
History and the Subliminal:

Uncovering Ideology in
Historical Films

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“Never let truth stand in the way of telling a good story” is a maxim that has framed the construction of narrative in much of popular culture.¹ Many historical films boldly claim to be based on true events, giving their audiences a feeling of trust and assurance that what will appear on the screen is the truth, a factually accurate representation of past people and events. However, often truth in historical film resonates more with the above maxim of storytelling than the facts themselves. Opportunities to present perspectives, ideas and beliefs are available in any form of text, thus film, and specifically historical film, is no exception. All films are texts and every text is open to author discretion. Therefore the authors of film, the funding bodies, the screen writers, directors, producers, editors and so on, are given a platform on which to show their perspectives and ideologies to film audiences. In the case of historical film, these perspectives and ideologies are built into a story from the past.

The question of how to analyse historical film as a source in its own right is a current concern. To interpret the historical motion picture and film documentary as a source of its own identity is an endeavour which Rosentone and Sorlin agree is in the birthing stage of academic discussion. Rosenstone explored the notion that the genre should be analysed differently and independently of other types of sources of history. However he left many questions unanswered concerning the analysis of methodological frameworks of historical film, the central inquiry being how to engage

¹ Bronwyn T. Williams, “Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story: A Work for Three Voices,” *College English* 65(3) Special Issue: Creative Nonfiction (January 2003): 290.

with historical film to measure the fact and fiction it represents. The current concern is that the narrative form that historical film encompasses either distorts or ignores the facts. The question to explore is on what grounds should historical film have licence to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the events and people of history to tell and sell an entertaining story, and in turn represent social history in a deliberate manner. Hayden White posited the concept of historiophoty, the practice of analysing historical film through visual and filmic discourse, in the same vein as a historiographical review of written and visual sources, such as maps and photographs.²

This paper adds to the debate by examining three different films concurrently, illustrating the ways in which narrative can be used in filmic form to reconstruct, or indeed construct, history. This article contributes to the academic debate by furthering White's historiophoty approach, through the examination of three films from a historiophotical perspective. It suggests that all historical film contains subliminal messages, albeit intentionally or unknowingly, within the context of the time of production.

This argument is by no means cynical. A filmmaker's ideas and perspectives may be communicated through film subconsciously, without any deliberate decision to do so. Conversely, a film may be made to serve a particular agenda, generally political, with a definite ideology in mind. Historical films can contain subliminal meaning hidden in the form of a subjective narrative. Historical accuracy and critical representation are often put aside for the telling of a story to suit a particular purpose. To illustrate this point, three films made in the period between the 1940s and 1990s will be analysed: the American classic, *Casablanca* (1942), the Australian film, *Breaker Morant* (1978), and the Disney animation, *Pocahontas* (1995). All three films depict events in history, and whilst by no means are they completely false depictions of real events, there is evidence of a deviation from the facts in a bid to present underlying political ideology. This ideology is shaped by the script, screen techniques, and characterisation in each. Hence, *Pocahontas* is a film about reconciliation of peoples, *Casablanca* is a piece of war propaganda, and *Breaker Morant* represents Australia's emerging sense of nationalism. Through narrative structure these ideologies are presented to audiences in the form of words, sound and images.

Pocahontas is a Walt Disney animation about a princess, Matoaka, also known as Pocahontas, of the Powhatan tribe, a group of people forever altered by the arrival of the British to America in 1607.³ According to historical records, Pocahontas was taken to England after marrying a British man, John Rolfe, where she died in 1617. She was instrumental in helping Rolfe establish tobacco plantations and in turn the survival of the British in their new land.⁴ Since the British invasion of America, the relationship between Native Americans and Europeans has been buoyed by issues surrounding white supremacy, land disputes and assimilation. The film, *Pocahontas*, presents the idea of reconciliation through a false romantic relationship between a character who did exist and who knew Pocahontas, Captain John Smith, and the princess. Images of Pocahontas and Smith playing and frolicking in the idyllic surrounds of waterfalls and greenery, which actually did not exist, create an atmosphere of unity.⁵ As each learns about the other there is a sense of

2 Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review* 29(5) (December 1988), pp. 1193-1199.

3 Randy Amici, "Pocahontas Unanimated: The Life of a Powhatan Princess," in *Box office archaeology: refining Hollywood's portrayal of the past*, ed. Julie M. Schablitsky (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast, 2007), 105-107.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

togetherness, which is only interrupted by the evil greed of man, before being resolved when Smith is shipped back to England to recover from gunshot wounds. In the film *Pocahontas* survives, but in reality at the time depicted by the film's conclusion she had died, this being one of a number of inconsistencies with the historical record, along with the false romance. The inconsistencies provide filmmakers with the opportunity to tell a story in which their interpretation of Pocahontas' life can be told, and a sense of harmony, the underlying ideology is achieved. The evil wrong doings of the past are resolved; the resolution of history is manufactured by the film.

The many inaccuracies in *Pocahontas* were opposed by the descendants of the Powhatan people when the film was released.⁶ If none was the wiser, the film could be said to present a convincing representation of a history resolved through the putting down of weapons, peace and unity. However, the film could be considered an example of propaganda due to the inaccuracies and the lack of acknowledgement in the film of what really happened to Pocahontas. In the film, her contribution to the establishment of the American colony was virtually ignored, another telling sign that the subliminal ideology of reconciliation in the film outweighed the retelling of actual events and people. Historical film academic Marnie Hughes-Warrington considers *Pocahontas* a propaganda film, citing critics who suggest it is an 'expurgation of political and historical discourses in favour of imperialist romantic fantasy'.⁷ In the case of *Pocahontas* the subliminal message underlying the film came at a cost to historical accuracy.

In comparison, *Casablanca* was produced explicitly as propaganda. The filmmaker's and American government's purpose for producing *Casablanca* was to convince the American people of "why we fight"; it was one of a package of seven war films funded and produced by the American Department of War during World War Two.⁸ Released in 1942 after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, *Casablanca* tells the fictional story of events in the city of Casablanca, part of French North Africa which was pro-Nazi, known as Vichy France. It was a place where European refugees fled as a means of escape to America. America's foreign policy of isolationism had been in place since the 1930s and support for it amongst the American public was strong.⁹ Hence, the American government identified a need for a series of convincing war films to prove America's new role as an active and influential country on the world stage, specifically in the European and Pacific theatres of World War Two. There is an explicit political agenda evident in the film and its underlying ideology is reflected as the characters journey a storyline reminiscent of the conflict; Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, represents America, Isla and Victor, Europe, and Renault, France, face the challenges of the enemy, Marshall Petain, who represents Vichy (Nazi) France. The symbolic characterisation smacks of war propaganda, as blatantly stated in a 2012 newspaper interview with *Casablanca's* Oscar award-winning screenwriter, Julius Epstein.¹⁰ The fundamental purpose of *Casablanca* was to convince the American public that the US should be involved in the war. The ideology behind *Casablanca* is slightly more discernible than the case of the subliminal in *Pocahontas* and *Breaker Morant*.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed.), *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 147.

8 Emin Tunc Tanfer, "Casablanca – the Romance of Propaganda," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 55 (2007), accessed January 7, 2011, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/55/casablanca.php>.

9 Paul Kiem, Tom Cantwell, Daryl Le Cornu, et. al., *HTA Modern History Study Guide* (2nd ed) (Annandale, NSW: History Teachers Association of NSW Inc, 2007), 224.

10 Liam Lacey, "The cult of Casablanca," *The Globe and Mail*, March 16, 2012,.

Indeed the latter is founded on strong political ideology. Based on the true case of war crimes involving three Australian soldiers during the Boer War, *Breaker Morant* was produced as part of a plan to create a new identity for Australia through film. The Australian Film Development Corporation produced a number of films from about 1970, after a change in Australia's relationship with mother England which had joined the European Economic Union. *Breaker Morant* developed the idea of the tough yet sensitive Australian male of English heritage but with a strong self-image identifying as Australian. The underdog as the true victor and challenging authority are distinct themes in the film. However the idea that there is still an ultimate authority, that being the Australian and British governments and ultimately God, comes through in the film, particularly in the final execution scene. This scene displays clearly the nationalist ideology which is most evident throughout *Breaker Morant*. Interestingly *Breaker Morant* was a precursor to the classic nationalist Australian war film produced a few years later, *Gallipoli* (1981), directed by Peter Weir.

Symbolism is deployed to present the subliminal ideologies in all three films. This visual technique is effective in communicating the ideology of each film. Historical film critic, William Guynn, suggests use of symbolism in film is a 'distinct strategy' to speak about events in more general or abstract ways.¹¹ In *Pocahontas*, images of nature and the environment symbolise the idea of unity with both Smith and Pocahontas connecting with the spiritual elements of nature, represented by the song, 'Colours of the Wind'. The relationship Pocahontas and eventually Smith share with Grandmother Willow, a personified tree, also presents a symbol of reconciliation. In *Casablanca*, the bottle of Vichy Water is a salient symbol. In the final scene Renault, representing France, confirms his loyalty to Rick, America, as was the case in the historical record of Free France's relationship with America during World War Two, by throwing the bottle of water into a bin and kicking it. In *Breaker Morant*, one symbol of nationalism is the slouch hat worn by the soldiers, an iconic headdress symbolising the first part of identifying as an Australian soldier.¹² Through symbolism, filmmakers can get audiences to connect with knowledge associated with a visual object, and in turn audiences often unknowingly connect with the ideology being shaped and delivered by the film.

Another method used to connect the content and ideology of a film to audiences is romance. Packaging history as romance has been labelled one of six filmic sins.¹³ It has been criticised as a branding device, because the past is not naturally and only romantic, and frames history in a simplified, narrow view. As discussed earlier, the romance between Smith and Pocahontas portrayed in the 1995 film is fictional. There is also no record of Pocahontas saving Smith's life, a scene which pulls at the heartstrings of audiences of the film. Additionally there is evidence that Pocahontas was taken against her will to marry John Rolfe and go to England. Randy Amici claims 'Hollywood's love triangle' has hidden how Pocahontas' interactions with the colonists significantly helped shape history.¹⁴ The romance is represented as the foundation of reconciliation between Native Americans and Europeans. This is a precise example of filmmakers using mistruth to help shape an ideology. As Amici suggests, as more historical evidence is uncovered about Pocahontas, perhaps Hollywood will tell the real story.¹⁵ The concern for filmmakers is whether

11 William Guynn, 2006, *Writing History in Film*, New York & London: Routledge, p. 147.

12 "The Slouch Hat," Australian War Memorial, accessed October 3, 2014, <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopaedia/slouch>.

13 Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, 18.

14 Amici, "Pocahontas Unanimated," 113.

15 *Ibid.*, 118-119.

audiences would flock to see 'the real story' which is not as simple, romanticised and pleasant as the 1995 version of the film depicts.

Similarly *Casablanca* is a film within which the plot is centred on romance. The romantic interactions between the main characters serve the film's ideology as an engaging metaphor of interactions between America and Europe from 1942. The characters deliver a subliminal message; Rick, the resilient man with the tough exterior, rescues married couple Isla and Victor Lazlo from the hands of the Nazis by organising their illegal departure from Casablanca. Isla and Victor, as Europe, are the metaphor of countries in need of help, brave and honourable but battered by the initial victories of the Nazis in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and France.¹⁶ Rick sacrifices his own romantic desires for Isla by doing what is morally right, organising the escape so that the Lazlos remain together. Subliminal messages delivered to the American public through the film helped shape ideas of America as a strong and necessary participant of the Allied war effort. It suggested that sacrifice on the part of the American people was morally right and necessary, and gave a sense of individual duty to the war effort. The film made the enemy, Vichy France, represented by Petain, personal. The film delivers a classic good versus evil storyline. Romance is exploited to engage an emotional response to the film and to 'sell the war'.¹⁷

Not all films contain romantic themes. In *Breaker Morant* it is not romance, but action, which serves to deliver the film's nationalist ideology. Romance is limited in the film with only brief mentions of wives back home and love affairs with Boer women. It is the action scenes which hook audiences into the film and therefore the agenda behind it. Flashbacks are shown to explain how the alleged war crimes were committed by Harry Harbord Morant, Peter Handcock, and George Witton. The Australian soldiers of the Bushveldt Carbineers serving in the Transvaal were court martialled for killing eight Boer prisoners of war and a German missionary. Morant and Handcock were executed for their crime. The events in question are played out in shooting scenes and dramatic action including impassioned dialogue designed to hook the audience. The flashbacks give the impression to viewers that they can trust the film to deliver a true depiction of events. This film technique is used to encourage the audience to support the case of the alleged war criminals, who become trusted friends to the audience, as Major Thomas delivers a convincing defence case. The audience in turn begins to trust the subliminal nationalism in the film. The nationalist agenda is delivered through action, and this action includes courage, perseverance and the quest for truth. Challenges to authority are seen in the film, but there is an ultimate authority figure, represented by Lord Kitchener who orders Morant and Handcock be executed by firing squad. *Breaker Morant* is a masculine film which appeals to a stereotype of the Australian male, in fitting with a new sense of nationhood which has in fact been an evolving process in Australia since the late eighteenth century.¹⁸ The Australian male is one of a number of groups of Australian society that have been represented in film as part of this evolution of nationalism. Indigenous peoples have also been represented and misrepresented.

Stereotypes of Indigenous peoples are part of the ideology behind the films. Representation of Australian Aboriginal Peoples in film has changed significantly over time with the twenty-first

16 Nathan Wise, *Casablanca – the Romance of Propaganda* (Armidale: University of New England, 2013).

17 *Ibid.*

18 E J Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (2nd ed) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 78.

century seeing a dramatic rise in the number of films depicting Aboriginal history and the role of Aboriginal people in Australia today. In *Breaker Morant* there is no representation of Aboriginal people despite recent data uncovering twelve Indigenous men who served Australia as soldiers in the Boer War.¹⁹ This suggests that the ideology of the film in regards to race relations is that the Aboriginal soldier did not fit the stereotype of what was considered a valuable and worthy participant of the nation of Australia: the identifiable white Anglo Saxon male, physically sound with a rough exterior and a sensitive side. A similar subjectivity is found in *Pocahontas*. Only one of the hundreds of Indigenous tribes of America is represented in *Pocahontas*, the Powhatan tribe, and this subjective representation founded yet further criticism of the film.²⁰ The assumption in *Pocahontas* was that all Native American communities were the same, Pocahontas and her community serving as the exemplary version of Native America, when in fact, similar to Australia, Indigenous tribes differed in their cultural practises due generally to the environment in which they lived. The representation of the noble savage ideology is seen in the film in the design of the animated Pocahontas, predominantly as an exotic beauty. A Pocahontas engraving made by Simon Van de Passe in 1616, considered an accurate depiction of the real life princess, differs significantly to the image in the 1995 film.²¹ This supports the notion that the noble savage ideology was a defining feature of the film. In *Casablanca*, the only African American character, Sam, played the role of the saloon bar piano man, paid to play at the beck and call of Rick and his important customers. He is a one-dimensional character who is never fully developed.²² This suggests his character was not worthy of exploration and not important to the plot of *Casablanca*, an attitude reminiscent of the race stereotype which existed in America at the time of the film's release.²³ These three examples show how film audiences can be delivered a subliminal ideology of where and how certain groups of people fit into a society. Rather than suggesting an alternative, these representations connect with existing gender and race stereotypes within societies therefore resonating with the majority of the film audience. Of course this has a bearing on the film's success, particularly in the area of commercial profit.

Pocahontas grossed 487 million dollars on its release, considered a success amongst other higher grossing Disney films.²⁴ *Casablanca* did well at the box office when released in 1942 and has since become "one of the classics"; as Randy Roberts explains, *Casablanca* 'has not gone stale'.²⁵ It also won three Academy Awards. *Breaker Morant* grossed about thirteen million dollars at the box office internationally.²⁶ The commercial success of films is evidence of their scope of influence both nationally and internationally. Commercial success helps viewers trust a film, in turn trusting the ideology the film inherently presents. This outcome can be long-lasting. In the case of *Casablanca*,

19 Elise Pianegonde, "Aboriginal soldiers who fought in Boer War 'deserve greater recognition,'" *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, May 30, 2014, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-30/calls-to-identify-and-honour-aboriginal-soldiers/5489648>.

20 Amici, "Pocahontas Unanimated," 104-121.

21 *Ibid.*, 107.

22 Tanfer, "Casablanca – the Romance of Propaganda," 3.

23 Kerrie Newell and John Salmond, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in the American South 1945-1968*, (Melbourne: La Trobe University, 1992), 3-8.

24 Lynda Garland, *Selling History – Pocahontas*, HIST332 Week 11 [Topic notes] (University of New England: Armidale, 2013).

25 Randy Roberts, "Casablanca as Propaganda – You Must Remember This: the Case of Hal Wallis's *Casablanca*," in *Hollywood's America: Twentieth Century America Through Film* (4th ed), ed. Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 133.

26 "The Oz Film Database: Breaker Morant," Murdoch University, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/dbase/2004/breaker.htm>.

for example, the film's classic status attracts audiences.²⁷ The ideology embedded in the *Casablanca* story continues to be aired. Whilst critical hindsight allows more for discernment amongst audiences, the ideology in the film remains unchanged.

For films to attract the commercial dollar they must be appealing. The strategy to gain the attention of potential filmgoers is often driven by a zealous marketing campaign. *Casablanca* premiered just nineteen days after United States forces landed at Casablanca, Morocco, to fight the German enemy there.²⁸ The film hooked into a current, topical event which affected the American public after the shock of the bombing of Pearl Harbour. *Casablanca* served the public well by explaining America's necessary role in World War Two. *Pocahontas* was produced as one of the Disney Princess collection of films; actress Irene Bedard, who played the role of Pocahontas, played down the historical inaccuracies stating the film had an 'element of magic' and portrayed Pocahontas as 'a renowned beauty who was a leader of her people'.²⁹ Bedard's comments fit the Disney princess appeal, a highly successful product for Disney. *Breaker Morant*'s selling feature was its line-up of actors, at the time an emerging group of Australian stars which included Bryan Brown and Jack Thompson,³⁰ who helped sell the appeal of the film. All of these factors assisted in selling the underlying ideologies of the films under discussion.

The aesthetics of the film also influences audiences. For example, in *Pocahontas*, waterfalls, and green and mountainous landscape create visually enjoyable imagery which captivates viewers and consequently delivers the subliminal message. Music also involves the audience in the film. For instance in *Casablanca*, a black and white film, it is not imagery which engages the viewer, but dialogue and music. The film's appeal is shaped by classic one-liners such as "Here's looking at you kid", which have become synonymous even with the mere mention of the name of the film. The songs 'As Time Goes By', the representation of the enduring love between Rick and Isla, and the French national anthem have also become synonymous with the film. One of the most powerful scenes in *Casablanca* is the battle in which 'La Marseillaise' is sung by the "good" characters against the singing of a Nazi anthem. Bruce Beresford, in directing *Breaker Morant*, used a number of wide shots of horizons to juxtapose the plight of the war criminals against the beauty of nature, coupled with a poetic script. This is particularly evident in the execution scene in which the rising of the sun signals the fate of the soldiers. Visual imagery, dialogue and music all assist in engaging audiences into the subliminal message.

All films are a text and subsequently an interpretation of filmmakers' perspectives, albeit deliberate or subconscious. Funding bodies, screen writers, directors, producers, editors, all those involved in the production of a film, are part of the construction of a representation. In the case of historical film, the representation features events and people of the past, and there is an expectation of the depiction of truth. However often truth, the factually accurate representation of past people and events, is distorted for the sake of entertainment. Mark Twain did not let the truth get in the way of telling a good story in his famous novel based on the Civil War period of American history in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a story which accentuates the plight of minority groups,

27 "Box office / business for Casablanca," IMDb, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034583/business>.

28 Roberts, "Casablanca as Propaganda," 138.

29 Renata Joy, "An Interview with Pocahontas," UltimateDisney.com, <http://www.dvdizzy.com/pocahontas-interview.html>, accessed October 10, 2014.

30 "Breaker Morant: Full Cast and Crew," IMDb, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080310/fullcredits/>.

specifically African American people. This example, whilst a piece of prose, is comparable to the nature of historical film, in which ideology can be built into a story from the past. Historical films can contain subliminal meaning hidden in the form of a subjective narrative. The three films, *Casablanca*, *Breaker Morant*, and *Pocahontas*, show clear evidence of an underlying ideology. Making a broader statement about reconciliation is the subliminal message in *Pocahontas*, whilst *Casablanca* is upfront in its purpose to instil support for the American war effort. *Breaker Morant* demonstrates the emerging sense of Australian nationalism in a display of courage against adversity. These subliminal messages are delivered via the deployment of a number of techniques including symbolism, romance, action, characterisation and representation of stereotypes, along with aesthetically appealing imagery and music. Marketing and merchandising of films help bring them commercial success. Commercial success in the minds of audiences aligns with the perception that a film is reliable, along with a sense of trust that the film will tell the truth. Embedded into this representation of assumed truth is ideology which in turn is then consumed by the less critical film goer. An insightful and critical viewer of historical film will see the ideology hidden beyond the premise of a 'good story'.
