

Docudrama Performs the Past

Docudrama Performs the Past:
Arenas of Argument in Films
based on True Stories

By

Steven N. Lipkin

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For My Family

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Docudrama Performs the Past begins where *Real Emotional Logic* ended, with the new millennium's remarkable persistence of productions of feature films and movies-of-the-week "based on true stories." While this book, much in the vein of its predecessor, strives to explore the facets of the cinematic persuasion that producers and audiences, for various reasons, find so useful, it does so by embracing the recognition that docudramatic re-creation performs people and events of the past, and consequently its performance contributes importantly, and at its best responsibly, to public memory.

The focus here on docudrama's interplay between performance and memory has benefited from a number of influences. Derek Paget has brought "Acting With Facts" in film, theatre, and television to the foreground of scholarship in these disciplines through his leadership of the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England grant project by that same name, as well as through many fruitful years of advice, collaboration, and friendship. I also must thank Nancy Lipkin Stein for invaluable guidance through the connections between the fields of rhetoric and public memory studies. Alan Rosenthal, in generously sharing his wisdom of the necessary balance between theory and practice, has repeatedly helped return my thinking to the ethical dimensions of the ways docudrama shapes public memory.

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CHAPTER ONE

ARENAS OF RE-CREATION: EVENTS DOCUDRAMA, WAR DOCUDRAMA, AND THE BIOPIC

“We actually shot in the house where Mary Malone grew up. In the scene where she’s talking to Bobby [Jones] on the telephone? And her father’s sitting there? That’s Mary’s house. I said, this is the stairway she really went up, this is where her father was sitting, this is all real. I think everybody got lit up by it pretty well.”

—Rowdy Herrington, Writer/Director, *Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius*¹

Understanding how docudrama performs the past rests upon three basic presuppositions:

First, as docudramas re-create actual people and events these works perform their material. Simply put, docudramatic re-creation is performance. Docudramas, films and movies-of-the-week based on true stories, hinge their appeal on re-creating actual people and events. The premises of the persuasive arguments docudramas forward accordingly work within the basic settings allowed by noteworthy events, and the lives of noteworthy individuals. Docudramatic performance appears to us within these settings.

Second, as docudramas perform the past, they offer us a performance of memory. Through these performances the memories of others become ours. The performance of memory warrants—grounds—docudramatic representation in actuality, and indicates the sense of obligation to the past that helps make docudrama a distinctive mode of representation.

Third, the spirit of obligation to the past frames the ethical considerations docudrama raises, as performance in docudrama shapes public memory.

These suggestions have ties to ideas I’ve developed previously in *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice*.²

In that book I forwarded the view that docudrama is a mode of presentation made distinct by what warrants its representations of its material. To clarify, docudrama works as a mode of presentation, rather than as a film genre. Docudrama is not a kind or type of story, but rather a means of representation, a way of offering argument about the past. The work of re-creating actual people and events suggests that it makes more sense to view docudrama as a mode of storytelling, rather than a singular story genre. Docudrama's reasoning from setting becomes a fundamental characteristic of how docudrama operates as a mode of representation.

While substantial scholarly energy has been devoted to film genre theory³ the idea of "modes" in film has not received much attention. In his *American Cinema/American Culture*, for example, John Belton refers to melodrama as one of several "modal genres" without further explanation of what this means.⁴ Belton is suggesting that melodramas, like musicals, become identifiable through foregrounded formal elements, their means of presentation. In *Representing Reality* documentary film scholar Bill Nichols distinguishes between several modes of documentary film, including the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative modes, characterized and differentiated by how the technology of representation mediates the relationships between subject, audience, and filmmaker.⁵ Both Belton and Nichols work with modes of filmic representation by emphasizing not what is represented, a focus more in the spirit of genre theory, but rather how representation works.

I've suggested that docudrama works as a mode of presentation in its fusion of documentary material (its "actual" subject matter), and the structures and strategies of classic Hollywood narrative form, including character development, conflict, and closure.⁶ Performance also distinguishes docudrama as a mode, since docudrama foregrounds what it represents as performance, however it is a performance of the actual. To see this, consider how foregrounding performance creates a kinship bond between docudrama and reality TV. John Corner, for example, in examining the same kind of foregrounding in reality TV has referred to the work of framing, staging, and narrating simulated documentary material as "performing the real."⁷ This differs from docudrama, however, since there is no actual memory to perform. To paraphrase Bill Nichols, reality TV becomes distinct as it gives us one performance too many.⁸ But the two modes share the work of foregrounding performance. Markers such as star casting, and feature film advertising, distribution, and exhibition remind us emphatically that docudrama performs what it re-creates. What is important here, however, is that docudramatic re-creation warrants its representation by performing a memory of the past.

I have proposed that docudrama's persuasive logic depends upon warrants.⁹ Warrants ground docudramatic representation in the actuality it represents. Warrants in docudrama include models (indexically iconic representations, or motivated resemblances to their actual referents), sequences (alternating images of actual and re-created material), and interactions of real and re-created materials within the same screen space. Warrants link and authenticate the evidence and the claims that docudramas forward. The performance of memory in docudrama also warrants claims about the past. Representing memory grounds the representation in actuality, authenticating and legitimating the argument, the view of the past, that we are watching. A film such as *Flags of Our Fathers* (C. Eastwood, 2006) further shows that docudrama can perform various kinds of memory, however when docudrama performs the past its representations most importantly become part of public memory, pressing historical and ethical obligations upon all facets of the work of performing the past. I will view "memory" here as the performance of the past, a view that distinguishes between memory as a process (and consequently the subject of cognitive theory and methodologies), and the filmic representation of that process and what is remembered ("memories").

Docudrama's performance of the past—its performance of memory and memories—falls into several further modes of docudramatic argument that I suggest we envision as "arenas" of presentation. Arenas of the performance of memory keep our attention drawn to the space within which we see roles fulfilled. Arenas of action, like those within which sporting events occur, are ritualistic spaces, coded by norms, rules, and expectations. As realms of representation arenas balance equally the import and functions of action, setting, and text. Within the arenas that docudramas perform memory occurs the reciprocal legibility of setting and action: in brief, we read the one through, and because of, the other.

Docudrama's fundamental work of shaping our memory of actual people and events through its work of re-creation creates three broad and flexible kinds of settings, the arenas of docudramatic representation. The arenas that frame docudrama's performance of memory accordingly include the representation of noteworthy events (*United 93*; *The Perfect Storm*; *Frost/Nixon*); the representation of the events of war (such as *Defiance* and *Flags Of Our Fathers* serve to illustrate); and the representation of noteworthy individuals in the biopic. Looking at specific works suggests that arenas can provide staging grounds separately or in unison. As modes of representation they are ways or manners of operating, and so the issue is not accomplishing strict categorization, but seeing, for example, how what characterizes the means of representation in an events

docudrama and in the biopic might work in unison in films such as *Charlie Wilson's War*, *The Insider*, or *The Greatest Game Ever Played*.

One result of viewing docudrama as working within arenas of the performance of memory is that it mandates attention to setting. It allows us to ask, what relates acting to context, to the literal and figurative stages that frame it? While there has been a great deal of valuable work recently on screen acting, this research has been largely focused on technique. The material in Cindy Baron's and Sharon Carnicke's *Reframing Screen Performance* and most of the essays anthologized in the earlier *More Than A Method*, edited by Cindy Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo, understandably focus on describing "screen acting," how it can be related to Stanislavskian training, and generally return to matters of technique, gesture, and expression.¹⁰ Baron and Carnicke in *Reframing* situate acting within film's larger formal system and the case studies that follow consider the impact of lighting, editing, shot framing, and sound on film performance.¹¹ Frank P. Tomasulo's "The Sounds of Silence: Modernist Acting in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up*" in *More Than a Method* relates actors and the film's acting to the filmed environment, noting: "Indeed, the Antonioni character is often just a small part of a larger visual and social field ... By foregrounding the background, Antonioni redefines the nature of film dramaturgy—and the nature of cinematic performance."¹² Tomasulo is suggesting a useful distinction between acting, and the craft elements inherent to acting for film, and performance, which we can understand to be role behavior (purposeful action) within physical space and cultural contexts. Diane Carson's essay in *More than A Method* on John Sayles's *Matewan* (1987), also in the anthology's section on modernist acting theory, considers how location helps feed the authenticity of performance, which comes much closer to what I see happening in docudramas that often re-create events that have happened in the places where they occurred or close to it.¹³ Within recent literature on screen acting then there is at least some indication that we should consider the reciprocity between action on screen and the space within which it occurs.

The arenas that frame performance become the means to make the past present. Arenas create the staging ground for contestation, confrontation, and engagement. Identity and action intersect within the arena. It is precisely because of the arena that who one is, where one is, and what one does become reciprocally legible. Through place—the space of the arena—action and identity define each other. The arena produces action. Character action becomes a consequence of the codes that give the arena its shape, structure, and form. The arena fits within a larger social system

and is recognizable as a staging ground because of the structures, rules, and processes that characterize it. As it fits within a larger social system the arena expresses and reinforces social codes. Sports provide us with a multitude of examples of arenas. The ropes and canvas that frame a boxing ring provide the physical space that activates the rules and strategies of boxers, actors whose identities are defined by the actions performed within the space of the ring. One could say the same of a baseball diamond, a cricket pitch, or a football field.

The “arenas” that ground action within place in docudramas about noteworthy events, people, and war provide memorable forms to frame action and identity. We see what happens within the arena as both relatable and moral. Since the actions that occur within arenas have the purpose of attaining goals what we see within these arenas becomes relatable. We might not share a goal but we can relate to—understand and identify with—the necessary effort that has to be expended to attain it. The variety of emotional, cognitive, and optical point of view structures we find in the performance of the past also ensure that we relate to what the arena enacts for us.¹⁴ Arenas create a space of contestation that presupposes a moral system. The arena allows us to view the processes of winning and losing in a moral light. The arena addresses the questions, is it right or wrong to win or lose? Any goal attained within the arena becomes illuminated by the moral light inherent to how the arena functions.

The notion of “arenas” of representation is also appropriate to the multifaceted nature of memory—the idea that remembering something that’s happened presupposes not only action (what we did, or what was done to us) but also where (and how) such action occurred. Consequently when docudrama performs the past it becomes public memory through the functions of these arenas of performance. Noteworthy events and events in war become selected, arranged, and morally framed as they enter the realm of public memory through arenas of docudramatic presentation. In the case of the biopic, personal memory similarly becomes public property. In assessing the effects of such representations, public memory studies considers the rhetorical nature of works that address memory, and that create, shape, and reinforce cultural memory. Concerns here become kinds of memory, the means to evoke memory, the relationship between primary, personal memory and the secondary memories works about the past can represent, and the ethics of recovering and representing memory for diverse audiences.¹⁵

Docudrama, as a contributor to public memory, argues then not about the past as it “was,” but poses propositions about how people and events

should be remembered. Through the mode of docudrama we view the past as performance, as purposeful action within and in response to the arenas that define actions and actors.

The arena makes evident the balance, the interrelationship of actor, action, and place. In events docudramas the contested spaces of work and politics shape the arguments that result. The events arenas showcase the intersection of personal and public space, private ambition and public consequences. War docudramas evoke the material of memory in order to recreate the visceral space of the most extreme kind of contestation. Biopics explore what I will term “compulsive” space, the space of lives driven by the compulsions that create artists, musicians, writers, politicians, criminals, and public figures. Each arena operates as a submode, a variety, of docudramatic argument, however each arena also argues about the moral value of the contestation it showcases.

To illustrate, Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* (1995), a biopic, and Ron Howard’s *Frost/Nixon* (2009), an events docudrama, share not only the same subject, but also the strategy that where actions and events occur inflects how we read each film’s performance of “Nixon.” Both films reach the climax of their re-creation in houses, the White House in *Nixon*, and a private home in *Frost/Nixon* where the interviews that are the subject of the film will occur. The White House in *Nixon* allows us to see the subject of the biopic as simultaneously trapped and driven. The offices, meeting rooms, and bedrooms of the White House define the role, remind the President of who he is, and also of what he will lose. Frequent cut-aways during scenes in these locales to numerous documentary or documentary-like flashes of public events (war; war protests) or Nixon’s family connect his behavior to his thoughts, memories, and fears. The White House as an arena allows us to understand how Nixon is compelled to grapple with past influences as a means to manage the pressures of the present. The house in *Frost/Nixon*, on the other hand, frames the unfolding event for us as it stages a contest of the present in which the personal ambitions of interviewer and interviewee take on the most public kind of consequences. It is to be a conversation with “no holds barred,” displays the culmination of the desires of both men to be victors in public, while they sit, almost knee to knee, in a setting that anticipates where the product of their contest will find its audience.

The case studies in this book provide guides to the arenas within which docudrama performs the past. By no means can they document them completely and comprehensively. The broad arena of noteworthy events in this overview includes docudramas set within the spheres of work and politics. Clint Eastwood’s *Changeling* (2008) will lead off this discussion

since the film's "true story" showcases a collision between the two spheres. The arenas of events in *Changeling* pit personal space and memory against social institutions—law enforcement and mental health—in performing the vindication of a working mother's true memory. In *The Perfect Storm* (W. Peterson, 2000) the very scale of contestation in the work the film shows argues for the need for public memory. Work, the consequences of ambition, and the noteworthy events that result similarly drive the arguments forwarded in *Erin Brockovich* (S. Soderbergh, 2000) and *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (M. Burke, 1999). Both suggest we remember the work of their principal characters as necessary and memorable precisely as a measure of response to the power of the forces that would oppose and constrain it. The story of *Seabiscuit* (G. Ross, 2003) recovers exemplary public memory in order to equate work with cultural identity.

The case studies in docudramas about political events illuminate the codes and constraints that govern political action. Each story clarifies how the very reason for being of political process stems from the intersection of private ambition, public action, and the public knowledge and memory that result. *Strange Justice* (E. Dickerson, 1999) theatricalizes the crucible of a Senate committee hearing room in re-creating the epic confrontation between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. We see in the most personal terms how the left and right of American politics of the early nineties became polarized over the issues of race and gender raised by Thomas's nomination to the United States Supreme Court. As a very different film telling a vastly different story, Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006) also sets its story within personal, desperately contested space, as a means of making accessible the political consequences we know, and the personal consequences we can only imagine in the hijacking of the only 9/11 airliner that failed to reach its target.

The events of war constitute a second, distinct arena within which docudramas perform the past, drawing upon the material of personal memory as a means to argue for and shape public memory of people, actions, and their consequences. Within the range of eras and conflicts these films re-create, including World War II (*Defiance*; *Flags of Our Fathers*; *Uprising*; *The Pianist*; *Nuremberg*); Vietnam (*We Were Soldiers*); incursions of the 90s (*Black Hawk Down*); and Iraq (*Saving Jessica Lynch*) war docudramas perform the material of personal memory within the most visceral kinds of arenas. *Defiance* (E. Zwick, 2008) foregrounds its forest setting in order to argue for a revised public memory of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. *Flags of Our Fathers* offers us literally a meditation on memory, as it explores the clash of various (and various kinds of)

personal memories with the creation of public memory. If memory allows the past to become present, the essays that follow examine the functions and implications of that presence. *Uprising* (J. Avnet, 2001), *Nuremberg* (Y. Simoneau, 2000), and *The Pianist* (R. Polanski, 2002) focus on the physical features of setting to recover a sense of the emotional experience of the Holocaust. *Black Hawk Down* (R. Scott, 2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (R. Wallace, 2002) similarly evoke the visceral experience of combat as the premise for their arguments about the meaning of those wars. As an adaptation of historian Stephen Ambrose's printed oral history, the interviews that frame the ten episodes of *Band of Brothers* (S. Spielberg, 2001) ground re-creation to living memory in the miniseries's systematic effort to reclaim for public memory the rapidly disappearing personal histories of World War II veterans. The last entry into the arena of the events of war this section considers, *Saving Jessica Lynch* (P. Markle, 2003), returns us to the kinds of forces that influence public memory explored in *Flags of Our Fathers*. The shaping of the Jessica Lynch story echoes eerily, but not surprisingly, the construction of the war in Iraq in general.

Biopics, films that re-create the lives of noteworthy individuals, form the third and perhaps most sprawling arena of docudramatic argument. The essays here purport only to survey the topography of a terrain that includes films about musicians (*Ray*; *Walk the Line*), scientists (*Kinsey*; *A Beautiful Mind*), artists (*Pollock*; *Frida*), writers (*Capote*; *Finding Neverland*), actors (*Autofocus*; *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*), athletes (*Cinderella Man*; *The Greatest Game Ever Played*; *The Blind Side*), criminals (*Catch Me If You Can*; *Monster*; *American Gangster*), politicians (*The Last Kind of Scotland*; *Charlie Wilson's War*; *Milk*), and public figures (*The Aviator*; *Amelia*; *Good Night, and Good Luck*). The arena of re-creation spins a common thread among these diverse stories through the recurring argument that noteworthy figures become compelled to their accomplishments because of the clash between the predispositions of their desires, ambitions, talents, and/or inclinations, and internal and external constraints that shape those desires. The brief discussions included here on a number of these, with particular attention to *Ray* (T. Hackford, 2004), *The Greatest Game Ever Played* (B. Paxton, 2005), *Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius* (R. Herrington, 2004), and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (G. Clooney, 2005), detail how these films argue that accomplishment in these cases is a response to internal and external constraints.

The chapters that follow examine the spectrum of arguments docudramas offer as their re-creations reason from the arenas of important

events, the events of war, and the lives of noteworthy individuals. The case studies show how docudrama's re-creation of "true stories," its performance of memory, warrants the claims it forwards about how to remember the past. The aggregate of examining works made since the late 1990s allows us to see how, as recurring contexts, the arenas of docudramatic argument ground action and identity in the settings that frame performance, structure the moral value of the contestation that ensues, and shape the public memory of the past that docudramas perform.

CHAPTER TWO

CHANGELING AND THE PERFORMANCE OF TRUE MEMORY

“I had one rule when I set out to write the script on this, which was that everything had to be true. I’m not saying every single line was exactly true but every scene had to have happened and not necessarily in the way that I arranged them, but there had to be the facsimile of reality, as opposed to reality itself, which of course you can never get, even if you’re doing a documentary. But there has to be this kind of verisimilitude, which not only appears to be real, every scene is based on reality.”

—Martyn Burke, Writer/Director, *Pirates of Silicon Valley*¹⁶

Clint Eastwood’s 2008 *Changeling* claims, in contrast to most docudramas that are “based on a true story” to be, in fact, “a true story.” The truth of *Changeling*’s “true story” rests in the film’s performance of the fact of memory. Performance is central in the film. Performance frames the contesting truth claims that create the fabric of *Changeling*’s narrative. The film visualizes memory through the performance of role actions and behavior. The performance of roles within the film’s story distinguishes between true and false memory. The performance framework associates truthful memory with actual, lived memory, and opposes this to socially pressured, assumed role performances and the fabricated memories that define them. “Truth” comes to reside in the fact of memory, the memory of people and events that we have seen, and consequently know as “fact.” In line with other films Eastwood has made over the last two decades, *Changeling* also links truth in the performance of memory to survivor guilt, so that the interplay of guilt and memory form the truth of *Changeling*’s “true story.”

Memory offers us a performance of the past. Docudrama's performance of the past claims to re-create actual people, places, and events. The roots of the story's performance in the material of the past warrants the claims the film would forward.

"Performance" in general refers to role actions and behaviors. Both theatrical and sociological views of performance note the importance as well of the settings in which role actions occur. Sociologically, where we are impacts how we behave.¹⁷ The performance of roles in the theater necessarily frames character behavior and action within the general setting of the theater's stage, and the more particular settings a work specifies. To view and so understand "performance" means looking at the balance, the interrelationship between action and setting. If we interpret who people are not only on the basis of what they do but where they do it (or, to rephrase, where we are frames what we do) then it is fair to say that setting and role actions are reciprocally legible. The one informs the way we read the other, and vice-versa.

Before considering how *Changeling* argues for the truth of lived memory I would like to consider how docudrama's performance of the past allows us to understand memory itself as performance. A "memory" may be an effort to recover the past, but understanding how memory stages action and events within the settings of the past reminds us how the process of memory forms instrumentally the search for truth.

Performing Memory

Docudramas, films and movies-of-the-week based on true stories, tend to find the material of their stories in the lives of noteworthy individuals or in historically important events. Docudrama's representation of its real-life subject matter immediately raises at least two basic questions: is the work true to its subject, and is its representation through the codes and conventions of feature film narrative cinema appropriate? One answer to both questions begins here from the assumption that docudramas do not claim to be documentaries, and that docudrama provides a view or a version of the past, rather than "the" history of the events and figures it represents. What docudramas do offer, from their "basis" in "true stories," is a performance of their real-life subjects.

Docudramas about significant events become a performance of both history and memory. Performance in events docudramas foregrounds memory in various ways. In doing so these works argue for a view of history *as* memory. *Changeling's* true story, for example, could proceed equally as a history of corruption in the Los Angeles Police Department

(LAPD), the muckraking work of radio evangelism in the late 1920s, or the reform of abuses in government-run mental institutions, but emphasizes instead the story of a power struggle between the forces that form individual and public memory. Re-creation, the performance of actual people and events, allows a re-imagining and re-experiencing of the past. Docudramas provide not only a performance of past events, but also an argument through re-creation that history becomes accessible not so much as static “fact” as it does as a process of remembering.

What follows will first outline the nature of performance in docudrama. I will consider performance to stem from the interrelationship of role behavior and setting, and that the various means of highlighting this interdependence in docudrama allows the mode to claim status historiographically, rather than to purport to provide documentary historical record. *Changeling* illustrates how events docudramas foreground their performance of the past as a means to argue for the importance of understanding history as the process of remembering.

Performance in Docudrama

Recent studies of acting in film have drawn on traditional, theatre-based theory to focus on what gives a performance a distinct presence on screen.¹⁸ Areas of concern include the relationship of character and technique, and the differences between character and star acting. I wish to add to this discussion some thoughts on what is important about performance in docudrama. Docudrama narratives perform—represent—their real-life subjects by re-creating people and events. In earlier work I discussed several basic means by which docudrama legitimates, or warrants its re-creation of the real, including sequencing documentary and re-created footage, having actual real-life principals and locations share screen space to interact with re-creation, and modeling or replicating the real.¹⁹ Docudramatic performance provides us with a model of its subject. In semiotic terms, the modeled performance in docudrama is indexically iconic. It works as a model because its resemblance is motivated directly by its real-life subjects. Much in the way that any model works, the modeling that warrants docudramatic performance offers a sense of access to, control over, perspective on, and ultimately understanding of its subject.

Modeling depends upon resemblance; the work of modeling in docudrama depends upon resemblance in both the action and the setting that constitute “performance.” Performance in general is purposeful action. It is role behavior within a context that gives its action meaning.

In docudrama, modeling defines the interdependence of role action and setting. We read the one in terms of the other in order for modeling to work. The legibility of action and setting becomes reciprocal. The modeled reciprocal legibility of action and context argues for the validity and authenticity of docudramatic performance.

Setting assumes a particular importance in events docudramas, since their very choice of a subject argues for historical importance of place, time, and action. Performance in events docudramas appears as modeled action within contested space.²⁰ Space does not simply frame action by providing the staging ground. Space inflects action, and makes legible the codes that indicate its issues and uncertainties. Drama arises not only from the conflict of the desires of the performers, but also inheres within the contestation the space itself creates, whether it is the natural environment (*Erin Brockovich*; *A Civil Action*; *The Perfect Storm*), or the intersection of social and political forces (the streets of Derry in Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*; the airwaves in *Good Night, and Good Luck*; the cabin of United 93; the ears of Congress in *Charlie Wilson's War*). Watching events re-created in contested space is much like a trip to an arena or coliseum, in which staging reflects the roles and functions of competitors. Contested space associates physical and ideological conflict; action based on contestation makes visible the meanings—the codes and values—at issue.

At the same time, re-creation in docudrama foregrounds its status as performance. Docudrama indicates its performance of the real in several ways. The fact that docudramas are produced, distributed, marketed, and exhibited as feature films underlines their function as entertainment products. This is performance as branded commodity. Docudramas assert that they are “based on” true stories, foregrounding their project to re-create known figures and events. Further, just as docudramas tend to signpost their status as hybrid narratives (stories—conventional narratives—incorporating “true,” documentary materials), they also foreground the performances they offer as performance when, for example: *World Trade Center* (O. Stone, 2006) casts a star, Nicholas Cage, as John McLaughlin, the New York City firefighter who endured the events the film depicts; when Tom Hanks appears before us as congressman Charlie Wilson; when Philip Seymour Hoffman embodies a young Truman Capote; when Russell Crowe plays the roles of a tobacco insider, a Nobel-winning scientist, a New York City detective, or a Depression-era boxer; and when Denzel Washington reminds us of the fire of Malcolm X, the trials faced by Hurricane Carter, or the help that redefines the sense of possibility for the likes of an Antwone Fisher or talented university debaters.

Docudrama's very acknowledgement of its work as performance argues that we should view its modeling of the past historiographically, as a form of representing history, rather than as a representation of historical fact. If we accept this view of the mode, the key question becomes, not "was this what happened?" so much as, in what way(s) does performance in docudrama allow us to understand the significant people and events of the past? What is there in its modeling, its strategies of re-creation, that brings the past to life affording some new understanding of it for a viewer in the present? Robert Rosenstone suggests that "the past on screen is not meant to be literal (is history on the page?), but suggestive, symbolic, metaphoric."²¹ Considering docudrama historiographically prompts asking, what does its performance of the past do?

Before turning to how *Changeling* performs the past as it exists in memory, I would like to suggest that historiography attunes us to thinking about history as diverse, sometimes even competing versions of the past. Differences in accounts render accuracy as uncertain, perpetually subject to debate. Historiographers such as Hayden White and Robert Rosenstone argue that our sense of the past becomes formed not only by comparing and contrasting these various views, but also by considering what materials are brought together and how in forming the view of the past that any particular work forwards.

If how we formulate the past brings it to life, then the performance of the past adds another consideration as to "where" the past resides. "History" is in records of the past, but it is also in memory. Since docudramas do not purport to be historical records but instead, representations of the past that perform history, it is not surprising to find that events docudramas often focus their performance of history by replicating, directly or indirectly, the process of remembering the past. One implication of evoking the past through performance that models the process of memory is that one need not have lived the past and now remembers it; a viewer can understand that what is being represented is a model of what the experience of memory does to evoke the past. Flashback structures (*Walk the Line*; *World Trade Center*; *Charlie Wilson's War*; *A Mighty Heart*) are one means to situate the events unfolding on screen within memory. Another, equally conventional strategy, is for a work to argue that key, iconic images become the images of memory, and thus of history. *Good Night, and Good Luck* builds its evocation of Edward R. Murrow's courage under fire upon its replication of the "look" of fifties television and Murrow's *See It Now* in particular. *Charlie Wilson's War* depicts the seed of its story taking root in Dan Rather's report on freedom fighters in Afghanistan on *Sixty Minutes*.

United 93 places the images of planes penetrating the World Trade Center and the collapse of the towers on screens viewed by various air traffic controllers. *Flags of Our Fathers* explores not only what might be important about a widely shared image, but also what its repercussions were, and ultimately why it is important to foreground through performance the effect on the present of memory's evocation of the past.²² In all cases images audiences viewed became iconographic. These docudramas evoke the past, bring it life, by performing, through these key images, the very process of remembering itself.

Signposted then as a view or version of history, docudramatic performance foregrounds not only what evokes memory, but also the phenomenon of memory itself. Perhaps what the performance of the past in docudrama presumes most strongly is the need to remember, and that above all else warrants how its telling of "true stories" brings the past to life.

The Performance of Memory in *Changeling*

Changeling opposes true to false memory by presenting the differences between role actions in private and public places. Both kinds of settings function as arenas within which to stage the conflict in the story between true and false memory, and so between the actual, "natural" relationship between mother and son, and the fabricated, socially forced relationship the process of child abduction and return creates. Scenes in the privacy of the Collins home present us with the fact of the biological son and the fact of "true," lived memory. Scenes in public places—the train station, and in courtrooms—foreground the performance of memory in general, and the implications of acting out the fact of memory when one has been forced to assume a memory of the past. The foregrounding of the performance of false memory only reinforces what we know to be the truth. We know it because we and Mrs. Collins (Angelina Jolie) have seen it, and we, too, remember it.

In each of the scenes that contrast true and false memory, the space of the setting foregrounds roles, and the action we see within that space foregrounds the fact, the visual presence, of memory. The first scene occurs within the Collins home. She has promised her son that they will spend the day together and see a movie. She is called to work to fill in and so must break her promise. She explains, makes her son a sandwich that he can have later for lunch, dresses for work, and leaves. He is on his own. The scene reinforces her conflicting responsibilities as mother and provider. She is good at her job, and a reliable, competent worker. As a

single, working mother she needs her job. She provides a comfortable home in a middle-class neighborhood for her son and puts food on the table. She would be the best mother she can be in the time that job responsibilities allow. She has made her son a promise, however, and the process of changing the plan, of dressing for work, packing the lunch, and leaving the house plant the seeds for the sense of guilt that will overtake her life when she returns and finds him missing.

In addition to the actions that establish role conflict (mother's promise as opposed to employee's obligation; dressed for a day off as opposed to a day of work; eating together at home as opposed to the "working" lunch) the construction of space in the scene serves to foreground the presence of the boy when she leaves, compared to his absence when she returns. He (and so their relationship) fills the kitchen. The kitchen frames the role conflicts. The kitchen provides the staging ground to show conflict inherent in the role of mother as provider, and son as dependent. The shot as she leaves shows the house's living room, pulls away from Walter framed in the window and recedes down the street beyond, suggesting the tenuous nature of the shelter from the outside the house provides.

The influence of the space outside the house, and by implication the outer world that will impinge on the relationship between mother and son, becomes reiterated when she returns home. The scene bookends the earlier departure for work. We track to the front door and see her enter from the outside. He is not there, not in the empty living room, bedroom, nor the kitchen. It is now the end of the day, and the sandwich he should have eaten for lunch remains untouched. She runs outside and searches the neighborhood for her missing son.

The son's absence becomes the visual indication of failure: failure to provide, to keep him safe, to preserve, ultimately, the relationship between mother and son. His absence indicates how her role conflict has led to her failure to fulfill her role. His absence combined with the fruitlessness of her search efforts (now and subsequently, over decades) further indicate the burden of guilt the memory of her son in the house imposes upon her.

The interplay of absence, presence, memory, setting, role behavior that setting demands, role obligation, and truth becomes foregrounded again during the scene at the train station when mother is to reunite with her discovered and recovered abducted son. Society has intervened in the mother's dilemma in the form of LAPD Captain Jones (Jeffrey Donovan), who earlier had come to her with the news of the likely discovery of her son in another state. The moment of reunion has been further set up by the prominence the investigation has received in the press, and the attention the practices and policies of the LAPD has received in the newspapers and

through the muckraking efforts of a popular radio minister. There is tremendous social pressure on the police to perform, and so the moment of reunion is equally a moment of vindication for the police. Consequently the reunion is a highly public moment. The train station is thronged with the press and curious onlookers. It is a stage set to frame the performances of cop and mother.

The boy who is supposed to be her son is brought off the train. His appearance fills the absence marked by the empty house and the fruitless search. However, immediately both she and we can see that this child resembles her son, but is different—it is not him. His presence to fulfill the role of her biological son is a lie.

She tells this to the detective, and he pulls her aside. He creates a private moment in this highly public space. Time has passed, he suggests; likely the boy has grown and changed given the passage of time, the misadventures he has endured; perhaps, he implies, her memory deceives her. Further, he emphasizes the public nature of the moment. They must accept this child as hers, at least here, in public view.

Her acceptance of his suggestions indicates the weight of social pressure, visible in the presence of the cop and the presence of the public, to bend what a mother knows to be the truth. She is forced to assume a role and with it the lie of both the fact of who her son is, and just as important, her memory of her son. She and we know, however, that the truth is rooted in our memories of the visible evidence of her biological child, and it is this knowledge, this truth, the fact of memory, that drives the rest of her story.

She is forced to take him home and treat him as her own. He says little. When she bathes him, and confronts him with the fact that he is circumcised and her son was not, he continues to say nothing, but to call her his mother. The collision of role performance, the fact of memory, and the forced falsehood of social pressure recurs when she tries to point out to a physician that this child has been circumcised, and his response is much like what we've heard before, that this was probably part of the boy's mistreatment during his abduction. Social pressure continues to intervene in denying the fact of a mother's memory.

Though an entirely different story from Eastwood's earlier *Flags of Our Fathers*, *Changeling* similarly pins much of the truth of its true story on the performance of memory. In both films performance becomes a means to meditate upon the truth of memory itself when performance allows us to understand the contrasts between kinds of memory, in particular the primary, personal memory and its associated traumas that collides with coerced, manufactured, public memory that the narrative

allows us to see in the context of role behavior within contested private and public spaces.

Both *Changeling* and *Flags of our Fathers* foreground the performance of history and memory as a means to access the past. The emphasis on performance in both films acknowledges the singularity and relativity of viewpoint that forms the basis for memory. The centrality of performance in these works allows them to explore the authenticity of lived memory, and to argue that truth in memory stems from understanding the very nature of memory itself as performance.

