
A game of truth and lies; a search for purpose in Postmodernism

Discuss the role of Historical Fiction in the Historical Discipline

Historical Fiction has established a literary and cinematic reputation as a genre of fanciful narratives, “a delicate arrangement of lies designed to spell truth... the most elaborate embroidery of all.”¹ Intentions are often corrupt, with Hollywood blockbusters putting aside truth in the frantic rush to feed the mouths of the entertainment hungry public. Such creations beg the question of whether there is any value in Historical Fiction, and more importantly, where is the line between fact and Fiction in Historiography? This essay aims to not only discuss Historical Fiction’s role in the Historical discipline but also confront the dilemmas between the genre and History itself. In a war between Postmodernists and Empiricists, Creators and Historians, teachers and audiences, Historical Fiction becomes more than just a genre, but may threaten the very way we think about truth. Perhaps the answers lie in a change in focus; an expansion in our understanding of Historical purpose.

Historical Fiction’s very nature seems paradoxical. As History demands truth, Fiction can seem to directly undermine the work of Historians. Author Richard Lee claims “History is always searching for truth. Fiction is not. Therefore Historical Fiction is bad History.”² This claim is easily supported by the overwhelming number of inaccurate portrayals in the public domain. *Troy* (2004),³ for example, romanticizes the relationship of the hero Achilles and the bed-slave Briseis, creating a narrative resembling features of Stockholm Syndrome that overlooks rape, abuse and treatment of the women of captured cities for the sake of a romantic subplot.⁴ Through inaccuracies, including the appearance of llamas in ancient Greece, the premature killing of key Historical figures such as Menelaus, Agamemnon and Ajax and the radical straightening of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, who are depicted as cousins rather than the lovers of Homer’s *Illiad*, director

¹ F. Campbell in G. Rodwell, *Whose History?* (South Australia, University of Adelaide Press, 2013), 133.

²R. Lee, ‘The problem of truth in history and fiction’, *Historical Novel Society*, York (2002) <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/but-a-fable-agreed-upon-speech-by-richard-lee/>, accessed 26 Nov. 2020.

³W. Peterson (dir.), *Troy* [film], (Warner Bros. Pictures, 13 May 2004).

⁴L. E., ‘Briseis in Troy and Stockholm Syndrome’, *The F Word* (29 June 2011), https://thefword.org.uk/2011/06/briseis_in_troy/, accessed 05 May 2020.

Peterson has distorted reality to achieve his own political and personal agenda.⁵ Winkler makes comment on this power of Peterson who “is one of the only filmmakers in Hollywood who has the final cut... an achievement that justifies our consideration of *Troy* as primarily Peterson’s.”⁶ This is but one example of the manipulation of truth to suit the agendas of Creators, primarily for entertainment, “whose films have almost invariably proven successful at the box office.”⁷ Another example can be found in *300* (2006),⁸ an adaptation of Herodotus’ *Histories* regarding the Spartan’s loss to the Persians at Thermopylae. In Zack Snyder’s cinematic retelling, Xerxes is not a royally clothed, bearded king of Middle Eastern appearance but rather a Eurocentric, hairless, scantily clad giant with an army consisting of masked men, ogres and trolls, a representation more reminiscent of myth than Historical truth. From the success of such films,⁹ it is easy to see that Historical Fiction falls more into the category of fantasy, a far cry from the pure search for Historical truth. After all, “respondents (usually Historians themselves) see History as Fiction’s antithesis.”¹⁰ Such films raise questions surrounding the democratisation of History.

Historical Fiction is part of the democratization of History which, though often thought of as anti-intellectual, is important for humanity in avoiding dictatorships and censorship in which truth is manipulated often for malicious intent,¹¹ and allows for greater access to the past. The democratisation and commodification of History has already begun on social media, a social discourse even more fraught with the possibility of inaccuracy, manipulation and misinformation.¹² As a facet of this democratisation in the public domain, Historical Fiction does not come without its problems.¹³ In the necessary process of the democratisation of History, several dilemmas of Historical Fiction should be discussed including the process by which facts are chosen and their subsequent manipulation to fit narrative conventions for the purpose of entertainment.

⁵ A. von Tunzelmann, ‘No gods or gay men but a whole lot of llamas’, *The Guardian* (28 August 2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/aug/28/bradpitt.troy>, accessed 05 May 2020.

⁶ M. Winkler, *Troy: from Homer’s Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 4, <https://books.google.com.ng/books?id=tDv2znATy4C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>, accessed 1 June 2021.

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ Z. Snyder (dir.), *300* [film], (Warner Bros. Pictures. 9 Dec. 2006).

⁹ Reuters Life, ‘Makers of action film “300” surprised at success’, *Reuters* (20 March 2007), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-300-success-1-idUKL1945909420070319>, (5 March 2021).

¹⁰ A. Curthoys and J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, (2nd edn, Sydney, UNSW Press Ltd, 2010), 2.

¹¹ D. De Simone, ‘The Consequences of Democratizing Knowledge: Reconsidering Richard Hofstadter and the History of Education’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 34/ No. 3 (2001), 376, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3054348>

¹² M. Aldwairi and A. Alwahedi, ‘Detecting Fake News in Social Media Networks’, *Procedia Computer Science*, vol. 141 (2018), 215, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2018.10.171>

¹³ H. Moeller, ‘Commodification of Philosophy: Professors vs Influencers’ [video], YouTube (18 Feb 2021), <https://youtu.be/0RmJO2IwHek>, accessed 5 June 2021.

Recognition of the weakness within Historical Fiction and by extension Historical truth allows for progress within the Historical discipline. “In our view,” says Curthoys and Docker;

“the search for Historical truth brings with it not a rejection but rather a greater awareness of... the necessary limitations of Historical practice. A self-conscious recognition of the fictive elements in Historical writing, we argue, strengthens - not weakens- the search for truth.”¹⁴

Creators of Historical Fiction, in the name of artistic license, pick and choose which facts to use, which to manipulate and which to leave the same, creating significant bias. American Historical Fiction author Sarah Churchwell claims this ‘poetic license’ is an excuse for lazy research, however¹⁵ Australian Historical Fiction author, Kate Grenville, likens this process to the Goths pillaging Rome with all manner of treasures lain out for the taking.¹⁶ It is this curated ‘pillaging’ that seems to distinguish Fiction from History. Historical Fiction could then be considered to directly oppose Empirical methodology.¹⁷ However, the act of biased selection is not reserved for authors and Creators but also for Historians in the writing of their Histories, as Poststructuralism recognises. Carr brings this subjectivity into the spotlight of the Historical discipline,

“History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the Historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The Historian collects them, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him.”¹⁸

As both Creators and Historians ‘pillage’ and choose their ‘fish’, the subjectivity of both disciplines is revealed, questioning the difference between Fiction and History. Both History and Fiction have value and purpose, however, both are flawed and consciously or unconsciously biased. Should not then Creators and Historians be challenged to collaborate to present the past in a more palatable form for the betterment of the general populace?

Historians have a responsibility to collaborate and participate with Creators to preserve the relevance of History. With the introduction of Postmodernism and Poststructuralism, it is not Historical Fiction that is under threat but the very nature of the Historical discipline. Carr comments on the problems inherent in the objective, Empiricist approach saying, “The Empirical theory of knowledge presupposes a complete separation between

¹⁴A. Curthoys and J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 6.

¹⁵S. Merritt, ‘How true should historical fiction be?’, *The Guardian* (20 March 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/mar/19/how-true-should-historical-fiction-be-mantel-andre-w-miller-gregory>, 9 June 2021.

¹⁶ Kate Grenville in G. Rodwell, *Whose History?* (South Australia, University of Adelaide Press, 2013), 137.

¹⁷M. Krieger, ‘Fiction, History, and Empirical Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 1/ no. 2 (1974), 336.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342788>

¹⁸E. Carr, *What is History?* (2nd edn, England: Penguin Group, 1964), 6.

subject and object. Facts, like sense-impressions, impinge on the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness.”¹⁹ Historians now understand, through the writings of Poststructuralists like Foucault, that this separation is impossible and no ‘truth’ is free from the bias and context of those who interpret its meaning.²⁰ The Historical Discipline is no longer a science in this contemporary context and the study of History will not thrive under the nihilism of Postmodernism nor through the blindness of its self-assured mission for absolute truth. Like Creators, Historians must acknowledge their own biases and “to which facts [they] give the floor, and in what order or context.”²¹ This does not require that Historians abandon accuracy but, as consultants and secondary sources for Creators, should acknowledge their own shortcomings in the creation of History.

A second challenge facing Creators is the manipulation of History into the conventions of narratives, for example, plot, characters, suspense and dialogue, to entertain. Historical Fiction novelist Melanie Benjamin expresses this challenge,

“A (Historical) novel cannot explore everything about a life. That’s what a biography or History does. But a novel has to entertain; it has to have a driving narrative... It’s like trimming a tree; I have to prune out some of the facts and events that don’t move that narrative forward. I lay them out in the order that will best suit my narrative.”²²

Creators, as seen in the movies *Troy* and *300*, manipulate the truth to fit the structure of entertainment, the former in its’ creation of a romantic subplot despite inaccuracy and the latter in the vilification of the Persians to provide a clear antagonist. This has generated fierce opposition from Iranian officials, such as Javadd Shamaqdare, who criticised *300* for its’ “plundering of Iran's Historic past and insulting its civilization”.²³ Even on the rare occasion an Historical event falls perfectly into the conventions of literature as it did with the story of Martin Guerre in the film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*(1982), in which the 16th-century peasant came home to find an imposter impersonating himself, Creators of Historical Fiction will undoubtedly have to manipulate the facts to fit a storyline and hold audience engagement. ²⁴ Natlie Zemon Davis, Historical consultant for the film, wrote, “Rarely does a Historian find so perfect a narrative structure in the events of the past or one with

¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²⁰A. Green and K. Troup, *The Houses of History*, (2nd edn, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 292.

²¹E. Carr, *What is History?* (2nd edn, England: Penguin Group, 1964), 11.

²² M. Benjamin, ‘Blurred Lines: Writing Historical Fiction From Fact’, *Writer’s Digest* (24 May 2019), 2. Once the subject has been decided, <https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/blurred-lines-writing-historical-fiction-from-fact>, 9 June 2021.

²³ G. Leupp, ‘Historian calls 300 a racist and insulting film’, *History News Network* (31 March 2007), <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/37394>, 18 Feb. 2021.

²⁴D. Vigne (dir.), *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* [film], (European International, 26 August 1983).

such dramatic popular appeal,”²⁵ however, despite the natural appeal of the story, Davis found the process dissatisfying as facts had to be altered or sacrificed to “give the film the powerful simplicity that had allowed the Martin Guerre story to become a legend in the first place.”²⁶ This highlights the difference between the Historical Discipline and Historical Fiction, with the latter’s main purpose being entertainment through carefully crafted storylines intended to hook viewers.

In light of this, Creators should take care of overstepping when it comes to the alteration of History in Historical Fiction and acknowledge their creative choices. Creators often do not need to significantly manipulate facts to achieve their purpose. As Rodwell says, “the Historical novelist need not be playing with History any more than does the professional Historian, notwithstanding the novelist’s obligation to storytelling.”²⁷ When it comes to the choosing of ‘facts’ by Creators, it is often beneficial to their purpose to stay as close to the accepted truth as possible, at least for the preservation of a shared Historical reality. In addition, as author Hilary Mantel rightly points out, “The reason you must stick to the truth is because the truth is better, stranger, stronger, than anything you can make up.”²⁸ Creators should use the words of Carr, who says “accuracy is a duty, not a virtue”, as a foundation for their approach.²⁹ Natlie Zemon Davis concluded, following the production of the film *La Retour de Martin Guerre* (1982), in *Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity* (1987), that film makers ought to aim for authenticity by allowing the past to “have its distinctiveness before remaking it to resemble the present”.³⁰ The past should be portrayed with the aim of authenticity and accuracy to allow Historical Fiction to be a valid form for constructing History. Unfortunately, not all Creators aim for accuracy but, as Sarah Johnson states, “simply use the past as a vehicle of making their plot more believable.”³¹ Hilary Mantel expresses the frustration of the battle between narrative and History;

“Don’t go against known fact... Historical truth is a rough beast, shapeless, blundering, hard to tame. It fights you every step. Your characters are never how or where you would like them to be.”³²

²⁵N. Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (England: Harvard University Press, 1983).

²⁶Ibid, viii.

²⁷G. Rodwell, *Whose History?*, 138.

²⁸H. Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’[podcast], *The Reith Lectures* (4 July 2017), BBC Sounds, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08wp3g3>, (accessed 23 May 2021).

²⁹E. Carr, *What is History?*, 10.

³⁰N. Zemon Davis, ‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 8/no. 3 (1987), 476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439688800260381>

³¹S. Johnson, ‘Defining the Genre: What are the rules for historical fiction?’, *Historical Novel Society*, Eastern Illinois University (March 2002), <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre-what-are-the-rules-for-historical-fiction/>, accessed 20 Feb. 2021.

³²H. Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’[podcast], *The Reith Lectures* (4 July 2017), BBC Sounds, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08wp3g3>, (accessed 23 May 2021).

The manipulation of History into the confinements of narrative conventions is an unavoidable challenge, therefore it is imperative to acknowledge bias, manipulation of truth and subjectivity on a public scale. This is already practiced by some Creators, as seen in the use of ‘based on a true story’ or ‘inspired by true events’ in the credits of films or even short ‘Historically accurate’ summations at the ends of novels. However, Zemon Davis suggests Creators could do even more to show the viewers where their knowledge of the past comes from and better acknowledge their sources through fashioning openings, credit scenes and even appendixes.³³ In addition, author Craiker states, “you can always add a disclaimer at the beginning of the book or an appendix with all the facts you changed at the end.”³⁴ With an aim for accuracy and acknowledgement of bias, Historical Fiction can become a far more powerful tool that informs the past while simultaneously providing room for artistic license.

The challenge to Historians is to allow Historical Fiction to exist as a form of History by expanding Historical purpose. Are Historians to continue pursuing the Enlightenment Project, a project acknowledged to be unattainable? Alternatively, its purpose could be in generating understanding, teaching and shaping identity. Lempert states History;

“is to be understood as a form of identity that elucidates specific choices and interactions (economic, political, and social) of groups within their environments that define them as a people exercising the creativity that makes us human.”³⁵

Aided by Historical Fiction, History could become pedagogical, passing on facts to a wider audience and shaping identity. As author Jenni Walsh states, Historical Fiction, though it “often borrows actual moments in time related to shifting economic and societal issues, has an uncanny way of resonating with relevance even a hundred, or hundreds, of years later.”³⁶ The nature of Historical Fiction allows for education, entertainment and understanding when used as a stage for Historical democratisation and societal development, providing a way out of Postmodern nihilism. Margaret George writes;

³³N. Zemon Davis, ‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity’, 480.

³⁴K. Craiker, ‘7 Ways to Avoid Mistakes When Writing Historical Fiction’, *Pro Writing Aid* (13 July 2020) 1. Have a Clear Idea How Much Fact You Want in Your Historical Fiction, <https://prowritingaid.com/art/1321/tips-for-writing-historical-fiction.aspx>, accessed 2 June 2021.

³⁵D. Lempert, ‘Taking People’s History Back to the People’, *Democracy & Education*, vol. 21/ no. 22 (2013), 3, <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/iss2/1>

³⁶J. Walsh in C. King, ‘Historical Fiction is More Important Than Ever: 10 Writers Weigh In’, *Literary Hub* (24 April 2017), Jenni Walsh, <https://lithub.com/historical-fiction-is-more-important-than-ever-10-writers-weigh-in/>, accessed 10 June 2021.

“Historical Fiction delivers facts in a manner that people find easier to grasp than in a History book, so it can reach a bigger audience and have a greater impact,”³⁷

Historians must acknowledge that Historical Fiction is not a subject completely isolated from History, to separate them would be to damn the study of History and nullify Historical Fiction’s value. Through it we become attuned to the past, we become aware of other cultures, perspectives and viewpoints. This purpose does not eliminate the need for truth, allowing for the Empirical method of enquiry, but enhances History’s value as it brings it out of the rigid archives of unattainable truths condemned by Postmodernism. It is this multiplicity of History that offers space for both science and literature,³⁸ allowing the relevancy of History in the public sphere. As Hilary Mantel rightly states, “The task of Historical Fiction is to take the past out of the archive and relocate it in a body.”³⁹

History and Historical Fiction can and have existed harmoniously. Narrative devices such as, “riddles, similes, analogies, metaphors and name arguments are all found in the Greek literature,” including Aristotle, Virgil, Dionysius, Cicero, and Quintilian.⁴⁰ Ancient Historian Virgil applies the conventions of narratives in his Histories. “Here Caesar Augustus... stands on the lofty stern; prosperous flames jet around his brow.”⁴¹ Vivid images and symbols are designed to paint the scene in the minds of the reader and like many of his natural images, fire is used to represent drama and violence, to provide a more intense experience.⁴² Likewise, Herodotus’ *Histories* “read like novellas, and the effect of the whole, in terms of created characters,... exploring of dilemmas... [and the] fantastical ethnography, is novelistic.”⁴³ This trait is common amongst Ancient Greek writers including Homer, in which “The grand style of the epic is maintained by the splendid pictures they throw upon the canvas.”⁴⁴

³⁷M. George in C. King, ‘Historical Fiction is More Important Than Ever: 10 Writers Weigh In’, *Literary Hub* (24 April 2017), Margaret George, <https://lithub.com/historical-fiction-is-more-important-than-ever-10-writers-weigh-in/>, accessed 10 June 2021.

³⁸Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 11.

³⁹H. Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’ [podcast], *The Reith Lectures* (4 July 2017), BBC Sounds, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08wp3g3>, (accessed 23 May 2021).

⁴⁰J. Leopold, ‘D. Rhetoric and Allegory’, in D. Winston and J. Dillon, ed., *Two Treatises of Philo of Alexandria: A Commentary on De Gigantibus and Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis*, (Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), 155.

⁴¹Virgil, *Aeneid*, tr. J. Dryden (Project Gutenberg, 1995), book 8.

⁴²B. Johnson, ‘Imagery in Virgil’s “The Aeneid”’, *Free Book Summary* (2021), <https://freebooksummary.com/imagery-in-virgils-the-aeneid-38324#:~:text=Virgil%20uses%20different%20elements%20of,journey%20to%20Carthage%20to%20Dido>, accessed 10 April 2021

⁴³Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 14.

⁴⁴A. Keith, ‘Nature-Imagery in Vergil’s “Aeneid”’, *The Classical Journal*, vol. 28/ no. 8 (1933), 591. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3290032>

Another example to consider is the use of counterfactuals in the Historical discipline as a means of using Fiction to better understand truth, a “necessary antidote to traditional deterministic tendencies.”⁴⁵ Grant Rodwell deals with this school of thought in his book, advocating the uses of counterfactual Histories for the betterment of understanding the value of what truly happened.⁴⁶ Counterfactuals utilise Historical Fiction to portray these counter Histories, engaging audiences while simultaneously emphasizing the value of reality.⁴⁷ Counterfactuals by their very nature are an example of the uses of Historical Fiction in Historical practice, as “counterfactual reasoning plays an unavoidable and implicit role in History,”⁴⁸ and, as Lebow argues, “are an effective research tool.”⁴⁹

The role of Historical Fiction in the Historical discipline is of great importance, now more than ever, not only as a means of the democratisation of History but also for education, entertainment and the revitalisation of History. Despite its many challenges, it would be a mistake for Historians to not make use of this powerful resource as Historical Fiction allows Historical relevancy in a Postmodern era. By expanding on the Empirical approach, History can become reinvigorated, no longer locked in archives but alive and breathing in the public discourse. This does not irradicate issues of manipulation nor does it justify misinformation, but rather opens the gates of History wider. Ultimately these discussions are, “part of History’s very nature,”⁵⁰ but as Nietzsche rightly says, “let us at least learn better how to employ History for the purpose of life!”⁵¹

⁴⁵M. Mordhorst, ‘From counterfactual history to counter-narrative history’, *Management and Organizational History*, vol. 3/ no. 1 (2008), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744935908090995>

⁴⁶ G. Rodwell, *Whose History?* 81-98.

⁴⁷ G. Rodwell, *Whose History?*, 86.

⁴⁸M. Bunzl, ‘Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 109/ no. 3 (2004), 857, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/530560>

⁴⁹ R. Lebow, ‘Counterfactual Thought Experiments: A Necessary Teaching Tool’, *The History Teacher*, vol. 40/ no. 2 (2007), 154, <https://doi.org/10.2307/30036985>

⁵⁰Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 11.

⁵¹F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale, tr. R. Hollingdale (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1997) 66.

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