Inventing Historical Truth on the Silver Screen

After reading the article by Robert Rosenstone (2004), I picked out some of his interesting ideas related to the way historians discuss historical and documentary films. He suggests the alternative approach to measuring the historical credibility of such movies, and points at the most common mistakes historians make when they criticize these works. Rosenstone notes that it is inappropriate to expect a genuine reflection of the past as it really was from the movies. He explains his standpoint stating that any film, including documentaries, requires a creative approach. It means that even if a movie is based on the actual events, it has to have artistic design that helps to form a viewable and interesting material for the consumer. Otherwise, the movie that contains only dry facts may not be appropriate for the wide audience. Rosenstone appeals to the fact that many historians refer to movies as to the written sources and historical research. This kind of attitude provides unjustified critique of the events depicted in a documentary.

I agree with Samuel Zeisler’s view on this matter as I believe his standpoint expresses the opinion of many cineastes and connoisseurs of art. I consider myself a cineaste as well and, thereby, I think that judging a movie for its inaccuracy of facts and historical characters’ portraits simply kills the creative idea of the director. Cinema, as well as a theatre, intends to create various interpretations of actual events and characters with a help of director’s imagination and talent. Therefore, I support Zeisler’s comment and agree with approaches to documentary film critique introduced by Rosenstone in his article.
History and Pop Culture

Discussing the term “context” in his article *History and Pop Culture*, the author presented an important idea of the meaning the context has in relation to pop culture and history. The author notes that the products of pop culture, such as music, TV shows and movies, are always produced and presented according to the context of their time. It means a lot when considering these products in terms of historical value. In other words, products of pop culture are of interest to historians as they depict the society of the time when they were created. I found the example of how the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* reflected the attitudes of many people of that time. These issues were elucidated in an extremely interesting article. Despite the fact that this film was later criticized and provoked numerous riots and protests, it can be considered as a valuable historical document as it corresponds with the context of that time.

Robert Rosenstone provided another interesting discussion in his article, referring to the term “perspective”. He states that any piece of creative work, such as a movie or music video, is true from its own perspective, despite the fact that it might be not reliable in terms of depiction of historical events. I agree with this statement as I support the existence of original view on different events. I understand that film director can have his own vision of what happened in the past. Furthermore, he may present his vision in an unusual form, sometimes making it even harder to perceive and comprehend. However, this does not make the director’s perspective of historical events less truthful.

The related terms of context and perspective mean a lot in order to understand the principles of critique of the films based on true historical events. Analyzing the article *History and Pop Culture*, I came to the conclusion that filmmakers often shoot movies that reflect their own view on the events. This fact is conditioned by the context and modern
audience’s preferences and attitudes. This kind of movies can still be a valuable historical document as these films depict the current tendencies within the society.

**The Pocahontas Myth**

As I examined the suggested sources and made a research on the story of Pocahontas, I discovered significant differences in interpretation of actual events. I was surprised when I realized how the interpretation may change under specific circumstances. Investigating such controversial question, I found myself confused by the distorted reflection of facts. I started to doubt every opinion on this matter as the points of view were all different and unreliable. It was a very unpleasant experience as I felt that no one can be trusted. However, I decided to investigate the reasons of such contradiction in order to understand what makes people hide the truth or transform it in whatever way they want.

As a result of my investigation, I found that true facts do not always correspond with the desired reality of the involved parties. Through the example of *Pocahontas*, we see that the colonists created their own story that should have rehabilitated their image into the noble explorers of the novel lands. Drawing attention from cruel intervention to the Indian lands, the conquerors hid the discreditable facts of their story with the Powhatan’s people and Pocahontas in particular.

In 1995, Roy Disney filmed an animation movie that depicted a romantic story between the colonist John Smith and Indian girl Pocahontas. This movie has not much to do with the real historical events. However, I stick to the opinion that movies should not be criticized for lack of correspondence with facts. It especially concerns cartoons as their main audience is children who should not be scared by slaughters that occurred during the period of colonization. It definitely should not demonstrate how Pocahontas was taken as prisoner and raped during her captivity. Nevertheless, this film is an example of how the facts can be distorted and presented in a manner, which better fits the filmmaker’s vision. I think
*Pocahontas* indeed had a great impact on the way we think of early American history.

Thereby, I would recommend explaining the real facts to the children after watching it.
Works Cited


*History and Pop Culture*. N.d.
