

Historical Spaces as Narrative

Mapping Collective Memory onto Cinematic Space

Andrew B.R. Elliott

“Rome. Master of the Earth. In the eighteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius.”

“Anno Domini. XXVI”

“Judea A.D. 33 . . . Saturday afternoon . . . About tea time.”¹

The selection of the three prologues to historical films above stands as a testament to three ways in which traditional forms of scene-setting and storytelling have changed over time. In the light of historiographic criticism, which challenges our beliefs in a centred consciousness as omniscient narrator, historical films have been subject to a gradual erosion of trust in grand narratives consonant with postmodernity.² Just as each successive prologue yields to an increasingly self-conscious issue of narrative authority by placing it in an increasingly specific time, so too does the historical film in general encounter increasing resistance in terms of its credibility, objectivity, and ultimately trustworthiness as History. This article will argue that what has been lost in traditional modes of narration has been partially recovered by other cinematic devices. I will show that in historical films the formerly assumed

objectivity of the narrative voice has been transferred to spaces which have been charged with historical meaning, in which memory has been mapped onto landscapes, and used as a narrative device to avoid a human narrator.

Among the first questions to be addressed in this respect is the elision—implicitly suggested in my hypothesis—of history, individual memory, and collective memory, three terms that I have treated here as coterminous, though marked differences exist between these terms. There are, to be sure, differences in both genesis and function between memories held by a given cultural process of retention on the one hand, and those held by individuals on the other—particularly when those memories function as manifestations of individual and personal trauma. As Radstone and Hodgkin suggest, “trauma may be seen as a product of the *inner* workings of the mind, rather than the *outcome* of a happening.”³ However, when we consider these two types of memory in the light of historiography, while they hold vastly different *significance* to interested parties, I argue that their *functions* are not so very different. To dismiss memory as purely “the inner workings of the mind” would be to overlook “memory’s capacity to destabilize the authority of the ‘grand narratives’ with which History has become associated. While History has become negatively associated with the ‘public’ and with ‘objectivity,’ memory has become positively associated with the embedded, with the local, the personal and the subjective.”⁴

To take a concrete example, *Braveheart* (dir. Mel Gibson, US, 1995) attempts to retell the history of William Wallace’s uprising against the English as a series of events which equate the suffering and oppression of individual bodies (such as the institutionally-sanctioned rape of Wallace’s wife) with the overall suffering of the body politic of Scotland as a whole under English occupation. Thus, in this case the personal memory becomes a privileged eyewitness account of a greater historical event. A similar approach may be seen to operate in *Glory* (dir. Edward Zwick, US, 1989) and *The New World* (dir. Terrence Malick, US/UK, 2005), which both map individual memory onto the collective fates of races and larger social groupings, and which are in turn inscribed into key spaces which prefigure the modern US. It is therefore appropriate in this context to discuss collective memory in film as a process of mapping personal memories onto spaces of historical significance.

Charging a Historical Space

What is important about *Braveheart*'s process of mapping memory is that it establishes from the outset a predefined arrangement of spaces—that which Lukinbeal terms a “cognitive map” and a “sense of place”—to which the film can continually return.⁵ Wide-angle establishing shots, master shots, or contrapuntal shots of recognizable landmarks or monuments all “rely on icons and stereotypes of place to establish a cognitive map of the narrative’s geographic location. This cognitive map depends on the audience understanding the central icons of a location.”⁶ Such a cognitive map functions as a means of creating a historical reality in the viewer’s mind, and in practice can function even when viewers have no direct experience of it. Recognizing and relying on a cognitive map “does not mean that a person needed to visit the location to understand these icons. The repetitious use of icons in film and television of particular places and buildings can create a representational legacy that works to construct and establish a cognitive map, a sense of place.”⁷

By this process, Lukinbeal argues, “landscape as place is closely associated with the geographic expression ‘sense of place’ and refers to the location where the narrative is supposedly set (whether real or imagined). *Place provides narrative realism by grounding a film to a particular location’s regional sense of place and history. . . . In film, events take place and transform it into narrative space.*”⁸ In *Braveheart*, this sense of place anchors the medieval Scots in a landscape that is identifiably and appropriately Scottish for modern audiences—designed both to contain the “representational legacy” of Scotland and to contrast with traditional depictions of England. The opening titles of the film are set over swooping helicopter images of the Scottish Highlands, descending to ground level in a panoply of images of simple, homely, quotidian life in rural, and, implicitly, “innocent,” Scotland. A soundtrack of bagpipes further anchors these images in a stereotypical Scottish setting, as livestock wander freely among peasants decked in kilts and with their hair in braids reminiscent of those worn by stereotyped Native Americans.



Although numerous scholars have demonstrated that most of these features are, in fact, anachronistic, misleading or else wholly unfounded, by charging a historical space with credible and recognisable historical meaning (however stereotypical), these spaces create visual support for the narrator's claim to be recounting the untold truth.⁹ The accompanying voiceover claims that "Historians from England will call me a liar," yet the power of the opening sequence is such that it effects a shift in perspective

from England's spaces (the History we know) to the representational legacy of Scotland (the untold true story).

The power of these scenes can be measured by the extent to which they attempt to inscribe Scottish history—both as collective memory and as “History from below”—onto the landscape of medieval Scotland projected onto the cinema screen, which creates a sense of place that continues off-screen.¹⁰ Such a use of space as a means of retelling history relies on the cognitive map created in the opening scenes to establish a visual shorthand in which the unspoiled beauty of the Highlands contrasts starkly with the faceless, barren landscapes of the London scenes and the flat lowlands of the battles depicted later in the film.





By its reliance on a simplified, polarised dialectic between oppressor and oppressed, the landscape as “sense of place” can even extend beyond the screen and into other films such as *King Arthur* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, US/UK/Ireland, 2004), which depicts the Woads as Native American tribes living at harmony with nature. More problematically, too, such a teleological view of history, which constructs the English as descendents of imperialist invaders, invites oversimplified parallels with other oppressed colonies of England’s imperialist expansion. This precise dichotomy was later credited with playing a part in the rhetoric of the Scottish independence debate, on the grounds that if *other* colonies had been granted autonomy, then Scotland—as a nation under the yoke of England’s empire for almost 600 years—should be similarly emancipated.¹¹

In this way, therefore, *Braveheart*’s use of landscape and space as a means of telling history from an implied standpoint of impartiality and objectivity does seem to indicate that space can be used to sidestep perceived bias in retelling historical narratives. If objections to the historical record are frequently based on scepticism towards the historian and the rejection of his or her personal agenda, then by mapping collective and individual memory onto the landscape, Gibson is removing his historian from the equation and letting the space of Stirling in particular, or Scotland as a whole, become a reminder of the remote, bucolic and unspoiled Highlands which were “violated” by England’s occupation. Small matter, then, that the whole premise is based on some very shaky history: the important thing here is credibility.¹² Provided it is

believable, even an imaginary landscape can be “important in the construction of identity . . . [since] images of the lost homeland . . . can be passed down generations, summoning up loyalties and nostalgia.”¹³

Historical Spaces as Resistance to Historiography

Hayden White and other theorists have argued persuasively that history is largely a creation of the historian, meaning that the process of making history is never a pure, objective, or exact science.¹⁴ Robert A. Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, in their pioneering work on historical films, have demonstrated that such criticism has rightly been extended to the filmmaker, so that in the case of a film like *JFK* (dir. Oliver Stone, US, 1991), the inclusion of yet another version of events does not resolve the issue but makes the conflicting perspectives equally untrustworthy.¹⁵ Consequently, the past three decades have seen a shift in the means of telling history through films, a shift that privileges the story told over the voice that tells it, and that favors the narration over the narrator. In a world of multiple perspectives on the truth, I have argued elsewhere, the true version becomes simply that which is most credible.¹⁶ Such work, as it has filtered through to the public domain, has come to foster an increasing scepticism of the grand narratives and—in some cases—of the ability of the historian to narrate any history without imposing their own worldview upon it.

Recognizing that my contention—that academic discussions of the fallibility of grand narratives has gained ground among popular audiences—at first might appear implausible, it is important to stress here that I am not suggesting a general acceptance of the *specific debates* about postmodernism, but am rather suggesting that its *effect*—a gradual erosion of trust in one single, authoritative view of “the truth”—is noticeable through a number of recent trends. It would be difficult, to be sure, to offer conclusive proof of the existence of such scepticism without extensive audience studies; as it stands in 2012, there remains only one extensive and in-depth study of the audiences of historical films, and even here the primary focus was on quantitative consumption of the past, rather than a qualitative evaluation of how audiences approach these reflections.¹⁷ In place of an audience study, then, three recent examples may be offered that suggest that public history is no longer consumed indiscriminately, and therefore that historical films are not necessarily accepted by all viewers as accurate, unbiased representations of the past.

First, we might point to the debates currently circulating about 9/11, its concomitant conspiracy theories and the growing movement of those who

identify themselves as “truthers,” movements that recall earlier discussions about the Warren commission’s report on the JFK assassination. While it is certainly not my intention to discuss these various conspiracies here, cumulatively they do offer significant indications that there is a growing appetite beyond the academic sphere of those who openly challenge established truths and historical facts, and these movements do seem to support Paul James’s claim that “we are living through a time when grand universalisms . . . are being argued about and proselytized with renewed intensity [amid] a general scepticism about some grand narratives.”¹⁸

My second example is the increasing discussion and dissection of films—particularly historical films—in the public domain through blogs, online reviews, and dedicated forums such as imdb.com or Rotten Tomatoes, which allow viewers to voice dissatisfaction with, and breaches in verisimilitude of, the cinema. One of these sites in particular, www.movie-mistakes.com, offers a dedicated channel for viewers to criticise flaws in the continuity, coherence or accuracy of historical films in general. The length of entries on popular historical films such as *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, US/UK, 2000), *U571* (dir. Jonathan Mostow, France/US, 2000) and *Pearl Harbor* (dir. Michael Bay, US, 2001) suggests that audiences, or at least important numbers among audiences, are not accepting these films as strictly true-to-life.

Finally, a 2001 study by Paul B. Weinstein suggests that students of both history and culture are increasingly arriving at his class with a series of questions about the historicity of films depicting their chosen period, claiming that “we’ve all seen students brimming with questions about the accuracy of the newest historical blockbuster and eager to find out more on the subject.”¹⁹ Though of course Weinstein’s study (alongside my own, similar experiences) remains largely anecdotal, it reflects an important point which reinforces my two arguments above: that viewers are increasingly interested in the historical accuracy of films about the past. Such curiosity—though rarely framed in White’s historiographic terms—supports a wider trend in audiences of these films, suggesting that they do not accept filmic history lessons uncritically. Curiosity about the “real” story of a given historical episode not only suggests, then, that audiences are becoming more discerning about what they will accept as history, but it also explains the proliferation of easter eggs, interactive commentaries, and DVD “making of” featurettes, which accompany many DVD releases, and the popularity of documentaries that examine the truth behind a given historical retelling—as witnessed by the plethora of documentaries

about Templars, Grails, and Da Vinci in the light of Dan Brown's 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.²⁰

Examining this notion of credibility in more depth, we quickly arrive back at one of the concepts outlined above: the case of the cognitive map and the concept of "representational legacy." Lukenbeal writes, "Suspension of disbelief is destroyed [only] when geographic realism is not maintained. In effect, the viewer figures out that the narrative is lying, that the landscape is not really the location being depicted. A narrative retains its geographic validity and realism and is only guilty of lying if the viewer realizes that the ontological bridge has been destroyed."²¹ If the cinematic space of Scotland in *Braveheart* matches viewers' expectations of what medieval Scotland looked like, then it is deemed to be true.

That the images do indeed match viewers' expectations of a suitably medieval Scotland is ensured in two distinct ways, one iconic, and the other paradigmatic.²² First, in terms of iconic images, the opening scenes, with their spectacular panoramic helicopter shots of the highlands, uses what Colin McArthur describes as "the cinematic mechanism of the tourist documentary" to anchor the film into the specific space of the highlands. At the same time, these iconic images are further "explained" by the on-screen text which reads "Scotland. 1280 A.D.," offering the illusion of a "time and space precisely recorded."²³ Later, we are also treated to specific indexical images (see fig. 1) that anchor both the young Wallace and the landscape into that same proposed time and space allowing the viewer to "read" the medieval into the scene. Dressed in rough sackcloth, with long unkempt hair and covered in mud, the young Wallace is constructed from prominent images of the medieval peasant (drawn from museums, public history and, no less importantly, other medieval films), which contribute to his seeming visual authenticity in this setting.²⁴



Later on in the film, tartans will be used to establish this same visual authenticity, even though the use of tartan was a much later invention, a product of the seventeenth, rather than the fourteenth, century. Alongside the dry-stone walls and patchily thatched roof, the landscape ranges from a loch, a thicket, and some gorse, rising up to the mountains on the right, which are indexical links back to the swooping aerial shots of the opening sequence, encouraging an association with the highlands that vaunts a simple, homespun lifestyle of the indigenous Scots. At the same time as it uses these iconic signs, the film works on an association with other genres of film, most notably the Western, to identify the Scots as an indigenous people living close to the land, and untouched by the oppressive, colonising instinct of the imperial aggressor. The images also make paradigmatic references to a range of other films set in roughly the same space—if not the actual, geographical space of medieval Scotland, then at least the same imaginary space that McArthur argues exists in the “Scottish Discursive Unconscious.”²⁵

It is also important to note here my final point about this credibility, picking up on William Wood’s argument that visual authenticity in historical films is not necessarily about a strict truth-to-life, since an argument might well be raised here about our ability to know the reality of the medieval period in the first place, but instead about the absence of any ruptures in this pretense.²⁶ Perhaps more important to the viewer’s sense of credibility of the overall scene is not that such-and-such a cloth is believably medieval, but rather (1) that it looks like other representations of the same period (e.g. in *Highlander*, *The Bruce*, etc) and (2) that *it is not obviously modern*. To reprise those iconic images, the credibility is

assured by the lack of modern markers, of a wristwatch or glasses, buttons, or zippers. The landscape is uncluttered by telegraph poles and electricity pylons, no planes fly overhead, and no Land Rovers can be spotted snaking their way alongside the lochs or down metalled Highland roads. Even the cow in the background of Figure 1 is carefully devoid of any tags or brands that identify the intrusion of the modern world and threaten the verisimilitude of the space. In this way, *Braveheart* does not have to be about recreating museum-like accuracy in order to be believable to viewers as a depiction of medieval Scotland, but works on the basis that “the truth of an historical phenomenon can be realised through the sheer accumulation of contemporary signs of the real.”²⁷ Generally speaking, as *Braveheart*’s tartans make clear, visual authenticity is established by the period look; outside of scholarship, it seems that the period look is a frequently evoked measure of authenticity, since “when viewers argue the authenticity of a film or the lack of it, they usually mean realism based on decorum or fittingness.”²⁸ A lack of attention to such details, on the other hand, creates flaws which “destroy the consistency of the illusion, eroding our emotional investment in the film . . . the sense of historical depth disappears, and we are left looking at a movie set.”²⁹ Within *Braveheart*, then, these two fields converge so that, on the one hand, there were no visual cues which betrayed the authenticity of the medieval image, and on the other, “the end product succeeded in capturing the essence of Scottish nationalism and heroism that previous versions of the legend had evoked to countless generations.”³⁰

Paradoxically, had the film told the truth, and filmed in Wallace’s historical lowland home which looks very much like parts of England, viewers’ expectations might have been destroyed by the disjuncture between expectation and reality, the destruction of the ontological bridge between cinema’s “representational legacy” and the unrealistic real, in the same way that the lack of tartan, while strictly accurate, risks contradicting this representational legacy. It seems logical, then, to observe that narrative authenticity in the case of the historical film cannot mean to film history as it really happened (to paraphrase Ranke’s famous dictum), but instead authenticity is felt to have been achieved when the images on screen most closely match the viewer’s expectations of what it looks like. If the few examples explored here are representative, then it is clear that charged historical spaces can play an essential role in establishing this authenticity.

It is in this respect that the charged historical space becomes most important for the cinema in a time of historical (and historiographic) uncertainty. By mapping memory and history onto a given space, that

space becomes infused with a kind of impersonal memory which is deemed to be reliable by its correspondence with viewers' collective expectations.

Notes

- 1 The prologues come from, respectively, *Braveheart* (dir. Mel Gibson, US, 1995); *Down With Love* (dir. Peyton Reed, US, 2003); *The Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, UK, 1979).
- 2 For more on historiography, see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). For a study of the effect of such criticism on the ways in which history is represented in film, see Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (CITY?: Longman/Pearson, 2006); Rosenstone, *Screening the Past Film and the Representation of History* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1998); David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1186–1192; and Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 3 Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 97, emphasis mine. For a particularly accessible overview on the subject of trauma and memory, see "Remembering Suffering: Trauma and History," pp. 97–103. For a more comprehensive overview of the subject, see Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, eds., *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity, and Recognition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005). For work specifically on memory in film, see Marcia Landy, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (London: Continuum, 2001); and Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 4 Radstone and Hodgkin, *Memory Cultures*, 10.
- 5 Chris Lukinbeal, "Cinematic Landscapes," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): DO WE NEED PAGE RANGE? 8.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 6–7, emphasis mine.
- 9 For a step-by-step debunking of these opening scenes, see Sharon Krossa, "Braveheart: An Illustration of Scale," available at

- <http://medievalscotland.org/scotbiblio/bravehearterrors.shtml> (accessed 14th November 2011). For scholarly criticism of the film, see Colin McArthur, *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television* (BFI, 1982); McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots: Distortions of Scotland in Hollywood Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Tim Edensor, "Reading Braveheart: Representing and Contesting Scottish Identity," *Scottish Affairs* (1997): 135–158.
- 10 The expression "History from below" to indicate an alternative type of history which runs counter to so-called "Great Man" narratives comes from the Annales school, and specifically from Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 163.
- 11 For more on the "Braveheart Effect," see McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots*, 125–130; Elycia Arendt, *Braveheart and Broomsticks: Essays on Movies, Myths, and Magic* (Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing.com, 2002), 19–20.
- 12 This "shaky history," it is worth observing, is not necessarily a criticism of the film's historical credentials, but rather a recognition that the source text itself is of highly dubious value. Screenwriter Randall Wallace openly admits to using the later epic poem by Blind Harry as a source text for much of the film's history, which is not unproblematic given the nationalist impulse that prompted Blind Harry to write his ode to the folkloric Scottish hero. For an excellent discussion of the historicism of the film, see Canitz, "'Historians... Will Say I Am a Liar': The Ideology of False Truth Claims in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* and Luc Besson's *The Messenger*"; and Edensor, "Reading *Braveheart*: Representing and Contesting Scottish Identity." For more on the film's debt to Blind Harry's poem, see Arendt, "From Blind Harry to *Braveheart*: The Evolution of the William Wallace Legend," in *Braveheart and Broomsticks*, 19–37.
- 13 Hodgkin and Radstone, *Memory, History, Nation*, 12.
- 14 White, *The Content of the Form*, 36, 67.
- 15 See, for example, Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*. The example of *JFK* is particularly well discussed in Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 45–78.
- 16 I have discussed this phenomenon elsewhere, using the case study of James Cameron's films. See Andrew B. R. Elliot, "Perspectives of Truth in

- Aliens, Strange Days, and Titanic,*” in *The Films of James Cameron: Critical Essays*, ed. Matthew Kapell and Stephen McVeigh (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 72–89.
- 17 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 18 Paul James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In* (London: Sage, 2006), 44.
- 19 Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History,” *History Teacher* (November 2001), 28.
- 20 These include, for instance, TLC’s *Da Vinci Declassified* (dir. David Carr, David Comptois, US, 2005), Channel 4’s *The Real Da Vinci Code* (dir. Kashaf Chaudry, Canada/UK, 2005), or Disinformation Company’s *The Da Vinci Code Decoded* (dir. Richard Metzger, US, 2004).
- 21 Lukinbeal, “Cinematic Landscapes,” 17.
- 22 I am using the terms “iconic” and “paradigmatic” to refer to two separate semiotic strategies used to persuade viewers of credibility in historical films. While there is scarcely space to explore these concepts here, in summary we can call iconic signs those signifiers which summon up an identifiable image of a past space which is then explained within the diegesis. Paradigmatic associations, on the other hand, are generic tropes used to ensure credibility by reference to other similar signifiers drawn from other texts or genres. For more on these two concepts, see Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Representing the Medieval World* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010).
- 23 McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots*, 142.
- 24 See Chapter Six of Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*.
- 25 McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots*, 140.
- 26 William F. Woods, “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 38–51, 47.
- 27 Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2006), 103–107, 104.
- 28 Woods, “Authenticating Realism,” 47.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Arendt, *Braveheart and Broomsticks*, 21.

Andrew B.R. Elliott is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln, where he teaches courses on film, media and history. He is the author of *Remaking the Middle Ages*, and has written

several articles about historical film and television, semiotics, and the return of the epic in cinema.