, it appears that representative audiences distinguish

between historical films' various uses of history. Not only are individuals aware of these various degrees of history, but more importantly, they seek out informative historical films for thoughts on temporality, causality, and multicultural awareness. This last fact introduces an overarching theme of this study and the overall connection between folklore studies and public/popular history: the meaning and uses of history in moving images at the vernacular level and the ways in which individuals seek informative materials through entertainment to fulfill what folklorist William Wilson might call one of humanity's "deeper necessities."¹

I use an interdisciplinary approach that clarifies and establishes how a folkloric perspective strengthens audience studies and the recent historiography surrounding historical films. A folkloric approach provides a humanistic and ethnographic perspective to audience studies, which often is dominated by somewhat abstract discourses of power, social struggles, resistance, economics, and dominant ideology. A folkloric perspective acknowledges and engages these concerns, yet it also emphasizes the everyday and informal contexts of public history and individuals' uses of history outside formal educational and political contexts. It complements social theories by examining what common, informal, and everyday phenomena mean to the *individuals* within a society. As a vernacular or "people's" perspective, a folkloric study documents those customs, beliefs, traditions, actions, and aesthetics that are *central* to individuals in their everyday lives; it depicts the experiences and opinions of representative audience members emically and ethically. This study investigates individuals naturally engaging

in the viewing of historical films within certain social settings, specifically the family and home, and analyzes the function and reception of these films at this vernacular level.

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the historical development of folklore studies in order to illustrate how the field can contribute to other disciplines. This opening chapter also covers current folklore research on film, new avenues within the field of folklore and film, and discusses how folklore studies of narrative and belief can complement studies of historical narrative reception.

The third chapter surveys the historiography of historical films as well as the relationship between public/popular history and a folkloric perspective. More specifically, Chapter 3 discusses the definition of historical films, the four subgenres I have identified (historical-entertainment, period, faction, biopic/eventpic), and the ways in which film re-constructs history. After having presented the attitudes surrounding historical films, their classification as a genre of film, their formal re-construction of history, and a guide for evaluating them based on their classification as one of the subgenres, the focus turns from the form of the medium and its message to the audience and reception.

Chapter 4 offers a framework for examining audiences' reception of historical films. In this chapter I give a brief overview of audience studies and note some relevant findings in order to formulate a model for the qualitative study of film audiences within the home. I begin with a survey of general theories of mass culture and then examine the recent ethnographic turn in audience studies, as well as the importance of realism to popular texts, generally, and historical films, specifically. This chapter concludes with a

discussion of my methodology and an introduction to my research participants. The representational audience that I am investigating is a small family that defines itself as a “movie family.”

The fifth chapter offers a cultural and topical discussion of my research findings. I explore the “movie culture” of this family to in order to demonstrate the impact that films can have both during and long after viewing events. This exploration includes the family member’s appropriation of film quotes for “quote challenges” and “quote speaking” and argues for the relevance of dyad theory to the social function and uses of film between individuals and within small groups. This chapter then focuses on an in depth assessment of this family’s reception and use of historical films. The viewers’ responses in this field study provide evidence for the continuing use and calibration of the four subgenres as tools for examining the reception and uses of historical films.

With the theoretical exploration of historical films, a guide for judging historical films, a sound methodology for performing fieldwork, and a discussion of the family’s general viewing habits, I conclude by providing a case study (Chapter 6) that examines and evaluates the film *The Last Samurai*, its use of history, and its reception by the research participants. This film was selected in part because each of the research participants owns the film, and also because a film covering Japan and its samurai during the 1870’s provides an intriguing case study due to the positioning, or lack thereof, of the historical topic in American culture and consciousness.

The frequency and success of historical films illustrates the importance of this study. Historian Robert Toplin notices that at least one film nominated for Best Picture

from 1986 to 2001 dealt with historical content; twelve times these films won Best Picture: *Platoon* (1986), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995), *The English Patient* (1996), *Titanic* (1997), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Gladiator* (2000), and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001).² Furthermore, in 1998 when *Shakespeare in Love* won best picture, the other four nominations for best picture were historically related pieces—*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Life Is Beautiful*, and *Elizabeth*.³ Further examinations of recent Academy Awards also show that recent nominations for Best Picture have not forgotten the historical film. History is a popular film genre.

In addition, outside of the academy and across the Atlantic, Scottish National Party Leader Alex Salmond MP gave an inspirational speech to commemorate the seven hundredth anniversary of the execution of Sir William Wallace. On August 23rd, 2005, he touted Mel Gibson's epic film *Braveheart* (1995) for its new inspirational and supporting role in Scottish nationalism, "When the film *Braveheart* was produced, ten years ago, most of the establishment were horrified but the film went on to triumph to popular and international acclaim—and the story of Wallace was restored to a new generation of Scots."⁴ *Braveheart* is not the cause of Scottish nationalism, but it has been appropriated by its proponents. Its influence can be found in an eclectic medium of articles, speeches, and everyday discussions of Scottish nationalism in the post-*Braveheart* world. *Braveheart* is an example of the power of historical films and is a paradigm that illuminates the possibility of broad public uses of historical cinema.

Historical film's production can also have an impact on a historian's understanding of the past. In his book titled, *The Making of Alexander* (2004), Oxford historian Robin Lane Fox outlines the production of *Alexander* (2004) along with his role in the complicated process of projecting history on the big screen. Fox served as the film's historical consultant. After several discussions over one of the drafts, director Oliver Stone asked Fox one of the most amazing things, "Can you send me some script for this? I'm open to any suggestions: you send them, I'll harvest anything we can use."⁵ Fox had gone from interviewed consultant and evening phone calls to writing script for the film.

The film profited from the role Fox was allowed to play in its creation, but more interesting is the fact that Fox himself profited from the overall experience of discussing history, writing history, and "speaking to history." For instance, after a discussion with Oliver Stone concerning how the ancient Greeks would curse, Fox stated, "How *did* Macedonians swear at each other?"⁶ He continued, "Quite often, Oliver brought out the gaps in my own hazy notions of 'daily life.'"⁷

One of the most intriguing experiences of Fox's role as historical aid occurred in a conversation with Alexander himself, actor Colin Farrell. One conversation covered the role of Homer and Achilles over Alexander's personality. Farrell stated, "If there had been no Achilles, he would still have behaved like Achilles. Macedonia formed him, not Homer..."⁸ Fox contemplated the conversation, "I began to feel I should have talked more to this film-Alexander before writing my history."⁹ Colin Farrell further pressed Fox's notion of Alexander, "Your book's not right, Robin. You argue that in fact,

Alexander was still surrounded by friends and drinking-companions and was not lonely at all. Believe me, you can be lonely, even with people around you....”¹⁰ Robin Fox entered the film world expecting to help depict Alexander, a man he thought he knew very well. However, through this experience, Fox expanded his own knowledge by questioning and strengthening his own understanding of Alexander. Overall, historical films may have an impact at the societal, professional, and everyday level.¹¹ This study focuses on the everyday uses of film, and the next chapter introduces folklore studies and its importance to this investigation.

Notes

¹ William Wilson, “The Deeper Necessity: Folklore and the Humanities,” *Journal of American Folklore* 101 (1998): 156-167.

² Robert Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2002), 6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Peter Murrell, “Wallace Commemoration,” Scottish Nationalist Party
http://www.snp.org/snpnews/2005/snp_press_release.2005-08-24.1451923475/view?searchterm=braveheart (accessed August 24, 2005).

⁵ Robin Lane Fox, *The Making of Alexander* (Oxford: R&L, 2004), 42.

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Colin Farrell quoted in Robin Lane Fox, *The Making of Alexander*, 55.

¹¹ For a broader discussion of historical films influence, see Robert Toplin, “Impact,” in *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2002), 178 – 196.

CHAPTER II

FOLKLORE AND FILM

Folkloristics: History, Reputation, Importance

As noted in the introduction, this study uses an interdisciplinary approach that clarifies how a folkloric perspective can strengthen and influence popular culture theory, audience studies, and the recent historiography surrounding historical films. In addition to presenting new data and a new perspective to audience ethnography and historiography, I discuss fields of research in audience studies that are often overlooked in the discipline of folklore itself. I start by briefly discussing folklore studies' historical conception and its reputation in order to both conceptualize folkloristics and discuss the benefits a folkloric perspective can bring to other disciplines.

Folklore studies' reputation as a discipline devoted to the study of marginal cultures or peoples as well as a survival discipline is pervasive in academia. It has even been named the "the champion of conservation" by some folklorists themselves.¹ This reputation is a result of the discipline's own social and historical development. Elliott Oring's survey of the origin and growth of folkloristics illustrates how concepts such as marginality, survival, and conservation still influence folklore studies' reputation within the academy.²

Orality and folktales are often a key element in the discussion and reputation of folklore studies. This is not surprising as the original poster boys for the field are Jacob

and Wilhelm Grimm for their early nineteenth century work *Kinder- und Hausmarchen*, also known as *Children's and Household Tales*. While the Grimm brothers hoped to keep German tradition alive, they influenced the idea of romantic nationalism for one's home country by collecting traditions among those believed to be the heart of their country, the peasantry. Among the significance of their original work, their characterization of folktales as artifacts with long histories and their desire to "save" these tales in order to document German nationality greatly influenced folklore studies' development. The Grimms and other early folklore collectors turned their focus partly toward "survivals" following Edward B. Tyler's notion of cultural evolution. Oring explains:

In 1846 William John Thoms proposed that these popular antiquities be described by the term 'Folk-Lore.' He modeled his suggested program for the study of folklore directly upon the work of the Grimms. Thus the term 'folklore' was defined to designate materials believed to survive primarily among the rural peasantry who reflected life in the distant past. Although the term "folklore" would be redefined and qualified many times over, *these associations would never be eradicated entirely* [emphasis added].³

Folklore was consistently tied to both the peasantry and popular antiquities until the first editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* (1888), William Wells Newell, coined a newer and seemingly more appropriate definition for folklore in the United States.⁴ This definition was based on one key element: oral tradition.

According to Oring, this new definition helped allow for the examination of the lore of the American people who, as new settlers, were lacking the ancient "survivals" normally found in the European peasantry. This new definition moved away from the romantic or cultural evolutionist focus on primitiveness and the ancient to a focus

concerned with “orality” (non writing) and “traditions” (generation to generation communication). This new definition expanded the boundary of “lore” to be studied to *anything* that could be passed down traditionally. Oring clarifies, “But the definition also contained within it the seeds for change—change in the kinds of forms that could be regarded as folklore as well as the kinds of questions that could be asked about them.”⁵ In time, folklore began to connote folk life and folk society as well. In Europe, “a tradition of peasant ethnography arose which was devoted to the study of the whole of peasant life.”⁶ With modernization and technological advances, folklore communities were seen as homogenous cultures living within and amongst these new, modern societies; in other words, folklore communities were examined as a new type of survival. With this new additional focus on homogenous groups within modern life, the concept of marginality can be added to the consistent elements of folklore’s reputation: survival, ancient, traditional, and oral.

While folklore studies’ status as marginal and conservative is colored by its social and historical development, contemporary folklorists tend to stress its ubiquitous and informal aspects. Oring writes, “[folklore] cannot be legislated, scripted, published, packaged, or marketed ... It must be touched and transformed by common experience—ordinary humans living their everyday lives.”⁷ Most importantly, a folkloric perspective, as a people’s perspective, covers those customs, beliefs, traditions, actions, and aesthetics that are *central* to individuals in their everyday lives. In “The End of Folklore: The 1998 Archer Taylor Memorial Lecture,” Barre Toelken discusses the popular reputation of folkloristics as the study of cultural loss and the dying traditions of marginal peoples;

however, he argues that folkloristics serves as the field which studies people and traditions *central* to living culture, not marginal to it. For example, contemporary folklore studies examine current issues that are clearly central to today's living cultures—including, but not limited to, children's folklore; contemporary jokes and argot; politics and social justice; health and medicine; modern subcultures; issues regarding homosexuality, gender, and identity; fan art; and even folklore and its expression on the internet.⁸ And this does not include the recent studies regarding the integration and confluence of folklore studies and popular culture that will be discussed in detail below.

It is important to understand how folklore concepts motivate the research and reputation of folklore studies. For Oring, folklore research generally contains a focus on two or more of the following concepts: communal, common, informal, marginal, personal, traditional, aesthetic, and ideological.⁹ I would add the idea of belief to the concepts listed by Oring. My study focuses on certain aspects of culture noted by Oring: the common, the informal, the personal, the ideological (beliefs), and the marginal. Let me clarify what I mean by "the marginal." I use the concept to refer to the extent that *historical film* audiences have yet to be examined by mainstream academics and that their viewing habits and expressive culture have been largely neglected. I am not saying that the watching of moving images is marginal or that studies covering audiences are marginal; if anything, moving images are central in some societies and there is clearly an abundance of audience studies covering various topics. Also, I use the concept of belief in this study because folklorists study the informal and personal beliefs of individuals or societies, such as religious beliefs. I focus on individual beliefs pertaining to history as

experienced through film watching. I agree with folklorist William Wilson when he states, “To ignore the present—to value the people still doing the old things over those doing the new—would be to deny the humanity of our contemporaries.”¹⁰ In other words, the new can become traditional or replace older traditions, and I partially explore how families and other small groups may have traditions that concern moving images in a key way.

Folklorists assert that their theories and research can aid in creating a more holistic view of societies and cultural expression by adding the perspective of the lived experiences of people. As Oring argues:

There are people, behaviors, and expressions that will not be examined, or even observed, by those who are focused on cultural commodification, computer-mediated communication, and transnational exchange. Cultural studies practitioners will never know what challenges these communities and their expressions raise to their own comfortable theorizing, unless there are folklorists to tell them.¹¹

Furthermore, when Oring writes, “[Folklore] materials are employed as critical counter-examples to grand and not-so-grand theories broadcast from disciplinary centers,” he is expressing the view that folkloric research and its perspective on the common, the everyday, and the informal both critiques unwise theory and makes wise theory wiser.¹² Because the study of folklore is based on fieldwork, interviews, and people’s perceptions, the data may at times seem trivial or like an attack against abstract theory. Oring makes a final note of the trivial or trivia that folklorists may be accused of studying, “Trivia originally meant the ‘joining of three roads’ (tri + via). It designated a crossroad, a public space of great importance—both feared and respected—by which all travelers must

eventually pass.”¹³ This study aims to meet at such a public space, where the roads of everyday experience, history, and moving images meet.

From Folklore in Film to Film as Folklore

Although most folklorists have focused their efforts primarily on ethnographic film, they do not necessarily treat fictional film as an object unworthy of study.¹⁴ In his article “Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television: A Necessary Critical Survey,” Michael Koven lists four ways folklorists have dealt with fictional film and folklore. First, folklorists have engaged in “motif-spotting” in television and film. Motif-spotting consists of looking for folklore portrayed in film as well as analyzing how film may change a particular form of folklore (e.g., Disney and its reproduction and commodification of the Cinderella tale). Second, folklorists are increasingly studying fan cultures through ethnography. Interestingly, in this article, the only folklorists Koven mentions that do fan ethnography in either film or television are Camille Bacon-Smith, who works on women, fan communities, and television, and James McClenon and Emily Edward, who work on succubus/incubus films and belief.¹⁵ The other scholars mentioned that deal with recent studies of fan ethnography in television are media scholar Henry Jenkins, sociologist John Tulloch, and anthropologist Elizabeth Bird. While these scholars take ethnographic approaches that are similar to folkloric approaches, their works listed by Koven are not folklore studies of popular film. Although folklorists are investigating fan cultures, little of this research appears to be currently published. Third, the technologies of film and video are not only disseminating folklore, but producing narratives about film and television production as well. For example, the production of

The Wizard of OZ (1939) spawned a legend that claims a munchkin who hanged him/herself could be seen in one of the movie's scenes. Lastly, folklorists are beginning to question the notion of films as "fixed" texts with the common release of Director's Cuts, Unedited Versions, Restored Versions, and the fact that various national film boards have different rating systems resulting in different filmic content.

While Koven states that folklorists would do well in advancing further into the domain of film and television studies, he believes these studies are "tangential and adjacent to the main tenants of folkloristics."¹⁶ Part of the reason for this "tangential and adjacent" feeling is the fact that the majority of folklorists' work on fictional film deals with textual analysis or "motif spotting," such as the edited volume *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture* and Koven's recent work *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends*.¹⁷

Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture, edited by Sharon R. Sherman and Mikel J. Koven, contains a collection of essays that investigate film's use of folkloric content in relation to mass-media dissemination and the creation of multiple variants. The essays are written by both film and folklore scholars, and the editors stress the need to motivate interdisciplinary scholarship between the two fields. The overall theme of the work investigates the *use* of folklore by film, or in other words, folklore *in* film. In the introduction, Koven and Sherman discuss the definition of such folklore in film as *filmic folklore*. With *filmic folklore* as the cornerstone of analysis, the essays then branch out and examine filmic folklore in comparison to non-filmic folklore.

Herein lies the issue that my study addresses. Although the essays in this important volume investigate the use of folklore *in* film, they do not investigate film *as* folklore. The very term *filmic folklore* stresses that folklore in film is not the same as folklore outside film. While this claim is true, it constrains the research agenda to folklore in film while not considering the folklore *around or inspired by* film, specifically viewing events and the expressive culture created and shared by viewers.

The comparison of *filmic folklore* to folklore around film is often asserted through a performance model, which focuses on storyteller, text, and audience interaction. The argument against film as folklore claims that since the film is not itself a living-breathing storyteller, there can be no folklore event. There are two key elements to this argument: first, the story is not being created in space and time, and second, there is no storyteller-audience interaction. Elizabeth Bird comments on cultural studies' recent discussion of audiences' roles in the production of mass media, "If audience members are seen as active in helping to shape the way popular culture is created, they become much more comparable with folk 'audiences'."¹⁸ Although Bird and others are stressing a closer examination of audiences in *comparison* to folk 'audiences', this comparison confines the inquiry to a performance paradigm, focused on audience-storyteller interaction. This approach fails to recognize that, although there is no storyteller-audience interaction, there is still *audience* interaction. The social situation surrounding the viewing event in regards to interpersonal relationships, the beliefs influenced by the viewing event, and later activities or memories motivated by the event, such as quoting films, can all be examined through a folkloric perspective. While Koven mentions folklorists are looking

into new folklore expressions created by the film industry, they have not published, to my knowledge, research on the expressions and beliefs created within natural viewing contexts.

In addition, while folklorists are beginning to investigate fan ethnography, the “fan” is an intense concept that often focuses on passionate viewers and does not represent the more casual media viewer. Though fan studies provide key insights into fan cultures and subcultures in terms of resistance, cultural appropriation, and participatory culture, lost in the emphasis on fan ethnography is casual viewer ethnography. To clarify, the family members that serve as the research participants for this study define their family as a “movie family” because movies are a central part of their family culture, not because they are intense fans (this will be explained in more detail in Chapter 5).

Folklorists can add a great deal to the study of fictional films if they move from the examination of folklore in film to an examination of film *as* folklore. Film *as* folklore is not the study of a film through textual analysis alone—like motif spotting or the study of *filmic folklore*—nor is it a study which emphasizes a comparison to traditional folklore performances. Film *as* folklore is a study that places film in its natural context of everyday life, while emphasizing the audience’s perspective in relation to belief, interpersonal relationships, community, creativity, or other folklore concepts. Film *as* folklore does not indicate that film *is* folklore but that it—as well as other media—motivates, inspires, and aids in producing human expression and belief.

Folklore: Narratives, Genre, Belief

Folkloristics brings more to the study of audiences and popular texts than a specific focus on everyday experiences and expressions. Most notably, folklore studies can offer key insights into narrative, genre, and belief. In his opening chapter of “Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory,” Stephen Benson investigates the history and seminal role of folktale theory in the development of narratology.¹⁹ Key to Benson’s study is the fact that an analysis of folk narratives serves as vital building blocks for the examination of other types of narratives. The related elements of popular narratives and folk narratives have been used to suppress the argument that popular narratives are standardized, formulaic, and cater to the lowest common denominator. Bird explains:

Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that analyzes all kinds of media in terms of their relationship to ritual, storytelling, and myth. If narrative is a central way that we organize experience, as scholars in many disciplines now agree, it makes little sense to argue for mutually exclusive types of narratives such as ‘folk’ or ‘popular’... Thus popular culture is popular because of its resonance, its appeal to an audience’s existing set of story conventions.²⁰

Narrative is a key way in which we produce meanings from facts; however, what exactly does narrative do to facts and what does the impact of real versus imaginary data have on meaning?

In his work *The Content of the Form*, historian Hayden White explores the effect of “narrativizing” historical facts into a story with a beginning, middle, and end. White discusses narrative as a “panglobal fact of culture” that translates “know into tell.” By looking at nonnarrative representations of historical reality, the annal and chronicle, White stresses that we begin to “catch a glimpse of the basis for the appeal of

narrativity.”²¹ Annals are simple lists that record historical facts in chronological order. The only consistent element to compare the data, or historical records, is time. What the annal lacks is a subject or theme by which one can order events and create deeper meanings. What the annal lacks, the chronicle possesses. Chronicles are similar to annals in that they present data in chronological order, but they are different in that they tie their data together by subjects or themes to create deeper meaning. However, White explains, “Moreover, the chronicle, like the annals but unlike the history, does not so much conclude as simply terminate; typically it lacks closure, that summing up of the ‘meaning’ of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from the well-made story.”²² Discussing the chronicle *History of France* by Richerus of Rhiem, White continues his argument stating the chronicle further “throws onto the reader the burden for retrospectively reflecting on the linkages between the beginning of the account and its ending.”²³ On the other hand, narrative itself shapes events in such a way as to produce reflection and meaning. By ordering events through narrating (relating), a statement with meaning is produced.

This “narrativising” of historical facts raises three key issues: our genuine interest in history, the effect of the real opposed to the imaginary, and the relationship between genre and historical plots. Referring to Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of history, White discusses the relation of historical facts, narrative, and plot. History, folk narratives, and literature’s ultimate referent is the human experience of time or ‘the structures of temporality.’²⁴ However, White notes, “Historical discourse is privileged instantiation of the human capacity to endow the experience of time with meaning, because the

immediate referent of this discourse is real, rather than imaginary, events.” Furthermore, while a novelist may use his or her imagination, “... the historian cannot, in this sense, invent the events of his stories; he must ‘find’ or ‘discover’ them. This is because historical events have already been ‘invented’ (in the sense of ‘created’) by past human agents who, by their actions, produced lives worthy of having stories told about them. This means that the intentionality informing human actions, as against mere motions, conduces to the creation of lives that have the coherency of emplotted stories.”²⁵ In other words, historical actions are and can be narrated (related) because these actions are performed by historical agents, agents with real intentions which produce real meanings. These agents’ actions produce meanings for both themselves and others interested in their history.

Additionally, it is sometimes argued that historians force historical plots and their meanings into genres, such as tragic, romantic, or ironic. However, this argument presumes that genres do not exist or cannot originate in reality. On the contrary, the original genres or motifs of storytelling originate from human experiences. White explains concisely, “By discerning the plots ‘preconfigured’ in historical actions by the agents that produced them and ‘configuring’ them as sequences of events having the coherency of stories with a beginning, middle, and end, historians make explicit the meaning implicit in historical events themselves.”²⁶ Moreover, we are linked to agents and events of the past due to our common heritage as humans linked by time. We can relate to the experiences and emotions of past agents as common experiences of humanity. This repetitive view of history is described by Ricoeur as “the retrieval of our

most basic potentialities inherited from our past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny.”²⁷ *History is humanity’s experience*. What brings us to history is the fact that we, like past agents, are also agents within history. History takes the shape of genres because life is genre; we live sad tales, heroic tales, and comedic tales.

By combining White’s depiction of historical narrative with the work of folklorists, such as William Bascom, we can better understand the reception of historical films with regards to belief and attraction. In his essay “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” Bascom differentiates myths, legends, and folktales from proverbs, riddles, ballads, poems, and other narratives due to their form as prose. Bascom further delineates the three prose narratives by examining the relationship between the formal attributes of the narratives and the believability of the narratives amongst a community; his definitions are worth quoting in their entirety:

Myths are prose narratives, which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.

Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction.

Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today.²⁸

Oring comments on these definitions claiming that “these terms do not refer to the *forms* of narrative as so much as the *attitudes* of the community towards them.”²⁹ Myths generally represent narratives focused on beings and the world as it was in the distant past. These narratives often result in the *explanation* for the way things are today and are often regarded as both sacred and true. Folktales represent narratives that burrow deepest into the realm of fiction and fantasy in order to focus on our dreams, desires, or fears.

Legends, on the other hand, represent narratives set in historical periods and often result in the questioning of their happening. While Bascom's definition above stresses that legends are regarded as true, Oring explains, "In a legend, the question of truth must be *entertained* even if that truth is ultimately rejected...The legend never asks for the suspension of disbelief. It is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation; consequently, the art of legendry engages the listener's sense of the possible."³⁰ In other words, legends postulate the possibility of an event. In addition, opposed to myths and folktales, the principal characters of legends are human characters opposed to non-human or imaginary characters.

The entertainment of truth, the lack of suspension of disbelief, and the worthiness of the deliberation of truth are all elements of a legend that can be said to be similar to the majority of historical films. With the exception of *historical-entertainment* films, which will be described in much greater detail below, the *period* film, the *faction* film, and the *bio/eventpic* film all entertain truth, promote belief, and are worthy of deliberating their truth value. Thus, it can be claimed that historical films may function as legends. Their characters are primarily human, they are often set in a remote or recent—opposed to mythical—time, and they all raise issues of believability. Lastly, Bascom explains that the formula based on belief should be relevant to the truth status of the narratives for the teller and audience, not the scholars own subjective notions of the narrative.

Overall, it stands that narrative is a central way to present facts and meaning. In fact, Bascom's third function of folklore stresses this point: often folklore is educational and serves pedagogical functions.³¹ For example, narratives are pedagogical in that they

provide knowledge about facts, behavior, or even societal norms. Here is a brief example of film serving a pedagogical function at the most basic level. While working in an office, I observed coworkers playing a game they call “word of the day.” In order to stump a fellow coworker, one worker used her Iphone to select the word of the day, which happened to be the word “basilisk.” One coworker shouted out she knew the answer. She explained herself to her bewildered coworkers, “See, Harry Potter is educational. You can’t tell me I don’t learn from watching movies!” In addition, this instance reminded me of a similar occurrence in my own life. I was in high school and my mother and I were watching Jeopardy. One of the answers begged the question, “Who is Bellerophon?” I happened to know that Bellerophon was the hero who killed the Chimera in Greek mythology. Ironically, I knew this answer because these were the names for the virus and anti-virus in the film *Mission Impossible: 2*. My mother expressed sure bewilderment on her face when I knew the answer, but once I explained I knew the answer from a film, it was as if order was reestablished.

Films can serve pedagogical functions beyond simple facts, and as historical films are narratives that present historical facts and meaning, they relate to Bascom’s third function of folklore as educational. Historical films *as* folklore function as pedagogical devices, and each of the four subgenres of historical films functions at a different pedagogical level. Historical films offer insights into people, materials, events, and customs of the past. However, how does the dynamic of truth and history change when a film is partially based on true data? If history is full of raw marks or traces of the real world, what happens when artificial data is added to a historical film? Is this history still

“true?” These questions will be addressed below in the section titled *Re-Constructing History*. But first, I will look at the attitudes and historiography surrounding historical film as well as its definition.

Notes

¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quoted in Elliott Oring, “Anti Anti-‘Folklore’,” in *Journal of American Folklore* 111 (1988): 331.

² Elliott Oring, “On the Concepts of Folklore,” in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, Ut: Utah State University Press, 1986), 1-22.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ For example, see Jay Mechling, “Children’s Folklore,” in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres* (Logan, Ut: Utah State University Press, 1986), 91-120; Willie Smyth, “Challenger Jokes and the Humor of Disaster,” *Western Folklore* 45 (1986): 243-260; Michael Owen Jones, “Creating and Using Argot at the Jayhawk Café: Communication, Ambience, and Identity,” in *Exploring Folk Art: Twenty Years of Thought on Craft, Work, and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, Mi: UMI Research, 1986), 109-117; Lisa Gilman, *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Diane E. Goldstein, *Once Upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004); Daniel Wojcik, *Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Joseph P. Goodwin, *More Man Than You’ll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Heather R. Joseph-Witham, *Star Trek Fans and Costume Art* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Trevor J. Blank, *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009).

⁹ Oring, “On the Concepts of Folklore,” 17-18.

¹⁰ Wilson, *The Deeper Necessity*, 164.

¹¹ Oring, “Anti Anti-‘Folklore’,” 335.

¹² *Ibid.*, 243.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁴ For an example of a folkloric perspective on ethnographic film, Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).
- ¹⁵ Michael J. Koven, "Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television: A Necessary Critical Survey," *Journal of American Folklore* 116, no. 460 (Spring 2003): 188.
- ¹⁶ Koven, "Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television," 176-195.
- ¹⁷ See, Michael Koven, *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008), and Sharon R. Sherman, and Mikel J. Koven, ed, *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007).
- ¹⁸ S. Elizabeth Bird, "Cultural Studies as Confluence: The Convergence of Folklore and Media Studies," in *Popular Culture Theory and Methodology*, ed. Harold E. Hinds (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1996), 347.
- ¹⁹ Stephen Benson, "Tales in Theory: The Role of the Folktale in the Development of Narratology," in *Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 17-41.
- ²⁰ Bird, "Cultural Studies as Confluence," 346. For discussions on the centrality of narrative, see Jay Mechling. "Homo Narrans across Disciplines," *Western Folklore* 50 (1991): 41-52, and Walter R. Fisher, "The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning," *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 74-89.
- ²¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 4.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 16.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172-173.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ²⁷ Paul Ricoeur in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, 52.
- ²⁸ William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," in *Contributions to Folkloristics* (Meerut, India: Folklore Institute: Archana Publications, 1981), 97-98.
- ²⁹ Elliott Oring, "Folk Narratives," in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, Ut: Utah State University Press, 1986), 124.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ³¹ William Bascom, "The Four Functions of Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 66, 266 (1954): 333-349.

CHAPTER III
HISTORICAL FILMS

From Historiography to Historiophoty

As noted in the introduction, historians are beginning to investigate the reconstruction of history in historical films. As part of a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the book *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* analyzes moving images as historical artifacts. The editor of the piece, John O’Conner, writes that the mission of the project is “for historians to learn to use film and television in critical ways, and to train future generations to view everything they see more critically, in light of traditional humanistic values.”¹ The project itself offers an overview of the ways in which historians use moving images as artifacts; it breaks the analysis of historical films into two stages—Stage One: Gathering Information on the Content, Production, and Reception of a Moving Image Document; and Stage Two: Four Frameworks for Historical Inquiry. The second stage’s four frameworks are entitled, The Moving Image as Evidence for Social and Cultural History, Actuality Footage as Evidence for Historical Fact, The History of the Moving Image as Industry and Art Form, and The Moving Image as Representation of History.

The Project looks briefly at audience reception and often discusses audiences in terms of the effects caused by moving images, and while historians are aware of the influence of cultural dispositions, such as race, class, sexuality, and politics on viewer

reception, O’Conner writes, “Yet, no certain way exists to measure the impact of even the most popular film on the people who saw it.”² Without a solid method for examining audience reception, scholarship on historical films produces general claims on reception or sometimes lacks any discussion of reception whatsoever.

While scholarship on historical films as artifacts has grown, there seems to be a gap between the belief in film’s power to influence individuals and the belief in a need to study this influence in terms of the audience. John O’Conner writes, “However unfortunate, it appears likely that even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television.”³ Meanwhile, Robert Rosenstone agrees that modern audiences often actually learn their history from moving images, “Today, the chief source of historical knowledge for the majority of the population—outside the *much-despised* textbook—must surely be the visual media ... Any reasonable extrapolation suggests that trend will continue.”⁴ Moving images have come to dominate the popular domain of history through television, documentaries, and film. It is not unreasonable to state that the average American citizen may not have the time or desire to read a textbook or historical monograph, and the two hour celluloid reality is a modern vehicle for entertainment and attaining historical knowledge. Toplin succinctly concludes, “For many Americans, and for people around the world, visions of the past emerge from scenes in Hollywood productions. When imagining conditions in ancient Rome, life in the American West, social relationships in the antebellum South, scenes from the royal court of England, or conditions at a World War II battlefield, individuals often conjure up images and words from the movies.”⁵

I agree with Toplin when he claims the influence and role of cinematic historians force us to look at their contributions and impacts on the attainment of historical knowledge, since “they are delivering abundant information to the public, and they often shape ideas as much or more than those who provide traditional education do. These cinematic historians have become powerful storytellers. They are competing effectively with the schoolteacher, the college professor, and the history book author. Their work deserves attention.”⁶ In other words, historical films serve as pedagogical devices both in and outside the classroom. However, as historical films are popular texts and entertainment, they are sometimes dismissed by historians as irrelevant. Historical films are not historical when compared to traditional definitions of historical narrative. These films rarely use or interpret primary sources in order to produce a historical narrative. As a result, many historians often do not consider these films as historical works since they do not use the tools of history. Toplin poignantly states that this dismissal comes at a price: “It segregates scholars from important discussions of the subject that are taking place beyond the academy. Outside of university campuses, media critics, politicians, and film enthusiasts are engaged in energetic debates about cinematic history’s interpretations and influence. Participants in these well-publicized exchanges recognize the potential of motion pictures to affect the public’s attitudes about the past.”⁷

To narrow this gap, Hayden White denotes a new subfield of scholarship within history titled *historiophoty*, defined as “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse.”⁸ As historical films are formally and functionally different than traditional historical narratives, they require and deserve a new

field for discourse and analysis. White's distinction of historiophoty as a new scholarship alongside historiography stresses the divergence between the discourse surrounding visual texts and written texts. Visual texts require different tools for analysis than written texts. White writes, "Modern historians ought to be aware that the analysis of visual images requires a manner of 'reading' quite different from that developed for the study of written documents."⁹ In other words, visual images create meanings in their own way and it is imperative to understand their mechanism for projecting interpretations.

Robert Rosenstone makes two key claims in the introduction to his work *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. He states first, "a film is not a book," and then second, "film is history as vision."¹⁰ These two phrases could not be more paramount in the understanding of historical cinema compared to historical literature. It is for this reason, as introduced above, that Hayden White implements the new field of scholarship called *historiophoty*. Toplin elaborates this predicament, "Their [academicians] suspicions about the fundamental handicaps of filmed history vis-à-vis written history appear exaggerated."¹¹ When viewing, judging, and reacting to historical cinema, historians are prone to basing their opinion on the written discourse of a subject. Pierre Sorlin explains further, "We are trained to read, rather than to watch."¹²

Rosenstone lightly touches on *narratology* to evaluate historical literature. He states four basic findings: First, all narratives are structured by historians and never truly lived. In other words, the actions of historical agents are formed into narratives by relating beginnings, middles, and endings in order to make sense of the past. Second, narrative histories are fictional representations of the past created through verbal

language. Third, historical narratives are cast within their own genres—ironic, tragic, heroic, or romantic. And fourth, language is not a mirror; it does not reflect history, for it “structures history and imbues it with meaning.”¹³ Following this realization, written history appears no less bound to a degree of fiction than filmic history. However, White’s discussion of historical agents, noted in Chapter 2, weakens Rosenstone’s argument. For starters, the actions of human agents are not merely structured by historians, for these actions are lived; that is, they are performed in time. In addition, genres may be cast, but they are also lived. Overall, historical narratives are both fictional and factual representations.

Although all narration carries some fictional elements, this does not give cinematic historians the authorization to replace fact with fiction. I partially agree when Pierre Sorlin stresses that “historical films are all fictional,” for not all historical films use the same degree of fiction.¹⁴ While arguments stressing fictionalization within historical narration are valid and should not be forgotten, they should not be embraced entirely. Toplin stresses this case in three strong statements. First, “Historians are not naïve about the truth claims of either authors or filmmakers.” Second, “They are quite familiar with the argument that complete objectivity is an impossible goal and that all interpretations ... are constructed and contestable.” And lastly, “They are therefore quite amused by film scholars’ excitement in making this discovery and lecturing historians about its importance.”¹⁵

Relating fiction in historical literature to fiction in historical film, David Herlihy states, “Like Thucydides, they [filmmakers] must also place in the actor’s mouths words

that were probably never spoken but that seem appropriate to the person and the occasion.”¹⁶ Historical films share with literary history the setbacks of constructing history with fiction, but cinematic history also contains its own unique and powerful abilities. When discussing film as taken from a historical text, Rosenstone explains that the filmic data “will always be so skimpy compared to a written version covering the same ground.”¹⁷ However, he illuminates, “if short on traditional data, film does easily capture elements of life that we might wish to designate to another kind of data. Film lets us *see* landscapes, *hear* sounds, and *witness* strong emotions as they are expressed with body and face, or view physical conflict between individuals and groups.”¹⁸ Historical films have the unique power to communicate through sound and image which otherwise *dry* historical texts do not. Professor Toplin agrees, “Often, they [book oriented enthusiasts] concentrate on details in the script rather than on the visual and auditory devices employed by the director, the cinematographer, the sound engineers, and other artists and technicians who play important roles in shaping a film’s presentation.”¹⁹ These unique elements of film—the visual and auditory splendors of past worlds created—are part of what makes a historical epic so intriguing to its audiences. I shall conclude this discussion with a quote from David Herlihy, “Films are superb in representing the visual styles and textures of the past—values almost impossible to convey in written words. Let the visual serve the visual.”²⁰

Historical Films and Public History

Despite some acceptance of the importance of filmic histories, dismissal is the more common attitude taken by historians with regard to historical films. Cultural studies

theorist Ien Ang explains this type of dismissal through her notion of the *ideology of mass culture*. Ang claims that within the ideology of mass culture “some cultural forms—mostly very popular culture products and practices cast in an American mould—are *tout court* labeled ‘bad mass culture’ due to their apparent economic determinism.”²¹

According to Ang, the power of the ideology of mass culture is its ability to subordinate cognitive thought processes to emotional feelings. Ang further writes, “In opposition to ‘bad mass culture’ implicitly or explicitly something like ‘good culture’ is set up.”²² In other words, according to historians, historical films are ‘bad mass culture’ and their written counterparts are the ‘good culture.’ However, as this ideology illustrates, it is possible that historians are dismissing historical films based on their emotional appeal to their own work and the amount of influence popular films may have on audiences’ historical consciousness.

The issues surrounding historical films and the ideology of mass culture relate to the subfield of history known as public history, a somewhat broad subfield. It covers a variety of issues including, but not limited to, national identity, memory, heritage, material culture, exhibition, oral history, public policy, and education. According to the National Council on Public History, public history is “a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public.”²³ The underlying assumption in this definition is that public history is done by historians, in collaboration with historians, or by using the tools of historians. Moreover, public history is done for a general public. The most important feature of this definition is that

public history must be done by historians or in collaboration with historians. Public history must use the tools of history to create interpretations that can be provided to a general public.

There are a variety of ways that historians can make their research available to the public. They can reach the public through books, radio, television, and the internet. They can do interviews, create documentaries, or provide historical interpretations through both written and digital text. However, the very idea of public history seems to require sacrifice and simplification. Historian John Tosh explains, “The test for all the exponents of public history is whether they promote public understanding of significant topical issues. In that cause, some of what academics value highly may have to be sacrificed. Historical analysis designed for the public is almost always bound to simplify, by removing the stages of argument by which the writer has come to the stated conclusion.”²⁴ In effect, this is the general annoyance many historians feel towards public history. It must simplify the historical interpretation and to a degree it becomes ‘bad history,’ if claimed to be history at all.

However, in their work *Teaching History for the Common Good*, Keith Barton and Linda Levstik argue that most scholars formulate two different approaches to the past. These approaches are often polarized and simplify the issue. Scholars often “identify one approach as ‘real’ history and dismiss the other as inadequate, inauthentic, or merely ‘popular.’”²⁵ John Tosh further explains this dismissal of popular history for its lack of activating critical thought, “Of course, the outreach work of academics does not necessarily promote critical debate. Much of it treats history as entertainment: the good

story, the alluring ambiance, the historical who-done-it.”²⁶ In other words, history as entertainment does not necessarily promote critical debate for most scholars, and popular history is more often seen as mere entertainment that does not encourage critical modes of thinking.

Although historians may polarize representations of history in a way that Barton and Levstik might disagree with, the majority of public historians agree that history provides a specific way of thinking: history trains citizens to rationally evaluate evidence and arguments in order that these citizens form their own judgments. In the words of Barton and Levstik, “History’s place in the curriculum must be justified in terms of its contribution to democratic citizenship—citizenship that is participatory, pluralist, and deliberative—and its practices must be structured to achieve that end.”²⁷ History’s main use for the public is to give them critical thinking skills. However, these skills are not general transferable skills such as good communication skills or organizational skills: “The most valuable objective of history teaching is to enable young people to situate themselves in time, to recognize the centrality of change and development in accounting for the world around them, to grasp the merits—and the drawbacks—of historical comparison, and to draw on the past for a richer sense of possibilities in the future.”²⁸ While these skills should be the focus of historical education, according to historians these skills are not encouraged by popular history.

I challenge this notion and investigate why citizens are interested in history and how historical films may fulfill their uses, needs, and desires. *Image as Artifact* and the majority of scholarship on historical films examine the effects of historical films and yet

do not question their function. Furthermore, public historians often fail to delineate between public history and popular history. Perhaps they believe that popular history is more abundant than uncommon forms of public history. For example, an oral history project may be designated as public history but not popular history whereas a documentary broadcasted across the nation would be considered popular history. I distinguish the subfield public history from popular history for one simple reason. Public history is based on historian's historical insights whereas popular history is not. Popular history, *according to my own definition and delineation*, makes historical insights accessible and useful to the public, but these insights are not produced by historians. For instance, they are produced by filmmakers who, to the chagrin of many historians, have great agency and influence.

Additionally, Barton and Levstik's research parallels this study as they examine what students think about the past in their own terms and not "whether students conform to an abstract standard of 'correct' historical thinking or understanding."²⁹ Barton and Levstik found that children were learning history from a variety of historical contexts: television, trade books, museums, historic sites, and through oral communication with relatives. Barton and Levstik's study correlates with this study for another reason. They decided to use images to prompt students to discuss historical topics and concepts, and they found that "the pictures seem to have 'warmed them up' to answer more verbal and abstract questions, and the images also provided concrete reference points they could refer to throughout the interviews."³⁰ They asked the students to put the pictures in a chronological order and were amazed by the students' ability to discuss historical

concepts. They also found that the students were highly interested in discussing the historical periods. Their use of pictures to “warm up” the research participants is evidential of the power of images, what William Mitchell describes as the “pictorial turn” in the study of culture: the conceptualization that linguistic signs and symbols are supplanted by visual, nonlinguistic signs and symbols in everyday life.³¹ One of their findings is particularly relevant; the researchers asked a girl why history was something people wanted to study and the girl replied, “Just to find out about what’s happened in the past ... that’s something that everybody wants to know.”³²

While Barton and Levstik stress the need to know how history is embodied in various contexts, they state, “For the most part, we haven’t watched students use history outside formal educational contexts or talked with them naturally as they engage in such activities, nor, as far as we know, have other researchers. As a result, we are not as well positioned to examine students’ participation in a variety of specific social settings as we are to analyze the impact of societal contexts on school history.”³³ My thesis attempts to add to this research by engaging in such activities and performing fieldwork. I am interested in what viewers think about the past in relation to historical moving images. This study differs in that I do not examine young children who are beginning or in school, but older adults who are at various stages of their life and are no longer in school. I argue against the fact that the general public is not interested in thinking critically about history or that popular texts cannot provoke critical thought and debate.

Take, for example, two statements by historian Peter Seixas on students and film watching in and outside the classroom. Seixas first states, “Though teachers may show or

discuss popular film in class, it is fair to assume that most students do their thinking and discussion of these films outside the context of school.”³⁴ He then claims, “Students are likely swept quite completely into the ‘historical’ world as presented on film, but unlikely to exercise critical judgments of this filmic depiction of the past.”³⁵ A paradox arises between students “thinking” outside the context of school and their unlikelihood to “exercise critical judgments of this filmic depiction of the past.” What exactly are students (and others) “thinking” about historical films outside of school, and are these “thoughts” lacking critical expression? Moreover, we must not forget that the ways in which instructors introduce, discuss, and present films can greatly impact the students’ reception of said films.³⁶ Viewing context matters both in and outside the classroom. Evidently, the discussion of historical films as pedagogical tools has increased and will offer significant findings on students and reception.³⁷

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s research on the everyday uses of history begins to examine what Americans think about historical film and television outside the classroom. In their survey of over 1,400 Americans, they found that their respondents ranked films and television to be the least trustworthy of historical sources. They explain their respondents reasoning, “Many respondents talked about their hatred and fear of being manipulated by people who distort the past to meet their own needs.”³⁸ While it should come as no surprise that viewers may adhere to the ideology of mass culture like historians, the ways in which viewers negotiate historical film’s various uses of history has yet to be researched. For example, Rosenzweig and Thelen note, “People repeatedly told our interviewers that every book or movie was different,” and yet they did not

investigate how viewers make these assessments.³⁹ Current reception studies of historical film are only taking place within the classroom. My study examines the ways in which viewers assess different films' uses of history, and this is where a folkloric approach can strengthen popular history studies.

I have briefly discussed scholarship covering historical films as artifacts and how both written and filmic histories use fiction when constructing the past. It is essential to understand that film is a visual text and requires its own method for evaluation. Additionally, this evaluation must take care to understand the pervasive influence of the ideology of mass culture if it is to understand that historical films may have a greater function with regards to critical thought than historians first realize. It is also important to examine how historical films re-construct traditional history. This issue of re-constructing history begins with the exploration of two elusive questions: what exactly are historical films, and are they all the same?

Historical Films: Analysis of a Genre

Although I have discussed "historical films," "historical cinema," or "cinematic history" with a very loose assumption of these terms' definitions, it is important to define the historical genre and its subgenres so that we can better judge the films that make up such an eclectic mix. What differentiates a historical film from other genres of film? Is there something that *speaks* to audiences to let them know that the visual medium they are viewing is to be taken as a historical rendition? Is there also a differentiation within the genre of historical film itself? And lastly, how does a film re-construct history? The historical film as a unique genre, the subgenres of historical films, and film's technique

for re-constructing history are factors that must be studied in order to better interpret film's mode for communicating history.

Pierre Sorlin states that there is something *real* between a film and viewers that allows them to know that the presentation they are about to see is historical. There is an “understanding that is formed, with no difficulty, between the filmmakers and the audience: for both, something real and unquestionable exists, something which definitely happened and which is history.”⁴⁰ Sorlin goes on to explain that signs in the form of details enable the audience to connect the film with a specific time in the past. He uses and defines the term *historical capital* as the referent of such signs; “The cultural heritage of every country and every community includes dates, events, and characters known to all members of that community. This common basis is what one might call the group's ‘historical capital.’”⁴¹ In other words, individuals are aware of their own historical customs, beliefs, and materials—as well as others’. Many signs within a film can mark it as a historical film; furthermore, signs surrounding the production and advertising of a film can achieve this historical projection through various techniques.

As George F. Custen explains, title cards, voiceover narrations, and filmic overtures at the beginning of a film can avow to its historical intent.⁴² For example, while a film such as *JFK* (1991) easily asserts its historical intent by the very title of the cinematic presentation, other films can open with a filmic overture consisting of newspaper articles, news videos, or speeches. For instance, Disney's *Miracle* (2004) opens with these overtures, including President Carter's “Malaise Speech.” Some kind of “facticity” is asserted to mark a historical film, according to Custen.⁴³ In a section titled

Biography as Differentiation, Custen states that “the assertion of truth is yet another strategy used to differentiate a product, be it film genre or star, in a highly competitive market.”⁴⁴ The same could be said about any historical film and not just the biographical film.

Although the guidelines above differentiate historical films from other genres of cinema, these are not guidelines for categorizing historical films amongst themselves. This is one of the limitations of current scholarship concerning historical films. A film is often categorized simply as a historical film or based on the type of history: Western, Roman, Medieval, etc. *Historical films are not categorized based on how they use history.* For instance, a film may portray *characters with events during a period* while other films may depict *specific characters with specific events during a specific period.* I must interject a key point here: these differentiations among historical films are *paramount* when judging this genre. For example, a period film cannot be criticized for failing to tell the life story of a specific person. I have developed a scheme for categorizing historical films by asserting a continuum from fiction to fact. The two ends of this continuum consist of *mostly* fictional representations on one end and *mostly* factual representations on the other end. Furthermore, each subgenre rests on a point along this continuum with some being more fictional or factual than others (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Continuum of historical subgenres from most fictional to most factual.

The four subgenres into which I divide historical cinema are *historical-entertainment* films (which abbreviate to *h-e* films), *period* films, *faction* films, and lastly the *biopic* or what I will also call *eventpic* films. As described above, these categories place historical films on a continuum of fiction: the *h-e* film being the most fictional, the *period* film being slightly less fictional, the *faction* film being more factual, and the *biopic* or *eventpic* attempting to be the most factual. All four of these subgenres of cinematic history attempt to recreate, or what Robert Rosenstone calls “re-construct,” history to varying degrees.⁴⁵

First, not every film that can be marked as historical by Sorlin’s concept of historical capital attempts to tell a historical story. These films are categorized as *historical-entertainment* films. *H-e* films use a historical setting as a mode of placing events within a period of history for strictly entertainment purposes. The placement of this type of film into a period of history is as relevant as the magnificent worlds of fantasy films or sci-fi epics. For example, the science behind *Star Wars* is not meant to explain the possibility of a light saber; in comparison, the history behind *A Knight’s Tale* is not meant to detail the events of any real period or any real characters. There may be some moral or influential aspects of the tale, but these are relevant to the story itself and not the historical references.

As stated, *A Knight’s Tale* is full of humor and modernity while placed in a medieval setting. The overall moral of the story is that “every man can change his stars,” and the leading hero, William Thatcher (played by the late Heath Ledger), changes his stars by denying class repudiations and rising from a thatcher’s son to a noble knight.

This film is a historical film with the Medieval Age setting creating its historical capital. It even has a cameo by the “Black” Prince, Prince Edward, and references the wars between the English and French. However, this film is pure fiction within a historical setting, whilst touched with a pinch of modern anachronism. A humorous film and often recommended for its synthetic soldering of “pastness” and modernity, *A Knight’s Tale* is a historical *h-e* film with one purpose: entertainment.

The second subgenre of historical film, the *period* film, is not as easy to label and define. *Period* films constitute films that depict mostly fictional characters within a *specific* historical setting. A *period* film not only aims to assert its historicity through historical capital, but, using a phrase from Robert A. Rosenstone, also aims to “emotionalize, personalize, and dramatize” the feel and social environment of that period.⁴⁶ Through completely fictitious characters, period films communicate the situation of a given movement through time. The characters and events depicted are representational rather than real. That is, the characters and events depicted are not based on specific historical individuals and specific historical events; they are only depicted as generic types of individuals and events that may embody this time period.

Representation and *realism* will be discussed, separately, in greater detail below.

Saving Private Ryan (1998) is an example of a period film. The film is set during the invasion of Normandy in World War II and follows Captain John H. Miller (Tom Hanks) as he attempts to bring home one of four surviving American brothers, Private James Ryan (Matt Damon). The film is applauded for its realism, especially the opening thirty minute rendition of the invasion of Normandy. The film emotionalizes,

personalizes, and dramatizes events of World War II through fictitious characters and events. It makes no claim that the tale of Captain Miller and Private Ryan is historical.

The next subgenre of historical film, the *faction* film, requires a deeper examination of the blending of fact and fiction in historical films. In a section entitled *The Growing Prominence of "Faction,"* Robert Toplin defines *faction* films as historical films that "spin highly fictional tales that are loosely based on actualities. Their stories identify some real people, events, or situations from the past but blend these details into invented fables."⁴⁷ Since this definition is comparable to the definition affiliated with *period* films, further delineation is necessary. A *faction* film will more closely adapt real people to its stories and incorporate them than will the *period* film. The *faction* film places a fictitious character within a *specific* period consisting of *specific* historical individuals. One point must be stressed with relevance to *faction* films because of their amenability of actual characters with fictional characters: *faction* films are still not an attempt at portraying documented history. However, such films use specific periods, events, or persons more so than *period* films.

For example, Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator* places the fictitious Maximus in the middle of factual characters within a specific period of history. Emperor Marcus Aurelias, his son Commodus, and his daughter Lucilla are all specific historical persons who play a large role in the film. While Steven Spielberg's period film *Saving Private Ryan* places fictitious characters within a specific period, the *faction* film *Gladiator* places a fictitious character within a *specific* period consisting of *specific* historical individuals. Toplin makes note of the *raison d'être* of *faction* films, "filmmakers have

developed strategies to protect their flanks from the arrows shot by history-critics.”⁴⁸ The *faction* film enables filmmakers to use specific periods of history by creatively looking through the eyes of fictitious characters in order to avoid public scrutiny. *Gladiator* is still not an attempt of portraying documented history. The characters mentioned above in *Gladiator* are mentioned in name only, for their actions with the fictional character Maximus are obviously purely fictional. However, it uses a more specific period, events, or persons than that of a *period* film, thus adding to its appeal and sense of reality.

The attempt at actual historicity in the genre of historical films can be found in the subgenre known as the *biopic* or *eventpic*. I correlate the term *biopic* or biographical epic with the term *eventpic* because sometimes the main focus of a film is on a group of real characters and events rather than just a single individual. Let us think of the terms as one with the exception of the characterization of one versus many. The *biopic* or *eventpic* attempts to accurately portray the history of a specific person(s) and event(s). As I will discuss below, some fiction is inevitable in cinematic history, but the goal of *bio/eventpics* is to portray history by staying within the bounds of the historical record.

Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) attempts to recreate and examine key moments of Alexander the Great's life: from his upbringing as a child to his feats accomplished as one of earth's greatest military geniuses and leaders. Although some dramatic license should be expected, the characters surrounding the historical Alexander are factual and the majority of events portrayed in the film are well documented. *Alexander* should not be defined as a *h-e*, a *period*, nor a *faction* film. It is imperative to note that though a film is defined as a *bio/eventpic*, this does not necessarily make it a successful one! The key

question is whether a *bio/eventpic*, such as *Alexander*, does what it *aims* to do. That is, does the film fall in line with its intention of portraying history, or does the film disguise false history as true history. All four of these subgenres can be evaluated based on their advertised use of history in comparison to their actual presentation of history. All cinematic history attempts to recreate history to varying degrees, and this raises a plethora of questions concerning an attempt to accurately depict historical periods, events, and people on the big screen. Overall, the four subgenres of historical films serve as tools to analyze historical films and their reception. The subgenres are general templates, not meant to be absolute, and a film will usually land close to one of these subgenres. Both the research participants' general reception of historical films (Chapter 5) and the case study of *The Last Samurai* (Chapter 6) will illustrate the effectiveness of this template in guiding the analysis of historical film reception.

"Re-constructing" History

In the introduction to his essay in the *AHR Forum* of the *American Historical Review*, John E. O'Conner stresses the importance of contributions from historian filmmakers who have experienced *filmland*.⁴⁹ He explains their importance for two reasons; first, they can contribute to our thinking of visual evidence in reconstructing the past, and secondly, they "can offer important assistance to their colleagues" who must allot their time to teaching in undergraduate classrooms.⁵⁰ These historian filmmakers are important, for they have firsthand knowledge and experience regarding the creative production process of historical films: from pre-production to canning the film.

Historians Toplin and Rosenstone have had the unique experience of creating historical fiction films for a broad public. Rosenstone was involved in the process of creating the film *Reds* (1982) and Toplin was the principal creator in the making of *Denmark Vesey's Rebellion* (1982), a made-for-television movie broadcasted on PBS Television. These historians can be considered historian filmmakers, and as such, their professional findings and discussions of historical films are invaluable. Toplin begins the discussion, "There are no true 'rules' for fabricating popular docudramas. Filmmakers do not consult a respected guidebook that lists successful strategies for the design of cinematic history."⁵¹ On the other hand, there are some common elements that can be identified as key issues when producing historical cinema. It should be noted, however, that these are not necessarily problems but necessities of a unique and powerful medium. I will list these elements of constructing historical films as *scope*, *3-act drama*, *partisanship*, *representation*, *illusion* and the use of *romance* in historical films.⁵² I conclude this segment of filmic construction by discussing what Rosenstone states to be the "key issue" and most "controversial" in constructing cinematic history: *invention*.⁵³ It should also be noted that several of these elements relate to the criticisms some historians generally have against popular history.

The average film is two hours long, or is it two hours short? The problem of *scope* in historical film deals with the reduction of time, characters, and events along with the blatant cutting of substance. According to Toplin, "Motion pictures cannot present comprehensive, definitive studies, and filmmakers understand the foolishness of even trying to cover a topic's length and breadth."⁵⁴ However, Toplin addresses the rebuttal

by Adrian Scott (a writer for the 1947 movie *Crossfire*) when discussing an attempt to definitively examine anti-Semitism, “It is proper material for pamphlets and books. But even in those media it is doubtful if definitiveness is possible. Find, if you can, a definitive one-volume analysis.”⁵⁵ In other words, not even written monographs can completely cover a topic and provide a definitive, closed analysis. New interpretations and findings will always breed new avenues for discussion and debate. The compression of substance in historical film also serves a more dramatic purpose. Rosenstone explains, “Films that have been truest to the facts have tended to be visually and dramatically inert, better as aids to sleep than to the acquisition of historical consciousness.”⁵⁶ This is to say that too much emphasis on detail equates to too little drama and even fewer viewers. Playing devil’s advocate, instructors must understand the complications of creating curriculum and giving discussions on a specific topic in a one hour lecture while keeping an audience’s—their student’s—attention. Why then is it difficult to appreciate how much a film can do through image, sound, and voice in two hours?

The next element of historical drama deals with drama specifically. Historical films must contain the basic necessities of the 3-act drama described by Aristotle: exposition, complication, and resolution.⁵⁷ The underlying notion behind the 3-act dramatic element is that every historical film must contain some form of morality. However, as White’s research on the content of historical narrative shows, narratives are meaningful to their audience because of the lessons they teach. Moreover, as research on narratives and popular culture show, mass mediated narratives function to satisfy the same needs, uses, and desires as those of folk narratives. Rosenstone takes this criticism

of morality further, “To put it bluntly, no matter what the historical film ... the message delivered on the screen is almost always that things are getting better or have gotten better or both.”⁵⁸ For Rosenstone, all historical films contribute to what historians call the myth of progress. In contrast, one cannot generalize that all historical films promote progress or that all historical films idealize hope. For instance, some may promote the exact opposite: nostalgia for a simpler and lost time. Moreover, if the majority of films idealize hope or nostalgia, is this necessarily something we must discourage? History is a tool that explains the past through the construction of a story; should historical films refrain from using the renowned 3-act drama as their storyline structure to better relate and bear meaning for their audiences?

The third element of historical cinema is *partisanship*. Toplin states that filmmakers “leave an impression that their interpretation is the only viable one.”⁵⁹ Rosenstone adds that “each [film] compresses the past to a closed world by telling a single, linear story with, essentially, a single interpretation. Such a narrative strategy obviously denies historical alternatives, does away with the complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history.”⁶⁰ The fact is that filmmakers have the right to speak their mind, or shall I say show their visions—whether propagandist, nationalistic, progressive, or nostalgic. As historians who have worked on the production of historical films, these two “historian filmmakers” know it is a bit much to state that filmmakers believe their interpretation is the sole, enlightened one. Furthermore, some films do acknowledge the complexity of motivation and causation and even leave the audience questioning the films interpretation.⁶¹ Is it also too simple to

assume that viewers take the history they see on screen as the only viable one? At what point does responsibility for the belief that the film's interpretation is the only interpretation turn from the film to the interpreter? Is it possible that audience members may take their history from the historical films they see yet are as skeptical of historical renditions on the big screen as historians and other critics?

A nuance of *partisanship* is the notion of demons and "grayness" in historical films. American audiences may want uplifting stories, as noted above, and in order to have these stories one needs heroes and villains. As Toplin states, "Cinematic history needs demons, too, and they are often assigned rather cavalierly."⁶² In addition, if a film provides good analysis in the form of contradiction or "grayness," it is often stated that it does not provide strong entertainment. A recent example is the film *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). By attempting to show religious fanaticism as the real enemy, critics claim *Kingdom of Heaven* is said to lose its audience as it focuses on religious fanaticism. The film depicts fanaticism as the enemy rather than providing a clear cut enemy; the film is thus labeled as bad entertainment that audiences will not comprehend. However, if the film instead depicted polarized heroes and villains, audiences would be looked down upon for not wanting a more sophisticated interpretation and for getting the simplistic version they desire. Toplin concludes that filmmakers must hook the audience with strong partisan views and if they refuse to do so, they will invite great financial risks.⁶³ One must not assume that all filmmakers are so egotistical as to believe that their films are definitive interpretations. Moreover, it could be argued that it is not contradiction and grayness that invites great financial risk, but more facts than satisfying narrative. Films

are primarily entertainment, and if they become documentaries instead, their box office may suffer. Filmmakers must attempt to balance history with entertainment.

Representation, the fourth element of historical cinema, is the collapsing of characters into what could be called *stock* characters and the compression of events into one unlikely episode. Toplin explains, "History from Hollywood almost always appears in its familiar generic form, with the principal characters' encounters standing in for the experiences of hundreds, thousands, or millions."⁶⁴ The individual is said to stand in for the many, and through their lives one sees the broad social changes of history. In historical cinema, it is the individual versus society in what Toplin calls the "great men" and "great women" theory.⁶⁵ Rosenstone agrees, "The point: both dramatic features and documentaries put individuals in the forefront of historical process ... the solution of their personal problems tends to substitute itself for the solution of historical problems."⁶⁶ According to these two historian filmmakers, individuals are the motor and main attraction of the changing tides of history in historical cinema. For them, rather than the struggle of individual versus history, the cinematic film should take a more traditional approach and depict the individual being shaped by the impersonal forces of history. However, one cannot generalize and say that all historical films show individuals determining history.

It is worth noting that history instructors use representational figures to instruct their students with regard to historical happenings. In addition, filmmakers can make it clear that individuals are affected by the impersonal forces of history. The problem is not that *representation* is an element of historical cinema but how filmmakers use and abuse

this contentious element. The case study of the *The Last Samurai* and its reception by the family (Chapter 6) will explore questions concerning history, individuals, and impersonal forces in greater detail.

Illusion is the element of a historical film that brings the “pastness” to the present. “As some historians describe the achievement,” writes Toplin, “films can demonstrate ‘the pastness of the past,’ communicating a sense that conditions in historic times were, in many ways, different from those of the present.”⁶⁷ Historical films have the ability to bring textures, sounds, and emotions of times that are otherwise terra incognita. David Herlihy exclaims, “The historical film not only creates illusion but also extends its domain into the audience.”⁶⁸ History is not a complete mirror image of the past but a mere re-construction, and this re-construction can sometimes get in the way of historicity. Rosenstone disparages, “This is the mistaken notion that mimesis is all, that history is in fact no more than a ‘period look.’”⁶⁹ For him, this is “the baleful Hollywood corollary: as long as you get the look right, you may freely invent characters and incidents and do whatever you want to the past to make it more interesting.”⁷⁰ With the new awesome ability of CGI (Computer Graphic Imagery), audiences are able to witness this “pastness of the past” at a whole new level. Historians have the right to denigrate the preferred superceding of historical imaging over historical facticity, but this does not mean that historical cinema must stop focusing on period detail. Imagery is a powerful tool, and it is essential for historical realism and its attraction.

Some audience members love a romantic tale and not every historical tale has one, so why not play with Cupid’s arrow and insert a little bit of love into a lot of history?

Toplin explains, “The romantic elements of a story heighten the emotional impact for most audiences; in particular, they help attract women to the theaters.”⁷¹ Gambling with romance and love does not always mean the addition of romantic characters, mostly women, for it can also mean the negation or manipulation of characters to focus on the amorous, dramatic effect. Toplin refutes the criticisms of filmmakers playing Cupid, “The prominence of romantic element in cinematic history does not constitute grounds for dismissing the genre’s value as a perspective on the past ... Romantic themes draw audiences to cinematic history, adding strong human touches to topics that may, at first glance, seem too dry for mass entertainment.”⁷² The element of romance in filmic narration cannot be forgotten, for it brings a larger audience to the theater for mass entertainment. Hopefully, history will not be forgotten in the process.

The reason for the alienation of *invention* from the elements of constructing historical films discussed above is that *invention* embodies these elements. By reducing events, stocking characters, mingling events, creating illusion, and adding romance, filmmakers are inventing the past. They are artistically re-constructing at both the factual and symbolic level. Invention is the various manipulations of historical capital found in cinematic history. Toplin notes that film scholars constantly reference Hayden White’s theory of relativism that states all “historical interpretation involves the arranging and telling of stories, not the objective presentation of truth. All historical explanations constitute forms of fiction.”⁷³ The idea that there is no objective truth is a cornerstone for the argument pertaining to invention and manipulation in historical films; however, Toplin notes it would be wise not to take this fact to the extreme: “But are all

manipulations defensible?”⁷⁴ The short answer is no, but this requires further examination.

Robert Rosenstone states that there are two types of invention—false invention and true invention—but before explaining this theory, it is important to form a basis and explanation of “truth” that enables us to judge the veracity or falsity of a historical manipulation.⁷⁵ Sometimes the best way to judge what *is*, is to judge what *is not*. Alan Brinkley explains, “There may be no completely objective or ‘absolute truth,’ but there are such things as untruths. There are things that simply are not true, that are lies.... We do not always find [truth], but we seek it. And in seeking truth, we also have to seek untruth and attempt to avoid it or discredit it.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, historical interpretations are labeled as true interpretations when they are weighed against current historiography and considered plausible interpretations. Rosenstone explains that “any ‘historical’ film, like any work of written, graphic, or oral history, enters a body of preexisting knowledge and debate.”⁷⁷ For Rosenstone, inventions are true “in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they impart an overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued.”⁷⁸ In other words, while historians may not know exactly what happened, they often know what did not happen, and any filmmaker must be prepared to face Rosenstone’s notion of false and true invention.

In conclusion, the genre of historical film is an elusive and complex creature. Rather than criticize all historical films against the written discourse, historical films should be studied based on how they *advertise* and *actually* use history. Is a *historical-*

entertainment film bad history because it uses blatantly obvious anachronisms? Does a *period* film that aims to portray the beliefs, customs, and materials of a past time fail the test if it uses stock characters and romance? Should a *faction* film be examined as a *bio/eventpic*? Should a *bio/eventpic* be dismissed as history because it cannot examine the entire life of a character? I assert that a historical film should, first and foremost, be evaluated based on its advertisement and aim in relation to its degree of fiction. Having discovered a film's aim, the analysis can move to a judgment of whether or not the film actually stays true to its advertised intention. Once the film's intention is addressed and evaluated, the analysis of the film as propaganda can begin. Clearly, *period* films, *faction* films, and *bio/eventpic* films, with their intent to inform at various levels, can be the most problematic when it comes to concerns of romanticizing, stereotyping, or propagating the past. This guide, along with the knowledge of invention, truth, "untruth," and subgenres of historical films, is the beginning of the examination of historical film reception. In order to finish it, one must consider the viewers.

Notes

¹ John O'Conner, *Image As Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1990), ix.

² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

³ John O'Conner, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1201.

⁴ Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections of the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1174.

⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, 198.

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- ⁶ Robert Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), ix.
- ⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, 4.
- ⁸ Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1193.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14-15.
- ¹¹ Robert Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1226.
- ¹² Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), 5.
- ¹³ Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words," 1180.
- ¹⁴ Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 21.
- ¹⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, 168.
- ¹⁶ David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Film and History," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1189.
- ¹⁷ Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words," 1179.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 1179.
- ¹⁹ Toplin, *Reel History*, 50.
- ²⁰ Herlihy, "Am I a Camera," 1191.
- ²¹ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), 93.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ National Council on Public History, "What is Public History?" <http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history/> (accessed May 3, 2010).
- ²⁴ John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 136.
- ²⁵ Keith Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004) 4-5.
- ²⁶ Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 103.
- ²⁷ Barton, *Teaching History*, 40.

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- ²⁸ Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 127.
- ²⁹ Barton, *Teaching History*, 17.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ³¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- ³² Barton, *Teaching History*, 16.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 17-20.
- ³⁴ Peter Seixax, "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native-White Relations," in *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film*, ed. Alan S. Marcus (Charlotte, NC: IAP-Information Age Pub, 2007), 100.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ³⁶ S. Elizabeth Bird and J Godwin, "Film in the Undergraduate Anthropology Classroom: Applying Audience Response Research in Pedagogical Practice," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 37:3 (2006): 285-299.
- ³⁷ For example, John O'Conner, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*, discussed above, provides an ancillary chapter that relates to public history. This chapter, titled "An Introduction to Visual Language for Historians and History Teachers," discusses historical films as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. For further reading on this topic, see Alan Marcus, ed., *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film* (Charlotte, NC: IAP-Information Age Pub, 2007).
- ³⁸ Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 97-98.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁴⁰ Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 20-21.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁴² George F. Custen, "Making History," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2001), 76.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁴⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*.
- ⁴⁶ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 123.

⁴⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ O'Conner, "History in Images/Images in History," 1200.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1200-1201.

⁵¹ Toplin, *Reel History*, 14.

⁵² The terms *scope*, *3-act drama*, *partisan*, *representation*, *illusion*, and *romance* are formed as a compilation of the several ways that historical films use historical content. The motivation and influence for these terms are from the works of Robert Toplin, *Reel History*, 17-50, and Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 54-61.

⁵³ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 67.

⁵⁴ Toplin, *Reel History*, 17.

⁵⁵ Adrian Scott quoted in Toplin, *Reel History*, 18.

⁵⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 7.

⁵⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, 19-22.

⁵⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 56.

⁵⁹ Toplin, *Reel History*, 23.

⁶⁰ Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words," 1174.

⁶¹ For example, see *Alexander*. Directed by Oliver Stone. (Warner Home Video, August 2005), and *Breach*. Directed by Billy Ray (Universal Studios, 2007).

⁶² Toplin, *Reel History*, 26.

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 57.

⁶⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, 48.

⁶⁸ Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Film and History," 1186.

⁶⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 60.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Toplin, *Reel History*, 46.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 72-73.

⁷⁶ Alan Brinkley quoted in Toplin, *Reel History*, 167.

⁷⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 71-72.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

CHAPTER IV
AUDIENCE STUDIES, REALISM, METHODOLOGY

Audience Studies: A Brief Survey

“Visual literacy is an essential tool for citizenship in contemporary America” – John E. O’Conner.¹

In modern society, Americans are inundated with media and mass culture and it is essential for theorists to examine the media’s role in everyday life. While it is currently common practice to examine the medium, the message, and the audience to understand the complex role and effects of media in our society, early theorists disregarded audiences. Moreover, as I have argued, historians continually neglect audiences as they have yet to formulate a methodology to examine the function of historical films among viewers. In this chapter, I give a brief overview of audience studies and note some relevant findings in order to formulate a methodology for historical film reception. I begin with a survey of general theories of mass culture and move into a survey of the recent ethnographic turn within audience studies. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my methodology; this methods section also introduces the research participants.

While certain elitist, Marxist, and the Frankfurt School theories can be contested, their place and importance in the discourse of popular culture studies is well documented.

Both general historians' views towards historical films and Ien Ang's ideology of mass culture serve as evidence that these early theories are still predominant in the everyday discourse surrounding popular culture. Mass culture studies, and thus the study of popular culture, were originally dominated by two theories: elitist and Marxist.² The former theory bases its argument against mass culture's democratization of culture and exhibits a feeling of nostalgia for the days when taste, and thus authority, belonged to the elite. The elitist argument stresses that art is high art, literature is "great" canonical literature, and authority over taste belongs to elite intellectuals. In addition, mass culture from this perspective produces passive audiences who are manipulated by standardized commodities that are based upon the lowest-common-denominator of interests in order to garner mass profit. Furthermore, individuals are considered atomized individuals due to the decline of community ties in the new societal framework: industrial and modern. These theorists, such as Matthew Arnold and Dwight Macdonald, are pro avant-garde, seeking art outside the marketplace of mass culture.

Similar to elitists, Marxists stress the democratization of culture and its societal import; however, for Marxists, the massification and democratization of culture is part of the political economy's natural evolution and a necessary revolutionary step. In other words, capitalism is a necessary step that initially provides power to the masses. However, Marxists hold the view, similar to elitists, that individuals have become atomized, passive consumers within this modernization. The Marxist's greatest critique

of mass culture is that mass media impairs critical ability: the critical ability to see past the guise of capitalism.

Drawing upon Marxist theories of mass culture, the “pessimistic mass society thesis” was put forth by leading members of the Frankfurt School: Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. The leading force behind the development of this thesis was the rise of fascism in early twentieth century Germany. Due to the Nazi’s propaganda machine, the media was perceived as a powerfully persuasive, aggressive, and negative force. Falling in line with elitist and Marxist theories, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the “Culture Industry” as a factory that produces standardized cultural goods and ideology in order to manipulate the masses into passivity.³ Mass culture is easy pleasure that creates false needs and false consciousness.

Sociologist Dominic Strinati offers a succinct review of the weaknesses and critiques of the Frankfurt School theories of popular culture, including the notion that leisure culture is bad culture:

It is as if Frankfurt School theorists know what people should and should not be doing on the basis of their own ideological preferences ... The idea of what people should and should not be doing, and what they should really want, although couched in vague and abstract terms, actually assumes a particular model of cultural activity, one influenced by the example of art and the social position of the elite intellectual, to which all people should aspire.⁴

According to Strinati, the Frankfurt theories’ critique of the standardization of popular culture misunderstands that standardization is necessary for communication, and above all, finding the next popular song is easier said than done. Finally, while the Frankfurt School emphasizes that theory must be critical—oriented towards changing society—

their approach to capitalism implies a Marxist ideology of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism followed by its socialist replacement. Strinati clarifies, "The fact that this revolution failed to materialize did not lead the Frankfurt School theorists to question the basis upon which it had been predicted in the first place. What they did was to assume that it should have happened, and then tried to work out why it had failed to materialize, a characteristic of much Marxist thinking in the twentieth century."⁵ Implied in this view is the Marxist ideology that capitalism is merely one evolutionary step in the political economy.

Lastly and most important to the study of historical film reception, the Frankfurt School's view of popular culture continued to define audiences as passive, atomized individuals that are susceptible to the Culture Industry's omnipotent power. Overall, the theories lack empirical evidence and are inundated with abstract and inaccessible language. For example, part of the pessimistic thesis is the "hypodermic model" of media consumption that holds the belief that powerless viewers are simply injected with the media's message. However, as David Morley explains, after Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse immigrated to America during the 1930's, their model was refuted by American researchers throughout the 1950's and 1960's due to the plurality of American society. American researchers, according to Morley, thought the thesis "sociologically naïve."⁶

In addition to mass culture theories based on political economy, structuralism and semiology are tools that aid the understanding of mass culture texts, specifically the ways in which they determine meaning. To reiterate, it is not my intention to give a substantial

review of these theories' development but to clarify their strengths and weaknesses as tools that determine the production of meaning. Structuralism's greatest contribution is the recognition that all parts within a structure are systematically related, and each part, including the summation of parts, acquires meaning through these relations. As such, in the beginning structuralism took a deterministic view of the production of meaning as the audience was still a mass audience that was dominated by the meaning produced by the structure of the text. This universalistic and deterministic approach often "reduces culture to a mental structure and so neglects its complexity and its historical and social specificity."⁷ Structuralism is a valuable tool for determining the dominant meaning within texts, but meaning cannot be truly understood through textual analysis alone.

Drawing upon structuralism, semiology began to open the meaning of texts with the key notion that sign systems are arbitrary. While semiology's strength lies in its emphases that texts are polysemic and open to various interpretations, it raises questions concerning the availability of interpretations and why some interpretations are preferred over others. As Strinati notes, "How do we know, for example, that the conclusions offered by semiology are not the result of the subjective impressions of the analyst but an objective uncovering of a systematic structure of meaning? Indeed, is semiology better viewed as a type of textual appreciation or literary criticism than as an objective social science?"⁸ Both Structuralism and semiology's strengths lie in their ability to determine a dominant meaning within a text, but researchers need to be aware of falling into their traps: there is one universal and deterministic meaning that cannot be negotiated or resisted, or there is an indefinite availability of meanings. Overall, such theoretical tools

are practical if combined with contextual data, most importantly, socially situated viewers.

In comparison, recent psychoanalytic theories seem to add similar, but limited, value to media reception theory, for they focus their analysis on the universality of subjects and thus a text's universal meaning. While psychoanalytic theory has heavily influenced scholarship on identity, subjectivity, and personality, the theory largely fails, as David Morley states, "because the theory, in effect, tries to explain any specific instance of the text/reader relationship in terms of a universalist theory of the formation of subjects in general."⁹ Such approaches have been the failure of many discussions of historical films. Following film theory, these films are often analyzed using structural, semiological, or psychoanalytical models, and while each of these models provide valuable insights, they often generate a preferred reception of film without examining contextual data: most importantly, audiences' or viewers' interpretations and opinions of the texts.

To continue, early American research on popular culture began to focus on one of two poles in the communication paradigm: the message or its audience.¹⁰ The former model focused on the message and then moved the examination to its effect on the audience. The latter model began with the audience in terms of social, environmental, and "needs" elements and moved the examination to its "use" of the text. As Morley explains, the former model took a behavioral approach while the latter model took a structural-functional approach. It must be noted that throughout these early studies the audience was still assumed to have "a shared and stable system of values."¹¹ Morley

places these two models under a normative paradigm in comparison to the new interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm is articulated through the “uses and gratifications” model, which stresses “the important fact that different members of the mass-media audience may use and interpret any particular programme in a quite different way from how the communicator intended it, and in quite different ways from other members of the audience. Rightly, it stressed the role of the audience in the construction of meaning.”¹² In other words, audience members bring individual needs, desires, and uses to popular texts and may create variable meanings.

In *Television Culture*, John Fiske expands on these ideas and delineates the concepts of audience, audiences, and viewers. Fiske explains that audience is a term easiest to understand and dismiss as “it implies television [or other media] reaches a homogeneous mass of people who are all essentially identical, who receive the same messages, meanings, and ideologies from the same programs and who are essentially passive.”¹³ The term audience is clearly a remnant of the view held by early popular culture theorists. Fiske continues by discussing the practical move from audience to audiences:

Pluralizing the term into ‘audiences’ at least recognizes that there are differences between the viewers of any one program that must be taken into account. It recognizes that we are not a homogenous society, but that our social system is crisscrossed by axes of class, gender, race, age, nationality, region, politics, religion and so on, all of which produce more or less strongly marked differences.¹⁴

Lastly, Fiske describes viewers as socially situated individuals who make meanings and gain pleasures from media. Fiske is clear to delineate a viewer from a “reader,” however.

He explains, “The ‘reader’ is less concretely situated than the ‘viewer’ and is rather the embodiment of that central cultural process—the production of meaning.”¹⁵ To clarify, Fiske defines a “reader” as an individual who interprets texts (e.g., books, film, television, advertisements, etc). Hence, a viewer is a type of *reader*, or interpreter, who is further situated in an interpretive event: film. Understanding research participants as *readers* further situated as film viewers enables the implementation of a uses and gratifications approach. Film offers a different format than both television and books, and thus will serve different functions, uses, and gratifications.

However, several scholars dismiss the uses and gratifications model, which stresses the agency of individuals to use and interpret texts differently than the producer intended or differently than other users. For example, drawing on Stuart Hall and Philip Elliott, Morley raises two objections to the uses and gratifications model: first, the model overestimates the openness of the text, and second, the model is insufficiently sociological due to its “essentially psychologistic problematic, relying as it does on mental states, needs and processes abstracted from the social situation of the individuals concerned.”¹⁶ Morley insists the text is more closed than open by its portrayal of dominant ideology and thus limits the availability of interpretation. While I agree with Morley’s inference that a text limits the availability of its interpretation, I strongly agree with Fiske’s claim that “in this negotiation the balance of power lies with the readers. The meanings found in the text shift towards the subject position of the reader more than the reader’s subjectivity is subjected to the ideology of the power of the text.”¹⁷ In addition, Morley emphasizes that individual reception based on inter-psychological facets, such as

needs, desires, and gratifications, is sociologically irrelevant. Obviously, mental states, needs, and processes should not be abstracted from social situations, but they also should not be forgotten when discussing social situations. It is common practice among media ethnographers, and folklorists, to socially situate research participants before delving into their individual reception.

The strength of the uses and gratifications model in relation to its utilization as a framework for historical films lies in its ability to discover the details of reception at a deeper level: the people's level. In regard to Morley's second claim against such an approach, individual viewers' needs, desires, and gratifications can both affect other viewers' watching habits or opinions, and if enough individuals are satisfying their needs, desires, and gratifications through film, it can clearly be quantified to be sociologically relevant. There should be no doubt that sociological relevant factors will be revealed through detailed analysis. The uses and gratifications model simply stresses quality *before* quantity; it stresses the need for empirical evidence. This is where folkloristic approaches fall in line with the uses and gratifications approach to audience reception. Folkloric approaches document the experiences and opinions of representative audience members in order to complement grand social theories by examining what common, informal, and everyday phenomena mean to *individuals* and small groups within societies. The overall strength of these two models is their ability to discover the details of reception as a function of people first and society second. These approaches ensure that raw data and experiences of phenomena are elicited in order to serve as a foundation for the application of theoretical analysis. Clearly, the documentation of individual and

small group reception raises questions regarding representation. Representation in qualitative analysis will be discussed in more detail below.

Morley's objections to the uses and gratifications model brings up another approach to mass culture and audiences that both supports the uses and gratifications model and provokes similar objections. This is the populist approach to mass culture. In contrast to the ideology of mass culture, Ang describes the ideology of populism, and this ideology can be summed up in one phrase, "There's no accounting for taste."¹⁸ There is also no accounting for "use." The populist approach to mass culture, of which Fiske is often labeled a proponent, acknowledges the freedom of viewers to interpret and use texts in their own manner.

The objections to populist approaches draw from arguments proposed by elitists, Marxists, and the Frankfurt School. In his article "Beyond Cultural Populism: Notes toward the Critical Ethnography of Media Audiences," Timothy Gibson stresses the power of macrostructures to restrict polysemy and political activism. Throughout the piece, the term "constrain" and the phrase "over-determined social positions" stress the power of macrostructures, specifically culture and industry. Drawing upon early pessimistic theories, Gibson emphasizes two key objections proposed by opponents to populist approaches. First, the active viewing of mass culture is not in itself political resistance. And second, economic structures of power constrain divergent and oppositional meanings as individuals do not hold the same discursive power or influence of those as central institutions. For Gibson, scholars need to stress how macrostructures constrain political efficacy, political activism, and meaning.¹⁹ Clearly, the reaction to

populist approaches assumes a particular model of cultural activity that involves political activism, and this is the main argument against proponents of viewer agency (e.g., Fiske, Jenkins, Ang, and Radway).

However, by making political activism imperative and compulsory, opponents to populist approaches completely disregard and dismiss other cultural activities, specifically the role of pleasure, entertainment, or leisure activity in everyday life. As Ang concisely argues, “*Pleasure*, however, is *the* category ignored in the ideology of mass culture. In its discourses pleasure seems to be non-existent. Instead it makes things like responsibility, critical distance or aesthetic purity central—moral categories that make pleasure as irrelevant and illegitimate criterion.”²⁰ The ideology of mass culture, and specifically the Marxist and Frankfurt School component of this ideology, dismisses all possible functions of mass culture except political activism. As Ang notes, “In this way the ideology of mass culture places itself totally outside the framework of the popular aesthetic, of the way in which popular cultural practices take shape in the routines of daily life. Thus it remains both literally and figuratively caught in the ivory towers of ‘theory.’”²¹ The uses and gratifications model, a folkloristic perspective, and a populist approach can help explain how mass culture objects, such as historical films, function in lieu of the ideology of mass culture’s assumptions regarding compulsory political activity. Moreover, as I reveal, cultural objects, specifically certain historical films, are not only pleasurable, but can be pedagogical and provoke critical modes of thought, such as cultural and historical awareness.

Overall, audience studies have taken an “ethnographic turn” with an emphasis on participant observation, interviews, and other tools affiliated with the fieldworker. For example, Henry Jenkins’ work, which is often cited by folklorists, examines fan cultures and participatory culture through a seemingly ethnographic and folkloric perspective.²² Fan studies, such as those by Jenkins, are currently fashionable in audience studies for their focus on community, participatory culture, cultural appropriation, and resistance.²³ Meanwhile, scholars, such as Annette Markham, Nancy Baym, and Elizabeth Bird, are also implementing and discussing digital ethnography.²⁴ However, studies which focus on fan cultures tend to move the discussion of audience reception away from more casual viewing experiences. As Elizabeth Bird states, “Most people, most of the time, are fairly casual media users.”²⁵ While discussing scholarly approaches to handling taste and aesthetic judgments of popular culture, Bird also notes, “... there is also a tendency to favor programs and genres that may be considered, edgy, avant-garde, or attracting a ‘cult’ audience, such as the *Star Trek* franchise.”²⁶

Jenkins work on *American Idol*, a recent cult favorite to be studied by academics, is intriguing for its discussion of viewer social interaction. In “Buying into American Idol: How We Are Being Sold on Reality Television,” Jenkins explores the convergence of media corporations and advertising companies to tap consumers emotional capital via “affective economics.”²⁷ In cooperation with Initiative Media, Jenkins and other MIT researchers carried out ethnographic research to understand group dynamics of families viewing *American Idol*. Jenkins describes the goals of the research, “We wanted to better understand how people integrated the experience of watching *American Idol* into the rest

of their social interactions.”²⁸ What is of interest to me and important to my study is the description of three types of viewers by media industry insiders: zappers, casuals, and loyals. Zappers are individuals who simply “channel surf,” that is, they constantly switch programs seeking instant gratification. Casuals, on the other hand, are individuals who may be aware of general themes of a program yet follow programs rather sporadically. And lastly, loyals are individuals who stick to their programs, spend time talking about them, and “are more likely to pursue content across media channels.” Jenkins succinctly notes, “Loyals watch series; zappers watch television. Loyals form long-term commitments; zappers are like the folks at cocktail parties who are always looking over their shoulders to see if someone more interesting has just entered the room. Casuals fall somewhere in between; they watch particular series when they think of it or have nothing better to do.”²⁹

Jenkins notes one of the project’s key findings, “The Initiative Media/MIT research team found that in almost every social space where *American Idol* was watched, viewers of different degrees of commitment were present.”³⁰ While I am uninterested in viewer dynamics in relation to affective economics and advertising, the discussion of zappers, casuals, and loyals and the finding that viewers of different degrees of commitment are present at different viewing occasions are key insights that can be related to other viewing events. For instance, loyal viewers of American War films can attract other casual and seemingly uninterested viewers of this specific subgenre. Lastly, while these notions of loyal, casual, and zappers aid in understanding viewer interactions,

ethnographic findings concerning realism—specifically its attraction—add a great deal to the more specific study of historical film reception.

Realism “Rules”

Realism is an attractive element in multiple platforms of popular culture, whether it is the lure of reality television, sports broadcasts, or even comic book superheroes. The recent boom of reality television is a case in point. It is obvious that reality television’s current reputation is based upon its dubious advertisement of being “real.” Scholars, such as Su Homes, Deborah Jermyn, Ron Simon, and John Corner, use a seemingly historical-geographic method to search for the history of reality television through a mixed investigation of documentaries, television game shows, and caught-on-tape television; all shows that market their “liveness.”³¹ In addition, the two most watched programs in the United States and Canada are currently Super Bowl XLIV and the recent 2010 Winter Olympic Hockey final, respectively; sport is reality.

Moreover, realism’s attraction can be seen in seemingly super-human platforms: the comic book industry. Like all tales, the values superhero stories instill and stand for are only relevant if they speak to current audiences, and all superhero audiences have one thing in common, they are indeed human. For example, Marvel’s attention to emotional realism awarded them great financial success. Comic book readers “showed enthusiasm for what [Stan] Lee called ‘realistic fantasy’ stories about superheroes who performed impossible feats but evinced believable human qualities and failings ... If not quite ‘believable,’ these stories at least took place in a world more relevant to the audience.”³² The epitome of emotional realism for the young comic book audience has been

Spiderman. Comic historian Bradford Wright explains, “Peter Parker furnished readers with an instant point of identification. All but the most emotionally secure adolescents could relate to Peter’s self-absorbed obsessions with rejection, inadequacy, and loneliness.”³³ Comic book artist John Romita notes D.C. Comics never understood the key to Marvel’s success; their “characters were becoming human.”³⁴

Recent ethnographic studies by David Morely, Ien Ang, and Janice Radway offer key insights into the importance and appeal of realism. I use findings in their research in order to create my own qualitative framework for investigating the reception of historical films. Below, I explore how realism can aid our understanding of historical realism in the reception of historical films.

While investigating family viewing within the home, David Morley discovered that social roles played a larger role in viewing preferences than gender.³⁵ Furthermore, while masculinity identified itself with “factual” programs—news, documentaries, and sports—and femininity identified itself with preferences for fictional programs, there were systematic exceptions to this rule as educated women and working women found themselves more interested in factual programs.³⁶ The disapproval of fictional programs by socially placed men or women along with the penchant for needing to learn during leisure activities fits well into Ien Ang’s conception of the ideology of mass culture. For those who adhere to this ideology, mass culture, and possibly leisure itself, is bad unless one is bettering oneself. Factual or seemingly pedagogical programs have a higher status than programs of *mere* entertainment. Lastly, Morley’s work on family television is complimented by James Lull’s work *Inside Family Viewing*, which partially focuses on

the media's role in creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships.³⁷ Lull's work on family viewing will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter that focuses on family viewing and historical film reception (Chapter 5).

In addition to Morley's findings concerning factual programs within the family, Ien Ang provides a mechanism for examining historical films beyond entertainment with her delineation of empirical, classical, and emotional realism.³⁸ Empirical realism is the comparison of material realities "in" and "outside" the text. Classical realism is borrowed from film theory to designate the conventions of moving images to resemble the flow of reality, mainly the natural and physical laws associated with causation. Ang notices that both empirical and classical realism are cognitive opposed to the last type of realism, emotional realism. Emotional realism, paraphrasing Ang, is the act of discerning concrete situations and complications as symbolic representations of a more general living experience.³⁹

These three types of realism relate to the four subgenres of historical film—*historical-entertainment*, *period*, *faction*, and *bio/eventpic*. The reader might observe that this all seems very theoretical and may question its relevance to a discussion of ethnography. However, Ang's delineation of realism is paramount in the analyses of audience member's responses to historical films. Degrees of fiction, a formal characteristic of texts, can be linked to degrees of realism, an ethnographic characteristic more easily discerned through audience members' responses. Who is to say that audience members will designate *The Last Samurai* as a period film as I have? Furthermore, do audiences actually view films and delineate them in terms of these four

subgenres? It is clear they do, to varying degrees, and these subgenres are useful tools for analyzing both the formal and ethnographic elements of viewer reception. By combining structuralist and semiological approaches to texts with ethnographic findings, we can rid ourselves of the pitfalls of believing texts are both over-determined and infinitely polysemic. Moreover, another question arises: how powerful is the attraction of empirical and emotional realism? As noted in Chapter 3, it would appear this power is strong as filmmakers use historical realism to advertise their products amongst competition. The three types of realism identified by Ang serve as a bridge between audiences and the fictional characteristics of historical films.

With the exception of the *historical-entertainment* subgenre, the *period*, *faction*, and *bio/eventpic* film will always use the production ploys of classical realism: the flow of reality, specifically the natural and physical laws associated with causation. The key element of delineating historical films lies in their use of empirical realism and emotional realism, for empirical realism within a historical film can encompass both material substances—architecture, geography, etc.—and historical characters. Meanwhile, emotional realism within a historical film can encompass both documented events and symbolic representations of general living experiences. The addition of history adds the possible addition of historical characters and events in order to strengthen realism's affect.

For clarification, the *period* film focuses on emotional realism from general living experiences and empirical realism solely from material objects. The *faction* film blends fictional characters with empirical characters, empirical materials, and emotional

situations; this is, no doubt, why the faction film is the most complicated subgenre. The *bio/eventpic* encompasses empirical realism at both the material and character level while strengthening emotional realism through the representation of documented events (Figure 2).

| Historical Subgenre | Classical Realism | Empirical Realism | | Emotional Realism | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Material | Character | Documented events | Representative events |
| Historical entertainment | (more often than not) | | | | yes |
| Period | yes | yes | | | yes |
| Faction | yes | yes | yes/no | yes/no | yes |
| Biopic/Eventpic | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |

Figure 2. Subgenres of historical film and their relation to realism.

Most importantly, empirical and emotional realism are transformed into *historical capital*—dates, events, and characters of a historical period—with the addition of temporality. What makes each of these historically real is not only that they existed, but that they existed in a specific time and place. This holds true for events as well; they happened.

In addition to Morley’s findings on factual programs within the family and Ang’s discussion of empirical, classical, and emotional realism, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* offers external validation that audiences believe that they learn cultural “knowledge” and “facts” by reading texts; most importantly, they see this as a

legitimizing factor. Due to the simple prose writing and narrative structure, readers believe they are reading historical “facts” that can be used at a later date. The significance lies in the fact that the readers *believe* they are learning and cite this learning as an industrious act of value. Furthermore, while Radway establishes that women enjoy learning factual data from long historical, she also notes that editors are aware that instruction is a principle function of Romance novels for their readers.⁴⁰ This is relevant to my research as two of my research participants discuss Romance novels and their depiction of history in comparison to historical films serving the same function.

Methodology: Media Ethnography and Historical Films

I use the above research findings to compliment my own methodology, and throughout this thesis I have been stressing the importance of a folkloric perspective and a uses and gratifications model in performing such ethnography. David Machin explains there are two main reasons for ethnographic studies of media: ethnography finds the finer details of the ways in which people live with media more generally, and ethnography observes and seizes real instances of social phenomena.⁴¹ Moreover, Machin restates my emphasis for discovering rather than speculating about social phenomena, “Further, if we are imposing a model of what we assume that social we are investigating is like, are we really investigating anything?”⁴² Lastly, since ethnography stresses the contexts of investigation, it is a qualitative approach to gathering data that raises concerns about representation. Such studies deal with target samples in order to examine specific questions and issues. Bird clarifies, “And we should not agonize unnecessarily about pure ‘holism’ as a goal. Few anthropologists study complete, self-contained societies any

more (if they ever did), but write ethnographies that explore specific questions and issues.” She continues, a “holistic perspective emerges in the attempt to see these questions and issues in context, and linked to other aspects of the culture.”⁴³

Additionally, it is imperative to realize the benefits and limitations of one’s methods. As folklorist Bruce Jackson notes in regard to fieldwork, “Every question implies a category of answer, and every machine limits the field of acceptable response. The questions we ask and the machines we use do not merely provide data; they also structure the data we get.”⁴⁴ Methods matter because they shape our conclusions, not because they lead to transparent truths.⁴⁵ For example, I categorize my methodology for this project as a media approach. In other words, I begin the search for evidence of historical viewings through observations and by asking the interviewees about their general habits of watching moving images. I began the group interview with an open-ended question that asked for clarification on why the family members considered themselves part of a “movie family.” On the contrary, I could have begun the interview with a question regarding the family member’s feeling about history, which I would have termed a historical approach. Ironically, my methodology begins with a discussion of media and moves towards historical films and historical consciousness. I could have easily reversed these concepts, and undoubtedly, I would have gathered different data. The reasoning for choosing the media approach resulted from my interest in folklore studies and media culture, in general, and historical films, in particular.

As noted, the representational audience that I am investigating in depth is a small family that defines itself as a “movie family.” Members of the family include the

daughter, Jessica Gray (28), the son, Jason Gray (30), the mother, Lori Gray (54), and the father, Rick Gray (57). Also, Jason Gray is married to Heather Gray (32). Heather took part in the group interview, but individual interviews were not performed with Heather as she was pregnant and gave birth to her new son Daniel Gray. All members of the family are Caucasian. Rick and Lori can be classified as middle-class, and Rick is a pilot for a major airline. Jason, Heather, and Jessica are all college graduates and employed. In addition, I have a special relationship with this family as Jessica is presently my fiancée. As far as logistics, Rick and Lori live in upstate New York during the warmer months and spend time in Florida during the colder months. Jason and Heather live in upstate New York, and Jessica is currently living near Boston, Massachusetts.

The main reasons for writing about this family are threefold. First, as Jessica is my fiancée, I am able to examine people with whom I am familiar and a micro-culture in which I already participate. And as such, “‘fieldwork’ has actually started years before.”⁴⁶ Bird explains, this allows “the native researcher to focus attention on phenomena that they are already quite familiar, whether the context is India or the United States.”⁴⁷ Second, as Lull’s work on family television shows, the watching of moving images serves various functions for families and small groups. As a subtheme of the proposed study deals with additional avenues of folklore research, the general findings about this family and the importance of moving images to their lives serve as examples of future research possibilities for folklorists outside “motif spotting” and fan ethnography. Additionally, everyday observations have made me aware of the fact that small groups outside of family contexts can also be situated as “movie friends” or “television friends.”

Families are certainly not the only type of small group in which moving images are central to their culture and identity. It is important to remember that this family is a representation of one type of culture in which the watching of moving images serves a central role. Also, the family members are all college graduates who are no longer in school, unlike the school subjects of previous studies (Chapter 3).⁴⁸ As such, these findings relate to the interests of public historians, such as Barton and Levstik, who explore how citizens think about the past in their own terms.⁴⁹ This study presents findings relevant to this question and offers a new method for historians to perform similar qualitative studies in other contexts. In other words, this study attempts to address the question: how and where do working, educated citizens learn their history and why?

For this research project, I performed one group interview with the research participants, focusing on their general viewing habits, and I observed the viewing of several films through participant observation. I then performed individual interviews with the participants to discuss historical films in more specific detail. Because I literally live on the opposite side of the country (Eugene, Oregon) from my participants, my fieldwork was performed using a variety of methods and tools. I originally contacted the research participants through email, received their consent letters, and then had them carry out a small activity that discerned whether or not the individuals separated historical films from other genres of films. I performed this step by simply asking the research participants to categorize their film collections into their own genre schemes. The benefits of this method over other commonly practiced methods is it allows research

participants to categorize their films in their own ways—opposed to me imposing categorizations and defining films as historical films for them. Fan ethnographies generally categorize the viewers based on specific cultural objects (e.g., Jenkins and *Star Trek*, Radway and Romance novels, Ang and *Dallas* the soap opera) rather than allowing the participants to categorize their viewing preferences and habits in their own terms in relation to other media objects. By allowing research participants to categorize their films in this personal way, I am able to compare the reasons behind their selection and viewing of historical films in relation to other genres of film. Also, their categorizations provide broader data about the ways in which viewers classify and think about their film collection.

After the initial email and response to the categorization activity, I performed an in-person group interview with the family to contextualize their viewing behaviors and experiences in order to establish and situate an in depth discussion of their categorization and viewing of historical films. This group interview also allowed me the opportunity to begin questioning the family on the genre schemes they used to categorize their films. I began the general discussion of historical films in relation to other film genres in this group interview. Most importantly, I discovered whether or not the individuals differentiate historical films within the genre itself by questioning the individuals about their general perception of historical films and the use of history in these films. This group interview was highlighted and contextualized by general everyday observations that I experienced and observed in my time participating with the family.

I performed this group interview and the individual interviews as conversational styled interviews following the strategy of Kathryn Anderson, communications scholar, and Dana Jack, education and psychology scholar; the key element here is the ability of the interviewee to discuss his or her own interests in a conversational manner.⁵⁰ As Anderson and Jack state, “The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell [his or her] own story in [his or her] own terms.”⁵¹ In other words, conversational styled interviews allow for flexibility and digression on the part of the narrator.

After this initial in-person group interview, I carried out interviews using a variety of tools and interview formats, such as in-person interviews, email interviews, and instant messaging interviews. It is important to understand when and why it is possible to use new media formats, especially if the goal is execute a conversational styled interview.⁵² In other words, it is imperative to know when new media provides what Bruce Jackson calls “useful-fieldwork—fieldwork from which the researcher learns something and by which valid information is obtained.”⁵³

New media provides various benefits for those engaged in fieldwork and interviewing. For example, while I was transcribing the family group interview, I came to a point where my fiancée was speaking, and I suddenly realized this portion called for an important follow up question. I immediately stopped transcribing, asked my fiancé a question concerning the interview using instant messaging, and then she responded. I easily copied and pasted the typed-text into my transcription notes, making a note of the

second transaction. This additional and crucial follow up question was asked and responded to within a few minutes. This example illustrates the extent to which new media can benefit the research process in terms of transcription, distance, and time. This follow up question not only added information to my transcription but improved the *quality* and clarified the information already present.

In “New Media Technology’s Qualitative Effect on Interviews,” I argue, “If new media platforms ultimately add original data or aid existing data in order to clarify the research of the person or people of interest, the *raison d’être* of our research, then one should use them ... As folklorists, we may use these systems, while always being cognizant of their capabilities and drawbacks. In the end, folklore studies is as much about the researcher and his or her methods as it is about the people it explores and attempts to understand.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, as Bruce Jackson states, “The machines and their products are never more than tools to capture information which in turn will add to our knowledge and increase our understanding.”⁵⁵ The following two chapters examine the information gathered from my fieldwork in order to add knowledge and aid our understanding of the reception and function of historical films.

Notes

¹ John O’Conner, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” 1201.

² It is not my intention to review the history of these theories here. My intention is only to draw out the relevant themes of these studies to popular perceptions of popular culture and audiences. For a concise introduction to mass culture theories, structuralism, and semiology with regards to popular culture, see Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

³ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming. (NY: Seabury, 1972), 120-167.

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- ⁴ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 67-75.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ⁶ David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 46.
- ⁷ Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, 107.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁹ Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, 60.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-58.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 51-51.
- ¹³ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), 16.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, 52-53.
- ¹⁷ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 66.
- ¹⁸ Ang, *Watching Dallas* 113.
- ¹⁹ Timothy Gibson, "Beyond Cultural Populism: Notes Toward the Critical Ethnography of Media Audiences." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24 (2000); 253 – 273.
- ²⁰ Ang, *Watching Dallas* 116.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York : New York University Press, 2006).
- ²³ For example Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. (London: Routledge, 2002); Lisa Lewis ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

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- ²⁴ Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym, *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009); Annette N Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space* Ethnographic alternatives book series (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998). S. Elizabeth Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ²⁵ S. Elizabeth Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 51.
- ²⁶ Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*, 121.
- ²⁷ Henry Jenkins, "Buying into American Idol," in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 59-92.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³¹ John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversion," *Television and New Media* 3, no. 3 (August 2002), 255-59; Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, "Understanding Reality TV," in *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-31; Ron Simon, "The Changing Definition of Reality Television" in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian Jeffrey Ross. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 179-200.
- ³² Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Ma: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 207.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 210.
- ³⁴ John Romita quoted in Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 224.
- ³⁵ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia Pub. Group, 1986), 146-147.
- ³⁶ Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, 162 – 163. Also, it is important to note that Morley himself states the respondents answers may have been slightly skewed as he performed group interviews rather than individual interviews whereas pressures from other family members may not have been felt. For his discussion of this issue see Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, 166-167.
- ³⁷ James Lull, *Inside Family Viewing: Ethnographic Research on Television's Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- ³⁸ The definitions that follow for empirical, classical, and emotional realism are based on Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 36-44.
- ³⁹ Ang, *Watching Dallas*, 44.

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- ⁴⁰ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 86-118.
- ⁴¹ David Machin, *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002), 85.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁴³ S. Elizabeth Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*, 7.
- ⁴⁴ Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 4.
- ⁴⁵ Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*, 9.
- ⁴⁶ Alasutari quoted in Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*, 7.
- ⁴⁷ Bird, *Audience in Everyday Life*, 7.
- ⁴⁸ For example, see Keith Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 17; Alan S. Marcus, ed. *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film* (Charlotte, NC: IAP-Information Age Pub, 2007).
- ⁴⁹ Barton, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, 17.
- ⁵⁰ Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *Womens's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11-26.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁵² Vincent Bisson, "New Media Technology's Qualitative Effect on Interviews" (paper presented at the annual meeting of American Folklore Society, Boise, Id, Oct 23, 2009).
- ⁵³ Jackson, *Fieldwork*, 1.
- ⁵⁴ Bisson, "New Media Technology's Qualitative Effect on Interviews."
- ⁵⁵ Jackson, *Fieldwork*, 108.

CHAPTER V

A “MOVIE FAMILY” AND HISTORICAL FILMS

A “Movie Family”

As noted, the research participants for this study partially define their family as a movie family. Movies serve as a central part of their micro-culture. While the overall aim of this project is to examine the function and reception of historical films, one goal of this project is to explore how movies play a central role in interpersonal relationships and within small groups. This goal focuses on film *as* folklore as it stresses the cultural activity around and long after viewing events. This chapter can be divided into two sections: a cultural exploration of movies within family culture, and the reception of historical films by the family members.

James Lull provides a typology for the social uses of television, and this typology can be extrapolated to other media, such as film. This typology is an invaluable asset that helps to illustrate the ways in which the members of the Gray family use film within their own movie culture. Lull stresses, “It is somewhat arbitrary to distinguish between the personal and interpersonal uses of television, however the inventory and explication of the uses of television described here focus directly on their communicative value as social resources.”¹ Lull divides the social uses of television into two camps: the structural and relational. The two structural uses of television are television as an environmental resource and television as a behavior regulator. As an environmental

resource television serves to “create a flow of constant background noise which moves to the foreground when individuals or groups desire.”² For example, both Jessica and Lori will often leave the television on while doing work. Jessica, specifically, will throw in a movie while cleaning her room, doing chores, or finishing up work for her job. I also noticed that Rick will leave the television running while he is preparing his flight plans or doing other paper work.

As a behavior regulator, Lull notes that television “punctuates time and family activity such as mealtime, bedtime, chore time, homework periods, and a host of related activities and duties.”³ As will be described below, the watching of moving images for the Gray family is simply “family time,” and sometimes television schedules regulate when one will watch (e.g., Sunday afternoons and football) while on other occasions movie time is influenced by other factors, such as a rainy day.

It is Lull’s discussion of the relational uses of television that should be of interest to folklorists, for these relational uses describe the ways in which small groups—in this case families—use media for interpersonal relationships, contact, and activities. There are four divisions of the relational uses of television: communication facilitation, affiliation/avoidance, social learning, and competence/dominance. As a communication facilitator, media and their narratives are used as illustrative examples. Lull writes that media can be used as “primary known-in-common referents in order to clarify issues.”⁴ As a communication facilitator, media can also be used to ease the tension in a room or as a resourceful way to entertain house guests. Media can also help “some family members clarify interpersonally their attitudes and values.”⁵ Several examples of film as a

communication facilitator will be illustrated below in the family members' discussions—such as quoting films, reminiscing about memorable viewing events, or referring to films in relation to other people and activities.

Affiliation/avoidance refers to the use of media for interpersonal contact or avoidance. Simply think of the stereotypical date night: dinner and a movie. Two general observations will briefly clarify this point. First, while the family and I relaxed to watch one of their traditional holiday films, each of the couples spent the time nestled next to his/her significant other. Second, when Rick fiddles with paperwork or prepares his next flight plan, he often goes into the secluded den, puts on the television, and works without distraction. This notion of affiliation/avoidance relates in great detail to the discussion of dyads and media viewing below.

Social learning as a relational use of media simply implies that we learn from media. Media offers propaganda, role models, or even educational topics. Lull writes of the latter, "Parents encourage their children to watch television game shows, public television, or network specials as substitute school experiences."⁶ Social learning clearly relates to the notion of media functioning as pedagogical devices. However, Lull's statement serves as evidence that some shows are more often examined in this light while others are not. The constant and persistent notion that historical films are merely entertainment evinces this common practice. Moreover, Lull focuses more specifically on the interpersonal uses of television. My examination of the uses and reception of historical films within the family focuses on both the personal and interpersonal aspects of historical film reception.

The last of Lull's relational uses of media is competence/dominance: viewers can illustrate their competence by demonstrating knowledge to others. In addition, individuals can demonstrate knowledge over the television itself, thus expressing their own dominance of the issues. Other ways of illustrating dominance include the selection of shows to watch or the restriction of television use (e.g., a parent removing television privileges from a child). Competence and dominance were prevalent elements in my own observations of and discussions with the Gray family. For example, Rick may often illustrate his competence of aircraft knowledge in films or television shows, Jessica may divulge scientific facts regarding marine life, and Jason, as a martial arts instructor, may critique fight scenes.

Overall, the typology of the social uses of television can aid in clarifying the ways in which families, other small groups, and individuals use media. While this study focuses on a "movie family," the four relational uses of television—communication facilitation, affiliation/avoidance, social learning, and competence/dominance—can be extrapolated from television to offer a framework for this discussion. I will highlight these four uses of media as I present a cultural exploration of movies within family culture, and I will begin by examining the family's self-identification as a "movie family."

When asked what Jessica [the daughter] means when she describes her family as a movie family, she replied:

What I mean about that is typically when we want to do something together at night, we usually try to pick a movie to watch. We will also quote movies on a regular day to day basis. We'll quote them and then ask what movie it is, kind of a back and forth. Even if we're not asking, if someone quotes a movie, someone

else chimes in about what movie it is and comes out with another quote. So, I feel like our conversations a lot of time end up revolving around movies in some way or shape of form. I just feel like we are a movie family, and we enjoy watching movies and kind of commenting on them.

It is clear that Jessica's comments fit well with James Lull's notion of media serving as a communication facilitator. While quotations fuel conversations, the act of watching movies as a family creates shared experiences and memorable events as well. In a sense, movies and the viewing event can become "family capital." By family capital, I mean to stress that both the movies and the memories associated with the viewing event are drawn upon to provoke conversations, memories, or stories that take on significant meaning.

Jessica continues to stress the watching of movies in terms of memories of shared experiences:

We revolve around movies because we watch them together. When I see a movie it makes me think of times we've watched it or quote them together. If I'm watching it alone and I watch something like *Spaceballs* or *Men in Tights* or *Princess Bride*, I just think of quoting stuff. And even sometimes I just think of, 'Ohh my god when Jason and I watched this we did ...' I just think of things like that. Even *Armageddon*, I think of the one time that I was actually laying on the couch [and] we were together [her and Jason] and the first time I ever, ever in my life cried during a movie. I was balling at the end of the movie ... I just think of those times, and I like thinking back on fun times or times when we've been together, especially when I'm alone. So I just really associate movies with my family.

While the family defines itself partially as a movie family, Rick [the father] was clear to stress that the act of watching movies stressed quality over quantity, "I was just going to say, believe it or not, if you were to probably compare us with a lot of other families, maybe except for this one [referring to Jessica], I don't think ... it sounds like

we're a family where all we ever do is watch movies. And I don't think we watch that many movies." Lori [the mother] commented on Rick's response, "No, we don't," and Rick continued, "As a whole, she [Jessica] watches a lot when she's alone." Jason [the son] added his take on the quantity of time spent watching films, "I mean, we don't spend all day watching or we'll watch one at night after a full day of doing stuff as a family." Lastly, Jessica had her say, "At night before we go to bed after we play cards or do something we'll typically stick in a movie and watch it. I'm not saying like all day long. If it's raining we'll maybe put something in, but we do other stuff—when I'm alone especially. I mean, I watch movies all the time just cause I have nothing ... I can't play cards by myself."

Here in Rick's and the rest of the family members' comments, the ideology of mass culture and the implication that leisure activity is idle activity comes to surface. Throughout the group interview, Rick was clear to stress that the family did not watch movies constantly and that "movies are the lazy man's way out." He also commented, "When we're together, got some time to kill, and we want to do something brainless, we put on one of the movies we know we all like." While the family members mention they do not constantly watch film, it is Rick who consistently throws in belittling comments here and there. Rick's responses are socially consistent with David Morley's findings that heads of households, specifically working class males, tag media entertainment as unproductive cultural activities.⁷ As I will illustrate throughout this chapter, it is clear the Rick enjoys the time spent with the family during these activities. His quips concerning film are actually sociologically triggered than actually practiced.

In addition, the family's desire to clarify the amount of time they spend watching movies seems to raise issues regarding their status as a movie family. One could contest that film may not seem to be a central part of their daily life. However, it is clear that the family recognizes not only the watching of films as part of their culture but also the memories, quotes, and activities that are generated from the viewing events as well. The members of the family do not just sit, watch a movie, and then leave after being briefly entertained. They carry the movie and the moments they shared together with them, and they continue to build on these moments to construct part of their identity as a family who owns shared experiences.

When I asked how the family decides what films to watch, Rick joked, "There's dictatorial rule." After the laughter, Lori explained, "It depends on what mood we are in. We decide, 'Do we need action, do we need mystery, do we need' ...", and Jessica commented, "That's when we go to the genres. 'What are you feeling today?' Then it's a majority decision. Then we'll start listing off movies, and we'll go with that one. On the rare occasion that dad wins ... its either Western or War." Jason explained the format for choosing rentals, "Now, what's fun is when just one or two people get sent to the video store to rent one. Then you bring it back and you always try to find something that you wanted to see, but you also try to figure out what everyone else wanted to see. And you never get it right [he laughs]." Jessica explained this is why they "typically bring two" home, and Rick joked, "Especially when you bring Veggie Tales [a computer animated Children's show]!" Jason commented on the different interests between him and his sister and their parents, "This is the one to watch tonight. This is the one mom and dad

can watch later after they complain about the one we picked up and about how awful the movies are we like.”

While the family jests about their individual movie choices, it is also clear that they have movies that are considered “family movies.” These are movies that someone in the family has seen and believes the other family members will like, or these are movies that they all saw together. If they seem to all enjoy the film, then these films will usually be bought for the others and given to them on Christmas, their birthday, or for other occasions. As Jessica explains, “Oh yeah, every year, everybody has the same movies every Christmas ... For the most part, we tend to like the same movies.” Lori chimed in, “Well, if we all like them and since we’re not together, we want everyone to have it, so that would be Christmas presents for everybody.” Rick explained the type of movies they all enjoy and will watch when the family is together:

We watch, I don’t know, lots of times, *Pirates of the Caribbean* or stuff like that. We get together and we like to watch some of those movies, even *National Treasure*, *King Arthur*. Movies that we all found we like. So, it’s one of those things that when we’re together and we got some time to kill, and want to do something brainless, we put on one of the movies we know we all like. And movies like *Pirates* we always get a laugh out of. So, it’s a good way to do it.

They continued to discuss the importance of movie time being family time, and Rick transitioned the conversation into their holiday traditions, “Especially at the holidays, there’s nothing better during the holidays then to have a fire in the fireplace, have the Christmas lights on, put on a Christmas movie, and have all your family there.” Jessica added, “Yea, its unwinding, not worrying about it, the holidays are just family. It’s really our family oriented gathering.” They even have a select group of films that

they watch every holiday season: *Scrooge*, *Christmas Carol*, *White Christmas*, *Little Drummer Boy*, and *Rudolph*. Rick and Lori further commented that they were films they watched when they were younger, “I think *Rudolph* I watched when I was young and everything ... and *White Christmas*. Well, my mom liked *White Christmas*.” Lori added, “Yeah, all the movies we watched as youngsters.” Rick and Lori watched these films when they were younger, and as Rick noted, they watched these films with Jason and Jessica “ever since they were knee high to a grasshopper.” Even though members of the family live in different states, they usually manage to get together during the holiday season to spend part of the season together. They each explained they watch the films at least once throughout the holiday season together, and Lori added, “We don’t watch *Scrooge* without him [Rick].” Rick agreed, “*Scrooge*, *Scrooge* we watch once ... and that’s with everyone together.” And in traditional jesting fashion, Jason commented on Jessica’s distaste for one of the films, “*It’s a Wonderful Life* we like to watch when we really want to annoy Jess.” Jess replied, “When I’m never anywhere in sight, cause I will go upstairs and read. I won’t sit and watch it.” During the interview Jason could not help but get throw in a one-liner and quoted the movie, “EVERYTIME A BELL RINGS AN ANGEL GETS ITS WINGS,” and mid-quote Jessica and Lori chimed in and repeated the quote. Both the films they must watch together and the film Jessica refuses to watch, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, illustrate the contact/avoidance element of Lull’s social typology of television. The family comes together to spend quality time together during *Scrooge*, and Jessica and Heather bolt upon the idea of watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

The family's discussion of *Scrooge* led to an examination of variation between the television depiction of the film and the DVD. Lori explained, "It was on TV and they always cut off the ending. We didn't know that movie had another section to it until we bought the DVD." Jessica clarified the difference between the two versions, "He's [Scrooge] in this red looking coffin on the ground, and all of sudden he wakes up and he's choking, and I was like, 'I don't know where it goes from there to there.' Until you actually see it and see the whole in hell scene. And you're going, 'Oh, that makes more sense. He's getting the chain wrapped around him and then he wakes up with the bed sheets wrapped around him.' It makes more sense." In other words, the television adaptation deleted a scene that confused the family for some time, and it was not until they bought the DVD that their curiosity was satisfied.

A few years ago I spent Christmas with Jessica and her family, and we spent one traditional night watching *Scrooge* together as a family. Each of the three couples sat together while watching the movie, illustrating the use of the media for contact. The family also had their traditional holiday wassel drink. When the scene depicting Scrooge in hell came up, the family had the same conversation they continue to have every year about the DVD's and television version's contrasting variations, illustrating another example of the media as communication facilitator.

Christmas is not the only time the family watches certain films. They also watch films during Easter, such as *King of Kings* or *10 Commandments*. Jason explains he and Heather have even began their own tradition, "Ironically enough, Heather and I have gotten into the tradition of watching *Veggie Tales Easter Carol*, which is very similar to

Scrooge but done at Easter time, and Veggie Tale style.” And Jessica commented on this new tradition in regards to their pregnancy, “And it’s Veggie Tales. Now you’ll be able to watch it with the kids!” As Rick and Lori watched films with their parents and then films with their children, so too will their children watch traditional films with their sons and daughters.

One specific memory was brought up with regards to a Christmas film, but it was not because it was Christmas. During the interview and out of nowhere, Jessica exclaimed, “*Yogi’s first Christmas!*” and explained how her and her father, Rick, watched the film—what was perhaps an exaggeration—around twenty seven times after she got her tonsils out. The following conversation then took place between her and the rest of the family:

Rick: I never wanted to see Yogi again.

Lori: But you did.

Jessica: He hibernated for a long time. I love that movie.

Lori: I’m surprised we didn’t wear it [VHS] out.

Jessica: It is. Don’t worry. It is.

Rick: What I want to know is: you were working a part time job. I’m working my full-time career job, and I got saddled with her watching *Yogi’s First Christmas* twenty-seven times while you went off to work. How did that work?

Jessica: Because I was daddy’s little giiiiirl.

Lori: Because you were off. You were off at that time.

Jessica: I was daddy’s little girl and you had to be with me. I was five and I was coughing up blood ...

Rick: The things I do ...

Jessica: ... and I had pound puppies in both hands and I was watching *Yogi’s First Christmas*, eating ice-cream.

Rick: Over and over and over and over and over and over again.

These are the sort of personal experience narratives, memories, and associations this “movie family” has with their movies. Jessica even brought *Yogi’s First Christmas* down to Florida when she had to have neck surgery a few years ago. She knew she would be out for awhile and explained to her father, “In honor of you I watched it. We brought it for after my neck surgery, but you were gone. I did bring it up so it would be ready, available after my neck surgery. I was like how can you not. I’ll be in bed longer than when I had my tonsils out.” Overall, these types of personal experience narratives, memories, and associations are prevalent amongst other small groups as well, including families, friends, and coworkers who make moving image a central part of their daily lives.

As Jessica alluded to in her explanation of their movie family, quotes often spur conversations or guessing games as to which movie the quote belongs to. She and her brother, Jason, are particularly fond of “speaking quote” or playing the “quote challenge” game. Jessica explained, “... even if we’re not watching it, we are talking about them or quoting them. So even if we’re playing a game, somehow we get on the topic of movies, which is why I think maybe we’re not always watching them but we talk about them.” Furthermore, when I earlier asked Jessica what she meant by “movie family,” Lori immediately commented, “Those two [Jason and Jessica] can quote any movie anytime.” Jason commented, “Not mentioning that dad’s always said that if you take all the movie knowledge out of our heads, they’d be flat.” Jessica replied, “That too.”

Rick explained his feelings toward Jessica and Jason’s compulsion, “Well that’s what I was about to say. I was going to mention that I believe the only conscious thought

that you two ever have is a movie quote. I don't think you have a conscious thought of your own." Of course, Rick seems to be disparaging Jason and Jessica for their unproductive knowledge or habits. However, Morley and Lull's work on viewing preferences within the family along with Ang's concept of the ideology of mass culture provide evidence to question if these feelings are really just pressures of a patriarchal society that sees certain leisure activity as irresponsible of the duties of male providers in households. In fact, Rick's comments are sociologically based rather than actually practiced, for Rick enjoys jumping into the fray as well. He explains, "It's always a challenge of mine if I can get them because these two, that's all they ever do is quote movies. And I don't, believe it or not, watch that many movies, but if I can get them on a quote or something, makes my day, especially when it's her favorite movie." Jessica jumped into the conversation, and she and Rick began reminiscing:

Jessica: I get a kick out of it when you actually do, and then you look and your actually like, 'I quoted a line, what movie is it from?'

Rick: Especially when I get ya!

Jessica: Shutup! ... He didn't. I got it!

Rick: That made my day!

Jessica: I got it. It's just so frustrating that it took so long, cause its ugh. Coulda popped out the whole rest of the movie, quoted the entire rest of the movie, and I was still like, 'the name of the movie would be?'

Rick: You know we've done that. I can't remember a time when we didn't do that. When you guys were this high you were quoting movies.

Here Rick and Jessica are reminiscing over an instance where Rick quoted a line from one of Jessica's favorite movies, *White Christmas*. Rick's, as well as the other family members, use of movie quotes falls in line with Lull's relational uses of media. Movie quotes are used to affiliate with others through shared capital. It is clear that Rick enjoys

this “movie culture” and values the opportunities it provides to be close to his family—if only in jesting.

As the family member’s discussion shows, quoting movie lines is more than just reminiscing the good and memorable times they have spent together. It is also a way to challenge each other in their own folkloric game, illustrating the social use of media for competence and dominance—albeit in a lighthearted manner. To give the reader an idea of how pervasive the activity of quoting and challenging each other is, the following “quote challenge” took place mid-interview when Jason quoted a line:

Jason [quoting a movie in a goofy British accent]: ‘I haven’t quite figured that part out yet.’ ... don’t let me down on that one (speaking to Jessica).

Lori: They can not only quote movies, but they can quote them in the way the people talk.

Jessica: Oh freaking hell ... is it ...

Rick: There’s another one!

Jessica: No, I know it. ‘I haven’t quite figured that part out yet.’

Jason: Let it be known, Jess has just been stumped. AAAGAIN!

Jessica: Uhhhghh.

Rick: Wow, this is a new record.

Jessica: Uhhhgh.

Jason (quoting from the same movie): ‘I’m on the east side; I’m on the west side. It’s not exactly the Mississippi.’ [He laughs]

Jessica: Heh, yea. *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. Crap.

Rick: See that’s why I didn’t get it. Cause I [Jessica commented: Yea, you haven’t made it that far in that movie] never made it through that movie.

Jessica: Nope, you never made it that far.

Rick: I saw that movie for about ten minutes and took it out. Said, ‘Never, I don’t wanna ...’

After Rick’s comment, Jason and Jessica continued quoting the movie, practically finishing each other’s quote:

Jessica: 'Achoo. Bless you! Yup, must be him ... I am Asneeze, father of Achoo.'

Jason: 'Do you know Praying Mantis? You're looking at him.'

Jessica: 'What are you wearing under there? Practically nothing. Except that. I have a chastity belt. Mmmmmhmm ...'

Jason: 'It's an everlast ...'

Jessica: 'It's an everlast. I bet. Um ... darling. [Rick commented: See what I mean.] The key won't work. What? Call a locksmith! Call a locksmith!' Man. I can't believe that. That's just depressing [referring to her inability to remember Jason's quote immediately].

Rick: Stumped again.

Jessica [quoting the same film]: 'I challenge you to a duel. Waaatssssshh. I accept. Bom.' Fabulous!

Finally, I commented, "I just want to see if you're going to keep going," and Jessica replied, "With my quoting? I was thinking of another one. I was going to, and I was like, 'I can stop probably now.'" Of course, the quoting did not stop. And, as Jessica was quoting one film, one quote lead to an entirely new film:

Jessica: 'I'm guessing, I guess no one is coming ... I guess there was a ladder around here somewhere. Oh shit ... Oh shit. There goes the planet.'
Spaceballs.

Me: It just keeps going.

Lori: ... and going.

Jessica: When I said, 'Oh shit,' it just got me into *Spaceballs*, 'Oh shit. There goes the planet.' I can just quote from one to the next! I don't know! They just remind me of the next one!

The sheer ability of individuals, such as Jessica above, to remember lines is incredible, and it is reminiscent of the wonder expressed by folklorists when they encounter the ability of oral story tellers or oral historians to memorize phrases, events, and details. In fact, memorization and moving images are two important elements of historical film reception that will be discussed below. Some viewers, such as Jessica, are

visual learners, and this can have an impact on their historical consciousness both in and outside the classroom.

Dyads and Dyadic Traditions

Until now I have discussed films and their significance in regards to the family as a collective, but as Jason and Jessica's compulsion to quote films demonstrate, their relationship is quite intimate. Additionally, each of the family members has a unique and close relationship with each of the others. While folklorists examine folk groups, such as class based, occupational, ethnic, religious, or familial, the nominal societal relationship is the dyad, defined by Elliott Oring as "a more or less enduring interaction between two individuals who primarily relate to one another as persons rather than as occupants of social statuses."⁸ To clarify, while Jason and Jessica are brother and sister and members within the family, they also have their own unique and significant relationship, and as exemplified above, their fondness for films is one basis for their bond. Their "quote challenges" have become a dyadic tradition that also has been incorporated into the wider family, and as Oring explains, "Dyads regularly utilize ideas and behaviors common to the larger society, but endow these with unique characteristics and meanings."⁹ Oring designates these traditions as "behavior or linguistic routines that are generated, endowed with significance, and maintained within the dyadic relationship."¹⁰ These traditions have three meaningful effects. First, they test the sensitivity of immediate experiences as shared significance. Second, they symbolize intimacy through uniquely shared experiences. Third, they solidify past experiences into a recurrent and significant relationship built on shared experience and value.¹¹ I use the term dyadic traditions

loosely to designate shared experiences that belong to two individuals but can also be related by others. For example, Jessica and her father's, Rick, shared experience of *Yogi's First Christmas* is not secretive or esoteric, but it is *their* experience. However, as Oring notes, dyadic traditions can be ephemeral, and if Rick decides to never see this film with his daughter again, this will move from tradition to memory.

Most importantly, Oring notes, "... it is the spirit of play that strongly imprints the culture of this social relationship, and we must be prepared to acknowledge that play and humor are important languages for the expression of intimacy and affection."¹² There is no doubt that play and humor are strong elements of the "quote challenge" or "quote sparring" that takes place between Jason and Jessica. Interestingly, it appears that Rick enjoys the capability of sparring with his two children, hence solidifying his relationship with them.

Of course, dyadic traditions are not solely linguistic but behavioral as well. This is evidential in the family members' viewing preferences. As Jason noted when renting movies, "This is the one to watch tonight. This is the one mom and dad can watch later after they complain about the one we picked up and about how awful the movies are we like." Lori explains her and Jessica's watching habits in opposition to her husband's, "He [Rick] watches his War. I have to watch all my love stories without him; I can watch them with her [Jess]." Jessica commented, "Typically she'll watch them with me. When I'm home," and Rick noted, "I'll put the action ones on alone, and turn them up loud, get the house verberating."

Additionally, after Jason jokingly noted that Merlin, Jessica's dog, enjoys football, Rick noted, "Yes, there are things that take precedence over movies, like football," and Jessica commented, "... maybe not in your household [talking to Jason and Heather]." Jessica and her father enjoy a boisterous Sunday afternoon screaming at the television watching football. This is one of their dyadic traditions, yet Jason explains, "No, but I'm happy to sit down and [Jessica commented, "Which is good."] watch it when we're together ..." Jessica finished his sentence importing the significance of these times, "When we're together ... it's all just family time, really."

Moreover, while not specifically a dyad as it relates to three people, Lori acknowledges her attempt to create a fun atmosphere for her children through humor and fun while Rick, a pilot, was away on flights, "But we [Lori, Jason, and Jessica] always used to do things together ... when he [Rick] was gone on flights because I was trying to make it a fun time for them. So we would watch a lot of movies. That's how we would really get into some of the movies. We were taping VHS tapes and everything." This "triad" confirms the use of film for play and fun in order to alleviate the melancholy of a missed loved one. In addition this "triadic" tradition strengthened their relationships through shared experiences with value. Films, both in the theater and home, are powerful stimulants for dyadic, or even "triadic," traditions as often times they are excuses for intimate encounters, such as dates, or friendly relaxation. These shared experiences can often provide "couple/friend/family capital" for testifying to the uniqueness and existence of relationships.

A "Movie Family's" Historical Reception

During the group interview, I moved the discussion from the importance and role of film within their family to their individual categorization of films. The members of the family were previously asked to categorize all of their movies by their own definition based on genre and attraction. To clarify, Lori and Rick, Heather and Jason, and Jessica have their own collection of movies. They were asked to categorize their collections individually, and due to their status as a "movie family," all three of these groups have several of the same films. Most importantly, their categorization of films served as a nuance to the ways in which they felt about their films at a general level. For example, Lori, Heather, and Jessica were the only ones to use the term Historical/History as a genre type. Jason and Rick, on the other hand, used less specific terms to define their films, such as Comedy, Action, Adventure, Battle, Humor, etc.

However, while Rick often insisted, "I'm simple, it's just Action," or listed another type of genre, one genre did stick out among his more straightforward terms: America at War. As Rick explained, "That's a big interest. WWII especially is a big interest of mine, historically. So, I put a lot of that stuff together there." Additionally, Jessica asked her father if he would put *Saving Private Ryan* in America at War instead of Action, and he replied, "Mmmhmmm. Yeah. Cause even though the story of Private Ryan is fiction, the D-Day was pretty accurate that they showed, and you know some of the other stuff, so yeah." He continued explaining his reason for America at War as a genre for him, "And I do all of the American wars though, like *Gettysburg*, *The Patriot* as the Revolutionary War stuff. I'll put that as America at War. It's just my separate

category for that stuff. And then, the other one, the Action, Blood, Gore ... whatever [he laughs]. Lots of noise, 'yay!'" Rick does not initially consider history to be the major attraction in several of his other films, but he does have his own historical interest. Here, Rick even comments that the story of Private Ryan in the film *Saving Private Ryan* is fiction, yet the film has meaning for him as a representation of World War II and D-Day. Rick is illustrating his awareness that *Saving Private Ryan* is a *period* film.

Jessica commented that she would have put *Saving Private Ryan* with her military films because it has real aspects "but it's not necessarily realistic so I would have still just put it with military." Jessica is also illustrating that *Saving Private Ryan* contains emotional realism and period realism although "it's not necessarily realistic," referring to the characters and some events. After mentioning she has another military film called *Tears of the Sun*, she explains why this film—like *Saving Private Ryan*—is a *period* film opposed to a *bio/eventpic*. She explains a scene where a Special-Ops team helps refugees in Nigeria:

They have real stuff in that [film] too ... the scene where the people [refugees] that were walking with them [Special-Ops] were crying. They were real tears because they were remembering when they were in that situation. Because a lot of them were actually taken out of that situation. And so, you watch the commentary on it or you go into the bonus features and they start talking about this stuff, and they were there and talking about how this is all realistic. This was happening. *Although it's not necessarily based on a true story, that stuff really was happening. It's not like they're true characters. But the whole philosophy behind it was happening.* These people that were in the movie actually went through that and experienced it. So they re-experienced it in the movie. And so a lot of those scenes were raw *emotion* because they flat out said they almost couldn't deal with it because it was really the same thing that they saw before. So it was really interesting when I read or listened to that and looked at it. But that's still in my military section.

This film, like other period films, is not based on real people but real situations.

Although Jessica places this film in a “military section,” she discusses the film in great detail with respect to emotional realism and also as a *period* film—illustrating the usefulness of Ang’s three types of realism in ethnography.

With regards to *historical-entertainment* films, it is interesting to note that none of the research participants designated *A Knight’s Tale* (briefly discussed in Chapter 3) in a Historical/History genre categorization. Although Rick and Jason did not label any of their films historical—with the exception of Rick’s America at War films—Lori, Heather, and Jessica, who had History/Historical categorizations, labeled the film as Comedy, Adventure, or Action. Despite the fact that a discussion of *A Knight’s Tale* never took place during the group interview, Jessica commented on another *h-e* film, *Timeline*. This film is about a son who, with the help of a few archeologists, attempts to rescue his father trapped back in time in fourteenth century France. Even though Jessica categorizes this film as Adventure and History, she discusses it as existing between a *h-e* film and *period* film:

I put that as kind of a Medieval Action because there’s historical value there. They go back in time and they actually tell the real story of certain battles and stuff that were happening there. So I put that as historical but in a Medieval [time frame]. *I mean it is historical but it’s not based necessarily on a true thing.* But they do talk about the true events and they’re showing true events. There’s history in there. I have it as Historical Adventure.

During her discussion, Jason commented on the use of a medieval setting, and why, although the film contains time travel, one could categorize it as Medieval “because the majority of it [the film setting] takes place there.”

The difference between a *h-e* film and *bio/eventpic* film came to light when the family started to discuss the recent *King Arthur* (2004) film. InternetMovieDatabase.com (IMDB.com) offers a succinct synopsis of the film: “Based on a more realistic portrayal of ‘Arthur’ than has ever been presented onscreen. The film focuses on the history and politics of the period during which Arthur ruled—when the Roman Empire collapsed and skirmishes over power broke out in outlying countries—as opposed to the mystical elements of the tale on which past Arthur films have focused.”¹³ In fact, Jessica explained the film in terms of the other more mystical and romanticized versions:

It wasn't the normal story. It was a little different. I liked it better because, to me, it seemed like a more *realistic* story—for some reason. I felt it was more realistic than any of the other [King Arthur film] ... *First Knight* ... and all those other ones that are based on the same thing. Because it wasn't just ... this mythical person that had this great community and it all worked out and blah blah blah. There was a story to get there ... I felt like it was more realistic and that's why I put it more with a little bit of history, because I really felt they really tried to get a real story out of it.

Jason agreed with Jessica's description of *King Arthur* as being a more realistic version of the Arthur tale in comparison to the other Arthur films, like *First Knight*: “The thing with this Arthur movie is it, it doesn't have the legend feel to it. It doesn't have that fairytale ...” and then Jessica finished his sentence, “That mythical, ‘Oh there's King Arthur and the round table' ...” The family then had the following conversation among themselves, practically finishing each others' sentences:

Jessica: It's like he's a real man, he looks like a real person.

Jason: Right, right, you could really ... you could really look at it and say ...

Jessica: ... that could be true ...

Jason: ... this could be the way this happened [Lori commented: Yeah] and how when stories are told of it, you know...

Jessica: ... it gradually changes, yeah ...

Jason: ... down the line you can see how it can become what we think of King Arthur as being ...

Jessica: ... become a fairytale, but in reality, that could ... this is a person that could have really felt this way and done this, but there's, it's not just always going to be roses.

Jessica: Yeah. And that's why the first time I watched it that's not what I would have pegged it for. I liked it the first time I watched it, but it wasn't what I was expecting when I watched it. I was like its King Arthur. Yeah, clearly I know the story of King Arthur ... and it definitely wasn't that way ...

Lori: ... and it was not the same storyline ...

Jessica: ... I liked it, at no moment was I like, "I ... don't really like this movie." It's different.

What is of interest here is the fact that they feel this version of King Arthur's life "could be" the story behind the romanticized versions. They understand the possible evolution of the historical Arthur into a romanticized fictional tale.

Most importantly, they understand that this is not *the* true history of Arthur. Due to other contexts, they are aware that the story of a real, historical Arthur is unknown, but they feel that this film is at least an attempt to discuss what that real, historical period and man could have been like. This film is hard to place as a *bio/eventpic* because it attempts to tell a story of a historical person that is unknown. However, the film works as a *bio/eventpic* because it is a more realistic version than the often romanticized tales. Perhaps *King Arthur* is a *faction* film due to its ability to be more specific than a *period* film but less specific than a *bio/eventpic*. The importance *does not lay in our ability to successfully cast the film as either type*; the importance lays in the viewers' ability to realize that this film is a more realistic/historical depiction of a legendary, mythical, and

often romanticized historical character and yet also realize that this is only a closer representation of history rather than *the* representation of history.

When asked if the film changed their perception of Arthur, Jessica noted, “In some level it made it more real for me. It made it feel like it could be more of a realistic situation ...” and Rick jumped in, “The story behind the Legend!” Jessica continued, “The story behind it, yeah, the story behind it made it better for me rather than something like a *First Knight* where it just seemed like ‘Ok, whatever, it’s just a movie.’” Here, Jessica notes that while she enjoyed *First Knight*, its status as a *h-e* film made it more “just a movie” compared to the *King Arthur* film that took a more realistic and informative approach. After Rick commented that *First Knight* was still a good movie, Jessica rebuked, “Well, yeah, no, it’s [*First Knight*] good. I’m not saying that. It’s a completely different feel ... It’s like, yeah this is a movie, it’s a legend, whatever. But with *King Arthur*, I was like ‘that makes it more realistic for me, like it could really have been that way.’” Jason commented on the ability to perform a willful suspension of disbelief between films:

It changes my perception of [a historical King Arthur] when I’m just thinking about it and having conversations like this about it afterwards. Where I’ll say, ‘You know it could be similar to the way this movie [*King Arthur*] shows it [rather than more romanticized versions].’ But when I go back and watch a movie like *First Knight* or something like that, I’m not thinking of the movie *King Arthur* in the back of my mind ... I just look at the story that’s being told in that movie. But as an overall, ‘Oh I’m thinking about it or having a conversation about it,’ I’d say it [*King Arthur*] affects [my view of a historical King Arthur].

Lori commented, “It’s a different movie; it’s a different way to tell it, yeah.” Jason’s comment brings up two key points. First, he is not comparing the two movies and

assuming that one is more relevant or important than the other as entertainment. Second, the film *King Arthur* still affected his perception of what a real story of Arthur and his times may hold.

A popular perception of the film—a perception I also know others have from firsthand accounts and conversations—was negative because of its more realistic and dark approach. Lori fits into this group of people. She states, “I didn’t like it at first ... I have a very tough time with a dark storyline.” In a phrase that seems to represent the general, if flawed, judgment of audiences, she also noted, “I like happy endings [she laughed]. I need happy endings.” Furthermore, the film’s more realistic, or brutal, depiction of Arthur was not what she was expecting. Reminiscing over the older, more romanticized versions, she explains her initial reaction to the film, “Now this isn’t how this is supposed to be.” However, she explained, “But now that I’ve seen this Arthur a few times, I actually like this, and I don’t know why.”

As the family members’ comments illustrate, the film was a newer and more realistic depiction of the man and history behind the legend. In addition, Lori’s initial reception of the film is representative of many others who felt the film introduced them to a still unknown historical character, who they had previously only witnessed as a romanticized knight in shining armor. In a way, the film introduced and informed its viewers of a more historical reality behind the man. The film’s opening caption shows no cloak of intention: “Historians agree that the classical 15th century tale of a King Arthur and his Knights rose from a real hero who lived a thousand years earlier in a period often

called the Dark Ages. Recently discovered archeological evidence sheds light on his true identity.”¹⁴

Moving from the family’s discussion of the more realistic *King Arthur*—a *bio/eventpic*—in comparison to the more imagined *First Knight*—a *h-e film*—the family presented its own type of *bio/eventpic* that serves as evidence to the importance of emotional, empirical, and thus historical realism: the Inspirational film. Jessica explains the genre, “[An Inspirational] has to be something that actually happened. There’s a story line behind it and it’s like Wow! There’s a Wow factor ... it does [really] happen.” This categorization fits well within the *bio/eventpic* subgenre of historical films and illustrates that “something that actually happened” has a “wow factor.”

One of the films the family discussed as an Inspirational film was *Miracle* (2004), which is about the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team’s “miraculous” victory over the Russian team. As Americans, the film is of special interest to them, and while Heather’s parents went to those Olympics, Rick admits, “I saw that game live and I’m not even a big hockey fan.” However, this film was of special interest to Jessica for two main reasons. First, as a graduate of the University of New Hampshire, she explains, “You know the last guy that got cut? The very last guy that got cut out of that team right before the Olympics. He was from UNH. His picture is on the wall at UNH.” In addition, the inspirational aspect of the film was key to the reason Jessica saw the film. She was a member of the UNH swim team, and the team went together to see the film. After Rick commented, “Inspirational sports, always good. That ranks right up there with War movies [he laughed],” Jessica explained:

Basically that's why our team went ... that's why I put it in with Inspirational. Because it is a big underdog film. Especially as a swim team, we went in [saying], 'look they can do it, we can do well [too].' As a whole team we wanted to go and see them kick butt—show the hard work and how it paid off, and it was fabulous. By the end, you're like, 'Alright were pumped, ready to go, when we have our next meet' ... I mean, I've always had to work hard to kind of get where I want to go or do. So when I see a movie where other people have to do that and it pays off, it's really, 'Ok, that's cool.' It gives you this—I mean it sounds silly—but it gives you this warm feeling of 'that's awesome, that's just really cool, and that can happen'—especially when its sports. When I was swimming, I'd sit there and be like, 'I can, I can go and I can win and I can do it.'

This example serves as external validation that viewers are aware of some films' use of history and intention—in this case, the intention to motivate and inspire through a “miraculous” event. The entire University of New Hampshire swim team went to see the film because of its inspirational quality: a quality based on authenticity of events. As Jessica stated, the film showed the whole team, “Look they can do it. We can do it too.” This film was clearly more than an evening of entertainment for these student athletes, for it had lasting effects—such as feelings of motivation—long after the viewing event.

Jason jumped into the conversation and explained his attraction to Inspirational films, “I like the aspect of the team coming together. Cause your always starting with people hating each other at the beginning or something like that, and then through the hardships they go through they pull together. That's what I like.” However, Jason admits that Inspirational sports movies are not necessarily his thing, “I really don't have a desire to go out and watch [Inspirational sports movies], so I typically don't watch those ones in the theater.” However, Jason, a casual viewer, explains his desire to see the films. He just needs a little push:

I usually wait until these guys [Rick or Jessica] actually rent it and ask me over to watch it. And then I sit down to watch it ... I really enjoy the movies. I just don't have a desire to go out and see those ones. There's lots of movies I'd love to go out and watch. Those ones just don't do that for me, but I really do enjoy the storyline when I sit down and do watch it. But I need the motivation of someone saying, 'Hey let's watch this together,' and then I'll go.

Of course, that someone for Jason is usually Rick or Jessica, the loyal viewers. Rick clarified, "That's because you [Jason] like the inspiration part, but you're not a sports nut ... you're big in Tae Kwon Do, but outside that you're not a sports nut." Jessica added, "But you're [Jason] not sports. We're obsessed with sports. So, sports, and add in inspiration and we're like 'double whammy, let's go!'" The family and social interaction in this instance result in diverse viewing experiences—in this case, for Jason. As loyal viewers, Rick and Jessica bring Inspirational films to Jason, a casual viewer. Here we can place Rick and Jessica in a behavioral dyad as loyal viewers of sports broadcasts and Inspirational films, and as noted above, dyadic traditions serve as ways to communicate a relationship's status and significance. With Inspirational sport films and sports television, Jason joins in on Rick and Jessica's behavioral tradition to share the experience. As Jason noted, "No, but I'm happy to sit down and watch it when we're together."

As a brief digression, when Jessica mentioned that she was often bruised and broken during swim season and needed inspiration, Jason quoted a line from the Disney film *Aladdin*. The following "quote challenge" took place:

Jason: "Will not break, will not" ... [Jason and Jessica – "it broke!"]

Rick: See you quoted another movie didn't ya? See ...

Jessica: Which one?

Rick: I don't know! ... I probably never watched that movie.

Jason [quoting *Aladdin* again]: "This is no ordinary lamp!" (laughs)

Rick: Not *Aladdin*? Oh, cause that lamp ...

Jason and Jessica: Yes.

Jason: Get the man a prize!

When asked if the film *Mighty Ducks*, an imaginary film about a group of young children who come together to form a successful hockey team, is an Inspirational movie, Jessica explained, "No, it's not real. I'd say it's a good sports one and it's fun to watch. It's cute, entertaining, inspirational, but it's not, not something that actually happened. So it's something that is put on there as an underdog just to make it entertaining ... It's not the real stuff." Rick added, "Most Inspirational [films] we watch actually happened. [They are] based on something that happened." Meanwhile, the rest of the family listed several of these films: *Remember the Titans*, *Hoosiers*, *Miracle*, *Rudy*, and *We Are Marshall*. When Jessica finished the list with the movie *We Are Marshall*, she further explained the importance of actual events while describing the movie to her family:

It's literally the hard work and its stuff that actually pays off. Because then you sit there and you're like, 'It does happen.' But if it's just a movie and it's put there for entertainment value, it's cute and its fun, just like *Little Giants*. Looooove the movie, and yes they win and it's fabulous, but I still would have put it under my sports category and not my Inspirational because it's not actually real ... So, it really has to be something that actually happened and there's a story line behind it ... it's like 'Wow!' There's a Wow! ... it does happen. I mean *Marshall*, it's inspirational and you look at the end of the movie—they really did horrible that year—but they won that one game.

She continued asking the rest of the family, "Did you guys ever see *Marshall*? Do you know what it's about?" Rick replied, "Never watched it. I know what it's about ... they

got killed in the plane crash ...” Following Rick’s reply, Jessica explained the film, its historical events, and its import in great detail to her family:

It’s about the football team that got killed in the plane crash, almost the entire team. There were only some [players and coaches] that stayed home ... the [head] coach died. One coach was actually going to do recruiting for someone else, so he wasn’t on the plane. So then they had to recruit some freshmen—[back then] freshmen couldn’t play in games. When they went to certain games they got playbooks from other teams because the other teams were like, ‘Look we’re going to help you out.’ Everything was new. And they lost every single game but one, one of their home games ... they end up basing the inspirational parts on [the fact that] they won one of the games. At the end, usually all those other inspirational movies are like they did really well and blah blah blah ... but in *Marshall* they explain: they lost this coach, this coach never coached again because he went in to help that one year, and he said, ‘I’m not coaching after this,’ and he didn’t. So you listen to it and you’re like, ‘Really?’ It’s not like a lot of good things came of it, but the team pulled them all together. Everybody stayed on the field after the one win, nobody wanted to leave. And then eventually the team started building back up. That’s inspirational because it pulled everybody together. And that’s where I look at those movies. I’m like, ‘That’s, that’s just cool.’ Something happens; it sucks on some level, but it pulls a community together.

In addition, when I asked Jessica if she knew the story and event before seeing the movie, she replied, “I didn’t know the story before I saw the previews. When I saw the previews, I started trying to find out because I knew it was based on a true story. So I went to figure out what it was, what it actually was. So then I did know the story before I actually saw the movie ...” I followed up on her response by asking where she went to find out the story, she explained she went online to Google.com and talked to people. She did not just talk to anyone though. She explained, “Sports people. Any football players or anybody that actually really enjoys watching college football and understands it too. So, I

wouldn't have necessarily gone to people [who didn't watch football]. It was definitely people that would sit on a Saturday and watch college football.”

It is clear that the film sparked her interest in this historical—and inspirational—event. Clearly, Jessica's viewing of this film had affects beyond the viewing event: both before and after. Before viewing the film, Jessica briefly asked others about the event as well as did some light research on Google.com to see what the film was generally about. After the film, she explained both the event and its import to her family during the interview. Her discussion is in fact an impromptu presentation of the details of this historical event. Most importantly, she was telling her family what happened based on the film. Although Jessica did some research to see what the film was generally about, she drew upon the film as her main resource for presenting this history to her family.

When I asked if she remembered the events from her research or the film, she explained:

I got that information from what the narrator says at the end of the movie when she explains what happened, and how although that was the only game they won that year, it meant so much to the town. It [the film] also talks about where some of the people ended up ... It's similar to *Remember the Titans* and *Radio* when they start talking about what happened later after that one time frame that was depicted in the movie.

She further added that her other knowledge of the event, such as the coach missing the plane crash due to recruiting, came from the film.

It is clear that a variety of factors lead to Jessica understanding that this film is a *bio/eventpic*. She asked others as well as Googled the film. Additionally, the film's overtures and narrator signaled the veracity of its historicity. Beyond this, the film not only informed her of this event in an entertaining fashion, for it was also her resource for

sharing this history and its importance with others. The Inspirational film, as a type of *bio/eventpic*, verifies the notion that real events truly matter to viewers and inspires them because the depicted events actually happened. And it is clear that formal signs can help verify the film's historicity. However, as I will show in the next chapter, these signals—such as narrators—can confuse viewers as well.

Jessica also discussed her interest in history from reading Romance novels while noting that the films served as guides while reading. She explained, “See, I got history out of it a little bit more when I started reading some of mom’s books. Because there’s books that they do the research. They talk about the Bruce [from *Braveheart*]. Lori added, “They do talk about it [the history].” Jessica and Lori read Historical Romances partially for the history, confirming Radway’s research on Romance readers.¹⁵ In due fashion, Rick teased Jessica regarding this reading material, “That’s not what you read her books for. Who you kidding?” After repugnant glares from Lori and Jessica, Jessica continued:

No [referring to Rick’s comment], but when your reading through the Medieval ones, which is why I read them, and they really have that information—they do the research to try to get the information. You’re reading back information that you didn’t even get in a movie but you sit there and you peg it from the book and your going, ‘Oh they’re talking about that [from the movie], and that would come from that, that’s interesting.’ So, I would’ve still pegged a little bit historical, but I pegged it more historical after I really started getting in depth information just from the books. Not even realizing it going, ‘Oh my god I know that from the movie.’

Rick mentioned, “I mean the books ... the books tend to go into the history of it more than the movies will. So, when I really want to delve into the history part of it more, I’ll

read on it, you know. I go to the movies just for the entertainment, you know, Action type stuff. You know, maybe part of the history of it. But the books will do it more, but that's why I like to read the books." As noted in Chapter 3, films are seemingly sparse in historical data compared to novels—with the exception of visual information.

Rick enjoys Historical novels and is currently reading a series on the English navy during the war of 1812. He notes, "Although the characters are fictional, the authenticity of the time period and the naval battles is astounding. Intense but great reading. So, I guess you can say I'm still interested in that type of subject. My Air Force upbringing I guess. It's not just the two periods [Civil War and WWII] but any period dealing with history and specifically military history." Rick is aware that books can obviously cover more detail and stresses that movies have more entertaining elements. Yet, remembering a conversation between him and Jessica where they were referring to the movie *Windtalkers* (2002), I asked Rick if he was aware of the Navajo marines and their radio cipher, which the film depicted. He mentioned, "I didn't. Actually I think I did read a little bit about that but not much. Yeah, if it's a subject that I hadn't read on, I'd still find it interesting you know. I'll delve into that part of it, but movies are the lazy man's way out. You know, sometimes" (Here I highlight Rick's response as a stereotypical response found among many critics of historical films due to the ideology of mass culture, and in no way am I implying that Rick feels this is purely so). In addition, Rick will delve into the historical aspects of films even if his main reason for viewing is action. Rick and many others read historical novels for their interest in history, but this does not mean that movies are necessarily the lazy mans way out. For example, movies can inspire the

pursuit of further historical knowledge. Or, more intriguingly, perhaps the reason that some viewers select historical films over historical novels is because they are too busy with other responsibilities: working, the responsibilities of parenthood, etc.

In fact, this highlights a key argument against those theories, such as anti-populist theories, that stress political activism. If members of society are too busy to read novels, why is it necessary to put down their interest in historical lessons through film? Jessica, on the other hand, does not see historical films as a poor substitute for books but as a handmaiden to history. The film *National Treasure* prompted her to read on the Knights Templar, and she explains the correlation between films and books:

That's how I started after *National Treasure*, which talked about the Knights Templar ... I found a book down at the condo—the library at the condo—they have a book on the Knights Templar. So I got that and I'm trying to read that to learn a little bit more about the Knights Templar. Cause I love stuff like that, history is so fun for me but it's not easy for me. I don't always remember everything. Like I could never be a history teacher, but I find it fascinating. *So, I get more out of history in movies because I can keep it in my head longer than, say, when I learn it in school through history books, because I learn nothing.* So, now I like to read a little bit more. I wasn't a big reader, so now when I get interested in a movie about a certain thing and then I find a book on it, I can read a little bit better. That's how I'm starting to get my history a little bit more, because I'm enjoying it more that way: with reading it once I've seen it first in a movie. I started enjoying it through my movies because I find it fascinating, but I couldn't remember everything prior to that ...

When I asked her what she meant when she stated she could remember her history better, Lori succinctly added, “She memorizes movies.” Jessica confirmed Lori's response, and then answered my question explaining that she is more aware and knowledgeable of historical topics after viewing films:

Yeah, I can discuss things more a little bit now based on movies. Like if somebody starts talking about something I'll be able to pick it out of a movie. And it's typically something that has been studied, so even if its clips of information that I know to be true and it may have been put in a movie to make entertainment value, I know it's true. I can pick it out from a movie rather than picking out from a history book or a history lesson.

Jessica confers the ability to delineate the different uses of history in films. She is able to "pick it out of a movie" even if it has "been put in a movie to make entertainment value."

As noted, *National Treasure*, a purely *h-e* film that uses history as motivation for a treasure hunting adventure, prompted her to be interested in the history behind the fictitious treasure hunt. In addition, she added that movies enable her to contribute to conversations and feel a sense of accomplishment, "Prior to watching certain movies, I wouldn't have been able to pick out anything. If somebody started talking about certain wars, I'd be like, 'I can't even contribute to this conversation.' But I can contribute now to conversations and actually appreciate and enjoy them." For Jessica, historical films facilitate an aptitude to enter conversations she would otherwise feel inept at entering.

Jessica's use of historical films raises awareness about the ability of films to serve as pedagogical devices both in and outside the classroom. Historical films are both motivational and mnemonic devices. Jessica comments on both:

It's the movies that are getting me interested in the history. And now that I like reading, I don't mind going and finding books on certain aspects of some movies, like the Knights Templar. It was just interesting to me in *National Treasure* because I love movies like that. So, I'm sitting there going, 'Oh, well there may be something behind this. It'd be fun to learn about it.' And then I can get into the history of it by reading a book now. But I have to start it with a movie otherwise I don't get it. It doesn't click in my head. It doesn't stay there. I can learn so much better with movies.

Lori mused, “If we only had known that when she was going through school ... She would have done much better on her tests,” and Jessica confirmed, “Mmhhh. Yup. I might not have spent hours and hours and hours and hours and hours every night trying to remember everything.” Jessica’s discussion of films as a more appropriate pedagogical device for historical knowledge relates to the movement in education research known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), a non-profit research and development organization that aims to expand learning opportunities, explains that UDL offers “a blueprint for creating flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that accommodate learner differences.”¹⁶

UDL identifies three strategies for accommodating learning differences: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action and expression. The former two strategies highlight the power of historical films to aid historical pedagogy. First, the strategy for multiple means of representation highlights the need “to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge.”¹⁷ This strategy focuses on perception, symbols, and comprehension. In Jessica’s case, her ability to comprehend movie details, including visual data, events, and quotes, illustrates the strategic advantage of using historical films to perceive, comprehend, and maintain historical knowledge. Second, the strategy for offering multiple means of engagement highlights the need “to tap into learners’ interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.”¹⁸ Jessica’s passion for film provides an option for enhancing her engagement with historical topics, which may seem *dry* in other formats. Regarding

motivation, her viewing of *National Treasure* and consequent activity of reading on the Knights Templar is a case in point.

The concepts that motivate the need for UDL can attest to the recent scholarship regarding historical films in the classroom. Historical films have become valuable tools inside the classroom. Sometimes instructors can simply mention films to encourage student's attention in class. For example, I was recently sitting in an undergraduate/graduate seminar and the professor highlighted his discussion of the ancient Romans and Elizabethan Europeans with remarks from popular films and television series. With each remark student's ears perked, mouths laughed, and teeth grinned. The fact that the professor himself highlighted and remembered these points illustrates the power and attraction of these films. The professor's strategy was to encourage interest in his discussion by simply referencing popular films of a historical nature that related to his discussion.

In a similar manner, I asked the family members to raise their hands if they ever heard of William Wallace before seeing the film *Braveheart*, and while laughing, none of them raised their hands. While Rick notes that films are primarily entertainment, I would not disagree. Historical films are meant to entertain, and although the initial attraction to *Braveheart* may be the gory battle scenes, part of the emotional punch is the history behind the film. Part of the power of inspiration or other meaningful messages, such as struggle and freedom, is that these actions *really* took place, these *real* battles facilitated a *real* sense of freedom, and as Universal Design for Learning highlights, this is a powerful and sometimes even necessary way to engage and motivate individuals.

Historical Accuracy: Do We Care?

Closing the exploration of the family members' perceptions of historical films, I asked the family members a set of questions that focused on one simple issue: does historical accuracy even matter? This question is of interest for one main reason. If viewers express an interest in historical accuracy and rendition, neither filmmakers nor historians can hide behind the veil that these films are merely entertainment: a position that I have already partially debunked. I have shown that historical films can represent history in a variety of ways and that the four subgenres—*h-e*, *period*, *faction*, and *bio/eventpics*—appear to be plausible conceptualizations that the Grays themselves use in distinguishing films. Each of these conceptualizations illustrate that historical films can function at various pedagogical levels. More specifically, the question concerning historical accuracy and viewer concern is twofold. First, it is useful to know whether viewers really do care about historical accuracy. Second, if this is the case, the real implication lies in the reasoning behind these concerns, for these concerns are not just about truth but the merits of history.

It is clear from the family members' responses that historical accuracy does matter. They even make it clear that historical accuracy matters depending on the film. For example, Rick notes that the majority of films are entertaining, and yet, some aim to portray a reality, in which case historical accuracy does matter:

It depends on the film. Most entertainment movies I don't care a whole lot about what facts they were based on (except where there are glaring mistakes which I always point out to my family to their chagrin). Sometimes I like the far out (e.g., *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc.). However, if I watch a movie that

advertises itself as mostly historically based (e.g., *Midway*), then I expect it to remain close to actual events. I understand of course that they insert fictional characters and story lines into the film to make it interesting. That's fine as long as the historical facts the film is based on are reasonably accurate.

In similar vein, Jason understands the need to fictionalize certain aspects of history while he stresses the desire to see accurate films if the intent of the film is to be accurate:

I think if you keep in mind the overall grand story that's going on, then you can make things up. Like what was a particular character thinking at this point in time, you don't know. But if you know enough about that character, you can create a background story that fits with his character that doesn't take away from the story. I think if you include extras that detract or cut out key parts of the story, than you're asking for trouble unless your purpose in creating that is to create an alternate history ... I'm ok with them not sticking true to a story if the intent of the movie is to deliberately not stick to the story ... I would be ok with it if something in that story happens that obviously, whether they point it out in the movie or there's just something so obvious about it that they don't need to point it out, which would have caused it [the history] to change. Where it's playing out the way it is and then something unforeseen happens that everyone knows didn't really happen in the story, and that allows a different storyline to take place with it.

Jason acknowledges that filmmakers can have fun with history if that is their intention, and he even stresses that these films can produce interesting thought experiments regarding the forces of time:

Because to me, that would cause a neat attraction. Even if the trailer comes out ... whether it's dealing with Hitler or whatever ... whatever key component led us to a victory over another nation ... the trailer comes out and says, "Here was the plan ... something goes terribly wrong!" And then that doesn't happen, and then it's like, "What would the world look like today." To me, I'd be like, "I want to go see it, that'd be interesting to think about."

He continued to discuss the relationship between accurately portraying history and playing with history, and discussed *King Arthur* as an example that falls somewhere in-between:

That's [true history] what draws people into it. They are interested in that story. They want to see that story portrayed, and not some alternate reality to that story when it was being advertised as the real thing ... movies like *Arthur* ... [are] based on the legend that everyone knows, so they can come out and be like, "Well here is the story behind the legend." But the problem is most of what we have to go by is the legend. So, there's really, you can look at it and be like, "Oh that could be a cool possibility that would have inspired the legend." But, is there a certain way of knowing for sure that that's what happened? No. Is it possible? Absolutely. So, that has a certain ring to it. But when you take a historical, well known, documented event and completely change it, and portray it like, "We'll here's what really happened." No. Here's what could have happened if things didn't go as planned. I'm ok with that [he laughs]. What would have happened if the South won ... You know? What would this world look like today—this nation look like?

Falling in line with Rick and Jason, Lori uses the film *Miracle* to reiterate that intention matters, "Miracle is based on something that really happened and should be more historical. We have to keep in mind that people want to be entertained, so they might have taken some license as to making events more dramatic ... But yes, I believe a film should be based on facts if they are portraying a movie to be that way." Lastly, Jessica offers a succinct review of the use of history in films and the importance of historical accuracy. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

If a film is based on a true story, I think it is extremely important to be as accurate as possible with all aspects of the film, such as in *Miracle*. Inspirational films can be very heartwarming and can be a good way to get someone motivated about a sports event, a test, anything, as long as the film does contain accurate information. Inspiration comes from knowing something was difficult, if not impossible to obtain, but that it can and has been done before. When I watch

movies like *A Knight's Tale* or *King Arthur*, I am not really looking for a strong historical base. However, *King Arthur* does elicit a strong interest to find out the “true” story of King Arthur, since there are a number of different versions of the story. Although *Timeline* is a fictional movie, I like to think the historical information they put into the movie is fairly accurate. For instance, the information about the battle between the French and English that occurs towards the end of the movie should hold true, since they are using “specific” historical information as a basis for the movie. The same goes for *Saving Private Ryan*. The tale about all the brothers but one dying, and a group of soldiers going to get the final brother out of the war and back home, does not have to be completely accurate. However, this is a story about war, and I would like to think that the details they put into the movie have a strong historical input.

Jessica’s response reiterates not only the ability of viewers to distinguish between various uses of history but also the recognition that historical accuracy does matter with regards to intention.

Overall, we can move from this recognition that accuracy does matter in certain instances to investigating the fallout of inaccuracy by answering one question: but why does it matter that viewers care if filmmakers stick to the facts or offer proper interpretations? The simple answer is nobody enjoys being lied to or misled. The more complicated answer lies in another of Lori’s responses to the issue, “If a movie is suppose to be based on historical facts, then it matters how true the facts are, or we would be basing whatever we see as fact and could get our history revised to a point where nothing is true.”

In effect, the reason historical accuracy matters—depending on the film of course—is because truth matters. The underlying assumption is that history itself matters, and it certainly matters whether the characters, events, or periods of history are investigated, interpreted, and discussed as accurately as our minds and our methods

permit. History matters and as the representational voice of the vernacular, the family members offered their reasons why:

Rick: As you know, I have a strong interest in history. I believe it is one of the most important courses that can be taught to our kids. As once said, "Those that fail to learn the lessons of history are destined to repeat its mistakes." I very much believe this.

Lori: History is important to understand and know so that you can use it to help form the present or help prevent things from happening. By looking at events that have happened in the past, you could help to avoid disastrous events from happening again. Unfortunately, we as a people do not care to look at what happened before or try to pretend that it didn't happen, so I believe we are bound to make the same mistakes again and again. If something in the past was good, you can look back into history and try to see what events were happening to bring about good results. You can then see if you could help things along to make good things happen again. Unfortunately people are always changing and they don't react the same way in the future ... We need to look not only into our history, but what is happening around the world to see where we are headed. And we should use this knowledge to try to make things better in our society.

Jason: I do believe history is important. However I freely admit that I was not all that interested in it in school. Why it's taught in school can be summed up with a quote that I did see in school once (the only thing I probably paid attention to in school): "Those who do not study history will repeat its errors, those who do will find new ways to error." I think that studying history allows you to see patterns that may have occurred before some major event (whether good or bad), and then you may have a better idea of where things are heading today when you see current events unfold.

Jessica: History is what helps us remember where we came from, and if people pay attention to history, it can help us learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. It seems the farther back history goes, the more likely it is that people are going to forget it and repeat the same mistakes, such as reasons for wars or political issues that have occurred before. I think if people take

the time to understand history, they will start to appreciate where we came from.

As all of the family members describe, history offers lessons that can serve as reliable resources for present and future situations. Most importantly, these family members do not stress the cliché that “history repeats itself.” They do emphasize, however, that it is important to remember the past in order to keep from *repeating mistakes*. In other words, history offers warnings and motivations. People can continue to be racist, bigots, or financially unstable, or they can look to and learn from the past and examine how historical precedents work across the human experience in order to possibly change themselves. Humanity can continue to fight wars or be reminded of past moments of peace that may motivate action towards pacification. In addition to activating changes, history can also help us discover who we are. As Jessica said, we can “appreciate where we came from.” Above all, history allows us to understand: “If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development” (Aristotle). If societies, groups, or individuals base their actions on false histories, the consequences can be dire: financially, emotionally, and existentially. History is humanity’s experience. How we choose to portray and rely on those experiences matter. As Historian David Thelen explains, we do it every day:

Using the past is as natural a part of life as eating or breathing. It is a common human activity. What we have in common as human beings is that we employ the past to make sense of the present and to influence the future. From this perspective it matters little whether “the past” consists of a 200-year-old narrative, an account from a textbook, a display at a museum, or a tale recounted by a family member over Thanksgiving dinner.¹⁹

... Or even a historical film.

Notes

¹ Lull, *Inside Family Viewing*, 35.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 36.

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷ David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia Pub. Group: 1986).

⁸ Elliott Oring, “Dyadic Traditions,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 21 (1984): 19.

⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Scott Summerton, “Plot Summary for King Arthur,” The Internet Movie Database.com, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0349683/plotsummary> (accessed March 25, 2010).

¹⁴ *King Arthur: Director's Cut*. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. 139 minutes. Touchstone Pictures, 2004. DVD.

¹⁵ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 86-118.

¹⁶ Center for Applied Teachnology. “What is Universal Design for Learning?” <http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html> (accessed May 6, 2010).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, 191.

CHAPTER VI

A CASE STUDY: *THE LAST SAMURAI**The Last Samurai: The Period*

In the previous chapter, I discussed and categorized the Gray family's reception of historical films in relation to the four subgenres of historical films: *h-e*, *period*, *faction*, or *bio/eventpic*. The chapter presented the family's reception of these historical films at a general level for two main reasons: 1) to gain a better understanding of the ways in which these individuals delineate between the different uses of history by Hollywood; and 2) to gain a better understanding of the power and attraction of historical stories and realism. I ended the last chapter with a discussion of the importance of accuracy, intention, and history itself. In this chapter I provide a more detailed and specific case study of a historical film, its evaluation, and its reception by individuals. I chose the film *The Last Samurai* for two reasons. A film covering Japan and its samurai during the 1870's provides an intriguing case study due to the positioning of the historical topic in American consciousness. In other words, because this historical subject is not well established in the minds of most American citizens, the film is contextually situated to influence viewers' opinions of the period, events, or persons portrayed. Additionally, each of the Gray family's members—Rick and Lori, Jason and Heather, and Jessica—all own the film. *The Last Samurai* is one of the films that they all enjoyed and decided to buy for each other, most likely at Christmas.

I begin with an overview of the Japanese historical period depicted in the film and then examine the film itself. This examination of the film expresses that *The Last Samurai* should be categorized as a period film. By correctly positioning *The Last Samurai* specifically as a period film, it is then possible to accurately evaluate whether the film faithfully fulfills its advertised intentions. Following the discussion of the historical period and the evaluation of the film's depiction of this period, I move the discussion to the film's reception by the family members.

Before delving into the historical period, two chief claims ground the discussion of the historical period and the evaluation of the film's depiction of this period. Due to the nature of any historical analysis and a filmic one in particular, *The Last Samurai* is not a definitive or holistic depiction of the period. This leads to my second claim: most importantly, *The Last Samurai* is entitled to its own historical interpretation. However, this historical interpretation does require due historical process; whether the film and its creators do so will be discussed below. Having made these claims, it is important to note that my discussion of the historical period visibly highlights the historical details the film aims to portray. I find no reason to argue over which details are more significant to the period. To clarify, similarly, different instructors may highlight different details of significance in the same course covering a historical period, event, or character.

The film is set between 1876 and 1877, but the overview of the period must begin well before these years. John-Pierre Lehmann explains there were a series of cultural invasions of Japan prior to the twentieth century. These invasions culminated in the cultural invasion by Commodore Matthew Perry and his gun-boat diplomacy of 1853,

which reopened Japan to the West by the signing of a treaty between America and Japan in 1854.¹ Other western nations quickly followed and would coerce Japan to undergo a series of rapid modernizations—political, industrial, educational, martial, and cultural. An *Edinburgh Review* (1872) article eloquently comments on the swift progress, “The Japanese are the only nation in the history of the world that had ever taken five centuries at a stride.”² Others such as the missionary magazine *MacMillan’s* stressed “that such changes to be durable must be the work of time, and that it is unwise to remove the old landmarks without due consideration of what it is best to substitute for them.”³ This swift progress did not take off right at 1854, for several forces inside and outside Japan were cautioning against the allure of modernization.

Japan’s government during this period had a decentralized sociopolitical framework. The government consisted of an emperor who, along with his imperial court, never meddled in political affairs and often lacked the power to do so. The real power during this period rested with the *shogun* or military dictator. The *shogunate* administration consisted of high ranking samurai lords known as *daimyo* who ruled over their domains.

In 1866 the British Ambassador Harry Parkes visited the southwest domain of Satsuma in an act of diplomacy in order to help coerce forces against both the Tokogawa *shogunate* and its international allies. During this diplomatic act, Parkes visited with the influential samurai Saigo Takamori (the historical figure that gave inspiration for the main character Katsumoto in *The Last Samurai*). Saigo, at this time, revered the emperor and the virtue of the samurai. Japanese historian Mark Ravina writes, “Japan’s

decentralized government, Parkes declared, was from an international perspective, fundamentally flawed ... Saigo's meeting with Parkes cemented Saigo's animosity toward the shogunate. Not only had the shogunate failed to uphold Japanese traditions of honor, it also was an impediment to Japan's international reputation."⁴ Finally, in 1868, after the Meiji ("Enlightened Rule") Restoration, "The boy emperor Mutsuhito ... reported the 'imperial will' ... went before the assembled daimyo and, seated behind a bamboo screen on a high platform, read a 'grand edict' dissolving Japan's political structure. The shogunate was abolished."⁵ Saigo Takamori and his allies had dissolved Japan's current government system, thus opening up the path for modernization, the path for international recognition, and the path for the inadvertent end of the samurai class.

With the restoration of imperial authority, Japan's leading officials were able to exploit this new illusion of imperial agency and began a process of political reform and modernization that would continuously strip samurai of their privileges and authority. In 1871 Saigo and others, disconcertingly, petitioned for the abolition of all domains. As a result, the emperor "appeared before an assembly of fifty-six former domain governors, and announced that to protect the Japanese people and achieve parity with the nations of the world, the domains were being dissolved."⁶ In 1873 the newly centralized government further centralized its power by conscripting soldiers for its national army, thus replacing what had been the samurai's duty for nearly a thousand years. The final blows came in March and August of 1876 when the government, first, banned the wearing of swords in public and, second, converted samurai stipends into bonds, which diminished their income by thirty percent.⁷ Saigo Takamori was a leading figure in the

abolishment of the shogunate, the restoration of imperial authority, and yet he was also a devout samurai. How could it be that the loyal servant behind these events came to lead a rebellion that Lehmann describes as “the last great attempt by the samurai to reverse the course the government seemed so evident in pursuing”?⁸

Lehmann further confounds the issue when he writes “... whereas the old feudal samurai moral code had been rendered obsolete by Japan’s adoption of capitalism and participation in the world of trade, the country had not yet found a new morality to suit its new society,” and concludes, “Undoubtedly Japan did lose some things of value from the Tokugawa period, but it also stood to gain a great deal. Nostalgia for pre-industrial Japan was out of place in terms of realities, though perfectly understandable perhaps, in terms of dreams and images.”⁹ In other words, is the replacement of a moral system with a thriving modern industry a successful transition? Are morality and industry ontological equivalents? Discipline is not ontologically synonymous with railways. We must not fall into the trap of believing the historical myth of progression that things have and will continue to always get better. Nor, however, should we fail to understand that modernization and industry may improve societies. We must ask, “But at what speed?” and, “At what cost?” when examining this rapid transition in late nineteenth century Japan. For example, Saigo would not have debated whether or not railways enabling workers the ability to commute is progressive and desirable. Saigo helped to dismantle the Tokugawa shogunate in order to open up foreign relations, engage in modernization, and progressively improve Japan’s way of life. However, in the beginning, he did not

realize that modernization would bring about a way of life that would, seemingly, jeopardize his core values.

Mark Ravina offers an alluring explanation for why Saigo chose to lead the Rebellion of the Southwest:

Saigo did not explain his sympathy for the rebels, but many historians have argued that he supported their defense of samurai privilege. Yet although this was undoubtedly true, for Saigo the central issue was maintaining a government based on virtue. Saigo was concerned with the dissolution of the samurai estate because they were the class that epitomized honor and selfless valor.¹⁰

Ravina claims that it “is undoubtedly true” that Saigo supported the defense of samurai privileges, yet this goes against his entire interpretation of Saigo’s last years. According to Ravina, Saigo was not an imperialist. In fact, he reproached the West for its imperial actions. Saigo believed in a Confucian order where a nation should lead through superior virtue. This belief “suggests why Saigo did not publicly protest the elimination of samurai stipends in 1876. He hoped to save the samurai class by inculcating frugal self-sufficiency. These samurai would rule through superior virtue rather than mere hereditary privilege.”¹¹ Overall, “Saigo’s fear was not that Japan would learn from the West, but that Japan would learn the wrong things from the West and import the façade of Western culture rather than the underlying virtues that had led to Western strength,” writes Ravina.¹² For Saigo, the West’s success must have been due to its belief in similar superior virtues as those practiced by the samurai class. However, he worried that Japan would only see the benefits of westernization and not the universal values that must compose it. In the end, the extermination of the samurai class was the extermination of

the superior virtues that should have guided Japan through its international, military, and commercial successes.

On September 24, 1877 Saigo Takamori breathed his last breath because “an imperial servant was obliged to remonstrate with his lord, to explain to him the errors of his ways. A servant showed his loyalty not by agreeing with his lord’s errors, but by dissenting and risking death.”¹³ The legend of his death by ritual suicide, *seppuku*, has inspired the Japanese since 1877 and provided the opportunity for Edward Zwick, Tom Cruise, and others to continue that tradition through their own rendition of the last samurai.

The Last Samurai: *An Overview*

Having briefly surveyed the period the film aims to represent, it is time to turn to the examination of the film itself: its plot, its structure, its aims, and its evaluation. *The Last Samurai* follows the life of Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) who is a civil war veteran and former captain under Colonel Custer. He’s a self-destructive alcoholic who is constantly haunted by the role he’s played as a soldier, particularly his role in the massacre of Native Americans. Algren is hired to train Japan’s new conscript army in the ways of modern warfare in order to quell the rebellious samurai. The audience sees Algren’s reluctance in his response to his former commander, Colonel Bagley (Tony Goldwyn), “You want me to kill Japos. I’ll kill Japos. You want me to kill the enemies of Japos. I’ll kill the enemies of Japos ... for five hundred bucks a month I’ll kill whoever you want. But keep one thing in mind. I’d happily kill you for free.” The first act continues with Algren making his way to Japan to train the new conscript army. After

some brief training, the army is forced into battle prematurely. Led by the samurai Katsumoto, the samurai rebels rout the new conscript army, taking Algren captive.

The second act begins with Algren in a remote hillside of Japan. The village is the village of Katsumoto's son and the audience is made aware that winter is coming and Algren cannot escape. During this second act, Algren undergoes alcoholic detoxification, realizes he is staying in the house of one of the samurai he defeated in battle, and begins to respect the peace and tranquility the village provides. Algren undergoes a series of conversations with Katsumoto, who is stricken by this former soldier, partly due to Algren's eagerness to die. Algren comes to respect the ways of the samurai and starts to pass the time through training. Time passes, the snow clears, and one night the village is attacked by men in black camouflage. Algren aids the village, Katsumoto in particular, in the defense. Algren asks who ordered the attack: the emperor or Omura, one of the conniving council members. The audience sees Katsumoto's loyalty to the emperor when he replies, "If the emperor wishes my death, he has but to ask." After Algren realizes it must have been Omura, Katsumoto discusses "the way of the warrior" with Algren, "To know life in every breath, every cup of tea, every life we take. The way of the warrior." Algren whispers, "Life in every breath," and Katsumoto replies, "That is Bushido."

Katsumoto then apprises Algren that the emperor has granted them safe passage to Tokyo. Algren rides back to Tokyo with the samurai ensemble, leaving the tranquil village he has come to respect. Once in Tokyo, Algren is reminded of the changing world around him as he is shown the conscript army's new howitzers and Gatling guns; Katsumoto realizes the boy emperor's voice has been silenced; and the audience sees the

new implementation of reforms against the samurai class, such as the ban on samurai swords and the wearing of the traditional topknot. Katsumoto attempts to rejoin the imperial council based on the emperor's wish, but a dispute erupts when he refuses to relinquish his sword:

Katsumoto: This chamber was protected by my sword when ...

Omura: We need no protection. We are a nation of laws.

Katsumoto: We are a nation of whores, selling ourselves ...

Omura: If we are whores, the samurai made us this way.

Katsumoto: I have not seen the Omura family giving gold to the masses.

Omura: Minister Katsumoto, it is with great regret ... but I must ask you to remove your sword.

Katsumoto: This sword serves the emperor. Only he can command me to remove it.

Omura: The Emperor's voice is too pure to be heard in this council.

Katsumoto: Then, I must refuse to give up my sword.

Katsumoto is then lead out of the council chamber and arrested. Meanwhile, Algren refuses to lead the now mature conscript army, and Colonel Bagley informs him that Katsumoto will not last the night. Finally, Colonel Bagley asks one last question before leaving, "Just tell me one thing. What is it about your own people you hate so much?" Algren is attacked later that night, defends himself, and frees Katsumoto before he can commit seppuku. On their escape back to the village, Algren convinces Katsumoto over a campfire to make the emperor hear his words:

Katsumoto: The emperor could not hear my words. His army will come. It is the end. For nine hundred years my ancestors have protected our people. Now, I have failed them.

Algren: So you will take your own life ... in shame? Shame for a life of service? Discipline? Compassion?

Katsumoto: The way of the samurai is not necessary anymore.

Algren: Necessary? What could be more necessary?

Katsumoto: I will die by the sword. My own ... or my enemy's.

Algren: Then let it be your enemy's. Together, we will make the emperor hear you.

In the third act, Algren then helps Katsumoto lead one last stand against the conscript army. Algren wears the armor of the samurai he killed during his first skirmish. In addition, he is made a sword which is engraved with Kanji: "I belong to the warrior in whom the old ways have joined the new." The last samurai fight the imperial army through guerilla tactics, and then are decimated by the howitzers and Gatlin guns during their final charge. Katsumoto is gravely injured, and Algren aids his friend in committing seppuku. Algren survives the battle and brings Katsumoto's sword to the emperor. The emperor takes the sword and states, "I have dreamed of a unified Japan, of a country strong and independent and modern. And now we have railroads, and cannons, Western clothing. But we cannot forget who we are or where we come from." The film ends with the emperor concluding that the new arms treaty with the United States is not in Japan's best interest. He asks Algren to tell him how Katsumoto died, and Algren replies, "I will tell you how he lived." The film ends as it began, with a narrative voiceover from the character Simon Graham (Timothy Spall). He believes the fictional Captain Algren found the peace and tranquility he was looking for and states, "And so the days of the samurai had ended..."

Overall, by looking at the narrative of the film, it is possible to extrapolate the film's principal message. *The Last Samurai* portrays the samurai and their values in relation to the encroachment of westernization. Nathan Algren, an American Captain, undergoes a positive transformation because of these samurai values. Having contributed

to Western expansion in the American West, Algren has seen the turmoil of imperialist values and no longer wishes to play a part in this ideology. Through his decision to aid Katsumto, he takes a stand against westernization in order to protect the samurai way of life. As cited above, Algren declares, "What could be more necessary?" The film clearly depicts samurai values positively while making westernization their main adversary. This is a decidedly simple explanation of the film's main message; however, in order to truly judge this message, it is important to investigate the film's intention, its plausibility as an historical interpretation, and, most importantly, its reception. Furthermore, it is also possible that individual viewers do not perceive the film's *seemingly* predominate message due to their cultural context, or if they do, the message may be believed, negotiated, or even resisted.

The Last Samurai: *An Evaluation*

Attempting to evaluate a historical film is always a very interesting task. For instance, does one judge the film solely against written history? Are historians at all interested in its entertainment value? Historians often start with a question regarding the accuracy of the film's historical content in comparison to preexisting knowledge and debates. However, I believe it is important to always start with a very basic question—what is the purpose of historical films?—and then move to a slightly more complicated question—what is the purpose, or in other words the advertised intention, of this specific historical film?

Regarding the purpose of historical films in general, such films are the work of popular culture and as such are intended to reach a wide audience. These films, by their

very nature, are not intended to serve the same function as a historical monograph. First and foremost they are a product that functions as entertainment; however, as discussed above, these films are not *merely* entertainment, for *part of their entertainment* is the ability to introduce and inform their audience about historical capital: historical characters, historical events, and historical emotions. However, as my discussion of the genre and subgenres of historical film illustrated, history can entertain in four different ways through the use of four different degrees of fiction—*h-e* films, *period* films, *faction* films, and *biopic/eventpic* films. Moving past the purpose of historical films in general, what is the purpose of *The Last Samurai*, specifically?

The title itself provides a clue. The film is about samurai, but what samurai specifically? Apparently, the last samurai, and it is clear the film's title does not reference Saigo Takamori or necessarily the Battle of the Southwest. The three movie trailers that can be found on IMDB.com (Internet Movie Database) also show no sign or reference to specific characters or events. They purely show clips of the film and relate it to ideas of courage, honor, and warriors. The only historical capital thus far referenced are the samurai and some of the period detail which is shown in the trailers. The film itself begins with an overture by the character Simon Graham:

They say Japan was made by a sword. They say the old gods dipped a coral blade into the ocean and when they pulled it out, four perfect drops fell back into the sea, and those drops became the islands of Japan. I say Japan was made by a handful of brave men ... warriors willing to give their lives for what seems to have become a forgotten word: Honor.

Still, no reference has been made to any specific characters or events; the period itself is not yet known. A viewer is left with the knowledge from the title that the warriors

the narrator refers to are Japan's samurai, but it is not until later, through a film caption, that the audience learns the film begins in 1876, America's centennial. The film also references previous events concerning Native American massacres through flashbacks and Algren's mention of the historical Colonel Custer, a historical man familiar to American audiences. At no point does the film, through overture or narration, depict Nathan Algren or Katsumoto as historical figures—although, as will be explored below, there is a closing overture in the film that may cause viewer confusion. The captions throughout the film refer to place names (mainly cities) and dates. The film is full of historical capital such as period dress and architecture. Of course, historical characters and historical events can also be considered historical capital, but, as noted directly above, *The Last Samurai* does not label its characters or events as historical through captions. So far—assuming the audience does not recognize the characters as historical capital, which is a safe assumption due to the position of Japanese history in American consciousness—the film seems to place itself on the continuum of fiction near the *period* film.

Moving from the production plays, advertisements, and overtures of the film to the director's aim, the film remains a period film. Director Edward Zwick's DVD commentary succinctly illuminates the goal of the film and its relation to historical significance:

You know it's the choice of the movie to celebrate one aspect of the samurai. Of course, we know they were an aristocratic culture that thrived on, um ... the burden was placed on the peasants, not unlike the chivalric culture of King Arthur and the romanticization of the round table, but to choose to celebrate those aspects of their lives—the philosophy, the idea of life in every breathe ... I think the

deepest and most important wellspring of their contribution to Japanese culture—to an audience that never really knew much about it. I mean a popular audience of seventeen year olds.¹⁴

Here, Edward Zwick's own words describe the film's purpose, "to celebrate one aspect of the samurai," and brings to issue two of the problems concerning the representation of history on the big screen: *partisanship* and *representation*. The film is partisan in showing the samurai in a good light while illuminating on their more fundamental and virtuous characteristics: honor, service, and discipline. Paraphrasing Zwick above, he is stating the main focus of the film is to celebrate and introduce these warriors to viewers that may or may not be aware of their culture. Zwick is not introducing Saigo Takamori or the Battle of the Southwest; he is not providing a definitive analysis of the samurai class during the nineteenth century. What he is doing is introducing audience members to a foreign and exotic warrior class in a positive, partisan way.

As noted in Chapter 3, films often use heroes and villains to illustrate their message. In this film the villain is westernization and the eradication of samurai tradition and morals, hence the title: *The Last Samurai*. The film is an attempt to understand the social turmoil of a disappearing warrior class steeped in discipline, honor, and service. Some argue that the film depicts westernization and modernization negatively. In the special features section of the two disc DVD titled *History VS. Hollywood: The Last Samurai*, military historian Geoffrey Wawro opines Hollywood's historical inaccuracy:

Let's face it; the samurai in this ... 1876-1877 ... were the bad guys. They were reactionaries trying to go back to a bygone time when women didn't have rights, when there was no hope of democracy, when there was a real caste system in the Japanese villages, where you have untouchable people who were discriminated against, and the Meiji government was trying to change that. In fact, a lot of these

conscript soldiers who were coming down and shooting at the samurai in the film, these were actually the good guys, guys that are trying to implicate a kind of democracy in Japan.¹⁵

Wawro places his Western views of democracy into a film that is meant to depict the struggle of tradition versus foreign influence and rapid change. Moreover, while his comments may hold some truth, they make the issues concerning Japan and westernization appear straightforward. His interpretation is one of many, and so is *The Last Samurai*'s. It could be argued that the foreign ambassadors were not in Japan solely to implement democracy and freedom for women and the untouchables. They were there to make a profit off of a modernizing nation, and did so through force. It was only through Commodore Matthew Perry's gunboat diplomacy that Japan re-opened its borders to Western influences, and it seems unlikely that the westerners had women's rights as a top objective. To insist that *The Last Samurai* is historically inaccurate due to the fact that the samurai were the real "bad guys" both simplifies and misses the point. Most importantly, Wawro's interpretation is grounded in the historical myth of progression: westernization is simply better.

If historical films, paraphrasing Rosenstone, are meant to make us rethink our historical path and question the values we live by, then *The Last Samurai* is an important historical work, for it highlights the negative impact of imperialism and modernization while celebrating the positive values of a lost tradition.¹⁶ Furthermore, if one appropriates Michael Pickering's purpose of post-colonial analysis, "... to write back against empire, against the grain of colonial discourse, in order to articulate alternative identities amidst the legacies of the imperial past," then one could argue that *The Last*

Samurai projects images “back against empire” in order to “articulate alternative identities” of the Japanese samurai and their traditions.¹⁷ Nevertheless, I must point out that Zwick’s interpretation is neither an objective interpretation nor is it the only possible one. Rather, it is one answer to a qualitative question: what effect did rapid modernization and thus the loss of samurai traditions have on Japan?

Having discussed the film’s historical interpretation, what about the film’s period details? Zwick opens his portrayal of the samurai with what could appear to be oriental and mystical illustrations. The first depiction of samurai in this film is Katsumoto dreaming of a white tiger that foretells Nathan Algren’s arrival. It is as if Algren was placed into their society by destiny for some unforeseen reason. In addition, during the first clash between the newly trained soldiers and the samurai, the film shows the samurai coming from amongst the misty Japanese wilderness in their somewhat demonic armor, thus possibly suggesting that these “men like beings” have come from another, unknown realm. As the battle is over and Algren is taken away, he sees what appears to be a gruesome and morose act of violence: Katsumoto decapitates one of the captured soldiers.

However, with the exception of Katsumoto’s vision, both the introduction of the samurai and the decapitation can be defended as realistic. Zwick’s own discussion of the first scene provides this realistic view:

It was based on some reading that we had all done about the samurai, their use of weather as tactics, how could a group armed without weapons take on a group with weapons ... in this case, their counting on the lack of training, lack of preparation of these troops, and their ability to intimidate them ... The image of these creatures, almost medieval looking in this armor, in these terrifying

silhouettes as they emerge was very much in my imagination, and there are those rare moments when something you photograph actually exceeds your imagination ...¹⁸

Moreover, the seemingly gruesome decapitation scene is later explained as the ritual seppuku. Zwick is not stating one must agree with seppuku, only that one must understand it within its own cultural framework. It could be stated that the film opens with quasi-exotic portrayals of the samurai and their rituals in order to captivate the audience. However, throughout the film, the samurai are displayed through realistic, or should I say earthly, illustrations.

It is interesting to note that, in passing, I have heard several historians refer to the film as a possible rendition of nineteenth century Japan with the film's attention to period detail. More importantly, the film illustrates the rapid development and change occurring during this period, a period summarized above and one that John-Pierre Lehmann explains was one of "uncritical adulation of all things Western."¹⁹ However, the question arises: how important is period detail in relation to true invention and audience perception? If a piece of armor, in passing, is slightly anachronistic, will the viewer's understanding of the historical meaning be greatly affected? As noted in Chapter 3, while historians are aware of the importance of illusion, they are more concerned with historical content.

For now, a quick example will suffice. While chatting with a Japanese historian and two history graduate students about the film and its historical representations, the historian expressed his dissatisfaction with an empirical scene in the film. The scene portrays Captain Algren, Colonel Bagley, and the translator Simon Graham walking up a

large staircase to the emperor's palace. The historian criticized Edward Zwick for attempting to show the imperial palace "on high" when in reality the palace is a flat plateau surrounded by the city. Now, for the historian this was a false invention in which Zwick attempted to embellish the emperor's regality. Interestingly enough, Zwick notes the stairs are from a different temple in Japan and right after doing so discusses the "humility" and "tastefulness" of the imperial rooms:

They were not grand, there was a real humility to the imperial family ... the idea that the rooms were of a modest scale is true to much of the Japanese architecture of the day. It wasn't as if the huge royal imperial palaces of Europe. Rather, the emperor was a figure who needn't have that splendor because it was understood that he had the support of everyone and he wasn't at risk. He was protected by all of the samurai daimyo around him, so he needn't necessarily have to be guarded in quite the same way.²⁰

It is interesting to note that Zwick may have unintentionally caught himself in a catch-22. By using the elevated staircase, Zwick had inadvertently depicted the Emperor "on high," yet his intention was to bring a feel of modesty and humility to the inner imperial chambers. To make the case more intriguing, I discussed this episode with an individual who had seen the film and she stated that the elevated staircase may have slightly added to the feel of the atmosphere as "on high"; however, she also stated the absence of these steps would not have changed her perception of the imperial throne as a regal position. Therefore, in judging the film, it is imperative to understand the audience's perception of the film in relation to the filmmaker's intention. How is it possible that the three people above—the historian, Zwick, and the individual viewer—all perceived the scene in different ways, and more importantly, are any of them truly

wrong in their interpretation? Furthermore, does this take away from the film's larger message?

Overall, is the partisanship and representation of the samurai in this film a true or false invention? Does the lack of depicting the samurai aristocracy negatively make the period description null and void, or simply *less* true? Do certain inaccuracies in period detail in addition to the answers to the questions above deprive the film of true historical meaning and interpretation? For starters, the partisan view of the film and its representation of samurai can be defended by looking at the existing body of knowledge and debates. As illustrated above, Mark Ravina's work *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori* illustrates the possibility that samurai fought certain aspects of westernization in order to defend their moral integrity. Subsequently, the depiction of samurai in a positive light is, as Zwick stated in his commentary, "the choice of the movie to celebrate one aspect of the samurai," and it is one choice and one argument in a sea of already existing knowledge and debate. Most importantly, empirical discrepancies will rarely impede upon the more powerful messages the film attempts to depict.

However, it is clear that Zwick's "bad guy" is not just westernization but American westernization, for both the American arms dealing and military training portrayed in the film was actually performed by other western powers. It could be argued that it was the United States that first re-opened Japan to the West, and America, as well as other Western countries, significantly influenced Japan throughout this period. It also could be argued that Zwick uses America and Algren to rake in American audiences' attention. And as one of my research participants will show, audience members may be

aware of this tactic. However, this misrepresentation of historical content is the type of issue historians raise when evaluating historical films. For example, while it could be argued that Nathan Algren, as an American soldier, is used to captivate American viewers' attention, this does not necessarily mean that American westernization needed to be the sole antagonist. Surely it is possible to place an American in the time period as well as accurately portray the influence of other western powers.

In addition, I have ignored the concepts of *3-Act Drama*, *Scope*, and *Romance* because these elements attack film as a medium and do not constitute grounds for "bad" history. Overall, *The Last Samurai* is a period film that takes certain artistic licenses with regards to historical interpretation. There is one general perception of the film that is worth noting. Both popular reviewers and historians recognize the film's attention to period detail.²¹ As discussed above, I have heard several historians attest to the accuracy of this detail with respect to a few exceptions, such as the annoyance about the use of leveled steps at the imperial palace. In addition, the film adequately captures the aura of the intense modernization of the period—especially the desire for all things Western in Japan at the time. Ultimately, further investigation is needed: how do individual viewing motivations, preferences, and historical interests impact the individual's perception of *The Last Samurai*, and what can this tell us about the function of this historical film, and possibly others?

The Last Samurai: *Perceived*

To begin, the Gray family members initially saw the film when Rick, the father, had rented it. Rick clarified while stressing his historical interests, "We saw previews,

but I'm pretty sure we waited to rent it at home ... My idea, but everyone was interested to see it. For me it's always the action, but not just action. It's the historical aspect of it that really interests me. If I had a choice between just some action movie or one that had a historical perspective to it, I would always choose the historical one, even if mostly fictional." As a viewer who prefers films with some historical aspect, Rick can be considered as a loyal viewer of historical films, and in this case, we have a loyal viewer attracting other casual viewers to this film. For instance, Lori mentioned, "I believe Rick was the one who suggested the movie and I was ok by that. We have watched it several times since then and I would pick it out myself now too." In addition, while Rick mentions that the others were initially interested in the film, Jessica admitted, "I wasn't too thrilled to watch it" but then "loved it." She loved "the fighting, the samurais" and "some of the things [she] learned about history." As a self-identified "movie family," Jason and Jessica received *The Last Samurai* on DVD as a Christmas present. Rick concluded, "The entire family really enjoyed the movie, as you can tell because we all now own it." The fact that Lori, Jason, and Jessica did not decide to see this movie on their own, had seen the film because Rick had rented it, and yet were attracted to it and now own it illustrates the dynamics of viewer networks.

Both Jason and Jessica mentioned they had heard of the film before they had seen it, but Jason specifically noted, "I actually think I did hear about it because I was intrigued by it dealing with samurai ... For the most part I really enjoyed it. I like the idea of believing in something so much that you are willing to die for that cause, especially when you know that standing true to that cause will make your death inevitable

... I do, however, think the samurai messed up a bit. Imagine if they chose to embrace the future even just a bit. Imagine samurai with Gatling guns.” At first glance, Jason’s response seems to reinforce the film’s interpretation that the samurai refused to use western weapons; however, this is not the case as Jason’s reference to samurai with Gatling guns was in jest. As I will show below, Jason does not believe that the samurai would have battled over what weapons to use in a battle.

Lori mentioned she enjoyed the movie “because of the ability of one guy learning the culture of someone else and actually becoming a part of that society.” She also enjoys movies that cater to underdogs while further mentioning that Tom Cruise “tends to do movies where he will fight for the underdog, and I like that at times.” Lori’s enjoyment of inspirational and underdog movies was clear in her early dismissal of the *King Arthur* film that was more dark than she was first suspecting. Lori’s attraction to *The Last Samurai* did not rest so much on the historicity of the film as much as its depiction of the importance of multicultural awareness. She explains:

I do not like it when people look at another person and judges that person based on the way they look or the color of their skin, etc. So I like it when a person takes the time to get to know someone else, even though he [Nathan Algren] had no choice in the matter in this movie. When you get a chance to understand the background of someone else you begin to understand why they do certain things. If you get to know a person and they get to know you, you or they won't be judged by what the others in the group are doing. *You might begin to change the way people think and change the way things are.* I've never liked the fact that people judged me as being snobbish because I was extremely shy and didn't talk a lot to others. When people got to know me, they realized I was not a snob and made a really good friend. I will go to the wall for anyone who I feel is being wronged. Also, I've always wanted to be able to speak to others in their own language, but I have not been able to learn any language very easily. Just wish I had that ability, but it never happened.

For Lori, this movie stresses the importance of understanding and appreciating other cultures, peoples, and customs; the film's value is its lessons on multiculturalism and xenophobia. These lessons are exemplified by Nathan Algren's path to understanding the samurai, and Native Americans, as different, yet respectable peoples with different customs and traditions—rather than the “savages” he once thought. The film performs two tasks at once for Lori: it presents samurai culture to her, and it stresses the importance of understanding other cultures while doing so.

In addition, Jason and Jessica are clearly attracted to the samurai, as one might suspect, but there is a deeper reason for this. Both Jessica and Jason hold black belts in Tae Kwon Do, and Jason is an instructor. Here are brief excerpts from their interviews, respectively:

Jason: I like the samurai way of life, their honor code. It might be a martial art thing. And I love their swords. There is just something about being honorable when you are cutting someone's body in half.

Jessica: The fact that it is samurai is interesting because of my martial arts background. Movies with any form of martial arts in them are always something I like to watch. I liked that they had very strong beliefs and stood up for them. I am a martial artist, so I really enjoyed the training they went through.

Furthermore, when Jessica was asked why she is attracted to the film—action, morals, samurai, or Japan—she replied, “The fact that [the film's content] is Japan, not so much—other than the fact that it is samurai.”

As Zwick stated in his commentary—noted above—his main intention of the film was to celebrate and introduce the samurai class to viewers. So far, Rick's reception and

attraction to the film fall in line with the film's intentions. However, if the samurai are what mainly attract Rick, and thus the rest of the family, to this film, are they still influenced by the historical details depicted in this period film? In order to answer this, it is necessary to situate the participant's reception in relation to their background knowledge of late nineteenth century Japan.

Regarding prior knowledge about the historical period, Jason stated, "I have never been a history buff. I'm not real sure about that period," yet with regards to the samurai he stated, "I was fairly acquainted with them before. I don't think I really learned anything new from the movie." When asked if he read up on them on his own or through a class he continued, "Mostly on my own I think—nothing extensive, just tidbits here and there." Overall, while Jason stated part of the reason he enjoyed the movie was because "they were fighting with swords and bows and arrows and I thought it was awesome"—phrasing that stresses the *merely* entertainment hypothesis—he states in a sophisticated manner:

... I think there were real battles that took place during this change, but I think this movie portrayed the samurai as "the old way" and the more modern army as "the new way" ... *I don't think the samurai would have fought and died for what weapons we should use in war.* I think it was this idea or principle of what we are willing to give up or how much we are willing to sell out on to gain "advancement" in the world. Are we going to sacrifice honor to gain power?

Jason was more familiar with samurai than the historical period. Furthermore, he states:

I know that Japan went through a period of westernization that of course was influenced by "westerners." If it weren't for that, the samurai's way of life would probably still be central there. So yes, I do believe there were other nations [than America] that played a role ... but I'm not sure it would be right to point fingers at any specific nations involved and say they are responsible for this change. I think

as technology advances the world gets smaller and it is only a matter of time before the rest of the world penetrates any area that tries to keep itself set apart.

Jason's response is significant. While he is not a student of the history, he is critically aware of the film's use of America as a representational country. Furthermore, he is critically aware of the social forces of history, in this case westernization as an entity in itself. The film has informed Jason of the period, but he is not so naïve as to think that America was solely responsible and that the samurai were merely worried about their weapons. In essence, the film did not really inform Jason about the samurai since he was familiar with their culture; however, he was informed on the period's atmosphere of westernization while being critically aware of the film's use of *representation* and *scope*.

In comparison, Jessica knew of samurai, but not much about them. Additionally, she did not know about this period in Japan:

I knew about the [American] Civil War, but I didn't know about any situation in Japan where westernization was trying to occur, other than the usual fact that America wanted to westernize everything. I knew about samurai because I was a martial artist, but I really didn't know a great deal about them: how they train, or what they truly believed in. I also didn't know they killed themselves if they felt they had shamed themselves or others in their group.

In addition, when asked if she has looked into the history since the movie, she stated, "I haven't really looked into anything. I basically think of the movie." However, this does not necessarily mean she's not interested in the history. In fact, she stated that time is a relevant issue when it comes to discovering the history presented in *The Last Samurai*, "I've thought about looking stuff up but never get around to it ... It's a time issue and then a push it aside issue. When I watch the movie or talk about it I get interested again

and want to look stuff up, but then that fades and I don't think about it until I watch the movie or talk about it with someone.”

Ironically, Jessica even mentions learning about history completely unrelated to the period. During the film, Algren mentions the Battle of Thermopylae to inspire Katsumoto. Jessica stated during the interview, “I remember asking dad about that at one point and him telling me that that was something that “really” happened, and then *300* came out and I thought it was cool that it had been mentioned in *The Last Samurai*.” Jessica had been informed about another topic in history through the discourse in *The Last Samurai*, and because of this discourse, she was influenced to see a film about another historical topic, the Spartan battle at Thermopylae. As I stated earlier, an average American citizen in our fast paced culture may not have the time or inclination to read a textbook or historical monograph. Most importantly, this does not mean that they are not interested in history. It is clear that Jessica is interested. The two hour celluloid reality is a vehicle for attaining historical knowledge, and may also be a motivating factor to attain more. Curiosity breeds discovery. In addition, Jessica’s responses expose the fact that she discusses these films and their history with others, and she looks to others who may know more about the history, in this case, her father.

While Lori was unaware of the historical period, Rick mentioned, “I don't know a great deal about that era in Japan’s history. I know the emperor was a God and I know some about the samurai code. I also know that the seeds of friction between Japan and the U.S. were sowed during that period. That friction helped contribute towards events leading to World War II years later.” Rick, an American military history aficionado,

contextualizes the film in relation to the events between America and Japan during World War II. In addition, Rick's comment about his prior knowledge of the historical period led into the discussion of the film's period realism, "I was not really surprised by anything in the movie and I think that it was mostly fiction, as far as the characters were concerned. Good movie though."

Moving from these viewers' prior historical knowledge of the film, it is time to see how they categorized *The Last Samurai* as a historical film and distinguished it as a period film in their own words. First, as Rick's comment illustrates, he believes the film "was mostly fiction, as far as the characters were concerned." He clarified:

I think the movie had its facts pretty straight about the time period, especially the relationship between the U.S. and the Japanese, also, the loss of importance of the samurai warrior—although that spirit did present itself in the Japanese fighting class right up thru World War II. Where it went totally fiction, I believe, was with Tom Cruise's character and that whole story line about an American samurai. Makes for good story. All in all a good movie with some time period accuracy and much entertaining fiction with the American character.

Jason sees the film as a period film as well, and although Jason admits he does not focus on the historical aspect of films and while he may never categorize films as "historical"—in fact, he simply labeled *The Last Samurai* as a Battle film—he is often aware of historical films' historicity. When asked if he remembered if the film was based on a true story, Jason replied, "I would say it is inspired by true events but simplified a bit for Hollywood purposes, and it gives the United States the role that would have been played by other nations." Furthermore, when asked what he meant by "simplified," he responded, "Well, I don't believe the movie was intended to be an historical documentary. Just like any movie based on something previous, whether real event or a

novel, you can't include all the details. You have to get complex issues across in a way that won't lose the attention of an audience that wants to be entertained ... I don't know specifics." When further asked if he believed Nathan Algren represented a historical American Captain, he stated:

I would not say that the particular characters found in the movie are the real life characters exactly, but I would say that, to some extent, they represent certain historical characters—if that makes sense? I am sure some are completely fictional. If I had to wager a guess at it, I would say the main roles represent real people, if not exactly than by concept, while some of the supporting roles, like the dead samurai's wife that Nathan Algren ends up falling in love with, most likely were not real. Was there a real Nathan Algren? ... I would guess not ... but was there a real person from a different culture who had interactions with and fought alongside samurai at some point during the conflict or conflicts that this movie is based on ... I would guess so. I guess that is a lot of fluff to say I don't know, maybe [he winks].

Jason's responses are thoughtful answers that relate to two issues pertaining to historical film's re-construction of history: *scope* and *representation*. He is aware that films "simplify a bit for Hollywood purposes, can't include all the details" and "have to get complex issues across in a way that won't lose the attention of an audience that wants to be entertained." Furthermore, both Rick's and Jason's categorization of *The Last Samurai* as an Action and Battle film, respectively, and their attraction to the film due to samurai serve as evidence that while history may not be a viewer's main reason for seeing a film, at a deeper level viewers can still be interested in the history, influenced by the history, or motivated by its historical interpretations. Above all, films can influence their audiences' historical consciousness without dominating it.

On the other hand, Jessica, having no prior knowledge of this period or event, is forced to wonder about certain events and characters the film depicts. She does not get any help from the film since the film does not provide clues through captions or narration. At one point during the interview, she turned the question to me, "Can you tell me if this movie was actually based on a true story because I can't remember?" After dodging her question through a discussion of realism, I asked her why she placed *The Last Samurai* under Adventure and History. She responded, "Hmmm, I think because I really thought it was based on a true story, and even if it isn't, there are multiple areas of the movie where there are historical things mentioned that are documented in history." The fact that she was not sure if the film was based on a true story is significant, for it forces her to wonder which historical elements of the film were realistic. Additionally, she is genuinely curious:

I was very interested in how the samurai respond to "failure," by killing themselves because of the shame. I was also interested in the use of the Gatling gun, for the first time ... I wonder how accurate the depiction of the fight between the samurai and the "westernized" army is when they use the Gatling gun, but I feel certain things that are said in the movie are fairly accurate, such as the information about the Spartans. And if I'm correct, there are other pieces of information straddled throughout the movie that I feel are accurate.

As discussed above, *The Last Samurai* does not make a claim to tell a true story, and this lack of claim partly confuses Jessica. However, she helped me understand when she wonders about a film's historicity and when she does not, "If a movie is actually based on a true story I wonder less. I'm also not completely stupid when it comes to history. I do know some things, so I can usually figure out when certain things are accurate. However, if it isn't something I know, and it's not based on a true story, I wonder." Her last

statement in the quote above summarizes her experience with *The Last Samurai*. First, the film does not make a claim to tell a true story. Second, Jessica is not familiar with the historical period. Consequently, this makes her wonder about the film's historical reconstruction.

In addition, Jessica wonders less, if at all, about other films that she and her family categorize as *bio/eventpics*—although they obviously do not use this term. For example, when asked if Algren represented a historical person, Jessica responded, “I really think he was ... Captain Nathan something ... I could be wrong, but I really thought he was based on a true person. I'm probably wrong and just hoping he was based on a real person because I felt like he had great morals, when he finally stopped being an alcoholic and realized that what the samurai stood for was a great cause to fight for.” To some extent, this statement verifies the notion that real events truly matter and inspire because they actually happened. In addition, Jessica's category of films labeled Inspirational further validates this notion. Referring back to Jessica's definition of Inspirational films, an Inspirational “has to be something that actually happened. There's a story line behind it and it's like Wow! There's a Wow factor of it does happen.” This categorization fits well within the *bio/eventpic* subgenre of historical films and illustrates that “something that actually happened” has a “wow factor.” Both Jessica's hope for Nathan Algren to be a real person and her definition of Inspirational films validate that history does indeed matter. Overall, through *The Last Samurai*, Jessica is introduced to westernization in Japan during the latter nineteenth century, is informed on samurai, and

is motivated to discuss and see a film on an unrelated historical topic, the Battle at Thermopylae.

Lori believes the period of the film is based on actual events and that Algren's character is real. She explains, "I think the film is trying to depict both these characters [Nathan Algren and Katsumoto] as being real. At the end they [the narrator] talk about no one seeing Tom Cruise's character again, and they did not know if he died from his injuries or if he somehow was able to get to the home of the samurai where he was able to live out the rest of his life. The film also talks about this battle being the end of the samurai. That's why I think the film could depict an aspect of Japanese history." Lori's response is significant, for it shows the importance of historical signifiers. As mentioned in Chapter 3, signifiers of historical capital can range from titles, trailers, captions, and filmic overtures. In this case, the film opens with a narration from one of the characters and closes with a narration by the same character. As Lori explains, the final narration proposes the rest of the life of the fictional Nathan Algren. Lori clearly mentions, "That's why I think the film could depict an aspect of Japanese history." In other words, this narration is what leads Lori to assume that Algren was real. This is the same type of narration that Jessica was alluding to at the end of the films *Miracle* and *We Are Marshall*—two inspirational films that can be labeled as *bio/eventpics*. This could also be part of the reason that Jessica wanted and thought that Algren's character may be based on a real person, although she was not entirely sure. Lastly, Lori also added that she did not really watch *The Last Samurai* as a true historical film, and she explains that the real significance of the film for her was in fact its multicultural message, "I do not

think I was watching *The Last Samurai* as a true historical movie; therefore, I did not think that everything in the movie was true to fact. I just enjoyed watching it as a film where one person learns to accept another culture and how he [Nathan Algren] adapts his life to it and becomes a better person.” While Lori was confused over the film’s portrayal of Nathan Algren, the “feel” of the film still seemed to be dominated by its period and cultural message.

Additionally, Lori stated, “I am not that interested in trying to find out if this is a true depiction of what happened in their history though.” As noted, Lori’s interest in the film stems more from the film’s lessons, such as the importance of multicultural awareness she alludes to above. Yet, although she is seemingly uninterested in learning about the period or validating the film’s representation of said period, she offers thoughtful comments on the social forces during this period:

I think the samurai believed they were protecting the Emperor by not changing their way of life. But things change and if you are not willing to try to change, you could end up destroying the very thing you are trying to preserve. In this movie I would not have been able to treat the Emperor as a God when he allowed others to destroy a very important way of life for the Japanese people. Conversely, I think if change comes too fast and you don't prepare for the changes you could also destroy yourselves.

More than worrying about the historical representation, Lori negotiates the historical social forces during this time and admits that change is inevitable, but not all must be lost, “Some change is good, and I believe the Samurai could have protected the emperor and worked within the society the Emperor wanted to go. The Emperor is depicted as very weak in this movie for a while, and he allowed the destruction of the samurai to come about. I think there was a place for both thoughts at this time.” She neither agrees

that the path to modernization should be quick, nor that one can bring everything with them on the journey.

In conclusion, *The Last Samurai* is not *merely* entertainment, and the family's reception of *The Last Samurai* serves as a case study that presents several significant findings. Estimations to why viewers generally choose to see historical films can sometimes be thrown out the window. Jessica, Jason, and Lori saw the *The Last Samurai* because Rick had rented it and they wanted to spend quality time together. Rick, a loyal historical viewer, can attract these more casual viewers to the genre (although, I do not mean to imply that the others may not have ever rented it on their own). Second, these viewers' responses to the *The Last Samurai* were contextually based. Rick admits he will almost always choose a historical film over other films. His knowledge of the period's history was situated by his awareness of the relationship between America and Japan during the World Wars. Jason and Jessica both partially enjoyed the film and its samurai because they are martial artists. This led them to focus their attention on the samurai's philosophy and training. Additionally, it is apparent that Jason's and Jessica's prior knowledge of the period, or lack thereof, influenced their decision to discern the film's historical basis. Lori, on the other hand, found more value in the film's main message on multicultural awareness and progression.

Despite Rick's, Jason's, and Jessica's attraction to the film, they were cognizant of the film's re-construction of history. Rick was aware of the film's use of fictional characters and period detail while Jason discussed film's impact on history regarding scope and representation. He noted that America was not the only Western influence in

Japan and, like Rick, that the characters were more than likely representational of historical persons. Jessica, on the other hand, was genuinely curious about the film's historical representation while Lori was more interested by the film's multicultural lesson, illustrating the variable and multivalent aspects of film reception and audience meanings and motivations.

In addition, with very little prior knowledge, Jessica learned about westernization in Japan and samurai during the late nineteenth century. While the film aroused her interest in Japanese and samurai history, the fact that she has yet to fulfill this desire indicates the agency of films as central sources of history in modern society. In other words, while films may motivate further historical inquiry, the hectic schedule of daily life may cause historical film to become the primary source of historical knowledge. Jessica's interaction with the film and its influence on her historical knowledge went beyond the viewing of the film. The mentioning of the Spartan Battle at Thermopylae in the film prompted a discussion with her father, and also motivated her to go see the new film *300*.

Lastly, and most interestingly, it is important that Rick and Jason were not confused about the film's intention as a period film and that Jessica was unsure whether or not the film was based on a true story. Comparing this with the fact that she knows that other films are based on true stories, this illuminates a problem of period films. Without previous knowledge and without *strong* formal hints from the film, it is possible that viewers are encouraged to wonder if the events being portrayed are true. It is important that Jessica quickly questioned herself on whether *The Last Samurai* was based on a true

story or not. She did not just take the film as fact. Jessica notices a difference between *The Last Samurai*, a period film, and other films that are Inspirational—a type of *bio/eventpic*. Comparing Jessica’s hope that Nathan Algren could be a real historical person with her category of Inspirational films demonstrates that whether a person was real or not does have a qualitative effect on the emotions a film arouses. Since Lori focused more on the film’s multicultural lesson than the confusing historical signifier—the ending narration of the fictional Nathan Algren—Lori’s perception of the film stresses that a film’s overall feel can still impede mishaps due to historical signifiers. Most importantly, these instances serve as evidence to the importance of captions, voiceovers, or narration in projecting the film’s historical intention.

Notes

¹ John-Pierre Lehmann, *The image of Japan: from Feudal Isolation to World Power, 1850-1905* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1978), 21.

² Quoted in Lehmann, *The Image of Japan*, 32.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai: the Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003) 31-32.

⁵ Ravina, *The Last Samurai*, 146-147.

⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁷ Ibid., 198.

⁸ Lehman, *The Image of Japan* 105.

⁹ Ibid., 136, 141.

¹⁰ Ravina, *The Last Samurai*, 199.

¹¹ Ibid., 195.

¹² Ibid., 194.

¹³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁴ This commentary by Edward Zwick can be found on Disc One of *The Last Samurai*, minutes 1:12:17-1:13:05.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Wawro, "History VS. Hollywood: The Last Samurai," Disc 2. *The Last Samurai*.

¹⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 129-131.

¹⁷ Michael Pickering, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 169.

¹⁸ This commentary by Edward Zwick can be found on Disc One of *The Last Samurai*, minutes 23:40-26:05.

¹⁹ Lehmann, *The Image of Japan*, 24.

²⁰ This commentary by Edward Zwick can be found on Disc One of *The Last Samurai*, minutes 13:34-14:20.

²¹ For a sample of reviews discussing the production and attention to period detail, see J. Calhoun "Re-creating Two Very Different Pasts for Cold Mountain and the Last Samurai." *Entertainment Design* 38 no. 2 (2004): 2; D. Shuler, "'The Last Samurai': The Return to a Code of Honor," *New York Amsterdam News* 94 no. 51, (2003): 22; D.D, "The Last Samurai (Film)." *New Yorker* 79, no. 39 (2003): 35.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

“I mean, if I were to put something in a category that I would call historical [film], I would probably name the genre boring [he laughs]. You know it would be like documentary or something.” -Jason Gray

As much as I have been stressing that historical films are not *merely* entertainment, it is clear that they are principally perceived by viewers as entertainment in initial discussions of the topic. Jason’s comments above are representative of the typical responses from individuals when questioned on film genres. While preparing my initial research questions it became clear that individuals quickly associate history with documentaries, schooling, or as Jason’s comment implies, even with “boring.” In closing my interviews, I asked Lori about her thoughts on history. Her connotation of the term was somewhat typical, “I never liked history when I was in school. To me it was just memorizing a bunch of dates so that I could pass a test, so I never delved more into events.” Similar to the participants in Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s study on the everyday perceptions of history, Lori’s initial connotation of the word history was to think back to school, memorizing dates, and taking tests.¹

On the surface, films are entertainment; history is documentary. But beneath the surface, historical films can be more than entertainment. In the case of *period* films, they can strongly emotionalize, personalize, and dramatize a historical era for audiences. In the case of *bio/eventpics*, they can illustrate historical lessons through the impact of

actual events. Or, in the case of *historical-entertainment* films, they can simply make history fun again and encourage viewers to reflect on temporality, causality, and multicultural awareness. But overall, historical films remain a paradox: entertainment or historical informant?

One thing is certain: more research is needed to truly understand the functions of historical films beyond the *mere* entertainment level. Part of this oversight is due to the juxtaposition of theoretical assumption and practical activity. Both viewers and historians initially associate films with entertainment and history with schooling. Historians need to be aware of the ideology of mass culture and its emotional appeal while realizing that not all historical films use history for the same purposes. With the attraction of visual media in relation to leisure time, we cannot ignore the impact these films have on viewers' historical consciousness at the practical level by focusing on the inadequate conclusions of textual analyses and grand theories alone. Part of my goal has been to initiate a strategy for examining this phenomenon. Through fieldwork, the theoretical subgenres that categorize films based on their use of history—rather than by historical period—have shown to be useful heuristics for investigating historical films, and Ang's three conceptions of realism—empirical, classical, and emotional—prove to be a starting point for analyzing research participants' responses. Most importantly, the responses reveal that historical accuracy matters with regards to advertised intention.

As a result, filmmakers need to be aware of their aims in telling historical stories. They need to be mindful of communicating these intentions honestly. Historical intention and truth is an attraction, and viewers do not enjoy being lied to. Filmmakers,

above all, cannot hide behind the shroud of *mere* entertainment if they are advertising historical knowledge. Real events have real impacts on viewers. Filmmakers must deny ego or the theoretical assumption that it is “good business” when they manipulate stories that are already moneymakers. History is drama. If filmmakers are more aware of the different subgenres of historical films and better able to adapt their film’s advertising to the different degrees of fiction, this could possibly affect the criticism these filmmakers and their films receive from critics, scholars, and audiences. Is it too much to ask that a film advertises its historical interpretation based on its degree of fiction? If you want to have fun with history, make a *historical-entertainment* film or even a *period* film. If you want to tell a true story that has real meaning, tell a *bio/eventpic* and stick to the facts. “Narrativising” history, borrowing from White, necessitates enough historical imagination of its own. Of course, filmmakers can insist that truth is relative, but true historical interpretations still employ facts. Interpretation may be negotiable; lying is not.

While this folkloristic and ethnographic approach to the Gray family’s reception of historical films has illustrated that these films can function at different pedagogical levels, this research has also offered other findings significant to folklore studies and public history. Folklorists can move from textual analyses of media and focus on media in our everyday life by shifting the focus from folklore *in* media to media *as* folklore. By focusing on small group interactions, folklorists can aid general audience studies by emphasizing the informal, common, and personal aspects of media culture. Some of these aspects of media culture for folklorists to begin with include quoting films, dyadic traditions—both behavioral and linguistic—and new media traditions within small

groups. Folklorists can even follow religious studies scholar John Lyden as he examines film's function as religion, "And the experience of watching film on video is often communal, too, as friends are invited over, popcorn is made, and a discussion of the film surrounds its viewing. Many memorize dialogue from movies that they can repeat with their friends as a sort of 'in joke' that defines their groups. Clearly, the communal nature of film viewing and its ritual aspects are linked."² This study has taken a similar functional approach to examine the communal and historical insights of films, and this brings us to this study's insights in the field of public/popular history.

Although films are initially perceived as entertainment by both scholars and the Grays in initial discussions, it is clear that some historical films promote understanding of significant issues and contribute to democratic citizenship. For instance, Lori enjoyed the multicultural message in *The Last Samurai* and Jason noted he enjoys films that play with temporality and causation. If "the most valuable objective of history teaching is to enable young people to situate themselves in time, to recognize the centrality of change and development in accounting for the world around them, to grasp the merits—and the drawbacks—of historical comparison, and to draw on the past for a richer sense of possibilities in the future," then it is clear that historical films often fulfill this objective.³ All members of the Gray family noted the importance of history and its lessons.

In Jessica's case, visual stimulants from historical films enhanced her historical recognition in other mediums, further emphasizing the importance of Universal Design for Learners both in and outside educational contexts. Historical films can also motivate further exploration of the topics at hand or overall historical inquiry. As a mentor of

mine often paraphrases Aristotle, “All Knowledge begins in Wonder.” Both the folkloristic and public history perspective of this study illustrate the way in which social networks affect viewers’ choices, motivation, and reception of historical films. Additionally, this framework for audience ethnography can be applied to other public/popular history areas that concern audiences—such such as historical biographies, documentaries, museums, and landmarks—as well as across other disciplinary focuses: literature, film, television, new media; race, gender, sexuality, and class—to name a few.

Of course, this study can only provide specific answers to specific questions regarding specific contexts. Annette-Markham offers a succinct review of the limits of qualitative studies in her more specific discussion of qualitative internet studies:

The interdisciplinary quality of the field of inquiry means that most researchers will fall short of someone else’s expectations for adequacy in reviewing literatures. The task of covering one’s bases is monumental: Required reading can potentially include all previous studies of ... phenomena across multiple disciplines ... It requires no great leap to realize that one’s research will more often than not fail to satisfactorily address even a fraction of those issues, theories, and previous studies relevant to individual readers. This situation therefore requires a keen sensibility to rhetorical strategies, whereby the researcher is able to situate the self and the study.⁴

As a qualitative study that focuses on representational participants, this examination has focused on a “movie family” that can be extrapolated to represent other “movie groups.” Further research objectives in folklore studies have already been noted. In terms of historical films, this study offers preliminary findings regarding the formal conventions of historical films and their impact on reception. Further research needs to be done on the perception of historical films’ intentions with regards to historical signifiers. A wider

sample of research participants could narrow or broaden our understanding of the actual effects of titles, captions, narrations, and historical overtures. While I focus on historical films, this study could be expanded to focus on television programs that depict historical events. For example, HBO's past miniseries *Band of Brothers* and the networks current miniseries *The Pacific* will offer excellent case studies of the impact, reception, and function of made for cable *bio/eventpics*.

In addition, it is clear that new media has a role to play in the reception of films. For example, Jessica mentioned that she Googled the story behind *We Are Marshall* to get a brief overview of the film's historical basis. In informal conversations regarding my research topic, friends, coworkers, colleagues, and even acquaintances have noted that they have used the Internet to investigate a film in relation to history for various reasons. Theoretically, I would assume that the majority of viewers do not "check" a film's historical accuracy; however, I believe things are changing with access to the Internet and the growing reputation of search engines, such as Google.com and Wikipedia, which offer a wealth of information, often on the historical accuracy of a film.

If this limited but significant endeavor has revealed anything, it is that historical films do not merely entertain, do not merely impress bad history upon minds, and do not necessarily stop affecting people's opinions, motivations, and desires in respect to their historical interests when the viewing event is over. Historical films are not always chimeras pretending to be something they are not, and it appears that viewers are often critically aware of the formal signs that characterize a film's historicity. This project hopefully has illuminated some of the issues surrounding historical film categorization

and reception while offering an approach for the examination of this phenomenon at a more sophisticated, and yet practical, level.

Notes

¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*.

² John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 47.

³ Tosh, *Why History Matters*, 127.

⁴ Annette N. Markham, "Question Five: How Can Qualitative Researchers Produce Work That is Meaningful across Time, Space, and Culture?" in *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method* eds. Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 52.

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