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**Representations of History in Popular
Cinema: *Schindler's List* and *JFK* as
Postmodern History Texts.**

by

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B. Comms (Media Studies)

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Communications (Media) Honours.**

**At the Faculty of Communications, Health and Science, Edith Cowan
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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

The concept of this dissertation is to research specific filmic representations of historical situations, and to discuss arguments presented in *Spielberg's Holocaust* by critics such as Bartov, Hansen and Zelizer (1997), that popular films such as *Schindler's List* are unable to represent history to the same extent as traditional historical texts. I will also attempt to locate specific interest groups who reaffirm the truth claims of traditional historical narrative, the gatekeepers of 'historical truth', and to examine the nature of 'popular history', and how it is negotiated in the modern cultural sphere.

I will analyse the concept of the 'unrepresentable' as it applies to *Schindler's List* and determine the socio-cultural impact of popular filmic history. I will discuss the possibilities of alternative history such as those presented in *JFK*, locating the significance of popular negotiated forms of history and attempting to define the progressive elements in popular film representations. Finally, I will discuss the constructs of history and historiography as they relate to theories of postmodernity and metanarratives.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously written by another person except where due reference is made in the text

Signature _____

Date 20/3/00

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
1. INTRODUCTION -	
Popular film representations of history in the 1990s	6
2. Popular history vs the gatekeepers of 'historical truth'	14
3. Representing the 'Unrepresentable' in <i>Schindler's List</i>	26
4. <i>JFK</i> and the alternative to history	44
5. Postmodernity and the future of history	59
6. CONCLUSION	70
List of References	75

Chapter 1: Introduction – Popular film representations of history in the 1990s

As the scope and cultural influence of the popular film industry of the United States continues to grow, Hollywood can be viewed as negotiating the importance and the level of representation of events in modern history. History lessons once given only in the classroom now often take place at the local cinema. Traditional history appears outmoded in its representation of past events, and art film representations deny the accessibility that historical study deserves. The compression, invention and fictionalisation of historical events inherent in popular filmic representations bring criticism from scholars and historians who champion the virtues of traditional modes of historicism. The question posed by this dissertation is; can popular film accurately depict/represent historical situations, events and characters?

Historiography presents the scholar with various arguments about the nature of representation; civilisations understand their own history from a culturally shared point-of-view, but this point of view must be negotiated within the media of the culture. Highly revered in the past, traditional history texts and the work of professional historians have never had to share the rostrum before with quite so many dissenting voices, now often presented through cinema. This has prompted many modern historians to analyse the potential of historical representation in popular film for telling

the truth. Pierre Sorlin (1988) locates historians' involvement with cinema as being related to their own conception of history:

not as a reflection of the past but as a social activity closely related to the self-definition and interests of social groups...history does not predate books, novels or films, it is built up and constantly reshaped by the media (p.2).

In terms of the progressive nature of information dissemination, Sorlin further notes (p.3) that popular films (and television) present to audiences information and historical facts (or representations of such) where they did not previously exist. Perhaps therefore, like a traditional history text, cinema can be tool of the historian in the teaching of history. Chambers and Culbert (1996) find that "...the value of historical films is that, through a skilful blending of images, words, and other sounds, it helps visualise the past and evoke a feeling for it..." (p.157).

Because there is such widespread agreement on the methodology of historical study and research, there is a reluctance to utilise or include popular cinema in historical analysis. While history continues to be a central interest to the general public, as Sorlin points out, the public does not participate in the negotiation of historical fact (p.4). He finds that "...there is an obvious gap between those who try to give history a scientific dignity and those who consume the past..." (p.4).

Popular filmmakers though, occupy a position between the two, they are

not concerned with the arguments of authenticity in historical discourse, yet they produce historical texts which ask for the audience to engage their historical capital as 'fact', when often it is not.

"U-571" is the working title of a Universal Pictures film about the Second World War, currently in production. Starring Hollywood heavyweights Harvey Keitel and Matthew McConaughey, the film depicts the heroic actions of submarine crew who capture a German U-boat and the very important cargo; a Nazi encoding machine. The problem with this particular big screen recreation of historical events as Tony Greenway notes in the *Empire* report on the film (1999, p.56), is that while such a machine was recovered from a German submarine, it was a British Navy operation which secured the encoder in 1941 before the United States had entered the war.

This attempt by Hollywood to embellish the historical 'truth' is merely the latest element in a campaign of greater cultural involvement that has become endemic within the Hollywood studio system in the past decade, engaging in politics, art and historical concerns. While the film industries around the world have long been both fascinated and concerned by history, and have attempted to recreate historical events from every era of human activity, never before has Hollywood been quite as involved in representations of history, nor as intrigued by its attendant arguments as has been the case in the 1990s.

Inaccuracy though, is not at all a new concept to popular historical film. While Greenway is primarily concerned with the proper recognition being

given to British war veterans, a greater issue is being wrestled with; can Hollywood film accurately depict history? Culbert and Chambers pose the question; ". . . what differentiates allowable compression and restructuring of the past for dramatic effect or irresponsible and dangerous distortion..." (p.158). Agreeing on what is necessary and what is 'untruthful' is problematic, and few historians or film scholars have offered solutions. Short (1981) in the preface to *Feature Films as History*, warns that films can no longer be seen as entertainment, and that it is the responsibility of historians to determine whether audiences have accepted the dominant discourse of whether they have been presented with an 'unrealistic' version of history (p.14).

While there appears to have been a trend in the production of historical films over the past ten years, the studios are merely supplying to an eager audience. Whatever sociological signifiers for this there may be, the proof is undeniable; most of the highest box office grossing films and Academy Award nominees in the past ten years have been entirely or partially based on historical events, including *Titanic* (1997), *The English Patient* (1996), and *Braveheart* (1995). Loshitsky (1997) and Sobchak (1997) both note that social elements other than the reactions to such films emerged in the 1990s which helped to search for the true historical capital of popular film, when history standards were measured for the suitability of popular film to be brought into the classroom.

The increasing interest in reworking history in popular film requires significant analysis as to whether these films should be allowed to become tools for historians, placed on high school shelves side by side with history books.

Chambers and Culbert (1996) discuss the increasing trend of representing historical events in Hollywood film in *World War II, Film and History* citing the "recent boom" (p.157) as an impetus for the revaluation of historical texts on the basis of accuracy and "...acceptable degree of artistic licence..." (p.157). Historical inaccuracy in popular film is arguably inevitable, the nature of representation makes it all but impossible to depict the most minute details and taking into account the constraints of the medium and also those controlling factors of budget and studio which will place emphasis on certain narrative conventions over and above the importance of absolute accuracy. Should popular film be excused for making concessions to mass audiences or should they be as firmly accountable as documentaries and history books? As Sorlin notes of historians, "...they are coming to realise that any film must be understood in the context of its production and the way the elements are assembled..." (1988, p.2).

Popular history, that which is negotiated in our contemporary cultural space, is the basis of the second chapter of this thesis. The point at which films cease to be merely moving pictures and pass over into a greater social context of popular history is significant in that it identifies those films

that have successfully disseminated their messages and historical capital. Identifying the traditional creators, shapers and gatekeepers of 'historical truth', and their reactions to popular cinema representations is important in the analysis of critical response to such films.

The two films under analysis in this dissertation, *JFK* and *Schindler's List* have both been immensely successful historically-based popular films released in the 1990s. Both films also passed into our imaginary cultural space, becoming catalysts to wider cultural discussions about the events they depicted. *Schindler's List* capitalised on renewed interest in the Jewish Holocaust at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, and allowed more accessible representations to follow in its wake. *JFK* was directly responsible for many of the actions that caused new laws to be passed about the disclosure of official secrets to the American people (Keller, 1993, p.78). The film also caused condemnation of the national media in the United States, many of whom were criticised for their own poor investigations.

One of the most surprising links between the two films is the concept of conspiracy. *JFK* actively seeks an audience willing to participate in the possibilities of conspiracy and Government subterfuge and promotes anti-historical thinking both through its production values and its discourse. *Schindler's List*, on the other hand, is partially a reaction to the very dangerous debate that the Holocaust never actually occurred, and that the entire event is fiction based on a Jewish conspiracy. Clendinnen (1998)

notes that writers such as Primo Levi have become involved in "...combating the ignorance and complacency of a deaf and increasingly distracted world..." (pp.65-66), and I would argue that *Schindler's List* takes a position alongside Levi in reaffirming the horrors of the Holocaust and providing potent arguments against Holocaust deniers.

The first film analysis, that of *Schindler's List*, is an attempt at discovering the limits of representation, and the central critical responses in an argument that certain events in history have become 'unrepresentable'. The critical reviews of *Schindlers List* by Hansen, Zelizer, and Bartov (1997) amongst others, look specifically at the films' social responsibilities in the face of the grave nature of Holocaustal studies. The idea that a film cannot accurately depict an event because of sheer enormity or horror is interesting in the context of the usual arguments over small historical discrepancies and inaccuracies. Omission is clearly an important part of the basis of misrepresentation, and brings to our attention arguments of what is included and what is not, and how traditional history texts have managed to acknowledge so much historical information.

The second analysis is that of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, which was one of the most controversial films of the 1990s because it presented an alternate history to the accepted version and at the same time uses a method of filmmaking to imply the truth. As a tool for analysing exactly what constitutes traditional history and what is considered alternative, the critical responses to *JFK* veer wildly between praise for its bold rewriting of

history, and condemnation for presenting untruths amongst fact in an irresponsible manner. Analyses by Burgoyne (1997) and Keller (1993) look specifically at the method of presentation and the critical reception, as well as the social ramifications of alternative history.

The contention that there is an alternative to traditional history implies a greater truth in 'history' as a narrative compared to the alternative speaking positions. This argument relates closely to an analysis of postmodern theory, in which history is viewed as a controlling metanarrative of the modernist era and therefore outdated and irrelevant in the current context. Not all of the significant modernist theorists believe history is a metanarrative though, and some have been vocal in rethinking historicism (Jameson in Landy, 1996, pp.8-9) in allegorical terms and not as a tangible form. This thesis would like to briefly cover the main responses to popular historical film from modernist and postmodernist critical perspectives.

The concluding analysis of this thesis will look at the possible futures of historical studies in popular film; technological, social and textual. As we face the new millennium, audiences will be preoccupied with looking at the past decades and centuries, and no doubt popular filmmakers will be looking to foster these thoughts and capitalising upon them.

Chapter 2: Popular history vs the gatekeepers of 'historical truth'

A discourse of traditional historical consciousness exists in our society, fuelled by our social fascination with our past and its effects on our present and future conditions. Vivian Sobchak in the introduction to *The Persistence of History* (1996) finds a "new self-consciousness" of history in the public sphere (p.4), and I tend to agree that 'History' has become a valuable commodity that audiences have come to recognise in the texts of our culture, and furthermore we all have a place in 'history' as it occurs. For Sobchak, "...people seem to carry themselves with a certain reflexive phenomenological comportment toward their "immediate" immersion in the present, self-consciously grasping their own objective posture with an eye to its imminent future possibilities for representation (and commodification) as the historical past..." (1996,p.4). That is, we have become so thoroughly aware of history that we conduct ourselves as vessels of historical information of the future, concurrent with how history has been reported to us from previous generations.

Traditional historical study has often been regarded as an exact discipline; traditional historical representations have been granted the same kind of wide cultural dissemination as science. The public has become increasingly familiar with the processes of the historian and willing to invest in the truth claims of the evidence. For McCullagh (1998), evidence has become such a commodity, that arguing against it becomes virtually

impossible; the example he gives, that some scholars have denied the extent or even the existence of the Holocaust despite the overwhelming evidence remains a powerful contributing factor (p.23). Thus, traditional history is based on inference, the notion that the most corroborated evidence proves to be the truth, "...the conclusion which historians generally adopt is that if an historical statement is well supported by abundant evidence, and much better supported than any alternative account, then the statement can be rationally accepted as very probably true..." (p.23). McCullagh explains that the concept of truth as it applies to traditional history is now understood to mean "...rationally coherent with other beliefs..." (p.46).

History, and the reporting or representing of it, is now more often being challenged within the social sphere as technology and the information/knowledge dispersal allows for greater audience participation in the 'making of history' through involvement in the mediasphere, from local to global. Public access to events and their representation has created a heightened social consciousness of the discourse of history, particularly in terms of immediacy, "...over the course of the century and at an accelerating pace, first cinema, and then television, camcorders and digital media have brought both the arbitrary and motivated segmentation of time to public awareness..." (Sobchak, 1996, p.4). Collective understanding of the events of recorded history continues to grow as does understanding the processes of historicising as well as an understanding of history as a process. What we are concerned with here are the

representations and methods that have replaced the outmoded techniques of representation created by the gatekeepers of 'historical truth'.

Technology has brought with it immediacy, where the event and the representation become simultaneous, media bringing the astounding images of our lifetime to us via satellite with an expert commentary. As Sobchak points out, history has not generally been thought of as immediate, "...history we thought was something that happened temporally "before" and was represented temporally "after" us and our personal and immediate experience..." (1996, p.5). For an event to become historical, she says, a period of analysis or "reflection" required grand narratives of progress, humane understanding and social improvement to be superimposed over the top. After such significant pondering, the event becomes the foundation of a palimpsest, meaning is attributed and conclusions drawn.

History though, is generally thought to be objective and non-biased. If the point of view is obscured, it becomes less obvious to an audience that the text is a construction imbued with preferred meanings and privileged readings. The historian supposedly removes bias from the text until all that remains is 'fact'. Popular film has a very clear construction, and often the mechanics of production are exploited and presented by the filmmakers as a source of interest in their promotional activities. More often though, the mode of production and the agenda of the filmmaker are exploited by the critic, historian or interest group as signifiers of a narrative weakened by

bias, designed to reaffirm the privileged position of traditional historical discourse. Factors such as the director's racial background, the political motivations of a producer, or the use of a famous actor portraying an historical figure for box office purposes have all been used to prove that popular film history is embellished and untruthful. As Hayden White notes:

facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups *can* assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But the facts are a *function* of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have (1996, p.21).

Specifically, history is mediated in all of its forms and the traditional history text is merely another product of an interest group, albeit a largely obscured and pedagogical one. White goes on to propose that it is difficult to conceive of a history text without a proclivity to fictionalise, or use "fictional techniques" to tell an historical narrative (p.21). Carroll (1997) discusses the difficult distinction between fiction and non-fiction as separate classifications of narrative. He points out that some scholars (including Christian Metz) believe that the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction is "inoperable" because texts utilise the same types of structural narrative and representation, both in the pursuit of authenticity (p.176). Carroll disagrees because, as he says, by naming all such textual representations as fictional regardless of content or mode, there is an implication that representations are not useful, which they clearly are;

representations are never equivalent to what they represent, but they are presented so that an event can be recalled beyond its actuality and will be coherent to audiences (p.177).

The Twentieth Century (as it draws rapidly to a close) has engendered a new form of historical event that resists traditional historical representation, as Hayden White (1996, pp.22-23) notes. An event larger in scope and involving so many people that traditional representation is unable to cover the full range of opinions, subject positions and possible conclusions. These events have also been covered so heavily by the modern media, from many differing angles, that they occupy a far greater cultural space than traditional history. This is the most likely source of confusion regarding representation and fictionalisation. This new form of event provides us with an interesting quandary, if traditional modes of historical representation are 'outmoded', why is there such resistance to new forms of representation?

Poian (1996) and other contend that a perception exists, "...that history is neither hard enough to be a real science, or soft enough to be a real branch of the humanities..." (1996 p.245). The 'opaque' nature of the discipline has no doubt triggered the defence mechanisms of some historians, which is perhaps why historians have generally tried to place history beyond the grasp of popular filmmakers, regarding them as ineffective vessels of truth and fact. However, as public knowledge of the constructs of history has grown, it has become increasingly apparent that

traditional history is no better equipped to represent history than popular film, and there has been a "...dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge..." (White, 1996, p.22)

Popular films have, for a long time, not been allowed to occupy the same social space as traditional history texts, filmmakers not considered suitable historians. Carnes (1996, p.9) notes this virtual chasm between film and traditional history representations, finding that:

professional historians pluck from the muck of historical record the most solid bits of evidence, mold them into meanings, and usually serve them up as books that...can be held and cherished, pondered and disputed. Hollywood History is different. It fills irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities...(it is) morally unambiguous (p.9).

In Western culture, historical discourse makes claims to be truthful and generally does not allow room for debate or negotiation. Although history is generally formed through the gathering together of various media and constructing a narrative from them, history texts go beyond being simply representative to become vessels of absolute truths. A history book presents what is known to be true and presents conjecture over events that are perhaps less well covered, as White (1996, p.21) observes, "...in conventional historical inquiry, the "facts" established about a specific "event" are taken to be the "meaning" of the event...".

The modernist view of history has elevated the truth claims of traditional history, of objectivity and realism to a level where Twentieth Century popular film is seldom able to reach. Once an historical event is reported by various sources which are eventually brought together with photographic or artistic evidence and presented as an impression of the event, attempts to provide cinematic perspective or audience negotiation are met with criticism and inflexibility. Arguments of inaccuracy and simplicity are levelled at popular film representations by critics and historians as a bid to partially fictionalise history, forsaking the apparent truth for revenue. As White (1996, p.21) points out, "...it seems...difficult to conceive of a treatment of *historical* reality that would not use fictional techniques in the representation of events...". White finds that conventional historical inquiry, the type that we have come to use today but that had been developed by earlier historians is ill-equipped to properly rationalise the type of events that have characterised the twentieth century; particularly international relations and warfare of unprecedented effect that cannot be explained by traditional historical terms.

The events of the Twentieth Century that have become the subject of so many popular film accounts constitute this popular history,

in their reanimation of the past these films speak in a language that appeals to the broadest possible audiences, thus leaving themselves open to the criticism of at least simplifying and even falsifying history. The language of these films feeds on the multivalent nature of everyday life and touches on prevailing

conceptions of nation, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Although popular philosophy in its use of history may appear to have a unified ideological position in its attempts to draw on differing constituencies in the culture and in its address to other cultures, it often betrays its eclectic terms of construction and hence its investments (1996, p.1).

Hayden White (1996, p.18) locates such films as *Schindler's List* and *JFK* (which are analysed below) in the same postmodern, para-historical canon, as the flawed but worthy vanguards of popular history representation. These films, he concurs "...deal with historical phenomena, and (they) appear to "fictionalise" to a greater or lesser degree the historical events and characters which serve as their referents in history..." (p.18).

Schindler's List for example, which will be discussed in chapter 3, "...caused a degree of consternation, even anger and frustration, among at least some scholars, artists and intellectuals...(despite the fact that) within the constraints of a Hollywood production, Spielberg has managed to strike a fine balance between relatively popular appeal and relatively high artistic quality..." (Bartov, 1997, p.42)

White points to the dissolution of strict, traditional modes of history retelling and the creation or re-invention of new sub-genres as central factors in the formation of popular history (pp. 18-19). These "metafictions" are central to the concept of 'negotiated history'; a history which is formed in our

cultural space between traditional history texts and audience reception. White, whose analysis of *JFK* will be discussed in chapter four, notes an "experiential shortcoming" in traditional history texts, in which the emotional representation becomes more important than the simple relay of 'the event as it occurred' (1996, pp.30-31). The representation of such events through empathetic narrative allows the audience to engage with a subject in the same way an historian has to, having had no actual experiential involvement in the event.

One such film of the 1990s that exemplifies this mode of representation is *Braveheart* (1995). Directed by and starring Mel Gibson, this highly popular Best Picture Academy Award winner presents the story of a Scottish folk hero, William Wallace, who fought for the freedom of Scotland from British rule in the Fourteenth Century. The film brings much from the present in its reanimation of the past, Wallace's (Gibson's) contention that the leader of an opposing army should "kiss his own arse" is anachronistic, but allows a modern audience to revel in the irreverence of the figure. Unfortunately for the audience, the majority of the historical material is neither ambiguous nor factually correct. Where there are some events invested with verisimilitude, others are the stuff of artistic licence and fabrication. In the film, Edward the First ("Longshanks", as he was known) dies at almost the same time as Wallace (1305) from an ongoing respiratory illness, when in actual fact he died two years later. A year later in 1308, Edward the Second married Princess Isabelle and their first child was born in 1312. In the film, these events occur during Wallace's lifetime,

with the possibility presented that Isabelle's child was the result of an affair with Wallace.

Braveheart presents the scholar with some difficulty as to the possibilities of future historical representation; the film is engaging and exciting and brings a little known Scottish folk hero to mass public attention, but at what point does the representation become altogether untruthful and irresponsible? The inaccuracies of *Braveheart* no doubt present the audience with the entertaining emotional 'roller-coaster' they have come to expect from modern popular filmmaking. Popular film though, is becoming a historical medium and therefore must be presented within certain parameters. For Hollywood, it should be no more than 180 minutes in length and with few if any footnotes beyond 'certain liberties have been taken with historical accuracy', if it is to succeed with a popular audience. Robert Rosenstone (1995), historian and writer of an historical text which became the film *Reds*, explains that for a cinematic theorist, historical accuracy is of secondary importance to discourse, "...the focus tends to be on the creation and manipulation of the meanings of the past..." (p.10).

For George Custen (1992), biographical films (such as *Braveheart*), or biopics as they are often known generically, are the embodiment of popular or public history; the history of Hollywood. Custen asserts that "...the Hollywood biographical film created public history. The biographical film routinely integrates disparate historical episodes of selected individual lives into a nearly monochromatic "Hollywood view of history"..." (p.3). In

much the same way Hayden White (1996) and others locate the 'codes' of popular history in the selection and elimination process of representation, Custen finds that biographical films build a narrative around selection, particularly in terms of period dramas (p.96). In such films, representation of nationality and profession are closely linked with modern day concerns of politics, to the exclusion of large parts of history that do not conform with the positive conclusions of the discourse.

Custen is primarily concerned with the biopic of the studio era, common during the earlier part of the Twentieth Century. The mode of representation in most popular history films is similar however, and draws comparable conclusions and criticisms of its modern counterpart. The inaccuracies and fictionalisation of the events, along with the highlighting of certain facets (to the detriment of others) is a pattern of narrative that followed onto the small screen when the biographical film (which had its heyday in the studio era) moved more or less to television to become a staple small budget production genre.

McCullagh (1998, pp.307-309) notes that arguments over the nature of 'how close to truth historical representation can be' are ultimately unanswerable and probably unknowable. Our understanding of representations and conclusions allow us to use popular history as a tool without being bound by the concept of 'absolute truth' and must be read using new standards, because "...film cannot be seen as a window onto the past..."(Rosenstone, 1996, p.71).

Popular history allows the audience to engage in representations of history which are presented, as Rosenstone suggests, "...in a partial and open-ended, rather than totalised manner..." (1996, p.206). When popular film is used to re-examine events of much controversy, or to bring attention to world shaping important events in an easily followed form, the outcome is often positive. On this point, Elsaesser (1996, p.146) finds that these kinds of films (his examples include *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now*) make history "...both possible and academic...attempts at exorcism without promise of redemption..." (p.146).

3. Representing the 'Unrepresentable' in *Schindler's List*

Very few films of the 1990s have caused such debate, both scholastic and public, over the value and accuracy of historical representations as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). The film won Academy Awards in 1993 for Best Picture and Best Director amongst others, and pulling in huge box office dividends, more than proved its popularity globally. *Schindler's List* strived for more than just widespread acclaim and revenues though, it attempted to provide some substantial social value as a tool for visually representing, what has tended to be an event in human history largely ignored by popular cinema; the Jewish Holocaust of World War II.

Schindler's List helped to raise awareness of the Holocaust at a time when the event was beginning to fade from popular consciousness. A new generation has emerged since World War 2, particularly in Australia, which has not dealt directly with anti-Semitism on any great scale, and the events of earlier this century that formed the basis of the Holocaust. Inga Clendinnen (1998) locates her own knowledge and cultural understanding of the Holocaust post-World War II, finding she had "...refused full imaginative engagement..." (p.3) in the event and had merely learned in the most scholarly, detached fashion. There appears to have existed a 'palpable breach' in Holocaust representation, with texts not being imbued with the requirement to emotionally engage with the topic and to interrogate its true nature (if that is ever possible). Whatever the instigator may have been, the latter part of the century has seen a rise in the number and scope of Holocaust representations in an effort to fill this breach.

The 1999 Academy award winner for Best Documentary was James Moll's *The Last Days*, a film about Holocaust survivors that was financed by Steven Spielberg and the Shoah Foundation which he himself had set up for the recording of Jewish testimony to these events. Spielberg's interest in the Holocaust has clearly followed on from the film *Schindler's List* into other areas of historical record, as have others. Although it is conjecture, it would be difficult to believe that a film such as *Life Is Beautiful* (1998) would have been made were it not for *Schindler's List* before it, and the huge amount of public interest the film brought to the Holocaust as a subject. Many scholars analyse *Schindler's List* in comparison to Claude Lanzmann's Holocaust testimony, *Shoah*.

Shoah, although critically respected and lauded, has not been seen by the public at large; its sheer length and its depiction of horror has relegated it to viewings by scholars and art film enthusiasts. Clendinnen (1998) calls *Shoah* "remarkable" (p.198) and notes that its filmic modes, and moreover, approach are well-suited to the presentation of the Holocaust, more so than *Schindler's List* which she finds ill-equipped to deal with "...the kind of fragmentary, ambiguous documentation on which history depends..." (p.197). Without accessibility though, it is left to a film such as *Schindler's List* to present the Holocaust to mass audiences, although in comparison it falls short of *Shoah*. Rawlinson (1999) finds that;

in comparisons with Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which does not restore the past but interrogates its traces in the present, *Schindler's List* looks naively unselfconscious or culpably manipulative in its bridging of fifty years to spell out the lessons of the Holocaust for the late twentieth century (p.120).

In a bid for higher historical capital than even *Schindler's List*, *The Last Days* was released with the tagline "everything you're about to see is true". When marketing hyperbole is discounted, the film can nevertheless be viewed as being positively representative of survivors and of the hope that ideologically punctuates *Schindler's List*, and was ultimately responsible for much of the latter film's criticism.

Popular films, such as *Schindler's List*, that are based on events in recent history, often represent specific aspects of the Twentieth Century that have not been readily available to audiences either culturally removed from, or too young to have lived through. Chambers and Culbert (1996) assert that "...the public memory of war in the twentieth century has been created less from a remembered past than from a manufactured past, one substantially shaped by images in documentaries, feature films, and television programs..." (p.6). How these films are presented to the viewing audience and the discourse they confer often constitute the primary information of historical record in our society. In the case of *Schindler's List*, many people now understand the Holocaust according to this one film, and the subsequent media attention it garnered.

Schindler's List, has been assigned a position as one of the few dominant popular texts available on the Holocaust. Omer Bartov (1997), in an overview of the *Schindler's List* 'phenomenon' feels the film "...is likely to continue to have a generally positive impact on both the public perception of and the intellectual and artistic debate about the Holocaust, as well as on future attempts to represent mass murder and genocide..." (p.42). As a film mantled with such responsibility of historical accuracy, it is important

to examine both its ability to affect society by taking this position and also its 'suitability' for the job. As Abraham Biderman confers in his memoirs, *The World Of My Past* (1995), with respect to the difficulty in representing the extensive horror endured by Jewish people, in this case of life in the ghetto, "...the great master has not yet been born who has the genius to portray, in all its enormity, the misery, the agony and the fear which the ghetto dwellers had to endure..." (p.28).

It would be difficult to argue with the 'undeniable truth' that the volume of social commentary which followed the *Schindler's List* 'phenomenon' was important in addressing issues of the past as well as those of the present. Yosef Loshitsky (1997) in *Spielberg's Holocaust* notes that "...the Holocaust as memorialised by Spielberg's film has been mobilised as an educational tool in the fight against contemporary racism, reinforcing the thesis of French historian Pierre Sorlin that the historical film always interprets the past from the perspective of the present..." (p.6). It is rare that a film causes such widespread debate in any country, let alone globally and this certainly would not have been possible had the film not been aimed at mass audiences.

Based on Thomas Keneally's non-fiction novel, *Schindler's Ark* (1982), the film mixes popular and artistic forms of modern filmmaking to recount the story of Oskar Schindler, the Nazi Party member and industrialist whose actions during World War II saved the lives of over 1,200 Polish Jews. Schindler is celebrated by the Jewish people whom he saved and their descendants, and has been commemorated at *Yad Vashem*, the Jewish Holocaust heroes remembrance authority in Jerusalem as a Righteous Gentile. Despite his important status among Jewish people, the

attendant arguments about Schindler's appropriateness for being the central figure in what is essentially a story of racial persecution and hatred have nevertheless clouded the popular historical account.

The film is ambitious, to say the least, starkly presenting a complex and dark story of immense trauma in 178 minutes, a long time in popular cinema, but relatively short in terms of the time it would take to adequately describe the entire Holocaust in a traditional historical text. The theme of mass uncontrolled mania, the power of the mob and the reality of the events that were brought into effect by it have a gravity that still reverberates today; both with the Jewish people and amongst others. Particularly for people interested in close studies of humanity and the human condition, but without much previous engagement with the information, *Schindler's List* provides a firm basis of understanding. Loshitsky (1997) quotes Frank Rich in his summation of its importance, "...a hit movie will forever preserve the Holocaust in the world's memory..." (p.3).

The film endeavours to place this potentially dense and interminable story into an understandable, linear narrative. Thomas Elsaesser (1996) explains that the success of the narrative perhaps lies in Spielberg's appropriation of a heroic figure:

while remaining within the terms of Hollywood dramaturgy, (Spielberg) relies on some of the "classical devices" of the historical novel, filtering events through a middle-of-the-road hero, the nature of whose involvement positions him at the margins of the stage of history, neither prime mover nor victim (p.163).

The creation of a central figure in Oskar Schindler is generally considered an affectation of popular filmmaking, focussing audience attention through one solitary figure that allows interaction in the subject position. This position becomes a point-of-view that the audience can identify with, rather than being lost in the countless number of Jewish characters who should be considered the most important part of the narrative and the event.

As Bartov (1997, pp. 42-43) notes in his analysis of the character of Schindler, "...Spielberg implies that even in the heart of darkness, even within sight of the death camps, the option of hampering the Nazi war machine never wholly disappeared..." (p.42). Bartov finds this both "important" and "problematic" because it allows for the kind of Hollywood intervention that would tend to taint the historical accuracy of the event. Landy (1996) argues that this use of Schindler (being a flawed human being and not a 'saint') is representative of "...a style congruent with contemporary conceptions of melodrama..." (p.252). The arrangement allows the audience to engage with the remarkable fact that Schindler despite his flaws, or because of them, actually managed to accomplish these unbelievable acts. In the face of the terrible atrocities committed against the Jewish people in the film, the audiences are more likely to forgive him his marital infidelity and other hedonistic traits.

As Hansen (1997, pp. 82-83) points out, the most common criticism of the character of Schindler as the focus and a privileged point-of-view in the film, which is essentially about the extermination of Jewish people, is that the central character is more or less a perpetrator. A member of the Nazi Party who eventually resists the inhumanity around him, is still a German.

The film is therefore viewed from a German point of view in which the Jews, she contends become "pasteboard figures" that resist identification. Bartov sustains this criticism by contending that it highlights a very painful question, "...why were there so few Schindlers, why was his case so extraordinary?..." (1997,p.43).

Elsaesser (1996) finds Spielberg's personalising of the narrative important to the film's emotional impact, deciding that Spielberg overcame the problem of personalising by engaging the list as a "...powerful device to retain in view a collectivity, while the repeated act of naming gives each the dignity of an individual fate..." (p.163). He further argues that such a film, which finds Schindler at the centre of the narrative, may in fact be a requirement to producing a narrative that differs from those previously historicised. Elsaesser's positive approach to the narrative structure reinforces the notion that many critical responses to the film may have been quick to judge the film on its popular sensibilities without fully exploring the positive aspects of utilising popular filmic methods.

Bartov's main theoretical fault (and he is not alone) in singling out the Schindler character for criticism saying that it is not truly representative is that it assumes that a representation of the Holocaust must be only from the Jewish perspective; as victims of such immense crimes, the Jewish people should be the only speaking position. By claiming that Spielberg's representation of the Holocaust is based on a German character implies that the representation of Oskar Schindler's 'true' story is unworthy because in the actuality of the Holocaust, so few Schindler's existed. Schindler's story is (unfortunately) unique, this does not however make the film misrepresentative. The film never truly shies away from the horror

(although, the story has elements of hope and happiness), and is perhaps the most realistic representation available to popular audiences. In reading Thomas Keneally's novel, Spielberg undoubtedly found a 'reason' to make a film about the Holocaust, the story of Oskar Schindler, the man, is remarkable, and contains enough of the elements to appeal to a popular cinema audience; a clear cut villain, a reluctant hero and a worthy cause made all the more exceptional because it is true. Bartov does not mention Keneally's novel, and there is no evidence that he denies the basic truths of the story, but finds the adaptation of it an 'unfair' representation of history.

Where there is source material, it is important to make a comparison between the two differing texts, to examine the "alternative forms of historicising" as Marcia Landy (1996, p.257) puts it. The clear difference between the two forms stylistically is the treatment of the speaking position. Keneally presents the narrative as a combination of the remembrances of the survivors and Oskar's widow Emilie Schindler. Landy finds Keneally's critical treatment of historical events far more successful than Spielberg's memorialised version because the novel explains the grounding of its knowledge in reminiscences rather than presenting the material as fact. Perhaps Bartov (1997) would have had a better argument if he had compared the two forms of historical document in his appraisal of the film.

Rawlinson (1999) analysed the adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel, as well as Keneally's adaptation of the source material, finding that Keneally's use of novel narrative techniques was well suited to the anomalous nature of Schindler, as well as to the understanding of the myth strewn path of

facts which have been built around his personality (p.113). The narrative difficulty in *Schindler's Ark*, and therefore in *Schindler's List* is the possibility of accurate representation of virtue. A conundrum presented to Keneally in the narrative of his novel, Rawlinson says, was the true representation of Schindler's actions and to editorialise his motives and reasons (p.113). The *Schindlerjuden*, the Jewish people whom Schindler saved, present the material as a memoir; there is conjecture, confusion and myth. Spielberg, Rawlinson contends, does not qualify his representation of Schindler because the story is presented as a redemptory tome based on the solitary figure in which the same information is presented as fact (p.116).

Rawlinson also notes, that the majority of Holocaust representation has been from the position of the Nazis; "...scholarship has been dominated by studies of the perpetrators..." (p.114). Spielberg's use of Schindler as central character is therefore less reliant on reaffirming grand narratives, it provides the audience with an insight into the anomalous, incongruous nature of the event.

Loshitsky (1997, p.8) provides a balanced critical approach to the portrayal of a central character. He points out at length that *Schindler's List* is a very important film bringing an important subject to the attention of mass audiences. He agrees with Bartov that the Holocaust should not focus on the individual but on the group or more importantly on the situation. "...We may argue that this incapacity to explore macrostructures is all the more problematic in a film such as *Schindler's List* which, following the model of classical Hollywood narrative, represents the individual as the protagonist of history..." (p.8). Loshitsky realises that an art film representation of the

Holocaust may remain faithful in narrative to the event, but would not have the same amount of audience appeal or popularity, and this representation of the event through an individual 'prime mover' is perhaps a necessary evil.

Bringing such an undeniably sombre concept to mass public attention through the medium of popular film was a particularly brave move for Spielberg and indeed the promoters, Universal Pictures, considering the large number of people who would consider themselves to have vested interest in the sanctity of the information being presented. Generally, Holocaust representations have been limited to documentaries and books almost exclusively because of the enormity of the subject, and its effects on such a large number of people. As Landy (1996) notes, the film provoked "...a range of responses from hostility to veneration..." (p.13) purely because of the intensely sensitive nature of the material.

Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum (1997, pp98-99) exclaims his extreme distaste for the filmmaking output of Steven Spielberg, remarking that his enormously popular canon of work amounts to little more than thinly veiled 'Oscar' bids and narrow-minded, colonialist action films, but that despite his presupposed disposition, *Schindler's List* ultimately won his respect.

The film was praised widely by such critics as well as audiences for the virtues of its themes and production, some of which even its detractors had to concede. In the fading light of first-hand account, *Schindler's List* despite its much-trumpeted flaws, presents the Holocaust intelligently and respectfully to the modern audience, in all its disparate forms. Miriam Bratu Hansen (1997) locates the three separate modes of reception as

official, popular and critical. These modes of reception, she contends, are difficult to categorise accurately, but the first involves self-promotion and studio hype as well as government reactions to the film worldwide and its inclusion in United States secondary and tertiary scholastic history curricula. This is particularly important because it adds weight to the film's claims of historical truth and its acceptance by the public. The popular mode of reception she says is difficult to analyse accurately because it transcends "ethnographic audience research and textually based constructions..." (1997,p.79). The third is the outright rejection of the film by critics and intellectuals (something we have seen evidenced in much of the reference material of this chapter). Hansen finds these critics' motives based more in the ideas of elitism and resistance of the popularity that in any real dislike for the film saying the "...critical dissent is directed as much against the larger impact of the film..." (1997, p.79).

That is to say, not all of those who saw *Schindler's List* were impressed by the film's ethically dubious bid to represent historical events of such magnitude and turn a healthy profit at the same time. In Rosenbaum's (1996) appraisal of *Schindler's List* he points to his heritage as a source of his own possible understanding of the text. As the grandson of Polish Jews, he says, "...I am one of those who may have been saved (or not saved) from the gas ovens by Oskar Schindler if my father's father hadn't immigrated to the (United) states..." (p.99). Rosenbaum makes a claim here to some kind of cultural and racial responsibility to the films discourse, a theme pervasive in many of the critical reviews of the film. *Spielberg's Holocaust* (1997) contains many such reviews from Jewish scholars, reviews that hinge on the films ethical responsibility towards Jewish people.

This idea follows the argument about the gatekeepers of 'historical truth' and who particularly should be allowed the privileged speaking position on a subject with such far-reaching effects. Barbie Zelizer (1997) discusses what we find as an appropriate representation of an event and who is allowed to speak; "...all of this raises serious questions about how we entrust our past to others. Whom do we trust more readily..." (p.29). For some critics (as for himself), Spielberg's Jewish background was an important issue which strengthened his speaking position; for others, his American status was the most important factor which explained his detached position from the subject. Thomas Keneally, an Australian author, never factored his nationality into the discourse of the text and for the novel to be acclaimed for its virtues without presenting this fact is a curious oversight, considering most contentions that the nationality of the 'historian should be so important. In the novel, where Keneally is quick to point out his position as a medium for the material, we see that the true speaking position is from the Jewish survivors. Because the film is structured more like a traditional narrative, critics have attributed to Spielberg the dominant speaking position when, in fact, the material has not changed, merely the mode of representation.

Criticism of *Schindler's List* on the whole is quite emotional, as one would expect from a subject as important to the Jewish people as it is damaging to the German nation and the Christian church. Retaining the sanctity of the events is of paramount importance, and for anyone to tamper with these facts for the purposes of moving a story along, which is generally a sound concept, becomes an opportunity to fictionalise. What critics are concerned with particularly are the moves on the filmmaker's part to

trivialise the contributing facts of history through compression and inaccuracy (Rawlinson, 1999, p.120). Critics and scholars in the field have paid close attention to note the ability of popular culture to represent history, as Zelizer notes, "...such discourse implicitly valorised the voice of the historian over that of the makers of popular culture. This was accomplished through an elision of the distinction between the event-as-it-happened and the event-as-it-is retold..." (1997, p.22). She further notes one important difference between the critical reviews of *Schindler's List* and other films, "...the details have come to be judged by not against standards of *representation* but against some absolute standard of historical truth..." (p.23). It is here that issues of inaccuracy in the film become important in the critical analysis of the film.

Omer Bartov (1997) points out that some of the most significant details of the film are also fabricated, simplifications of the events or complete distortions of actuality. Pointing particularly to the ending in which Oskar Schindler (played by Irish actor Liam Neeson) breaks down and weeps in front of the assembled Jewish factory workforce (when in fact he left quickly fearing capture), Bartov explains that the film's links to popular culture and box-office receipts were significant motives behind small departures from absolute truth as it is constructed in historical texts. I tend to agree that should a film make such overt claims to truth stylistically and through its own hyperbole that such contrivances or *misrepresentations* as they undoubtedly are, "...banalises both the man and the context of his actions..." (p.45).

As far as Bartov's main claims of misrepresentation are concerned, an argument opens up over the nature of 'representing the unrepresentable'.

Bartov claims (pp.46-47) that because Schindler's story is unique, in terms of representation it is untrue:

in the sense of not reflecting (or even negating) the fate of the vast majority of victims who were in turn swallowed up in a unique and unprecedented, and therefore (at least as far as Hollywood conventions are concerned) unrepresentable murder machine (1997, pp.46-47).

This analysis, that something cannot be representative because it does not cover the entirety of the event or subject, calls into question the boundaries by which we find a text representative; Is *Schindler's List* a film about the Holocaust, it is *representative*, or does it simply present a small part of a larger picture? Where is representation negotiated? On the screen or by the audience? If we find that all representations are distortions of reality then it is not possible for a text to be misrepresentative on these grounds, or we must find all historical texts as 'untrue' because of what is left from the account.

Miriam Hansen (1997) locates the main critical objections to *Schindler's List* at the point of representing 'the unrepresentable', saying that the criticism goes against the grain of all other criticism on the subject; "...if the criticisms summarised up to this point imply by and large that the film is not "realistic" enough, this critique involves the exact opposite charge, that the film is too "realistic"..." (p. 83). By attempting to portray itself as an absolute truth, the film takes the place of the actual historical event. She contends that this is not simply 'an event', but an event which is, by the nature of its horrors, truly unrepresentable and which becomes sensationalised by the false tensions of the narrative.

Schindler's List of course, must convince the audience that its historical capital is faithful to the event in order to succeed in presenting its discourse. As we have discussed, *Schindler's List* has been located as a 'popular film', separate from all other forms of filmmaking and therefore subject to the constraints of its particular mode of production. Audio-visually, the film takes great pains in its style and method to portray the events in a most realistic manner, in an effort to secure audience respect concurrently with reverence to the material. The first and most obvious visual aspect is the film's use of black and white photography. With the exception of the title credit sequence and the small documentary endpiece, the entire film is shot in stark black and white which is problematic; we are forced to locate its use within aesthetic and capitalistic production values.

Leibowitz (1997) locates the use of black and white photography within the history of filmmaking according to its appeal to the narrative; "...in the black and white scenes, the film looks like the dramas that were made during the 1940's...the look of black and white expresses nostalgia" (p.332). She asserts that this recognition of nostalgia is aimed towards the themes inherent in or for the artistry of filmmaking at that time. The film does not confer nostalgia towards the horrors of the subject, the colour scheme (or lack of it) merely adds weight to the film's claims of historical 'truth' by affording it period association.

Rosenbaum (1997, pp.99-100) too, applauds the black and white cinematography of Janusz Kaminski, particularly noting the deep focus and "handheld documentary-style footage" as elements that add realism to

the narrative and therefore accentuate the film's emotional impact. Bartov (1997, p.44) labels Spielberg's decision to make the film in black and white "highly effective" as it lends the film a documentary/newsreel quality that adds weight to its claims of authenticity. The film too doesn't shy away from the graphic nature of the subject and the film is never less than harrowing, particularly in the clearing of the Jewish Ghetto scene in which the camera follows Nazi soldiers running down the street in a rapid series of hand-held shots that add bewildered confusion to the narrative. It would be very difficult to sustain an argument against the film style chosen by Spielberg and Kaminski for *Schindler's List*, the film never suffers the lack of colour nor does it yearn for the kind of grandstanding cinematography of Spielberg's other films. If one were to agree with the large volume of criticism of *Schindler's List* on one point only, it would be that the visual aspects of the film add realism and emotional weight to the storyline.

Hansen (1997) locates the reaction to *Schindler's List* from differing subject positions as a basis for opening up old arguments of the respective values of art and popular culture;

Moreover in the way the film polarised, or was assumed to have polarised, critical and popular responses, the reception to *Schindler's List* threw into relief a particular pattern in the intellectuals' reactions to the film: they seemed to rehearse familiar tropes of the old debate on modernism vs mass culture (p.80).

Hansen has noted one of the most omnipresent factors in the many disparate reviews and critiques of the film; whether the film is deemed to

have social value or not comes down to its proclivity to either art or popular pretensions. Spielberg has clearly aimed for melange of the two, self-consciously preparing the film in the style of the former, while delivering the themes inherent in the latter. Loshitsky (1997, p.5) finds it ironic that the director of the most commercial of American films decided to "Europeanise" the film using non-American stars and a film crew made up of British, Polish, Israeli, German, Croatian and American artists; in an attempt to gain critical respect and artistic regard, while maintaining its thoroughly Hollywood narrative.

Perhaps this uneasy combination of both is reflected in the critical reception of Jonathan Rosenbaum and others, who like him, found Spielberg an odd choice of director considering his previous output (alluding to his inappropriateness for the director's job) but ultimately found a film which they could respect because it dealt with the subject in the most appropriate way, "...the fact remains that if (Spielberg) weren't this ruthless or this efficient I wouldn't have wept at the end of *Schindler's List* both times I saw it..." (1997, p.104).

Schindler's List is a film that traverses conventional Hollywood techniques and practices in an effort to increase its claims to historical truth and authenticity. It seeks to achieve the status of art cinema through the claims of an increased level of authenticity. These claims of authenticity are a discursive method of presenting the themes of the film to both the greatest possible number of people, and to receive (some) critical acclaim. *Schindler's List* has clearly passed through some imagined 'popular consciousness filter' to become, I would argue, a truly historical document. Loshitsky (1997) notes the important ethnographic debates that took place

after the film's screening in the United States, Israel and Germany and concludes "...it has attained the status of historical document, the final and undeniable proof of the ultimate catastrophe endured by the Jewish people..." (p.7),

Even more seriously, and similarly related to the film's box office success, is the fact that precisely because *Schindler's List* has been watched by large numbers of people who had very little previous knowledge of the Holocaust, and cannot be expected to gain much more knowledge in the future, this specific version of the event may remain the only source of information about it for many viewers (p.46).

One of Spielberg's clear, logical aims for the film is for it to become a definitive text on the Holocaust, a representation of the many facets of that deeply complex situation. Although Spielberg perhaps falters in bringing the conception to fruition, he manages to capture discursively and thematically the confusing and dense nature of the Holocaust and its situation within differing points of view. It is within this context that the film becomes truly 'representative' of history.

Chapter 4: *JFK* and alternative history

Released in 1991, the movie (*JFK*) was widely excoriated by politicians, commentators and scholars as a preposterous, even alarming deformation of reality. The outcry boosted (Oliver) Stone's stature in Hollywood, which thrives on publicity. But Stone isn't gratified by mere attention. Far more than his show-business colleagues, many of whom believe fame makes them experts from everything from health care to arms control, Stone desperately yearns to be respected. He went ballistic over a piece in the *Washington Post* by George Lardner, who referred to *JFK* as "the edge of paranoia." Such attacks seem to confirm Stone's view of himself as a victim of the entrenched Establishment (Karnow, 1995, p. 270).

Stanley Karnow's assessment of the *JFK* phenomenon and the media hype that surrounded the film during its production and continued long after its theatrical release is typical of the critical and scholarly analyses of the film. Presenting the 'grandstanding' Oliver Stone as a man whose motivations include popularity undermines his abilities as a filmmaker to impart an account of the Kennedy assassination that should be taken seriously. Stanley Kauffmann (1994, pp.98-99) in his review of *JFK* locates Stone's personal involvement in Vietnam and his distrust of the military-industrial complex as his motivation for making the film, and by presenting this bias, reaffirms Stone's inability to see the events objectively, or even wholly, as the Kennedy assassination in *JFK* presents only one facet; the Garrison investigation and subsequent trial.

These character attacks are central to holding the historian's privileged position of historical information dispersal. If official history is based on the presentation of "facts" as pure information without presupposed conclusions, is it possible to present a modern history divergent from the official record? Can there be an alternative history? This chapter will attempt to locate some of the main academic theories surrounding the uses of alternative historical narrative and show how *JFK* contributes to our understanding of the social and cultural interplay between history and popular filmmaking.

As Karnow's contention about Stone being 'irate' at a newspaper report shows, JFK's systematic rejection of the official record caused consternation and resentment in the major media. Hennelly and Policoff (n.d.) refer to the "merciless flagellation" and "derision" (p.1) the film attracted from the mainstream media upon its release. Indeed, after nearly thirty years of acquiescence to the official record of the assassination of John F Kennedy, and sometimes even their collusion in appropriating the official story, *JFK* loudly and publicly decried them as liars. Hennelly and Policoff note (pp.1-10) the continual instances of the major US media (and in turn the media around the globe) assisting the US Government in the dissemination of the conclusions of the Warren Report into the assassination, that Lee Harvey Oswald was the killer, and that he acted alone. They find that as *The New York Times* had publishing rights, reaffirming the Warren Report was more or less "an institutional imperative" (p.3).

JFK presents an alternative version of these events, highlighting the work of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison and the investigation of possible conspiracies, most of which find their way into, and are given fair hearing by, the narrative. Jon Margolis of the *Chicago Tribune* labelled the film "...an insult to the intelligence..." (Keller, 1993, p.74) and in doing so, highlighted the fact that the mainstream media rejected the possibilities presented in *JFK* as well as denying the massive amount of social benefaction involved in the instigation of the release of previously secret files on the assassination. Moyers (cited by Hennelly and Policoff, p.10), finds the social influence of *JFK* beneficial; "...it is quite revealing that it's Oliver Stone that's forcing Congress to open up the files and not *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, or *CBS*...". *JFK* has passed on from being merely a popular film presenting a discourse about the possibilities of nation and the nature of truth, providing an alternative historical narrative provides room for argument, expansion and socio-cultural exchange.

The film presents the Kennedy Assassination from the point of view of Garrison (Kevin Costner) as he uncovers a possible conspiracy centred in New Orleans involving the Mafia, Cuban exiles, right-wing militants and the FBI. Garrison's trial is based on the prosecution of Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) a prominent local businessman and associate of Cuban sympathiser David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) and (supposed) Presidential assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman). Garrison is assisted in his

investigations by a secretive military official known as "X" (actually a character made up of many different anonymous sources) who provides him with the motives he needs to string the admittedly 'thin' case together. The film presents Garrison's investigation as the most progressive element in the examination of the assassination and therefore takes it as its central plotline, with the official story of the Warren Commission providing only background information. From the opening scenes it becomes very clear that *JFK* intends to represent a highly politicised version of the events, which seeks to provide a useful dialogue with the official record.

For Chambers and Culbert, the point of the alternative discourse of *JFK* is not so worthy, "...for shock value or audience appeal or because they fit the ideological perspective of a particular director, the conclusions of such films can be impossibly extreme. *JFK* embraces a position rejected by every responsible historian..." (1996, p.157). Presumably, most responsible historians have assessed and researched the historical material presented in *JFK* in the same way they would interrogate a book on the events in order to fully understand the technical and historical requirements before passing judgement on the 'responsibility' of the film.

By his own admission, Stanley Karnow (1995, p.273) feels he is not qualified to assess the film on either a technical level or the historical rendition of the assassination. An historical expert on the Vietnam War, Karnow is interested only in setting straight the record of United States involvement in the war as it pertains to the film's conspiracy theory. His

proposition (p.273) that Stone lifted quotes directly from his history book on the Vietnam War and used them out of context, confirms the prevailing attitude of scholars to popular historical representation; this claim is an assertion that the traditional history text explains far more of the context, not to mention the thoughts and premeditations of two deceased Presidents of the United States. Karnow nevertheless becomes the authority of the two because Stone used some of his work as source material for the film and because Karnow's bias is not presented, there is an assumption that his work is completely objective.

Hayden White (1996) discusses context and *JFK* in his assessment of modern historical narrative, finding that the context of such an event is "not objectively determinable" (p.22) because of the infinite number of details involved in contextuality. Indeed, it would seem that context has no more prescience over fact than the historian. Karnow's argument that Lyndon Johnson's comments used in *JFK* were 'taken out of context' is as subjective as Oliver Stone's version of the assassination. White also points out that professional historians (such as Karnow) will draw out arguments about the historical importance of this event as long as it remains (or appears) relevant to current events and situations. Burgoyne (1996), finds that the majority of analysis of *JFK* to be centred on the same points, "...concerning the limits of fact and fiction and the erosion of the presumed boundary between documentary and imaginative reconstruction..." (p.113), much of which will be discussed further in this chapter.

In terms of its production values, the film was praised across the board; it is technically astounding in its attention to the recorded details of the event and investigation, for Kauffmann (1994) "...the film is almost a complete success..." (p.101). The film opens with a montage of historical footage outlining the major events preceding Kennedy's death, followed by a similarly styled montage of historical footage interlaced with scenes created for the film so as to make the actual and staged events appear as though they come from the same narrative. Keller (1993) notes that "...such a credible beginning helps to veil the obviously fictional quality of the other elements in the film..." (p.74).

The stylistic content of the film has been of particular interest to the majority of critics, detractors, academics and historians. Keller's assessment of the montage effect splicing staged and 'actual' footage together to add weight to the historical claims of the narrative is certainly not unique. *JFK* certainly uses this style to great effect in presenting the saturated nature of the event, showing that the official record has "seemingly" covered all the angles while at the same time slipping in its own small facts (and indeed fictions) which will later form conclusions. I feel however that for the most part, this style only serves to highlight the bias of characters and subject positions in the film, highlighting the little known pieces of information that have been suppressed by mainstream media and several Government investigations as they do not seem to serve the official record.

Rosenstone (1995) locates this particular use of narrative and stylistic film technique as the point at which the film succeeds with its historical capital, "...what I am suggesting is this: the Hollywood historical film will always include images that are at once invented and yet may still be considered true; true in that they symbolise, condense or summarise larger amounts of data; true in that they carry out the overall meaning of the past which can be verified, documented or reasonably argued..." (p.128). While it is not necessarily clear what part of history can be reasonably argued, the concept is sound; inaccuracy and invention are not designed to subvert the nature of the historical event, but are used rather to present the narrative in an easily-followed, concise form. The film language eschews traditional modes of historical reporting in an effort to compress the convoluted nature of reality and to depict the many specifics inherent in such an event. In approximating, *JFK* continually fabricates and fictionalises, though once again, the emphasis here is on what is included and what is obscured or removed. According to Stanley Kauffmann the progressive nature of the film is agonisingly tied to the narrative shortcomings;

the whole situation revolves, for me, to a state of tension among five elements. First, *JFK* is a fine piece of filmmaking. Second, it is a passionate work in an art that is mostly treated as an industry. Third, it distorts facts in the assassination theory it presents. Fourth, it strongly underscores our incomplete knowledge about the assassination and possible conspiracy...fifth, although the proof that Kennedy was killed because of the war is very slim, the film is one more outcry

against the waste and horror of Vietnam (1994, p.101).

One of the major stylistic criticisms that the film attracted was the use of extensive re-enactments based on the testimonies of Garrison's witness list, many of which never made it to the courtroom. The film presents David Ferrie's (Joe Pesci) flashbacks as he narrates, even providing the speech of certain characters within these re-enactments. While these scenes appear to present a questionable account of the events as fact, they are stylistically no different to a staple technique of the 'whodunnit' crime genre, Agatha Christie-styled crime thrillers in which the climax is often played out by the characters in several different ways before the truth is exposed (*Clue*, 1985). In these cases, we are presented with a stylistic expression of point-of-view, not the filmmakers version of the truth. In the same way historians present their versions (supposedly) free of bias, they may expect the same of historical films. Robert Burgoyne analysed the style, paying particular attention to the polysemic narration of the mysterious composite character "X". "...X"s narration, however, is replete with all the techniques that have garnered *JFK* such a notorious reputation for dissembling: it is filled with imaginary re-enactments and recontextualised documentary images that dramatise a far-flung conspiracy emanating from the highest reaches of power..." (p.121). Burgoyne concludes that these montage/flashback/narration sequences can be seen as either a "straightforward rendering of the character's version of events" or "rumour made photographically concrete" (p.121).

Karnow (1995) points out an important argument for the majority of scholars, historians and critics, that many of his academic friends have said that "...for most of their students, *JFK* is the truth..." (1995, p.273). Because of its use of technically precise visual material, not to mention its accessibility by popular audiences, *JFK* has now become source material on the Kennedy assassination; it has become an historical document. At the same time, some of the original, and it was assumed untainted, historical documents of the assassination have been imbued with the master narrative when they did not necessarily appear to conform with it. Hennessey and Pollicoff (p.4) find that the Zapruder film (an 8 millimetre home movie shot by Abraham Zapruder which is a virtual time line of the Dealey Plaza events) was seriously misrepresented by its owners, *Time-Life* to appear as though it maintained the official record by manipulating the running order of frames. This misrepresentation was a powerful indicator of Oswald's guilt, one of the first major pieces of evidence to influence public attitudes about the event.

Keller (1993) discusses the apparent power of *JFK* as a text, influencing and 'energising' public opinion and knowledge of the event (p.74). In much the same way the Zapruder film (or the representation of it) influenced public opinion thirty years ago, *JFK* presented an alternative narrative with startlingly similar results of effect on public opinion. The outrage and controversy the film caused with critics and so-called authorities, Keller says, sustains the theory that the social construction of cultural artefacts is the result of a new historicism that is based on an interplay of text and

audience. Keller suggests that "...in the recent reaction to (*JFK*), the circulation of social energy, so fundamental to historicist theory, is overtly manifest..." (p.73). A film such as *JFK*, which appears to have had as much influence on society as it has been influenced by, follows this model. Hayden White (1996) analysed the same paradigmatical shift in his assessment of new historicism as the basis of the rejection of traditional historical modes in modernist events.

Janet Staiger (1996) discusses White's theories, paraphrasing thus, "...modernism and what he considers its extension, postmodernism, provide new ways to represent and investigate...twentieth-century events and catastrophes...(by) producing new genres such as...historical metafiction..." (p.40). White's metafiction is a tenuous link between the positive anti-discourse of *JFK* and the irresponsibility of inaccuracy in popular film. The strange irregularity in this new irreverent style is that *JFK* appears to believe wholeheartedly in the possibility of pure, absolute truth and the sanctity of such. While the film seeks to destroy or at least discredit the privileged reading of the event and provide alternatives to the historical record, it sets up the possibility that 'truth' as a commodity is nevertheless available, and that by using an anti-narrative it is possible to uncover the conspiracy. For Robert Burgoyne (1996), the anomalous nature of the film's discourse is based on a requirement for historical truth to reaffirm national identity, as "...an expression of the imagined community..." (p.119).

The images of history evoked by *JFK* can be described in terms of two competing paradigms. In the first instance, as a result of its obsession with explaining the event, *JFK* appears to represent a traditional view that a unified and fixed historical reality exists, and could be recovered, were it not obscured by wilfully deceptive stories and the inaccessibility of the crucial facts. Seen in this way, the film sets itself the task of imposing a metanarrative to unify the disparate stories, rumours, and contexts of the Kennedy assassination into a coherent frame (p.119).

As a work of popular 'metafiction', the film is required to provide certain concessions or standards to a mainstream audience. *JFK*, like *Schindler's List*, is over three hours in length and presents so much information that an audience could not be expected to retain most of the narrative in a single viewing. For the purpose presenting this information in a (relatively) concise form, the filmmakers have instituted Garrison as central figure. Robert Rosenstone (1995) discusses the use of Garrison as a narrative device as it relates to popular filmmaking, "...Hollywood history is delivered in a story with beginning, middle and end...(and is) a story of individuals - usually heroic individuals who do unusual things for the good of others..." (p.123). In the analysis of *Schindler's List*, Bartov's (1997) reaction to the use of a central figure in such a large scale event was damning, once again though, the audience is afforded an entry point into the narrative, an identifiable character with which to identify.

The kinds of subtext that popular, mainstream film can have are particularly attributable to this kind of narrative focus. Indeed, the discourse of national identity that runs through *JFK* would not be as apparent to the audience (and Oliver Stone made sure that it would) were it not for the Garrison character and the subject position afforded to him. Garrison is a character who is seen multivalently; as a conspiracy nut, as a patriot, as a concerned father, as an amateur historian, as a truth seeker. Rosenstone (1995) raises the theory that historical film can tell us things that traditional history texts cannot (p.122), and in terms of subtext, this would appear to be true. For example, "*JFK* the book" would need to make specific actions clear and draw conclusions as to the nature of national identity and how it relates to Garrison the man, as well as Garrison the representation. The film provides this information, but does not require the audience to invest in it; the information is there to be rejected or accepted.

District Attorney Jim Garrison, played by Kevin Costner, pointedly provides this information to the audience in the courtroom scene that forms the climactic endpiece. Following a lengthy speech about patriotism, the nature of the truth and the incongruous official record, Garrison (Costner) turns and speaks direct to the camera, stating "it's up to you". The film seeks to symbolically place the onus of responsibility on the audience to participate in the retrieval of information and to create the kind of motivated social interplay theorised by James Keller (1993).

Robert Burgoyne's assessment of the social importance of *JFK* is based on the same principles of James Keller, "...*JFK* questions history both as a mode of knowledge and as a means of understanding the present. However, by focussing obsessively on a historical event, it also affirms a desperate need for history as the foundation of national identity..." (p119). An imagined community exists, contends Burgoyne (p.123), that is portrayed in the film as a lost object through the montage sequences that identify patriotism and the idea of the United States as a nation. Oliver Stone himself has remarked that he deliberately associates the death of Kennedy as the point of a great loss of national sentiment and identity, not to mention innocence. Burgoyne evaluates:

the film's radically contestatory interpretation of the past can also be (seen) as a form of popular counter-memory, bringing forms of popular cultural expression directly into the centre of its narrative art. Bypassing the narrative forms of official culture, the film fuses vernacular idioms such as docudrama, grainy, tabloid-style still photographs, television images, and home movies (p.123).

The lack of resolution in *JFK* helps to represent the erosion of the nation, the final courtroom sequence is followed by a postscript of sorts outlining developments in the investigation and the state of the secret FBI investigation files. By highlighting the marginalised thinkers, Burgoyne suggests that the film presents the national community split by ideology over the trustworthy nature of the Government. By referring to the events in Dealey Plaza temporally, the film implies that the nation was at once

joined together in the emotion of the event, only to be dissolved once the investigation began. At the same time, the film presents the possibility of the restored nation for the future which implies that although the film is not a master of the history it represents, it is possible to obtain the truth and regain the trust and belief in nation which supposedly existed before the death of John Kennedy.

The concept of the "imagined community" and its referents in the discourse of *JFK* is perhaps the best indicator of the progressive nature of alternative history representation, that it is possible to represent emotional subtext in a way not afforded by the traditional fact-based history text.

There is room for alternative history according to Keller (1993), who finds that the official record should never be made unanswerable to the same criticisms endured by filmmakers such as Oliver Stone:

despite...the considerable invention involved in the *JFK* script, the film illustrates an important aspect of historical record. It reveals the glaring unreliability of official accounts of the events. When challenged to defend his obviously fictionalised theories, Oliver Stone responded that the burden of proof is not necessarily on him because no credible explanation of the events has been advanced (1993, p.78).

While it would seem appropriate to praise *JFK* and its filmmakers for the bold anti-narrative set out to convey an alternative discourse, it could be argued that the same school of thought allows some academics to

conclude that man never walked on the moon, or more preposterously, that the Jewish Holocaust never took place. *JFK* though, actively protests and resists the master narrative that has been shown to be lacking in credibility and concrete evidence. Rosenstone (1995) states that *JFK* is not the product of traditional history, and is certainly not presented as such, it nevertheless provides the basis for more critical understanding of the event. *JFK*, he says, "...is not a work that tells us the truth about the past, but one that questions the official truths about the past so provocatively that we are forced once again to look to history and consider how events mean to us today..." (p.130).

Robert Burgoyne notes that the film may be an attempt to represent the fragmentary nature of history characterised by incoherence, contradiction and inconsistency. Perhaps the genius of *JFK* is that in exposing itself to criticism and ridicule on the basis of unfounded innuendo and fictional fabrication, it also exposes the shortcomings of the official record for the very same reasons. From there, the possibilities of historical interpretation and representation become as infinite as the 'facts' that they are supposedly based upon.

Chapter 5: Postmodernity and the resistance of metanarratives

The ultimate objective for any theoretical work based on an analysis of popular history representations such as *Schindler's List* and *JFK* is to attempt to locate the analysis within a theoretical rationale that presents the modes and significant elements as a conceptual whole; what I am concerned with here, is finding a context for popular film historical representations. The concept of postmodernity or *postmodern*, while an important addition to socio-cultural studies in the late Twentieth Century, is difficult to grasp and even more difficult for the historian to argue with other historians and scholars successfully without getting weighed down in theory. However, historians (both traditional and those concerned with popular film) generally agree that postmodernity offers a theoretical background for the kind of analysis that history (and the representation of historical events) requires. For Janet Staiger, "...postmodernism (provides) new ways to represent and investigate such twentieth century (sic) events and catastrophes..." (1996,p.40). The study of postmodernity provides analysis of popular films with a wider socio-cultural theoretical framework in which to assess them.

Postmodernity for Burke (1992) is a problematic concept, "...to a historian concerned with the long term, the choice of the word 'postmodern' is bound to look like yet another example of the hyperbole to which generations of intellectuals have resorted..." (p.137), but he notes that

"...explicit discussion of the relation between postmodernism and history has scarcely begun..." (p.121). Much has been covered since Burke wrote that in 1992, and in this chapter I will discuss the main arguments presented of the relationship between history, popular film and postmodernity.

In order to fully interrogate the kind of theoretical capital of postmodernity and postmodernism and the effects it can have on the analysis of filmic representations of history, it is important to map out the basis of postmodern theory. Postmodernity has come to be recognised and (generally) accepted as a defining term of the cultural movements within Western culture since (roughly) the end of World War II, culturally enveloping the American film industry of the late Twentieth Century. Postmodernity is something of a problematic term constituted by the defining of an era that cannot be specifically demarcated. As Smart (1992) notes; "...if there is a degree of agreement amongst analysts and commentators that the present era constitutes a significant moment in history, a time of radical change, there nevertheless remain substantial differences in respect of both conceptualisation and explanation of changes identified..." (p. 141). Kumar (1995), relates that there has been a definite cultural shift towards an 'information society', based mostly on the technological advances of the latter half of the Twentieth Century. This spread of information has led to the dispersal and proliferation of narratives and discourses available to consumers and audiences. This knowledge dissemination is the basis of a denial of the metanarratives (the

grand, controlling narratives) prevalent in the period of modernity and a gradual acceptance of the possibility of multiple points-of view.

In the introduction to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Jean-François Lyotard defines *postmodern* as "...incredulity towards metanarratives..." (p. 24). Lyotard's problematic definition of the postmodern is, essentially, a refusal to accept metanarratives, the governing discourses of science, religion and progress that formed the 'rigid' social structures around which the period of modernity was built. Kumar (1995) explains that Lyotard's theory as progressive as it seems, it is more of a cultural shift away from the discourse of modernity;

The 'metanarratives' or 'grand narratives' that Lyotard talks about are the great historico-philosophical schemes of progress and perfectibility that the modern age threw up. Though narratives, being prescriptive and practical, are distinguished by Lyotard from 'science', which is concerned with truth and truth-claims, there cannot be any doubt that much of the appeal of the metanarratives of modernity turned on their association with science and the scientific method (p.133).

The argument over metanarratives and history is important to the location of history in the postmodern cultural sphere. McCullagh (1998, pp. 298-299) notes that Lyotard has '...discredited, proved false...' (p.299) metanarratives, or generalisations, as a possibility of social understanding. Arguments against totality affirm the nature of popular historical films as selective representations rather than the grand histories that require

deconstruction and generalisation to comprehend. McCullagh (1998, p.300) also notes that this selectivity anticipates the creation of significant meaning, which is problematic. I would argue that for films such as *Schindler's List*, the aim of the production method was to deny such questions of significant meaning, because once meaning is assigned, the 'unrepresentable' then becomes overtly 'represented'.

Elsaesser notes that Lyotard asks us to remember to "...preserve the fact that the unrepresentable exists..." (1996, p.148), and states that it would be pointless to argue whether cinema has a place in the cultural dialogue of "...mapping out the moral or conceptual space of the unrepresentable..." (p.148). While treading carefully because of the serious nature of the subject, Postmodernity generally 'revels' in the gap between the reality and the representation. Postmodernity provides the opportunity for popular film to represent the 'unrepresentable' because, by the process of selecting the unique, it denies its representative nature.

How can popular representations of history have changed or possibly continue to change in postmodernity? An important element in the future of history is broadening technology, which may play a role in bringing popular filmmaking closer to historical accuracy, providing audiences with possibility and opportunity. An emergent home entertainment form, Digital Versatile Disc, or DVD, allows for a single text to be viewed in multiple layers with differing languages, and most progressive of all, with audio commentary. One particular disc, *Apollo 13*, contains a commentary by

director Ron Howard in which he recounts scene by scene the many historical inaccuracies, compressions and inventions in the representation of the ill-fated moon mission flight, as well as the many reasons why these factual discrepancies were required. On an alternative track, the commander of Apollo 13, Jim Lovell and his wife Marilyn also provide their version of the depicted events and how the film differs from their recollections. Neither seems particularly bothered by the use of 'artistic licence'.

DVD, and its exciting use of multiple layers in the deconstruction of popular filmic representation provides a greater audience understanding of the filmmakers role as historian, as well as the point-of-view of someone who lived through the reality. However, it does not make the text as it is viewed cinematically any more truthful in its retelling despite the ability to view the text within the framework of a multiplicity of narratives. The production of a technology with multiple speaking positions encoded onto one format is symptomatic of postmodernity and the rejection of the master narratives of modernity.

Equally as general as the concept of postmodernity, is the period of modernity, usually employed by historians to represent the period following Enlightenment in the late Nineteenth Century in which the sciences were held in indefatigable esteem (Smart, 1995, pp.9-11). Social progress was linked by most scholars to science, which had recently presented to the world the marvel of electric light, phonographic sound and the automobile;

"...From Kant to Hegel and Marx, from Saint-Simon to Comte and Spencer, the advancement of reason and freedom was linked to the progress of modern science..." (Kumar, 1995, p.133).

How this view of science changed has much to do with the nature of science itself; a discovery leads to more questions about the nature of the discovery until the original question seems almost irrelevant. For historical study, the same applies. Where modernity presented the audience with a 'masternarrative' of history as progress (almost exclusively ethnocentric based around Western civilisation), postmodernity and its proliferation of speaking positions denies the possibility of a coherent metanarrative. In the postmodern world, the ability to 'speak', to have a voice in the public sphere is more evenly distributed through the socio-economic strata, so much so that social groups such as ecologists and theologians and have managed to undermine and downplay the significance of science. The capability of such social interest groups to attract support globally for their particular cause through the media is a fairly obvious indicator of the narrative dispersal of postmodernity. The 'heterogeneity of contemporary social reality' is recognition of a fragmentation of speaking positions involved in the break-up of the old order.

The rise of popular culture coinciding with the rise of journalism and media is a demarcation of the postmodern epoch. To denounce popular culture is a central discourse of the modernist era, which sought to separate classes on the basis of 'high' and 'low brow' cultures. The nature of

postmodernist art (which is so problematic there is no real usefulness arguing either side), is at once irreverent and reverential of the modernist classics, and this melding of the aesthetic and capitalistic logic is a divisionary move away from the Modernist view. To locate popular film within this movement is relatively simple. Rosenstone (1995) notes that "...there is a perpetual struggle in film between those who want to make it a serious way of communicating (truth, cultural values either high or low, traditions, history) and those who see it only as packaged entertainment..." (p.232). Popular films of the 1990s such as *JFK*, *Schindler's List*, *Braveheart*, *Titanic* and *Apollo 13* aspire to a position between the two, to be seen as a popular entertainment, but also to provide the kind of historical capital of traditional history (high culture).

Coates (1994) finds '...to consider the relationship between 'high' and 'low' culture is unavoidably to broach that between individual and group. Much twentieth-century art erects a dichotomy between the 'high, the realm of the individual, and the primeval soup of the mass out of which it crawled. The case of cinema complicates the opposition, long before postmodernism rendered slumming fashionable; after all, its products are collectively authored...' (p.153). Mass culture and popular entertainment are no doubt connected to the capitalist discourse of postmodernity, the kind of ideology that Coates finds problematic.

Popular entertainment (film, television, and music) is by nature capitalist. Although capitalism would seem to disapprove of the powerful ideological

stranglehold of metanarratives, capitalism has become somewhat of a governing discourse; what is capitalism except a motivation theory that attempts to make sense of the world through value and cumulative wealth? An economic metanarrative may exist in the homogenous economic world. Kumar provides an alternate point of view:

there is in the first place a postmodernism that seems to fit rather snugly with the requirements of late capitalism. It celebrates mass culture, consumerism and commercialism. It is robustly populist in its attitude to "high" or elitist culture... on the other hand, there is a postmodernism that seems to stand against the currents of capitalist culture. Postmodernist thought lies behind many of the social movements that have based themselves on the claims of gender, ethnicity and locality. It has aided those seeking to establish an identity - personal or collective - against the rising tide of capitalist homogenisation (1995, p.193).

This concept contains the historically conscious modernist view of inevitable progress, the governing discourse of making the world a better place; where once science was a password for progress, information, knowledge and a variety of viewpoints have become the blueprint of the postmodern ethic. In terms of the way we view history and actuality, popular culture has long been regarded a poor medium of historical truths and the discourse of reality.

As a reaction to the rigidity of modernity, Rosenstone (1996) finds popular films (postmodern history films) progressive, "...because such films are

serious about describing and understanding, in however unusual a form, the beliefs, ideas, experiences, events, movements, and moments of the past. Because they accept the notion that the weight of the past has somehow helped to shape (us in) the present, even if they are not certain about how to assess that weight..." (p.215). Whether traditional historians confront the new understanding of their discipline or not, postmodern history, and popular films representing history continue to recompose the ideological framework of historical recording. Rosenstone (1996) finds "...Postmodern history is serious about making current meaning from the traces of the past. But it (obviously) suspects logic, linearity, progression, and completeness as a way of rendering that past..." (p.215).

If we are to recognise such popular films as the vanguard of a new postmodern history, we must ask 'what do these postmodern history films do to the past?'. For Rosenstone (1996), these films tell the past self-reflexively, and present it in terms of how it has meaning for the filmmaker historian. The multiplicity of viewpoints transcend traditional narrative modes (beginning, middle and end) and forsake traditional story development to isolate events of 'uniqueness' They indulge in anachronism, rhetoric and selectivity, alter and invent characters for the purposes of drama and popularity. They also refuse to conclude and "...never forget that the present is the site of all past representation and knowing..." (p.206). To look briefly at *Schindler's List* again as an example of this reflexivity and also to note the arguments of popular culture vs art, Bartov's (1997) assessment is at once praiseworthy and patronising;

Since it is a Hollywood production, *Schindler's List* inevitably has a plot and a "happy" end. The positively repulsive kitsch of the last two scenes seriously undermines much of the film's previous merits. Up to this point Spielberg's intuition lead him in the right direction, even if it went against the apparent (Hollywood) rules of his trade: and since the ultimate rules of Hollywood is box-office success, Spielberg managed to show that the rules should be changed, not the film (pp.44-45).

There is the recurring inference in the above passage that popular culture cannot create a text 'worthy' of the event, that Spielberg's creation of a happy ending undermines the good ideological work of the film. Bartov also notes that Spielberg actively worked against postmodernism in the betrayal of box office. The curious irony of this is that in terms of speaking position, postmodernity seeks to empower all; the 'truth' and ideology of Bartov's view are available to him because of postmodernity. Popular audiences of films such as *Schindler's List* are intelligent enough to realise that the depiction is not documentary but drama in which the narrative ends at a particular point for both the sake of length, and so the that film has a positive outlook; it is after all, a story about saving lives. Bartov's claim that "...Schindler got a kick from helping Jews and fooling Nazis..." (p.45) is not the truth for you or I, but serves to perpetuate his own personal ideology, made available to him by the thrust of postmodernity; the same that allows Spielberg to make a populist account of the Holocaust for wider (popular) audience consumption.

Postmodernity denies closure, which as far as history is concerned, is important; our understanding and explanation of history evolves as we learn more about the circumstances and motivations of an event. Although it seems that postmodernity 'devalues' history and our place within it, (Kumar, 1995, p.145), Tomasulo (1996) finds that the intent of new historicism is to amend the goal of trying to organise the events of modern history into a single coherent narrative pursuant to a single meaning..." (1996, p.70). Theorists such as Sartre and Michel Foucault, according to White (cited in Tomasulo, 1996, p.70) have "...challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences...". This re-examination of historical practices within postmodern boundaries (or outside modernist ones) based on the breakdown of rigid social hierarchies has developed to include popular forms of history where they were once rejected, to locate popular film history within the context of wider social theory.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

History is a discipline that demands analysis and explanation, a cultural force that, even onscreen, commands respect and instructs the viewer/reader of historical texts that what they are seeing/reading may be true; this is the nature of historicising. The many varied approaches of historical study have proven the fallibility of history and its reporting, Jenkins (1991) finds that the nature of historical study is therefore in a constant state of flux, "...different sociologists and historians interpret the same phenomenon differently through discourses that are always on the move, that are always being de-composed and re-composed: are always positioned and positioning, and which thus need constant self-examination as discourses by those who use them..." (p.9). By this reasoning, popular film may well find an authoritative place in the study of history.

Rosenstone (1995) finds such implications extremely important, although considering his background as a historian, the constructs of production weigh heavily on his assessment that further investigation of "...a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, might be used as a serious vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past..." (1995, p.3) must take place. The cultural reactions to such films as *JFK* and *Schindler's List* strongly suggest that such films are capable of representing history and may be taken seriously by film audiences.

Popular historical films have no doubt contributed to the kind of probing reassessment of history that has taken place in the postmodern era. Burke (1992) points out the serious nature of cultural debate over the shifting position of historical studies, "...historians like sociologists and anthropologists, used to assume that they dealt in facts, and that their texts reflected historical reality. This assumption has crumbled under the assaults of philosophers (and) it is now necessary to consider the claim that historians...are as much in the business of fiction as novelists and poets..."(p.126), and perhaps now we may add popular filmmakers. To break down the privileged positioning of the so-called gatekeepers of historical truth has indeed required much scrutiny from theorists such as Hayden White to reassess the nature of truth, interpretation and representation, the kind of contested concepts so central to the discourse. Jenkins (1991) asks "...who is history for ?" (p.18), and it is important to locate who selects history and how exactly we are positioned to read it. Should historical film continue to grow in importance, filmmakers may become decisive in the selection and omission of the events, times, places and people that form popular historical knowledge.

While making 'reasonable assumptions and conclusions' from the collected data and evidence from historical events appears to be the most applicable method of popular film historical representation, difficulty remains in the assessment of attempts to represent the unrepresentable. Inga Clendinnen (1998) points out the central concern surrounding Holocaust representation, "...there is the issue of sparsity. Out of

thousands of victims, only a few survived. Of those, few fewer still will be able or willing to record their experiences. We therefore cannot follow the historian's standard procedure of piecing together a context and sequences of action from surviving fragments..." (p.32). In light of such an important concept as the willingness of participants to share their cultural knowledge of the past, the analysis of historical devices seems beside the point.

Authors such as Abraham Biderman will ensure that such 'unrepresentable' events are represented, and as an extension of their work, popular film does have the capacity to adapt and present, because as Rosenstone (1995, p.11) notes, popular film history is beginning to seem like written history, with its basis in the aesthetic values of Nineteenth Century dramatic novel and its conventions of realism. At the same time he says, traditional historians will have to be more open to the possibilities of film because "...of the way the camera works and of the kinds of data it privileges, history on film will of necessity include all sorts of elements unknown to written history..." (1995, p.37).

The ability to comprehend history rests not only with scholars and theorists, but with the viewing public, although theoretical work over the true nature of history will always try to present it outside the realm of popular consciousness. Jenkins notes that theoretical concepts of words and their assigned meanings proves that the theorist can actually never know more about history than the public, "...epistemology shows that we

can never really know the past; that the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one, that is, is in the very nature of things such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it..." (1991, p.19). Without the burden of such theoretical quandaries, the popular film audience is free to understand, comprehend, reject or invest in popular history.

Whether popular film can accurately represent historical events and situations, I must answer, cryptically, yes/no. Popular films are still often infuriating in their blatant misuse of important knowledge in the fabrication of dramatic action. At the same time, popular film provides an audience that no other historical text can muster; that, in and of itself, proves its cultural value. Jenkins (1991) notes the central concern of historical representation as one of possibility:

History is a discourse, a language game; within it 'truth' and similar expressions are devices to open, regulate and shut down interpretations. Truth acts as a sensor – it draws the line. We know that such truths are really 'useful fictions' that are in discourse by virtue of power (somebody has to put and keep them there) and power uses the term 'truth' to exercise control: regimes of truth. Truth prevents disorder, and it is this fear of disorder (of the disorderly) or, to put this positively, it is the fear of freedom (for the unfree) that connects it functionally to material interests (p.32).

This kind of theoretical negotiation may yet prove the undoing of history as we know it, as a discipline of study, but can perhaps strengthen the claims of popular films like *Schindler's List* and *JFK* to progressive historical representation.

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