Can filmed representations of the past contribute to historical knowledge?

Over the years, history as a subject has adapted and changed to find new forms of historical knowledge. From the very beginning, where visual history was used in caves to explain through pictures occurrences in the past, to the recent form of written history which historians have begun to embrace as a reliable source of historical knowledge. Here, we are faced with a new historiographical change. The dilemma of whether to let a modern development, such as filmed representations of the past, into the things we consider as historical knowledge. In recent years, we have seen an increase in historical films, from the likes of “12 Years a Slave” and “Hidden Figures” to focused recreation’s of a single person’s historical influence like “The King's Speech” and “Jackie”, all concentrated on the lesser known of their characters portraying an unseen lesser discussion. This has resulted in an increasing demand to tackle the question of whether films can be used to contribute to historical knowledge, or are they a melodramatic display of the twisted truth designed to capture as many viewings as possible. This essay draws on a combination of sources, from scientific journals to interviews, to answer whether filmed representations of past can or cannot contribute to historical knowledge.

First of all, when considering something as historical knowledge, all forms of the piece of work, need to be viewed in their own right not under a broad genre. If one considers filmed representations of the past, each film has to undergo thorough analysis before they can be considered part of the historical canon. These evaluations would rule out any false impressions or effects the film could make. However, these analyses are not always accurate. Therefore, is it worth risking the effects of one distorted film being considered as historical knowledge if other films give beneficial contributions to history? Often, history is distorted to suit political agenda. One example is Sergei Einsteins’ 1920 film; Battleship Potemkin. Einstein used the montage effect, when shooting the act of the Odessa steps in order to paint the previous Tsarist government in a violent, malicious light. The scenes picturing Cossacks shooting sick and disabled children which were fleeing for their lives. The Soviet government commissioned the film intending to create propaganda to immortalise the Revolution of 1905 and muster more support for their government. In reality, no Tsarist massacre occurred on the Odessa steps but the fact that it is often portrayed today as having happened illustrates the power one film can have in changing popular opinion. With the advanced cinematic technology available today the impact of a single film would be far greater now than it was in Leninist Russia. When it comes to answering the question at hand, filmed representations cannot be classed as one genre. One has to analyse each individual representation before classing them as historical knowledge. Just as with other sources, filmed representations could be considered as historical knowledge, though careful evaluation, in conjunction with other sources, of each film is needed before classifying it as such, but this is already done with all other forms of historical knowledge and so this should not weaken its case for contribution.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a representation as ‘the way that someone or something is shown or described’, highlighting the filmed representation may not always have to a replica of the history that we have experienced and learnt about from alternative sources. Often, this representation is displayed by filmed representations of the past being created as art, constructed to be a cinematic experience. However, this cinematic form of representation is an argument for why filmed representations of the past could not contribute

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to historical knowledge. The experiences created often have a vested interest behind them, such as a bid to attract more viewers or receive profit. An example is Pearl Harbor (2001). It describes the Japanese kamikaze bombers aiming to bomb hospitals when truly the aim was American warships in port.\(^2\) Targeting a hospital increased the detrimental effect of the attack to the viewer as it was a place considered to be of care and safe. This inaccurately portrayed the target of the bombings, dramatizing the represented historical story to make the film more exciting, attracting more viewers. Moreover, it created an impression of the Japanese kamikaze bombers that was perverted from the truth. They appeared to target innocent children creating a villainous character producing a thrilling experience. With filmed representations stories need to be crafted, ones that have a beginning middle and end, leaving viewers with a message. Traditionally, this message is an optimistic one with the historical event improving or resolving. Repeatedly, providing an unchallenging view of history giving the impression that the event happened one way, and one character’s experiences were universal. This is rarely reality when viewing the event compared to reputedly regarded historical knowledge sources. Nevertheless, audiences of these films have preconceived expectations of watching villains, heroes and pace in a changing storyline. This desire for villainous characters or dramatized scenes is often the reason why films distort the details of a historical event. Providing a portrayal, not a true recreation. Ultimately, the true meaning and story do normally prevail in the film. This is something often overlooked by heavy critics of filmed representations. Even so, this begs the question; do sources of historical knowledge need to be factually precise or is portraying a general legitimate message adequate enough to be classed historical knowledge? For answering this question there is scope in comparing film with folk mythology. In folk mythology historical events were made into stories such as the Odyssey and Iliad. These stories came alive, featuring villainous and hero characters. The stories have become historical knowledge used for learning and teaching. They are seen to have historical basis when they too were recreating the past with a story, potentially over dramatizing events for the reader’s pleasure. However, the vested interest that directors have when creating their own filmed representations, which writers like Homer did not have, allows them to manipulate and distort events to fit their own motive. Consequently, the filmed representations cannot be a contributor to historical knowledge as they are likely to portray a false perception of history.

Emotion is a way of knowing, often obscuring our judgement or understanding of a concept. Emotion is reason for why filmed representations of the past cannot contribute to historical knowledge. Filmed portrayals of history are designed to invoke emotion in response to a historical event. This is done using music and manipulating shots of films, something which other sources of history cannot do. This allows historical events to have more importance than they should or increase the impact of specific events. Furthermore, other sources of historical knowledge such as written sources attempt to provide the reader with emotion that would have been experienced during the historical event. However, this is unsuccessful and the words on paper often fail to inflict emotion from the reader. Alternatively, films succeed here bringing history alive, establishing a connection with the viewer enhancing their understanding. Berger writes ‘images are more precise and richer than literature’\(^3\). They enable us to delve deeper into the past helping us use our imagination to understand. However, whilst forging this emotion we need to establish whether associating emotion with a historical event aids or hinders our understanding. Furthermore, does history gain by being empathetic? Is there a danger in directors expressing their personal emotions onto a historical source? Film makers may have preconceived ideas of historical events and project these, which may have been based on improper evidence, on to the screen. The best approach to

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learning from a historical event is one that is not overshadowed by bias or emotions. Therefore, if films inflict emotion on us, can we look at historical events with a neutral view when using them as knowledge? Thus, one can believe that films can contribute to historical knowledge as they give a further insight and developed experience into historical life. Nonetheless, we should be cautious when using them to make judgements as our decisions could be influenced by emotions purposely constructed by the film rather than the true historical event.

When considering something as historical knowledge we compare it to other sources of historical intelligence. In this case, we often compare film representations to written history. With written history we look at the author of the text evaluating the motivation behind the writing of it and their thesis, contrasting it with other similar sources. To truly justify if historical knowledge can be a filmed representation of the past we need to judge film by new standards. The impressions the film makes and how this is done is what we should focus on as this is the effect on the viewer. With films, we cannot analyse each lines historical plausibility as the significance established in one viewer’s mind, due to the other factors such as music and manipulation of shots, can be different to the spoken words. The final impact on the viewer and how this was made should be evaluated. Moreover, the idea of a separate judging criterion comes as films are more successful in portraying a general theme than having accurate historical knowledge. When analysing films, historians point out inconsequential errors and lack of expert knowledge in a film. This might be fundamental with written history, but with filmed representations these things rarely have the same impact. Consequently, filmed representations can be considered as historical knowledge if we establish an evaluation criterion. Instead of looking at the words in film, the lasting effect that these words create on the viewer need to be looked at, as it is from this people will form judgements and opinions about historical events.

The cinematographer Matuszewski concluded ‘film is a window to the past’\(^4\), a way of viewing something that historians cannot experience. It creates a sense of immediacy that other sources of history cannot grasp. With filmed representation one also learns about the architecture and landscapes of a historical environment. This helps us understand the history to a greater extent, creating a memorable understanding of history relating it to familiar objects. Alternatively, one has to be careful when considering film as a window to the past as many filmed representations portray false historicity. One example is in King Arthur (2004) whilst depicting old fashioned soldiers. Soldiers were portrayed to have shiny silver armour living in grand monumental castles. This is unrealistic as soldiers were more likely to wear medieval leather cuirasses and have castles of a smaller scale, being either a larger house or positioned above the village. The director creates a ‘period look’ to fit in with the assumed atmosphere and environment of the historical era they are recreating. This can leave the viewer with a distorted impression of what events might have been like in the time period. The assumptions that are made regarding beauty, civilisation and status can obscure the past\(^5\) creating a false representation. This skewed impression is due to the directors creating filmed representations having little understanding in an area of history whilst holding power to change one’s opinion on it. Thus, how can historical knowledge be used when other forms of current information are created and analysed by people with great depths of knowledge in the subject. There are measures in the film to prevent historical inaccuracies, the National Endowment for the Humanities having a panel of historical advisors on historical films. However, directors have no obligation to change the film after hearing the committee. Subsequently, giving chances to directors to create films influencing and changing the minds of thousands but be historically false leading to fictitious historical


impressions. When analysing other sources of historical knowledge, we discredit them if their creator has little in depth knowledge of the subject. Moreover, hardly any historians have learnt from filmed representations of the past. There must be a reason why when sources of historical knowledge are scarce to find historians avoid the accessible source of filmed representations. To surmise, filmed representations of the past could not contribute to historical knowledge because they are produced and made by a person with little knowledge of the historical era. They would be unable to provide or produce a contribution to historical knowledge that would be credible and reliable.

Nevertheless, historians not willing to take the risk of the unexplored use of filmed representations could be part of the problem. Historian E.H Carr stated ‘the function of history is to promote a profounded understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them’⁶. Films and their reactions display people’s present opinions about how they learn, understand and find history engaging. As well as people’s opinions on events and society’s interpretation of historical events generated by film. Historians need to adapt to what people engage with, otherwise there will be a growing disinterest in historical events. If historians want the general public to become increasingly educated about history, new ways of grabbing people’s interest in this changing world need to be considered. Filmed representations are a post literate, preliterate version of explaining ideas to a generation where written history is declining. For this, one must not shut the door to the question of filmed representations contributing to historical knowledge. If that door is shut it is likely that historical events which, are not taught in the classroom or known by the layman, will not be discussed within the new generation.

To conclude, film is a powerful industry with multiple genres. It gives directors the ability to portray their ideas onto a big screen influencing millions. However, this single mindedness aspect of film, having one person controlling and driving the path of the film, is what hinders filmed representations argument when considering it part of historical knowledge. One person, who has a lack of expertise and knowledge in history, has the power to recreate a significant event with the chance of the recreation being manipulated to fit the thoughts or interests of one person not the historical truth. If each historical film had to prove and supply the evidence behind its theatrical creations, there would be a platform to consider the filmed representations as historical knowledge. However, the modern industry is too polluted with the vested interest of monetary gain behind filmed representations that one can never be confident in believing the scenes in the films are not constructed for viewer’s delight. Therefore, filmed representations cannot contribute to historical knowledge.

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