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Spangler, Jonathan (2018) 'Truth' and 'Interiority': Screening and Interpreting the Early Modern Era. In: Histories on Screen: The Past and Present in Anglo-American Cinema and Television. Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 165-184. ISBN 1474217036

Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing

Version: Accepted Version

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‘Truth’ and ‘Interiority’: Screening and Interpreting the Early Modern Era

Jonathan Spangler

Filmmakers have had a long love affair with the early modern period (roughly 1500 to 1800), an era full of compelling narratives, dramatic conflicts, and opportunities for lavish sets and beautiful costumes. 1930s cinema is remembered for its epic swashbuckler adventures of buccaneers and pirates starring Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr, while leading ladies of Hollywood made their mark playing famous (or infamous) queens of the age: Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Bette Davis. The culmination of this pre-war interest is Flynn and Davis together, in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), swashbuckling and romance rolled into one. Films set in the early modern period are enriched by the brilliant colours of the Renaissance, the spiritual drama of the Reformation, the opulence of the Baroque, and the optimism mixed with anxiety and even terror in the age of Revolution.

But are films set in these times more than entertainment? Can they be viewed and analysed as part of a serious study of history? On the one hand, they can be used to convey a sense of the views of the filmmaker and his or her contemporary audience. To once again use the example of *Elizabeth and Essex*, viewers in 1939 were expecting a woman to be ‘ruled by her heart, not her head’, and were duly pleased when the steely Davis ultimately fell for the charms of Flynn, even though their romance was doomed in the end. Contemporaries retained a somewhat Victorian view of women, and were uncomfortable with the idea of Elizabeth I acting in a manly, authoritative manner. Lytton Strachey’s biography of her (1928), the basis for the film, is gratifying in that Elizabeth’s firm resolve for duty clashes strongly with her womanly desires for love and romance.[1] Society in the late 1930s was already changing,

however, and historical figures could become national champions, reflecting the fears of an impending global conflict and attempts by filmmakers to rally patriotic fervour (Flora Robson plays a heroic Elizabeth in *Fire Over England* (1937)). To examine the trajectory of Elizabeth I in film, we can follow the sequence of Glenda Jackson's portrayal of the Queen in *Elizabeth R* (BBC television, (1971)) as a burgeoning feminist, a working woman of her times; a silly, flirtatious monarch for a more frivolous decade in Miranda's Richardson's 'Queenie' in *Blackadder II* (BBC2, (1985)); a post-modernist view of Elizabeth as a drag-queen, all myth and little reality, provided by Quentin Crisp in Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992); a New Labour 'Great Britons' resurgence portrayal starring Cate Blanchett (1998 and 2007); and a revisionist, realistic, more world-weary version of the Queen for the post-9-11 world, in Helen Mirren's portrayal in the television miniseries *Elizabeth I* (HBO/Channel 4, (2005); see below).[2] This aspect of the use of historical films in academic study has been analysed thoroughly by experts in cinema history and cultural studies.[3] But it is also possible to examine films set in specific historical periods for other didactic reasons, to study the period itself, rather than just focus on the cultural and political environment in which the film was made. This chapter will offer some useful case studies for accessing the history itself, using films from recent decades that are set in the early modern period.

In addition to helping students, especially those unfamiliar with the period, to see and feel the atmosphere of this period (settings, costumes, furniture, artwork, and sometimes dialogue, music), some films lend themselves well to the study of the early modern period due to their usage of primary source material, from private letters to published speeches, plays and novels. One theme to emerge is the importance of 'interiority'—Queen Elizabeth I is often said to have pronounced that she did not want to 'open windows into men's souls', but by looking at well-made films set in earlier times, we can at least glimpse (or debate) how people from an earlier era felt differently, or the same, from us.

The Historiography of the Historical Film

As Robert Rosenstone pointed out in the 1990s, the debate over what kinds of history should be put onto film is not new.[4] In a later article, Rosenstone warned of the dangers of making history trivialized, romanticized, distorted or even falsified in the name of drama and immediacy of emotional connection (see also chapter 2).[5] Starting with Sergei Eisenstein in the 1920s-30s, some history films were meant to be deliberately informative, didactic, at least in emotional content if not in fact—most usually cited for Eisenstein is *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), but for earlier periods we could equally cite *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) (13th century) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) (16th century). At the other end of the spectrum, removing the emotion from a film entirely in an effort to achieve 'realism' in a historical event, is Roberto Rossellini's *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (*Le Prise de Pouvoir de Louis XIV*, (1966)), which Rosenstone categorizes as 'historical film as experiment' (in this case history that is 'de-dramatized'), in his tripartite division of historical films (the other two being historical film as drama or as document).[6] This film may be considered by specialists of the period as an accurate portrayal of the coming of age and surprising assumption of full power by the young Louis XIV in 1660, but is mostly devoid of anything that could be described as 'entertainment'. At yet another extreme, we can see experimental films that present the viewer with almost pure emotion to produce shock, such as *The Devils* (1971) by Ken Russell, based on a 1952 book, *The Devils of Loudun* by Aldous Huxley, which fictionalized a real set of events in western France in the 1630s in which a priest was accused of seducing a convent of nuns with the assistance of a satanic pact and demonic possession. The fascinating historical context (the priest was really a victim of political rivalries at the highest levels) is unimportant in Russell's film, merely the expression of the horrors of a period of such intense religious devotion as the early seventeenth century.[7]

In the later 1970s, a new style of historical film making began to emerge, in a sense parallel to the new type of historical scholarship now known as 'revisionism'. These films sought to achieve both historical accuracy and emotionality while also hoping for enough drama to create a hit with audiences. They sought to tell stories of people previously unpresented: fewer kings and queens, more ordinary people, both male and female. The now classic example of this is *The Return of Martin Guerre* (*Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, (1982)), directed by Daniel Vigne, which featured a well-known film star, Gérard Depardieu, and a genuine historian as an advisor, Natalie Zemon Davis, then of Princeton University. This film, and the accompanying book by Davis,[8] was based on actual events in the south of the France in the 1560s, much of which could be documented through court records found in archives of several southern French départements. The film transports audiences to a small village in rural France, Artigat, and is visually rich in costume and settings appropriate for peasant life in the 16th century—you can practically feel the warmth of the southern sun and smell the pungency of living in the same space as your livestock. The trial scenes are set in the Parlement of Toulouse, conforming as much as possible to historical records to provide an accurate look and feel of early modern judiciary settings. The story itself is a truly riveting tale of identity theft: Martin Guerre, married as a teenager, abandons his wife after a family dispute, returns after eight years to reclaim his wife and child, and his family inheritance, and is gradually revealed not to be Martin Guerre. But the revelation comes only after a lengthy lawsuit, the details of which are provided in a published account by one of the magistrates involved, Jean de Coras.[9] There is much for students to see and learn from in this film and from Zemon Davis's book: rural marriage practices and folk traditions surrounding couples who, for reasons unknown but deemed suspect, were infertile ('Charivari' or 'rough music'); growing tensions between Catholics and Protestants, and between urban and rural societies; and judiciary practices in the pre-modern world (notably the custom of

‘Confrontation’, between defendant and witnesses, before the latter’s statements are known to the former).[10]

The key person in upholding the false Martin’s story, is surprisingly (spoiler alert!), his wife, Bertrande de Rols, and this becomes a main feature of the film, and of Davis’ book: an attempt to give a voice to a woman in a period which is notably devoid of women’s voices. The fascinating question that intrigues audiences and makes this film a dramatic success is: why would a woman knowingly lie to support an imposter’s claims? Was it simply the security of having a healthy male which an early modern peasant woman needed to survive in a harsh world, or was it something more compelling to modern audiences : love and a woman’s right to choose? These are very human questions, often absent in theoretical debate. It was these questions, however, which led to the sharpest criticism of Davis’s work on this film, in an article by Robert Finlay published in *The American Historical Review*.[11] Finlay accused Davis of interpolating modern values more appropriate to the feminist age onto the character of Bertrande. What was portrayed as a wicked and devious deed in the sixteenth-century texts (Coras and the other court documents), became an act of devotion and collaboration between a man and woman; Bertrande and the ‘false Martin’ become heroes, rather than dupe and villain. Davis said she had striven to ‘fill in the gaps’ of the historical record by giving Bertrande’s side of the story when the court records were silent or biased, as she contends Coras’s *Arrest Memorable* is. The published debate between Davis and Finlay provides a compelling starting point for students of history in film for the early modern period, asking the fundamental question: how much is it the right or the responsibility of the historian to ‘fill in the gaps’ in our knowledge through informed invention?

Another film from this period worth mentioning in this context of informed invention is the classic film on the dangers of revolutionary idealism that has turned to unquestionable dogma: *Danton* (1983) by Polish director, Andrzej Wajda (again starring Gérard Depardieu).

Set in the year of the Terror (1794), it closely examines the unravelling of the friendship and political relationship of the two giants of the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton (Depardieu). The film is loosely associated with debates then going on in Poland about the virtues of freedom of expression versus the security of government authority, but it is useful to students of the early modern period for its use of 'imagined history', as in *The Return of Martin Guerre*. The speeches of Danton and Robespierre can be found in published document collections of the French Revolution.[12] But this film also allows us to imagine the undocumented conversations these men must have had, in private, which ultimately led to the break-down of their relationship and the guillotine for Danton.[13] These conversations were 'imagined' several decades before this film was made, by Stanley Loomis, in a process French cultural historian Marc Ferro defined as 'historical reconstitution'.[14]

This sort of 'scenic invention' can be found in other well-known historical narratives, most famously, the completely fabricated 'interview' between Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots—who never met in reality—as reconstituted by Friedrich Schiller in his play, 'Maria Stuart' (1800), which was subsequently imported into retellings of this story in opera (by Donizetti, 1835) and in film, from *Mary of Scotland* (1936) starring Katharine Hepburn; to *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971) starring Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson (again as Elizabeth); to the 2005 Helen Mirren television version, where, in a clever nod to the audience, the Queen says to Dudley: 'If I were to visit her, it would have to be in secret, for all of court would argue against it, but it could be done, I imagine.' The scene begins with Mary Queen of Scots, 'You were not announced', and Elizabeth's response, 'I am not here'. Such scenes make for great drama, and allow professional historians a bit of fun, but also stimulate useful classroom discussion about how much we can assume of historical figures' actions or thoughts in the absence of historical records.

Twentieth Century Myths and Legends

With the coming of a more flashy period in film-making, the later 1980s and early '90s, Hollywood filmmakers turned to more obviously blockbuster historical films, where storytelling took premier place, and 'serious' representation was pushed aside. Most of the bigger budget films were made based on accepted semi-mythical nationalist narratives rather than facts (such as *Braveheart* (1995)), and more art-house films sought to present 'revisionist' views at that time dominant in historical scholarship, reflecting an interest in post-colonialist re-evaluations of Europeans' presence in the New World (*The Mission*, (1986)), or post-nationalist views of events such as the English Reformation (*Lady Jane*, (1986)). Other films from this era, while excellent films, reinforce national myths and stereotypes rather than reveal 'true' history. A good example of this is *La Reine Margot* (1994) by Patrice Chéreau, which reinforces the long-standing image of wicked Catholics slaughtering innocent Protestants in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre (23-24 August 1572), the bloodiest episode of the French Wars of Religion, and in particular the wicked, foreign-born queen, Catherine de Medici, who masterminded the blood-soaked event. Scenes set within the Valois court draw a portrait of a decadent and sexually deviant royal family, in strong contrast with the moral and honest Protestant prince, Henry of Navarre. This is compelling viewing, but it is based on a novel by Alexandre Dumas (1845), and reveals more about the feelings of 19th-century Frenchmen about the resurgence of Catholic fanaticism and bigotry in their own time, and a rise in devotion to the memory of a morally upright royal dynasty, the Bourbons, in the 1840s represented by the 'people's king', Louis-Philippe (one of Dumas' early patrons). But as a study of historiographical change and national myth, *La Reine Margot* is useful for its depiction of the 'black legend' of Catherine de Medici (and it

helps that the role is played so artfully by an Italian actress, Virna Lisi): Catherine here is truly the 'black widow', lurking in corners, shuffling along corridors as a spider, barely human at all. This image can feature centrally in a classroom discussion, making usage of an excellent article on the evolution of Catherine's image across the centuries, by an eminent scholar of the period, Nicola Sutherland.[15]

There are other films based on Dumas novels, most famously the series of books focusing on the Three Musketeers, which have been made into numerous films and television series, from the first silent films to the present: a blockbuster Hollywood film of 1993 was outdone by an even more blockbuster version in 2011, followed by a fairly lacklustre, and strangely ahistorical, BBC television series in Britain in 2014. The most famous recent film of this type is probably *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1998) starring Leonardo DiCaprio, which is not very useful for use in class as it is full of anachronisms and is based on a clearly fictional story of the young Louis XIV having a secret twin. This is in contrast to *La Reine Margot* which although it too has anachronisms, portrays events with enough uncertainties of fact that it allows students to engage with the ongoing academic debates over the causes and meanings of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day.[16]

But fictional accounts can be useful for the basis of a historical film, many of which were written in the early modern period itself. The first true 'novel' is usually considered to be the *Princess of Cleves* by Madame de Lafayette, published in 1678, and although it was made into a French art-house film in 1961 (with dialogue 'adjusted' by Jean Cocteau), it has thus far never made it onto the big Hollywood screen. A more useful example therefore is *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), based on the novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaison dangereuses* (1782). Aside from beautiful costumes and elegant settings, the film conveys an important aspect of the French Enlightenment: the importance of wit and the careful usage of language as a mark of 'civilisation'—though of course in the end, it is revealed that this

shallow pursuit is not a mark of civilisation, rather of brutal barbarity. As such, the story can be set in any period, and indeed it has been (the 1959 French version is set in the 1950s, the two 1980s versions *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and *Valmont* (1989) are set as the novel in the 1780s, while *Cruel Intentions* (1999) is famously set amidst the modern Manhattan jet set). Students can compare the language used in the original novel with the way text is turned into dialogue in the more recent films.[17] Another film which conveys a similar message, but is entirely based on new material, is the delightful *Ridicule* (1996). Both stories reconstruct a past quite different from ours, but also reinforce deeply held notions (certainly in France) that pre-Revolutionary French aristocrats were vicious, decadent, and got what they deserved once the Revolution came (and the guillotine). This allows for stimulating classroom discussion about the truths over who was or was not in fact leading the earliest stages of the Revolution of 1789.[18] Other fictional accounts of this period allow students to get into the look and feel of the early modern world without attempting to look for 'fact', for example, those based on works of theatre like *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990) (yet again starring Depardieu), based on a play by Edmond Rostand, 1897; *Amadeus* (1984), based on the play from 1979 by Peter Shaffer, or *The Madness of King George* (1994), based on a play from 1991 by Alan Bennett. These examples are useful for allowing students to consider those things that were of concern to different sorts of people in 17th-century France, 18th-century Vienna, or 18th-century England.

Source and Scene: Integrating the History

Some films from this period can be useful in the classroom because they are based on actual letters or memoirs that have survived from the period. Once again looking at 17th-century France and the age of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King', *Vatel* (2000) is based on a tale recounted in a letter by the famous epistolary author, Madame de Sévigné, on 24 and 26 April 1671.[19] In

her letter to her daughter, the Marquise de Sévigné provides descriptive colour and dramatic narrative about a weekend party thrown by the Prince of Condé for his cousin, the King, and, crucially, provides the ultimate anecdote about early modern 'honour' when the famous chef, François Vatel, commits suicide rather than dishonour his master (Condé) when the fish do not arrive on the final day of the royal visit:

> The King arrived on Thursday evening. Hunting, lanterns, moonlight, a gentle walk, supper served in a spot carpeted with daffodils—everything was perfect. […] Night falls. The fireworks are a failure owing to fog, and they cost 16,000 francs. By four in the morning Vatel was rushing round everywhere and finding everything wrapped in slumber. He found a small supplier who only had two loads of fish. 'Is that all?' he asked. 'Yes, sir.' He did not know that Vatel had sent round to all the seaports. Vatel waited a short time, the other suppliers did not turn up, he lost his head and thought there would be no more fish. He went and found Gourville [Condé's chief steward] and said, 'Sir, I shall never survive this disgrace, my honour and my reputation are at stake.' Gourville laughed at him. Vatel went to his room, put his sword up against the door and ran it through his heart. […] Meanwhile the fish was coming in from all quarters. […] Monsieur le Prince [of Condé] told the King very sadly, explaining that it was a matter of honour as he saw it. His courage was both praised and blamed. The King said that he had been putting off his visit to Chantilly for five years because he realized what an extreme embarrassment it would be. […] He swore that he would not allow Monsieur le Prince to take all this trouble, but it was too late for poor Vatel. However, Gourville tried to make up for the loss of Vatel. He did so, and there was a very good dinner, light refreshments later, and then supper, a walk, cards, hunting, everything scented with daffodils, everything magical. […]

The film, directed by Roland Joffé, and yet again starring Depardieu (this time in English), is wonderful at evoking the atmosphere conjured by Sévigné, with lavish period costume, beautiful sets, and especially noteworthy reconstructions of the mechanical wonders of late seventeenth-century court entertainments: the astonishing array of pulleys and levers, the fetish for orientalism (*Turkerie*) in decoration and entertainment (and development of court ballet), early forms of fireworks, and the lavish outlay of food. Less effective is the love story added in the film for Vatel, but it is fun for students studying this period to see well-drawn portraits of the most prominent personages who feature in historical literature about the court of the Sun King: a stiff and unfeeling Louis XIV, a slightly befuddled Queen Marie-Thérèse (she never properly learned to speak French), an impish and playful Philippe d'Orléans (a fop who can wield a sword with deadly accuracy when needed—a welcome revised view of the homosexual brother of the Sun King), the notorious rake Lauzun (played wonderfully by Tim Roth, who steals nearly every scene), and a pompous mistress (Montespan) greeting her rival (La Vallière), weeping, on the stairs, with the quip: 'Are you going down, Madame? I am going up!'[20]

Using Madame de Sévigné's text in conjunction with this film suggests how a fairly short contemporary letter can truly bring a period to life, allowing students to 'see' and 'experience' the past, not simply read about it. Analytical discussions can be centred around reactions to the film by social and cultural historians.[21] However, attention should also be drawn to the fact that, as with other films examined in this chapter, the Joffé film re-asserts some holdovers from the Romantic (19th-century) past, notably that Vatel killed himself for the love of a woman, and that he prized talent over birth as the measure of a man's worth, neither of which is mentioned in the Sévigné story, and is not in keeping with the aristocratic values she espoused, but derives instead from later 19th-century views of the events described.[22]

A second good example of a film based on correspondence is the television miniseries *Aristocrats* (1999), co-produced by the BBC, Irish Screen and American PBS. Based on a book of the same title by historian Stella Tillyard,[23] the four-episode series is based around the thousands of surviving letters written by the four Lennox sisters, spanning from the 1740s to the early 1800s. These four women, daughters of one of the highest ranking peers in Georgian England, the Duke of Richmond (and great-grand-daughters of King Charles II, via his mistress Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth), provide an epistolary record of a variety of life experiences, and reveal a great deal about choices available to women of this rank—highly educated, but given little chance to use their education. Instead, at least in two cases, they passed their aspirations on to their sons: Lady Caroline was the mother of Charles James Fox, the leader of the liberal Whig party at the end of the 18th century; Lady Emily was mother of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a prominent leader of the Irish rebellion of 1798. Is it contradictory to consider how two of the most highly born women in 18th-century Britain—an era in which women, especially in the upper classes, were considered, and indeed treated, like little more than a man's property[24]—gave birth and oversaw the education of two of the most reform-minded men of the age? The exploration of these women's lives provides a useful antidote to the generalisation that all women were powerless, and that all aristocrats were conservative and hell-bent on exploiting the peasants. In conjunction with Tillyard's book exploring the letters, students can explore a myriad of social issues facing upper class women from the period: family and kinship (especially the importance of matrilineal connections in a mostly patrilineal society); administration of a large aristocratic household; romance and marriage, duty and choice; women's roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers to prominent politicians; death and inheritance; and so on. The text and the miniseries are both especially rich in these areas, as the four sisters each dealt with these issues in varying ways, successfully and, in some cases, spectacularly unsuccessfully (Sarah's

story includes adultery, divorce and illegitimacy). They can be studied as models of their era and their class, but the human element as individuals is abundantly evident as well in the sisters' correspondence, as they struggle with issues of love, marriage and betrayal, such as would be found in any Jane Austen novel.

The letters drawn upon by Tillyard and transformed into dialogue or narration in the series help to humanize historical people; some of their words and phrases are quite modern, while others are unusual and distant. Letter writing was an art, in fact the sisters refer to their mutual love of the letters of Madame de Sévigné, to them 'the quintessential, rational woman of feeling'.[25] For example, Caroline wrote to Emily to compliment her daughter: 'She is a delightful correspondent, her style quite formed.' And Emily wrote: 'When one receives a letter, sitting down immediately to answer it is like carrying on a conversation.'[26] And the same, to scold her brother-in-law Henry Fox (Caroline's husband) for flouting the convention of publicly read letters: 'What a creature you are! I receive your letter before a thousand people. "A letter from Mr. Fox, oh we shall have some news." Everybody waits with impatience till I have read it. I open it with an important face and then behold it's full of nonsense and indeed such stuff as is not decent to shew to any creature.' Students may also find it useful and interesting to read Caroline's letters as a traveller, a point of view normally reserved for men in this period—unusually for a woman, she travelled to Italy as her 'Grand Tour' in 1766-67.[27] Students can go further and supplement Tillyard's written word with the film's carefully researched period costumes, hairstyles, modes of transportation, or architecture.

Using historical films to look at styles and settings are thus also useful, but are often full of pitfalls. The classic *Three Musketeers* film trilogy by Richard Lester (1973, 1974, 1989) certainly convey the zest of life on horseback for a cavalier in the 17th century, but racing cross-country in dry and treeless central Spain is hardly evocative of lush, green

northern France. The above-cited *Vatel* does allow us to see appropriate settings (much was filmed at the Château of Chantilly, the actual setting of the story), but uses English music from a half-century later: instead of Lully or Charpentier (perfectly acceptable for French dramatic music from the 1670s), we hear Handel's 'Music for Royal Fireworks' written for George II in 1749.[28] Appropriate period music seems to be the poor step-sister to costume and interior decoration when it comes to historical film making. The Kapur version of the Elizabeth I story (1998) relies on outrageously anachronistic music for emotional effect: Mozart's Requiem (from 18th-century Austria) to evoke sorrow, and Elgar's 'Nimrod' (from late 19th-century Britain) to stir the nationalist sentiments of British audiences—in an ironically imperialist view of English history given the director's origins.[29] The block-buster version of *Marie-Antoinette* (2006) uses Vivaldi (who died in 1741) to convey the energetic frenzy of court life, rather than equally frenetic music more likely to have been played at the French court in the 1770s (for example, the 'Dance of the Furies' from Gluck's opera 'Orfée'). This film has other problems: the budget spent on costume and hair must have been vast—but historians versed in the literature and culture of this period may wonder if the producers therefore ran out of funds when it came to constructing dialogue. Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette and their courtiers come across sounding more like modern-day California teenagers than 18th-century aristocrats. But then again, this is the stated aim of the director, Coppola, an impression of the emotions of a lost teenager, not a factual representation of the period.[30] Historian Caroline Weber criticizes Coppola for creating a far too simplistic character, mostly a victim of her surroundings;[31] in contrast, Weber's own book on the subject explores the young Queen's adroitness at using fashion to control her environment and her self-representation.[32]

But Coppola's *Marie-Antoinette* is useful in the use of historical sources in a few of its key scenes. Take, for example, the complex ceremony in which the young Austrian

archduchess is completely undressed—even her Austrian dog is removed—and she is re-dressed as a French princess; scenes like this can be read in vivid detail in the excellent biography by Antonia Fraser, Coppola's inspiration for the film.[33] Students can go a step further to examine the primary source relating to a scene evoking the complicated court ceremonial surrounding the process of getting out of bed and getting dressed each morning at Versailles. The scene in the film is humorous (as each lady of higher rank enters the room, the ceremony is re-started, leaving the young, startled Marie-Antoinette naked and shivering), but is in fact based on a well-known passage from the memoirs of one of the Queen's ladies in waiting, Madame Campan.[34]

> [Marie Antoinette's] *toilette* was a masterpiece of etiquette; everything was done in a prescribed form. Both the *dame d'honneur* and the *dame d'atours* usually attended and officiated, assisted by the first *femme de chambre* and two ordinary women. The *dame d'atours* put on the petticoat, and handed the gown to the Queen. The *dame d'honneur* poured out the water for her hands and put on her linen. When a princess of the royal family happened to be present while the Queen was dressing, the *dame d'honneur* yielded to her the latter act of office, but still did not yield it directly to the Princesses of the blood; in such a case the *dame d'honneur* was accustomed to present the linen to the first *femme de chambre*, who, in her turn, handed it to the Princess of the blood. Each of these ladies observed these rules scrupulously as affecting her rights.
>
> One winter's day it happened that the Queen, who was entirely undressed, was just going to put on her shift; I held it ready unfolded for her; the *dame d'honneur* came in, slipped off her gloves, and took it. A scratching was heard at the door; it was opened, and in came the Duchesse d'Orleans: her gloves were taken off, and she came

> forward to take the garment; but as it would have been wrong in the *dame d'honneur* to hand it to her she gave it to me, and I handed it to the Princess. More scratching it was Madame la Comtesse de Provence [the Queen's sister-in-law]; the Duchesse d'Orleans handed her the linen. All this while the Queen kept her arms crossed upon her bosom, and appeared to feel cold; Madame observed her uncomfortable situation, and, merely laying down her handkerchief without taking off her gloves, she put on the linen, and in doing so knocked the Queen's cap off.
>
> The Queen laughed to conceal her impatience, but not until she had muttered several times, "How disagreeable! how tiresome!"

A filmed scene like this can be used to supplement a primary source text to prompt discussion of a historical topic: if French monarchs were supposedly deemed 'absolute', why were they so imprisoned by the rituals of their daily lives? After comparing a primary source anecdote and its filmic counterpart, students can examine such an issue as debated by historians, in this case, the debate over absolutism in France.[35]

Televisual Tudors: Historical Narrative on the Small Screen

It is not only big-screen historical films that can be used in conjunction with primary sources and historical analysis. Recently there has been a spate of very popular television serials, most with large budgets and subsequently lavish outlays on costume, sets and on-location shooting. Some have been terrible, but others have been quite good, and, in addition to being good entertainment, can be employed like the above examples to help students engage with the early modern period. Some of these have been analysed in a recent volume geared especially towards this aspect of the topic of historical film.[36]

By far the most popular has been *The Tudors*, produced by Showtime (2007-2010), in which a handsome actor portrays (rightly, by the standards of 'revisionist' scholarship) a young Henry VIII as a healthy and vigorous prince rather than the bloated monster we are familiar with in popular narratives.[37] But the series has many anachronisms, twists of historical facts (notably blending together Henry's two sisters into one character) and wooden engagement with the important movements of the time (humanism, church reform) which make it clear that this series is mostly about entertainment.[38] But *The Tudors* attracted a vast new audience to the early modern world, and was emulated by *The Borgias* (Showtime, 2011-13), *The White Queen* (BBC, 2013), *Wolf Hall* (BBC, 2015), and several others. As a study of 'interiority', the latter of these is excellent, as author Hilary Mantel painstakingly researched her subject and artfully constructed the inner world of Henry VIII's chief minister and reformer, Thomas Cromwell. Non-English-language production companies followed in the wake of such programmes, for example, another version of *The Borgias* (a French-German-Czech-Italian co-production, 2011-14); *Isabel* (Spain, 2012-14); and *Magnificent Century* ('Muhtesem Yüzyi') about the Ottomans in the 16th century (Turkey, 2011-14), cited as one of the most popular programmes ever in the Muslim world, which is unfortunately (so far) not released with English subtitles.[39] Most of these are very entertaining, but are of limited use in the classroom as they are riddled with anachronisms, often projecting 21st-century values and emotions onto late medieval or early modern situations.

For an exception, we can once again turn to the 2005 miniseries *Elizabeth I*, starring Helen Mirren. While it has flaws, there are certain elements which suggest its value and usefulness as a secondary source: digitally reconstructed settings; historically informed themes; and dialogue based in some places on written primary sources. The first of these, the digitally reconstructed sets, make watching the action more compelling for a student of history. Instead of setting Elizabeth's court in a vast, dark medieval space as is often done

(the Kapur 1998 version of Elizabeth seems to be set entirely within Gothic cathedrals), the producers opted to re-create (as much as we are able based on sparse and sometimes contradictory evidence) the English royal palace at Whitehall, either on a set (in Vilnius, Lithuania), or digitally, with its small courtyards, narrow corridors, wooden interiors, and, most interestingly, its waterfront landing on the Thames, where Elizabeth receives and sends away her important guests.[40] One of these guests leads us to the second point: historically informed debates, notably Elizabeth's relationships with her French marital suitors. Again the Channel 4 version is in contrast with the Kapur version of Elizabeth's story, which merely reinforces national stereotypes: all Spaniards are wicked and swarthy, all Frenchmen are homosexual, or at least cross-dressers. In fact, as we have seen with *La Reine Margot*, much of this notion of the Valois court as a nest of transvestism, sodomy and incest came originally from writers of histories of post-Valois France (that is, by Bourbon historians), or by contemporary Protestant writers. These views were then re-affirmed in the writings of men like Alexandre Dumas, whose version of the Valois court is filled with all three vices.[41] Mirren's Elizabeth is more nuanced, showing her pain in having to reject a suitor she actually likes due to the demands of 'public opinion', a fairly new phenomenon in the history of the English monarchy, and one which is corroborated in the academic literature. For example, Susan Doran argues that Elizabeth was not ultimately able to choose whether to marry or whom to marry, but was constrained by the pressures of her position, her advisors, her people.[42] This is depicted well across the series, notably in repeated scenes in the Council Chamber where the Queen bemoans her lack of freedom in such matters.

Finally, the third element: the use of actual letters and speeches by Elizabeth, delivered by a first class actor. Several short selections are drawn upon to create the dialogue for the series, from the very well known, such as the speech before her troops at Tilbury, 9 August 1588, or the so-called 'Golden Speech' before Parliament on 30 November 1601, to

the relatively unknown.[43] An example of the latter reinforces the point made above about Elizabeth's true feelings for her French suitor, the duc d'Anjou (unlike what is often portrayed in popular films). A letter she wrote to him (about December 1579 or January 1580) concludes in a rather melancholy yet affectionate tone, with Elizabeth noting that their marriage cannot proceed since 'the public exercise of the Roman religion sticks so much in their hearts', and signing off with 'my commendations to my very dear Frog.'[44]

Conclusion

Overall, the question is not just about students seeing and 'experiencing' the period—through settings, costumes and music—but also about exploring how the early modern mind differs from our own. This can be challenging—attaining 'interiority'—but using film in conjunction with historical documents can allow students a chance to get closer to historical experience.

This chapter has focused mostly on a type of historical film that has been especially popular in recent years: based on upper class, European lives. These are easy sells for film and television producers, as they feature great costumes and dramatic narratives. It is also usually easier for historians to find primary sources to analyse these stories, or to accompany classroom discussions. Nevertheless, we should certainly be aware of other geographical and social contexts. American history in the early modern period can be examined through large-scale films ranging from the discovery of the New World, such as *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992) (starring yet again Gérard Depardieu!) or *The New World* (2005), to the struggles for independence of the American Colonies, such as *The Patriot* (2000). But, as we have seen above, it is often the small-screen efforts that are more useful in terms of their historical narrative, and their engagement with contemporary historiography. *John Adams* (HBO, 2008) is based on a Pulitzer-prize winning biography of one of the United States' founding fathers by David McCulloch, and was directed by Tom Hooper, the same director of

the Helen Mirren television version of *Elizabeth I*. The seven-part series, starring Paul Giamatti, was filmed in some genuine historic sites, such as Bruton Parish Church, in Williamsburg, Virginia, though these were meant to represent Boston. Much of the dialogue is derived from actual letters and speeches, though the series is not without its critics within the historical community.[45] Such criticisms are of course excellent stimulators of classroom discussion and debate.

Other broad early modern topics not covered here include the Reformation or the Renaissance: there are numerous films based on the life of Martin Luther (recently one starring Joseph Fiennes, 2003), but surprisingly few depicting 15th-century Italy, Florence in its golden age, its ruling Medici family, or the artists they patronized such as Michelangelo or Da Vinci. Some of the emotionality and sensuality of the later Baroque age of the fine arts can be examined through the film *Caravaggio* by Derek Jarman (1986), but for a more critically aware examination of the contexts (political, intellectual, cultural) in which these artists (including Caravaggio) operated, it would be better to use the docu-drama series by historian Simon Schama, *Power of Art* (BBC, 2006). Schama, famous for his *History of Britain* (BBC, 2000-2002), also authored the series *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (2005) (for more on Schama, see chapter 14). Finally, we should mention a sub-genre of historical films that has become increasingly popular in recent years, partly due to the expansive popularity of video games that are based in historical settings (most notably 'Assassin's Creed', Ubisoft, 2007-2015), which is the 'epic battle film'. Examples include *Henri 4* (Germany, 2010), called *Henry of Navarre* for the English-subtitled version, marketed cleverly, if deceptively, with the tag line 'Ridley Scott Styled Battle Scenes' (Scott was not affiliated with the film); or *1612* (2007), a Russian film about the 'Time of Troubles' when Russia had no tsar and fought a bloody succession war versus Poland, which is essentially two hours of non-stop bloodletting. Are films like these worthy

of inclusion in a course about early modern history? Such films are a useful resource through which to explore the pivotal role played by warfare in the early-modern world, and the sense of relentless violence that led to the rise of modern diplomacy and the first pacifist movements. Moreover, they also call attention to an issue often ignored by the historical record: the extent to which the lives of the 'ordinary' were, in a pithy summary offered by contemporary philosopher Thomas Hobbes, 'nasty, brutish, and short'.[46]

In conclusion, we can see that the early modern era presents its own sets of issues for filmmakers and historians, notably the distance between the world of the viewers and that of the periods being portrayed. People in the more distant past dressed differently, their surroundings looked different, their music sounded different, and, most critically, they spoke and thought differently. This 'interiority' of historical characters has been the focus of much debate ever since the 'Martin Guerre' exchange between Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Finlay over the 'imagined' speech and thoughts of early modern protagonists. Most big-budget popular historical films for the cinema or for the small screen do not, however, have even this pretence at what is conventionally understood to be 'historical authenticity' (see chapter 2). Nonetheless, such 'popular' forms of history should not be rejected outright, Carefully selected, and interrogated next to more traditional forms of historical narrative, such films and television programmes offer an invaluable means through which to explore the politics, performance, and 'interiority' of the early modern age. Moreover, the very discussions and disputes that many of these productions have caused – over their worth, value, accuracy and authenticity – are themselves powerfully suggestive of the fluid nature of historical debate.

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[1] See E. H. Ford and D. C. Mitchell, *Royal Portraits in Hollywood: Filming the Lives of Queens* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

[2] There have been several fascinating studies of the evolution of the image and portrayal of Elizabeth I, all of which are useful to examine this issue as part of a history class, from M. Dobson & N. J. Watson's *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); to S. Doran and T. Freeman's *The Myth of Elizabeth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), especially the final chapter, by T. Betteridge, 'A Queen for All Seasons: Elizabeth I on Film'. Doran and Freeman also co-edited a follow-up volume, *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). See also B. Latham, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television. A Study of Major Portrayals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

[3] For example, P. Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Barnes & Noble Books, 1980); or more recently, M. Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

[4] R. A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995), introduction.

[5] Rosenstone, R. A. 'The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age' in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* ed. M. Landy, 50-66. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

[6] Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 50.

[7] The film was so incendiary it was given an X rating in the United States and the United Kingdom, and banned by several British localities. For a recent analysis of this incredible story within its historical context, see M. de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. by M. B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[8] With the same title (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[9] Published as 'Arrest Memorable du Parlement de Toulouse' in 1561.

[10] ‘Charivari’ is discussed briefly in Zemon Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 29; as is ‘Confrontation’, 63-66.

[11] R. Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre”, *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 553-571. This is followed in the same issue by a riposte by Zemon Davis, “On the Lame”, 572-603.

[12] For example, L. Mason and T. Rizzo, *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999).

[13] See J. Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda: History, Politics and Nostalgia in Polish Cinema* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn, 2008); and H. A. Garrity, “The French Revolution and the Seventh Art”, *The French Review* 62, no. 6 (May 1989): 1041-1051.

[14] S. Loomis, *Paris in the Terror* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964), 298-299; M. Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. N. Greene (Detroit: Wayne State University press, 1988), 29, 162.

[15] N. M. Sutherland, “Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen”, in Sutherland, *Princes, Politics and Religion, 1547-1589* (London: Hambledon, 1984) [previously an article in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 9, no. 2 (1978): 45-56].

[16] B. B. Diefendorf, *The St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008); A. Jouanna, *The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State*, J. Bergin, trans. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

[17] There is a new translation of the novel by H. Constantine, published by Penguin Classics (London, New York: Penguin Classics, 2007).

[18] For a recent examination of this debate, see W. Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[19] These letters can be read in the Penguin version, *Selected Letters*, L. Tancock, trans. (London: Penguin, 1982), 95-99 (specifically 97-99).

[20] Though it is tempting to think this anecdote also comes from a contemporary source, it does in fact derive from the witty pen of N. Mitford, *The Sun King* [originally published in 1966] (Vintage Classics, 2011), 94, which is often more fiction than fact. Nevertheless, there are ample published contemporary sources in translation from this period that can be used in conjunction with a viewing of *Vatel* to gain understanding of court life and aristocratic values: the letters of Liselotte von der Pfalz (the Duchess of Orléans), the Duc de Saint-Simon, La Grande Mademoiselle (the Duchess of Montpensier) and so on.

[21] For example, M. Longino Farrell, "Writing Letters, Telling Tales, Making History: Vatel's Death Told and Retold", *The French Review* 66, no. 2 (1992): 229-242; S. Shapiro, "Roland Joffé's *Vatel*: Refashioning the History of the *Ancien Régime*", in A. L. Birberick and R. Ganim, eds, *Studies in Early Modern France*, vol. 10 (Charlottesville: Rockwood Press, 2005), 77-88.

[22] This is discussed in the conclusion ('Inventing Traditions of Honor in Post-Revolutionary France') of the study by J. J. Davis: *Defining Culinary Authority: The Transformation of Cooking in France, 1650-1830* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013).

[23] *Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa and Sarah Lennox, 1740–1832* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), with several reprints.

[24] The subject of a recent BBC television drama, *The Scandalous Lady W* (August 2015), based on a true story of Sir Richard and Lady Seymour Worsley, whose marital problems scandalised Georgian Britain when they were unveiled in a public trial where she revealed that she had not committed adultery with one man, but with 27, and that this was mostly done to satisfy the kinky sexual practices of her husband (her accuser). Nevertheless, though Lady

Worsley won a moral and emotional victory over her husband, without his granting her a divorce, she remained his 'property' and had to continue to submit to his wishes.

[25] See the discussion in Tillyard, 93-100.

[26] Both quoted on 96.

[27] Her letters are happily available online for use in the classroom. *News from Abroad: Letters Written by British Travellers on the Grand Tour, 1728-1771*, J. T. Boulton and T. O. McLoughlin, eds, Eighteenth Century Worlds, no. 3 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 213-59, available online: universitypublishingonline.org (accessed 26 August 2015).

[28] Students wishing to explore the music of the early modern period can instead be directed to *Farinelli* (1994), about the castrato superstar from Naples; or *Le Roi Danse* (2000), about the French composer Lully and the invention of French court ballet. Both films are by Belgian filmmaker Gérard Corbiau and are scrupulously researched and performed by leading interpreters of early music.

[29] See G. Kaufman, "Royal Flush", *New Statesman* 11, no. 524 (2 Oct 1998): 36-37.

[30] R. Murray, "Writer/Director Sofia Coppola Talks About 'Marie Antoinette'", *About.Entertainment* available online: http://movies.about.com/od/marieantoinette/a/mariesc101006.htm (accessed 25 August 2015).

[31] C. Weber, "Queen of the Zeitgeist", *The New York Times*, 21 October 2006.

[32] C. Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie-Antoinette wore to the Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

[33] A. Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001). The 'handover' is described on the pages following 59.

[34] The memoirs of Madame Campan have been variously translated into English, and are easily available in paperback or online, for example J. L. H. Campan, *The Private Life of*

Marie Antoinette. A Confidante's Account (1500 Books, 2006), in which this passage is on 73.

[35] See the classic statement of the argument by N. Henshall, "The Myth of Absolutism", *History Today* 42, 6 (June 1992): 40-47; or a more recent analysis by W. Beik, "The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration", *Past and Present* 188, (2005): 195-224.

[36] G.R. Edgerton & P. C. Rollins, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2003).

[37] The healthy virile prince is presented, for example, in D. Starkey, *Henry: Virtuous Prince* (London: Harper Press, 2008).

[38] By the end of the series, historians can certainly criticise the producers' choices to leave Henry as a slender attractive man (he limps a bit by the end), or to portray perceived ugliness in 'Hollywood style' as only slightly less beautiful, as in the character of Anne of Cleves, played by the completely attractive Joss Stone.

[39] See E. Batuman, 'Ottomania: A Hit TV Show Reimagines Turkey's imperial Past', *The New Yorker* (17 February 2014).

[40] See 'Behind the Scenes', 'Sets', Eve Stewart, production design, and David Bowman, vfx supervisor, on the HBO website for the series available online: http://www.hbo.com/html/movies/elizabeth/behind-the-scenes/index.html (accessed 25 August 2015)

[41] For recent historical analysis, see K. Crawford, "Love, Sodomy and Scandal: Controlling the Sexual Reputation of Henri III", in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. X (2003).

[42] S. Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: the Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1995); or N. Mears, "Love-making and Diplomacy: Elizabeth I and the Anjou Marriage Negotiations, c1578-1582", *History* 86, no. 284 (2001): 442-466.

[43] These can be found in multiple sources online, but a good printed collection that gathers them all into one place is L. S. Marcus, J. Mueller and M. B. Rose, eds., *Elizabeth I. Collected Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). The Tilbury speech is 325-326; the Golden Speech is 335-344 (in three versions).

[44] Printed in Marcus, Mueller and Rose, eds., *Elizabeth I*, 243-244.

[45] J. Stern, "What's Wrong with HBO's Dramatization of John Adams's Story" (October 2008): http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/56155 (accessed 04 April 2016). For further academic analysis of this topic, see B. Osterberg, *Colonial America on Film and Television* (London: McFarland, 2001). The series was also compared to an earlier television series that focused on Adams (and his descendants), which relied heavily on actual letters and speeches for dialogue, and thus comes across as quite stiff and lacking in drama: 'The Adams Chronicles' (PBS, 1976).

[46] Hobbes, Leviathan (1651), from chapter XIII, 'Of the Natural Condition of Mankind As Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery', available online: http://www.bartleby.com/34/5/13.html (accessed 25 August 2015).