Americanization of History

Americanization of History: Conflation of Time and Culture in Film and Television

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

MAKING IT ALL ABOUT US: REVISING YESTERDAY IN LIGHT OF TODAY

Politics, profit motives, and popular culture: For many in our world today these forces control encountered history. In 2001, cultural scholar Gary Edgerton noted "television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today."[1] The contributors to this collection agree, adding only that knowledge of history today is equally informed by film. These media work in similar ways to present their views of the past to the audiences in the present, particularly given the likelihood today of films ultimately airing on television. In recent years, the use of historical settings and characters in major motion pictures has exploded. Since 2001, eight films have reached the list of the 100 highest grossing films of all time, either with a claim to tell a story out of history (300, *The DaVinci Code*, *National Treasure 2*) or with history as an essential element of its background story (all three *Pirates of the Caribbean* films).[2] Specifically, films such as *Pearl Harbor* in 2001, *Troy* and *Alexander* in 2004, and *300* in 2007 are prime examples of major motion pictures aimed at the coveted teenage audience that have used historical characters and settings as the path to fiscal success.

What are the questions and issues that arise when history is featured in fictional or pseudo-historical television and film? What responsibility, if any, do filmmakers have when their product is clearly labeled fiction? If the concern of studios and networks is limited to the bottom line, what role, if any, should academia play in addressing and/or correcting popular misconceptions? Are the sacrifices of historical accuracy to a current-day

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[1] Gary R. Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins. (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1.

[2] "All-Time Top 1000 Grossing Films." *Movie Web*. http://www.movieweb.com/movies/boxoffice/alltime.php?page=3&

cultural appeal an acceptable trade? While these are the general questions that were put to the contributors when they began these explorations, the final essays show significant diversity in the answers ultimately reached. Although there is no consensus achieved among the scholars whose work is contained herein, this collection as a whole frames the topic and provides multiple perspectives with which the critical reader may engage in order to complicate the question for herself.

Educated audiences know that "based on a true story" permits a great deal of leeway from the veracity of a tale when films are being made. However, how aware of that is the average viewer of these films and television shows? Perhaps an equally important question is, how much do the viewers of popular film and television really care? The Computer Generated Imagery-enhanced/altered Xerxes of the Persian army and his array of mythical demons found in *300* are arguably more memorable than the story of the actual man and his army. And long before visual media made this story so graphic for a modern audience, the story of these 300 Spartan underdogs standing up against this massive Persian army had been repeated over and over, despite general awareness that there were 1,000 other Greeks who stayed and fought as well[3]. Why? Because 300 versus thousands makes for a damned good story. Combining the attraction of a powerful tale with the memorable visuals that accompany a film version serves only to increase the likelihood that it is the dramatized Hollywood version that will be remembered, even in the face of contradictory historical data.

Many spectators will never go further into the story than the film or television show, and will be left with a potentially erroneous view of history. Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) creates an entirely new ending to World War II by staging a successful assassination plot against Hitler and several of his highest-ranking generals. In the first two weeks of release, this film grossed over $145 million dollars worldwide.[4] It is reasonable to assume that more than a few of the viewers of this film might be under the misconception that World War II ended when Hitler was killed in a theater fire in Paris.

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[3] *Last Stand of the 300: The Legendary Battle at Thermopylae*, The History Channel, (NY: A&E Home Video, 2007).

[4] "Box Office MoJo (*Inglourious Basterds*)." *Internet Movie Database.com, Inc*. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=inglouriousbasterds.htm

That film and television can influence the beliefs of the masses is without doubt. The twentieth century witnessed many uses of propagandistic films by world powers in their attempts to win both literal and moral battles. Some recent Hollywood films have attempted to take advantage of this reality by trying to correct the perceived mistakes, intentional or otherwise, of the past.

In 2006 Clint Eastwood directed *Flags of Our Fathers*, a film about the World War II American invasion of Iwo Jima and the planting of the flag on Mount Suribachi. The film divides its story between the expected battle scenes of a traditional war film, and the aftermath experienced by several of the men who became military pitchmen ordered to boost public purchase of war bonds, thus allowing the Allies to continue to fund the war. As such, this film self-consciously and intentionally exposes a side of war usually ignored in war films: marketing. It is also a story about historical revision itself, as the actual planting of the flag was recreated almost instantaneously in real-time when a photographer missed the actual planting and the American military personnel were ordered to recreate the scene so that it could be used in pro-American campaigns. The unfortunate reality for films like Eastwood's that try to be responsible in handling historical information is that while *Flags* made a respectable $60 million dollars worldwide, the more traditional action-oriented, albeit drastically reconceived, tale of the 300 Spartans made nearly ten times that amount.[5]

This collection explores television and film depictions of history, both in blatant uses of historical times and figures and in the more subtle utilizations of times gone by as settings or storylines. However, whether the use of history is blatant or subtle, the contributors reflect upon the historical-cultural moments in which the pieces were created, as well as the historical eras ostensibly presented as the settings.

In addition, several of the contributors investigate the literary foundations upon which their filmic texts rely. Some of the relationships between the literature and the film texts are tight, as in the poem to film translation of *Beowulf* or the novel to film translation of *Bambi*. Others have less direct, but equally important links, such as *Unforgiven* as a modern retelling of the tale of Achilles, or the perpetuation of the plot of

[5] "Box Office MoJo (*Flags of Our Fathers*)." *Internet Movie Database.com, Inc.* http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=flagsofourfathers.htm
"Box Office MoJo (*300*)" *Internet Movie Database.com, Inc.* http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=300.htm

"beset manhood" from nineteenth-century American literature into the twenty-first century television shows *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*.

Alterations to accepted historical understandings are often motivated by present-day mores regarding gender, race, class, or sexuality. What was acceptable in fifth century BC Greece, or England during the Middle Ages, or even the United States during World War II, is often now considered inappropriate. In addition, the concepts of beauty and what it means to behave as an appropriate man or woman change with each culture and era. This is perhaps the most important consideration of studios and networks when they are creating a product; beauty, sexual attraction, and virility must reflect the here and now, not the past. Several of these essays investigate the cultural specifics that mandated the alterations from then until now. It is a generally accepted truth that when stories are retold, they reflect not the mores of the time in which the story originated, but those of the society in which the retelling occurs. Hence this collection will tell us much more about our own socio-historical positioning than it could possibly hope to enlighten us about the past.

The Essays

This collection of essays looks at how both history and literature are translated in filmic texts to reflect the time and place of the translation. Major motion pictures as well as television movies and series are the sites of these explorations. The essays in part I look at one of the more popular periods utilized in historical films, and at one of the most prolific and successful studios in movie history. In "American Medieval: Hybrid Masculinity and the Medieval Popular Film," I. Mitchell-Smith investigates how studios over the past fifty years have read medieval in culturally-specific ways. His argument investigates not only temporal issues, but also the national dynamics of what medieval means; he compares nationalities and class issues. Finally, he focuses on the exploration of gender when examining how popular American heroic masculinity balances between high culture (with its attendant threat of feminization) and the savage and animalistic. He depicts how this heroic masculinity becomes imbued with a nostalgic authority when emanating from the "before-time."

The other essay in this section, "Them like Us; Then like Now: Translating the Historical Novel and the Non-American into Disney's Animated Films" by Greg Metcalf, delves into Disney's appropriation and

Americanization of "timeless" stories from cultures worldwide. The essay utilizes numerous Disney films for support, ranging from the early, but relatively unknown *The Three Caballeros* (1944), to the most recent and well-known *Mulan* (1998). Metcalf investigates how this attempt to make tales from across time and cultures interchangeable reduces them, often to the point where meaning is actually lost due to the lack of context.

Part II "It's American Dammit! Isn't It?" looks at some of the cultural icons of twentieth-century America, and discovers how they served, and continue to serve, to advance and to critique the hegemonic balance of modern society. Brennan M. Thomas looks at a classic and seminal film from the powerful world of Walt Disney Studios in "A Forest Fable: Elements of Allegory and Americana in Disney's *Bambi*." She concentrates on how the film depicted an American nostalgia for a return to the wild, as well as a release from the industrialized, hence harder to understand, modern world. In the interactions of the animal characters, she finds both the disenchantment of the working and middle classes in mid-twentieth-century America, as well as the reinforcement of the social/governmental system that keeps all of the animals in their places. The responsibility breakdown between Bambi's mother and father also supports the traditional gender roles at a time when World War II was forcing many of these roles to be reinscribed. Finally, she analyzes the connection between the gender roles society places upon the characters and how these conform to or challenge the roles deemed natural in the wild.

Rebecca Burditt looks at the great American pastime: baseball. In "Baseball and the Bomb: *Take Me Out to the Ball Game's* Myth for Postwar America," she argues that the film's nostalgia for the innocence of the early twentieth century works to alleviate fears emanating from the Cold War ideological crisis. Her exploration examines how the world of 1949 clearly bleeds into the story set in 1906 and ultimately dooms the film because the periods have too many differences for reconciliation, which leads to confusion and a flat story. However, while this transposition dooms the film as entertainment, it creates a powerful cultural artifact, as the filmmakers reach into the earliest days of the twentieth century to find a time before fears about American identity were so pervasive. The film blatantly celebrates all things "American." Burditt focuses on baseball as a locus of nostalgia, as well as discussing the origins of what it means to be American in a time when that question seemed less complicated and frightening. As did Thomas's exploration of *Bambi*, Burditt also concludes that this film fails in its attempt to get the

audiences to accept the status quo and leave the hard and dangerous questions to others.

Nicholas Moll directly links the iconography of the middle of the twentieth century to the present day by examining *The Lone Ranger* as a 1930s radio program alongside its 2002 television film remake in "The Utopian Future and the Pandemonic End: *The Lone Ranger* of the 21st Century." The original radio series was a morality tale for the depression era; however, as most successful media does, it represented the prejudices of its era, including those against Native Americans. Tonto was a largely silent character whose forays into spoken English usually consisted of guttural utterances. He was clearly the sidekick to the strong and heroically American Lone Ranger. In the 2002 remake, however, the updated series presents a Ranger lost in the progress of a changing society, while Tonto appears as the clearest source of authority within the text. Moll argues that both incarnations posit the series within a capitalistic society, but, unlike the 1930s version where the Ranger could rationalize this downtrodden, but valuable, capitalism with the myth of the Wild West, the 2002 version inverts the characters' responsibilities. Tonto becomes the one who can aggressively take on and win in encounters with the corporate world, while the Ranger is iconically configured in the aesthetic as the key representative of those being dominated by the brunt of progress. Thus Moll integrates multiple historical periods as we see the Wild West through the lens of the depression-era and then through the lens of today looking back through the depression-era.

Part III "Beyond the Bounds of Propriety," looks at characters existing outside of the socially accepted boundaries of social exchange. Kathleen McDonald begins this section with "The More Things Change: Buffy and Angel Enact a Modern-Day Sentimental Novel." This article examines how the very popular late twentieth/early twenty-first-century television show, *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*), aimed at a young adult audience, reaches back into the sub-genre of the novel most popular with young women in the eighteenth century: sentimental novels. The main plot of this formulaic genre was that a young girl failed to listen to the wise counsel of her parents or guardians and took up with an unsuitable man. He, inevitably, turns into an unworthy scoundrel and abandons her, usually destroying her, or at the very least destroying her chances for a "normal" life within her world. In 1998 the writers of *Buffy* use this plotline when they have Buffy, the very powerful female character who saves the world from demons and hell dimensions over and over again, recreate this moral tale of the eighteenth century. She has sex with her boyfriend who happens

to be a vampire with a soul; this act results in the loss of his soul, which leads him literally to attempt to destroy the world. This article investigates how a 200-year old moral tale aimed at keeping women in their subservient social place could so easily be transferred into a storyline for a millennial television series ostensibly celebrating the power and achievements of women.

Brandon Kempner continues the look at characters dwelling outside of acceptable behavior with his article "Beset Manhood in *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*." Kempner traces the idea of manhood under siege through American literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and follows it into television of the modern era. He delves into the question of how characters like Don Draper and Tony Soprano must constantly struggle to define themselves in their worlds. He notes that these shows work to dehistoricize the origins and social construction of the beset manhood narrative. He extends his analysis by noting that these shows reinforce the patriarchy of society when they conceive of the male characters as being violent outsiders, which commensurately depicts the female characters as the other who represents the limits society tries to impose upon the male characters. The women, therefore, stay firmly in secondary positions in the shows. He concludes that this positioning reflects a twenty-first century society that will speak of gender equality, but will regard only the story of the beset manhood as "truly literary," leaving equally popular shows, such as *Sex and the City*, to occupy the lesser space of "pop culture phenomenon."

The final article in this section is entitled "Hostile Tolerance: Gendered Mythologies and the Performance of Identity in the *United States of Tara*," by Desi Bradley. Bradley defines hostile tolerance as representation that claims to be supportive and furthering an understanding of a minority group, all the while actually undermining that group and reducing the acceptance it is claiming to promote. The character of Tara manifests multiple personalities (she suffers from dissociative identity disorder). The show's marketing promotes it as being a step towards understanding this mental illness, but Bradley argues that Tara's deviations from normative behavior are censured, both on screen and by the audience, thus leading to a reinscription of the same destructive myths about mental illness. Bradley also utilizes this show as a symbol for the postmodern working mother who inhabits conflicting roles, and for a society as a whole that is in the midst of an identity crisis. Ultimately, Bradley's analysis focuses on how hostile tolerance defeats its own main objective just in the act of attempting to have the discourse.

In the fourth section, "The Audience's Demand for Sex and Violence Rewrites History," the articles focus on changes enacted to classic myths or historical characters based on the perceived desires of the present-day audience. The first essay by Daniel Gremmler entitled "*Unforgiven*: William Munny and the Rage of Achilles" opens up the film as a contemporary Americanization of the rage of *Iliad*'s Achilles. Gremmler notes that the relative youth and diversity of American culture means that it lacks the historical cultural memory to create its own mythic history; this lack results in those who are attempting to create American cultural memory appropriating aspects from other cultures that they believe might work for this purpose. Writers and filmmakers long ago realized that the American Wild West was an excellent location to create an American mythology. Gremmler explains how easily *Unforgiven*, while never adopting the world view of the Homeric epic, borrows its basic questions liberally from the *Iliad*: What kind of man can kill another man?; Why do men kill at all?; What is the relationship between justice and vengeance? This essay examines how the respective societies of ancient Greece, America of the Wild West, and twenty-first-century American society converged and diverged in their answers to these questions.

The next essay is by Tae Yang Kwak and is entitled "Clash of Civilizations: Race, History, and Culture in *300*." Kwak investigates the plethora of omissions or alterations made to known facts in the presentation of the 2007 film about the fifth century BC Spartan battle at Thermopylae. This exploration is not merely a corrective of the factual errors in the film; rather it explores how and why the filmmakers believed that drastic alterations were necessary in order to sell the film. Because this film was a major blockbuster, Kwak also analyzes how readily American audiences, especially the young, identify with a culture known for being fascist, eugenicist, and religiously dogmatic. Kwak speculates that, possibly, if the filmmakers had left out all of the negative traits of Sparta, the identification by the masses with Sparta might have been much easier to accept; however, the film includes some of the most disturbing aspects of Spartan society. The film begins with the sweeping pans of infant skulls reflecting the infanticide that Sparta promoted in order to maintain physical prowess and conformity. It clearly depicts the corruption and superstition of the Spartan theocracy that doom the 300 to fight without official sanction, as well as Leonides's own inflexibility and prejudice that push the deformed Ephialtes to aid Xerxes, hastening the destruction of the Spartans. Kwak concludes that race, history, and culture have been so obfuscated in contemporary American society that the film *300* exposes a

fundamentally subconscious ambivalence in American identity between revolutionary underdog and postmodern hegemon.

Moving chronologically through this sub-topic, the next essay by KellyAnn Fitzpatrick is entitled "'Ond Hyre Seax Geteah Brad ond Brunecg': Failing Swords and Angelina's Heels in Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf*." Fitzpatrick explores how and why the 2007 film version of *Beowulf* departed so drastically from the original poem in its dealings with the character of Grendel's mother. Rather than the traditional demon character, the filmmakers decided to have Angelina Jolie portray Grendel's mother, thus replacing the decidedly unfeminine and violent bestiality of the poem's character with the power of seduction. Fitzpatrick concludes that for this alteration to work, it required placing in a medieval setting an actress who represents the contemporary American concept of desirability. Although Jolie's sexual allure dominates the initial view of the character, a close inspection shows that her heels are a type of claw. Fitzpatrick's exploration defines the claws on the heels as the "sea[x]" (knife) of the poem. The power understood in the Anglo-Saxon warrior world was that of the knife or sword. In contemporary society, it is often in complex associations of gender and sexuality that power can be found. Fitzpatrick semantically links these spaces of power to the claws that appear to be stiletto (Italian for knife) heels, and discusses the ramifications for the fact that in both incarnations it is Grendel's mother who engineers the events that comprise "the greatest story ever told."

The final section "Historicizing the Present" presents nostalgia for the current day. First, Michael Angelo Tata and Roman Olivos provide one understanding of today in "Volatility among the Polymers: *Nip/Tuck* and the Vicissitudes of Sexuality." They examine the world of plastic surgeons and what can and what cannot be made more palatable through modification of the body. Tata and Olivos explore masculinity and sexuality for social norms, as well as for the agonies and tragedies resulting from deviations of these norms. They discuss the social pressures that produce the marginalization of homosexuality on a show that so graphically embraces all manner of extreme heterosexual antics and fetishes. They explore how this show about plastic surgeons so expertly utilizes the act of disfigurement to critique the institution of plastic surgery, as well as to look at the intersection of incest (inappropriate sex), intersexuality, and disfigurement, which ultimately works toward a destruction of a sexual social hierarchy that will not permit a place for the non-heterosexual.

Anna Brecke finishes the collection with "Time Travel, Chronology and Narrative Flow in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*." Although this series is set in the period from the late 1990's into our own near future, Brecke argues that chronology as meaning becomes meaningless in a mythology where the past is uncertain and the future seems to be more real than an unstable present. Thus, Brecke deals with the issue of how this television/film franchise challenges the very idea of history itself. She notes that this series not only includes the ability to time travel, but centers the entire story on the results of that time travel, which means that its history is ever-changing. She argues that for modern audiences, contrary to the beliefs of theorists such as Raymond Williams, who posit that this kind of flow is difficult to interpret, it actually helps the audience to create the meaning. This incarnation of the *Terminator* franchise does not presuppose that one must be careful to preserve the past, because one cannot preserve a history that can be regularly altered.

These essays attempt to address the questions that academics ask when historical settings or characters are utilized in television or film, and to further the field by providing new answers or by repositioning old ones. The essays allow us to improve our critical understanding of both history and film, and by doing so, work towards accepting each on its own terms, rather than only in relation to the other. It is hoped that the conclusions reached by the contributors to this collection will help each reader to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the use of history in entertainment.

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PART I:

THE PAST AND THE OTHER IN FILM: OVERVIEWS

CHAPTER ONE

AMERICAN MEDIEVAL: HYBRID AMERICAN MASCULINITY IN MEDIEVAL POPULAR FILM

ILAN MITCHELL-SMITH

Introduction

When confronted with images of the Middle Ages that vary, sometimes drastically, from medieval sources, the first reaction of medievalists is often to identify and then put into hierarchical order the accuracies and inaccuracies of various depictions of the Middle Ages, arriving finally at an assessment of which reproduction "has gotten it right" and which has not.[1] This approach, which Robert Stam**Error! Bookmark not defined.** calls the "fidelity" model for assessing film adaptations, has given way over the past decade to a more recent trend that approaches reproductions of the "medieval" as representative of the time of their production rather than the time of their setting.[2] This more recent historicizing approach to medievalism has allowed medieval films to be read as narratives with their own historical and cultural contexts rather

[1] A good example of this approach is John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), which offers a precise and well-considered survey of medieval films, separating in each case the historically viable from the ahistorical creations of the film makers.

[2] For a full discussion of this shift in approach from historical to the historicizing see Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers, 2000)Richard Burt also offers an important discussion on the idea of "fidelity" and the role that history should play in the analysis of medieval film. See "Getting Schmedieval: Of Manuscripts and Film Prologues, Paratexts, and Parodies," *Exemplaria* 19, no2 (summer 2007), 217-242, 217-218. For a useful general overview of the emergence of "medievalism" as a field of academic inquiry, see David Marshall's introduction to *Mass Market Medievalism* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2007), 1-12.

than as works that are expected to be faithful to the historical record Cultural readings of films tend to focus on popular films whose narratives are specifically created for, and consumed by, a mainstream American audience. More specifically, cultural studies of historical films tend to focus on films not just produced for mass consumption by primarily American audiences, but those movies that have left a footprint in American culture and were seen and remembered as cultural events—what Angela Jane Weisl describes as producing a "distinct productive relationship" that separates texts that are just mass produced from those that cause a larger cultural reaction.[3]

One genre that tends to create large cultural reactions are action films those which define and celebrate a male protagonist by the violence he commits, and which offer the audience an escapist thrill through the depiction of this violence. The genre of the popular action film tends not to ask its viewer to question and scrutinize heroic masculinities, but instead to enjoy and internalize the precepts by which these masculinities are performed As such, the masculinities presented in action films can be read as both imitation and encouragement of cultural trends for male identity that already exist in some form in the minds of the viewer. The escapism that the movie offers is in reinforcing the beliefs that the audience already holds.

Lynn Shutters makes the argument that the Vikings in the *13th Warrior* (1999) represent realized masculinity, and the protagonist, an Arab, must incorporate elements of their identities into his own identity in order to achieve manhood.[4] While Shutters considers the Vikings generally as emblematic of western perceptions of foreign heroism, I would like to suggest that many of the ways that Vikings are manly are the same as the way that most American cinematic medieval heroes are manly. They are rugged and dirty, have a ready capacity for violence, are associated with open and wild spaces, and have long hair and beards that are only roughly groomed

On the other hand, scholars have also noted the ways in which the "medieval" in American culture stands not for roughness and barbarism,

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[3] Angela Jane Weisl, "Medieval Studies and Popular Culture," *Medieval Academy News* (Winter 2003)Accessed via medievalacademy.org.

[4] Lynn Shutters, "Vikings Through the Eyes of An Arab Ethnographer," in *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, eds. Lynn Tramey and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 83-85.

but instead for a time of opulent and polished civilization—the Middle Ages of Disney and the Excalibur Hotel and Casino, whose escapist medievalism encourages suspension of norms and enables indulgence, leisure, and excessive consumption.[5] In short, this second function of the "medieval" in American culture celebrates the very things that the rough and rugged version of the Middle Ages would reject: civilized spaces, nobility and entitlement from birth, lavish clothing, and tidy personal hygiene. I would like to nuance, and attempt to connect, both of these presentations of the Middle Ages by suggesting that American popular cinematic masculinity, when writ medieval and heroic, simultaneously incorporates and rejects the traits associated with both of these perceptions of the medieval

The films *Braveheart* (1995), *A Knight's Tale* (2001), and *King Arthur* (2004) left large cultural footprints, and might be seen as representative of popular medieval action films at the turn of the twenty-first century. These films consistently produce a model for American "medieval" masculinity that relies on an initially-established oppositional binary that pits barbarism and savagery against effete and high-brow civilization, wild and natural spaces against enclosed and constructed spaces, and individualism and freedom against the confines of conformity. Having established this binary, these films present ideal masculine behavior in an unexpected way. Instead of relying on a model for identity that preferences the rugged individualism of the frontier over the corrupting influence of civilization, these films carefully depict their male heroes as hybrids: their heroism includes the traits from both poles of the savage/civilized binary, but is defined completely as neither. In their hybridity the protagonists of these films find dominance. They are more rugged and wild than the feminized figures representing civilization and high brow culture, yet they are more civilized, clean, and romantically/sexually viable than the overtly savage, filthy, and ultimately animalistic figures who embody the traits associated with the opposing pole. This paper traces the presence of this model for masculinity in these films and then explores some of its implications for American male identity at the end of the twentieth century.

[5] See, for example, Susan Aronstein, and Nancy Coiner, "Twice Knightly: Democratizing the Middle Ages for Middle Class America," *Studies in Medievalism* VI (1994), 212-231.

American Masculine Identity in a Medieval Setting

The revisions that the creators of medieval popular film make to the historical record can be read as an Americanization: a reorientation of setting, plot, and characterization, in order to restage the narratives that are central to American culture. William Wallace, for example, was a member of the nobility, and, as such, he was wealthy and most likely similar in appearance to the British nobles against whom he was fighting. In *Braveheart*, he is reimagined for the American popular culture as a simple Scottish farmer who just wants to live free from the oppression of British rule (a characterization tellingly similar to that of Gibson's later role in a film set during the American Revolution, *The Patriot*). Accordingly, the film uses a range of symbolic markers to depict Wallace and his Highlander countrymen in terms of American-style ruggedness in contrast to the negative stereotypes of nobility, civilization, and high-brow culture: Their hair is long and wild, their clothing is ill-fitting, worn, and made of rough and frayed cloth; overall the Scots are depicted as a *dirty people*

Similar symbolic representations abound in the initial scenes of *King Arthur* (2004), the exposition of which introduces the knights of the round table as Sarmatians from the rolling plains of eastern Europe—the shabbily-dressed inheritors of a rugged warrior culture whose unkempt hair, rough and frayed clothing, and layers of grit and dirt on faces and hands evoke the same "medieval" moment as the initial scenes in *Braveheart.* It is significant that the first scenes in both films feature sweeping shots of open landscape, rolling hills, and generally untamed spaces. Both movies later associate antagonists with settled and enclosed areas, and so they complete a set of opposed images that pits civilization against noble barbarism, and settled, entitled life against life on a symbolic frontier. *A Knight's Tale* opens in a similar way: the protagonist, William, and his peasant companions are dressed in frayed and worn rags, are dirty, and are generally unkempt to the point that William's hair almost reads as dreadlocks.

While a point by point demonstration of the historical inaccuracy of this appeal to roughness is outside the realm of this paper (and not necessary—the inaccuracy of films such as these has been significantly covered by scholarship of the last ten years),[6] it is enough to note that all

[6] See Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies* and Stam, "Beyond Fidelity" in notes 1 and 2 above.

three of these films operate with the same symbolic imagery despite widely divergent historical settings—*Braveheart* is set in the thirteenth century, *A Knight's Tale* is set in the late fourteenth century, while *King Arthur* is set in the fifth. It should be noted here as well that the characters who display these traits are, for the most part, male. These films are clearly interested in situating male identity in the origins of rugged and wild barbarism. This is not to say that women are absent from the opening scenes of these movies, but instead that the narrative focus is on male identity. Accordingly, the relationship between father and son is highlighted in all three of these films.

The fantasy of rough and wild masculinity projected onto the distant past is further defined in these films through the stark contrast between the heroes and the villains of each story. Effete behavior, associations between civilization and enclosed or urban spaces, and negative stereotypical markers of high brow culture, nobility, and homosexuality govern the characterization of the antagonistic male characters and the groups of men whom they represent. *Braveheart* is perhaps the best example of the contrast that the antagonists highlight. The main antagonist of the film is Edward I, the king of England, whom we first encounter at the wedding of his son. The scene is brief, but it quickly establishes a number of thematic points. The King, and the British in general, are presented in terms of interior and civilized spaces. The wedding takes place within a chapel that is presumably in a castle, and the scene following, in which the king speaks to his counselors, reads as occurring in a separate part of the same castle. The clothing of the king, and that of the British, contrasts against the rough and unfinished clothing of the Scots in that the colors are clean and bright, the cut of the garments fitted and extravagant, and the general image of the characters and the rooms is one of opulence and nobility. The vaulted ceilings of the stereotypical castle and the rich and noble clothing of the British combine here to evoke the idealized Disney-fied version of the Middle Ages that Susan Aronstein describes in her treatment of the Middle Ages as a vacation spot.[7]

When this idealized Middle Ages is presented in *Braveheart*, however, it reads as essentially flawed in terms of the masculinity that inhabits it. The tension in the wedding scene rests in the harsh and disapproving looks that the King shoots at his son, the groom, who is depicted as overtly and stereotypically foppish and homosexual. The son alternates his own

[7] Aronstein, Susan, "The Democratization of the Middle Ages," 214-216.

glances between looking at his father with fear and submission, and looking over his shoulder to the man who is clearly his lover. Switching focus between the disapproving father, who is aware of his son's inability to perform proper masculinity; the son, who is feminized and indifferent to the sexually available bride who stands next to him; and the bride herself, who is confused at the groom's indifference, the scene demonstrates to the audience that the masculinity of the British nobles is deeply flawed.

The dialect of the king functions thematically in the scene following the wedding, and in a way that is now a standard for American depictions of the past. Perhaps the most obvious marker of specifically American versions of the distant past, in fact, is the use of an exaggerated, upper-class British dialect to signal villainy.[8] This function of dialect is often invisible to the viewers of American film because the removed medieval setting seems to explain and justify the dialectical choices of the director. It makes perfect sense to the viewer, after all, that the English king, prince, and soldiers in *Braveheart* would speak in British dialect because they are, after all, English. The royalty of England most likely spoke French until the fourteenth century, however, and the Middle English that was spoken in the thirteenth century sounds very little like modern British English

King Edward's dialect in this film is pinched, exaggerated, and stereotypically snobbish (similar, in fact, to the over-the-top accent of Prince John in Disney's animated *Robin Hood*), and it clearly characterizes the masculine identity of the king and of the British nobility as effete and snobbish. The dialect of the king is a significant point here, because the actor, Patrick McGoohan, can be found using a variety of dialects in his many film roles. Born in America, raised in Ireland, and working as a professional actor at the highest levels both in Britain and in the U.S., McGoohan should be seen as an actor in full control of his speech, as is demonstrated by his very specific south-eastern United States dialect in *A Time to Kill* (1996)That McGoohan's speech is an acting choice rather than his own dialect is significant because the way the king speaks in *Braveheart* contrasts with the Scottish accent that reads to the American audience as more viably masculine (and is just as much a choice for the American-born, but Australian-raised, Mel GibsonSpar). Thematically, these choices in how the king sounds connects *Braveheart* to a range of

[8] See Maria Wyke's more complete discussion of British antagonists in American film in *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

films that associate British accents with antagonists who are not just British, but effete, feminized, and overly civilized. *Spartacus* (1960) is an early example of this trend, as it uses the British dialect to mark characters who are Roman and upper class, but also feminized, overly indulged, and in some cases specifically and predatorily homosexual. *Spartacus* is also an important example because it contrasts the British dialects of the Romans against the American dialect of the slaves, clearly playing on the associations between England and empire that the American audience would already have, and recasting the heroic figures as symbols for American identity.

Similar thematic moves occur in *A Knight's Tale* and *King Arthur*, both of which contrast the initial and protagonistic ruggedness of heroic men against the flawed masculinity of antagonistic male characters. In *A Knight's Tale*, the characters displaying these flawed traits are similarly the British nobility, and are depicted as reserved and elitist snobs in their management and control of the chivalric jousting tournaments that serve as the setting for most of the film. Here, the contrast is not between Scottish peasant and British noble, but instead between British peasant and British noble. The tournament in this film is represented as a sporting event performed for two audiences—one peasant and one noble. The contrast of rough and rugged with snobby and elite is the constant theme of the tournament scenes, which alternate in their focus between the lower and the upper classes

In *King Arthur* a similar theme is at work, but here the manliness of the Sarmatian knights is contrasted against Romans who, relying on the more rugged Sarmatians to do their fighting for them, read as overly civilized, soft, and feminized. The story follows Arthur and his Sarmatian knights as they are forced by a dishonest Roman leader to travel to the north to save a Roman family from a group of raiding Saxons. Arriving at the Roman villa, Arthur and his knights soon learn that these Romans represent the decadence and corruption of Rome, and the drama of the plot revolves largely around Arthur realizing that his wish for an idealized Rome is a fantasy, while the reality is that Rome is a place where ideal masculinity cannot exist because of the corrupting force of civilization. As the film proceeds, the Italian accent of the Romans functions in a similar way to the dialect of King Edward in *Braveheart* and to the upper class tournament crowd in *A Knight's Tale*, in that it accentuates other traits, such as dishonesty, snobbishness, and the decadence of high culture.