

The Reel Thing

Film And Cultural Memory In Australia

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on one of the elements surrounding a paradox in modern interactions with the past in Australia – namely that while the numbers taking formal history courses have declined markedly over the past twenty years, this decline has been matched by a proliferation of interest in other forms of history in popular culture. While the ambient factors which inform how the past is understood in popular imagination range from personal and family memories through museum exhibits and a wide range of cultural artefacts, mainstream historical films, particularly Hollywood-style films, have a global reach and the potential to influence the perceptions of millions. This thesis investigates the interactions between mainstream historical film and Cultural Memory using narrative analysis of film as text together with Cultural Studies methodologies common to Oral History and historical research. The thesis has an Australian focus and is based on case studies for which mainstream Hollywood-style narrative films constitute a major primary source.

The films discussed are fictional in one way or another, cover a wide range of genres and represent the kinds of historical information to be found in that format. The argument proceeds along two major axes; one following the ways the past is shaped by interactions between stylistic features of mainstream historical film and the socio-historical context; the other concerned with social or political actions which, in one way or another, suggest a significant influence from a film (or a group of films).

The thesis is divided into three main sections. Section One gives an overview of the thesis, its theoretical foundations, the methodologies adopted and the reasons behind those choices. Each of the two sections which follow deals with one of the main areas of investigation noted above. The thesis concludes that historical film influences Cultural Memory by creating a ‘memory’ of surfaces of the past and by contributing to the stock of images and narratives about the past which circulate in culture. However while that influence is significant, it is tempered by the degree to which the film can be understood as relating to the present, and particularly by the kinds of intersections it makes with the other texts of culture. The thesis argues that regardless of the fact that much historical film is used as a space for reinforcing dominant ideological perspectives, mainstream film can be regarded as a vehicle for presenting history, provided we consider it as history in another genre.