



The Real Pocahontas?

Minor Quest

Skilful Compare and Contrast

Scenario

Many books and movies are based on historic events and the lives of real people. Disney has produced a movie called 'Pocahontas' which they say is based on the life of a real person who lived over 400 hundred years ago. Use skilful compare and contrast to decide, is she the real Pocahontas?



Our special thanks go to Rebecca Reagan and Robert Swartz for their ideas and guidance in developing this Quest.

INTRODUCTION

Comparing and contrasting the Disney movie with the historical sources allows our students and teachers to explore ideas around movies as pure entertainment or as entertainment combined with cultural discussion.

"Film is perhaps the most common way the modern American public is exposed to history, but many people still think that it is a waste of time to think seriously about movies, since, after all, movies are just entertainment. This position -- that film is primarily entertainment -- is often made by students. The position is wrong. Some films, it is true, are simply a matter of entertainment (American Pie II for instance), but many others use a particular artistic form to take part in a cultural discussion while also being entertaining. A large number of successful entertaining films have involved a good deal of political commentary, and entire genres are concerned with how we, as human beings, deal with pain and suffering. There is no reason that a film cannot be both entertaining and participate in the cultural conversation about the past that we call history." Dr Paul Halsall, Historian.

1 Authenticating the Learning

Initiate a whole class discussion to introduce the scenario and its problem making links to the achievement objective focus and the thinking skill.

Brainstorm and mindmap their present knowledge. What do we already know about the problem?

2 Constructing Relevant Questions

As you discuss the scenario, begin the question formation and planning the research.

During an interactive discussion between the teacher and class these essential research questions need to be drawn out for investigation. As much as possible these should be co-constructed:

What does the Disney movie tell us about the life and times of Pocahontas?

What do the historians say about the life and times of Pocahontas?

What do the historical documents say about the life and times of Pocahontas?

What is skilful compare and contrast?

Introduce skilful compare and contrast - co-construct with your class the Thinking Map for skilful compare and contrast.

3 Planning the Research

Discuss with your class and agree on a timetable with checkpoints. Also decide on the concluding performance and look closely at the assessment rubric.

4 Discovering Relevant Information

Begin the 'discovering relevant information' phase by modelling the use of the graphic organiser.

5 Constructing Knowledge

Have your students reflect on the Thinking Steps and their notes including their graphic organisers.

6 New Insights and Understandings

Have your students share their new insights and understandings.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING UNIT PLAN - SOCIAL STUDIES



Title: The Real Pocahontas?

Term: 1

Weeks: 4

Achievement Objective Focus – Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.

Thinking Skills Focus - Skilful Compare and Contrast

Scenario

Many books and movies are based on historic events and the lives of real people. Disney has produced a movie called 'Pocahontas' which they say is based on the life of a real person who lived over 400 hundred years ago. Use skilful compare and contrast to decide, is she the real Pocahontas?

| Learning Experiences | Learning Outcomes Students should be able to: | Organisational Notes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|------------------------------------|--|---|--|--|----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| <p>1 Authenticating the Learning Introduce the scenario and its problem-making links to the focus achievement objective & key concepts.</p> <p>Awakening Prior Knowledge What do we already know about this problem?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brainstorming <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mindmapping</p> <p>Strengthening Prior Knowledge</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Front Loading Activities - View one or more of the background DVDs. Construct a class timeline.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the scenario. • Explain why it is important to solve the problem. • Relate their present understanding of the scenario and its problem. • Place the events at Jamestown roughly in their historical context on a class timeline. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise data projector. • Book a computer pod. • Collect books on Pocahontas from the National Library. • Read and view a selection of the resources to familiarise self with the historic Pocahontas. See last page of this 'Teachers Guide.' • Read the articles at the back of this 'Teachers Guide.' • Check out Pocahontas, Jamestown, John Smith and Powhatan web sites. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>2 Constructing Relevant Questions Clarifying the problem found in the scenario.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List the key questions they need to answer. • Explain the steps in skilful compare and contrast. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View background DVDs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>3 Planning the Research Developing a plan of action.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the plan of action. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The New World Nightmare in Jamestown | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>4 Discovering Relevant Information Locating and selecting.</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> teleconference</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> fax exchange</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> e-mail exchange</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> bookmarked www sites</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> intranet site</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> school library books</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National Library books</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> magazines</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DVDs, videos</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Internet search</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> articles, magazines</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> school journals</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> visitor</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> EOTC experience</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> pictures, posters</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> interviews, surveys</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> found objects</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> software, CD ROMs</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> thinking map</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> demonstration</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Quest CD</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teacher directed activities. Have the students view the Disney Movie 'Pocahontas.' Read pages 1 - 25 'The Double Life of Pocahontas' by Jean Fritz (1987). Discuss and model use of attached graphic organisers.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> teleconference | <input type="checkbox"/> fax exchange | <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail exchange | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> bookmarked www sites | <input type="checkbox"/> intranet site | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> school library books | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National Library books | <input type="checkbox"/> magazines | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DVDs, videos | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Internet search | <input type="checkbox"/> articles, magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> school journals | <input type="checkbox"/> visitor | <input type="checkbox"/> EOTC experience | <input type="checkbox"/> pictures, posters | <input type="checkbox"/> interviews, surveys | <input type="checkbox"/> found objects | <input type="checkbox"/> software, CD ROMs | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> thinking map | <input type="checkbox"/> demonstration | <input type="checkbox"/> Quest CD | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the Disney Pocahontas. • Identify the historic Pocahontas. • Express their ideas around historical interpretation by movie makers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pocahontas Revealed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> teleconference | <input type="checkbox"/> fax exchange | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail exchange | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> bookmarked www sites | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intranet site | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> school library books | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> National Library books | <input type="checkbox"/> magazines | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> articles, magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> school journals | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> visitor | <input type="checkbox"/> EOTC experience | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> pictures, posters | <input type="checkbox"/> interviews, surveys | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> found objects | <input type="checkbox"/> software, CD ROMs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> thinking map | <input type="checkbox"/> demonstration | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quest CD | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>5 Constructing the Knowledge Forming and applying.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teacher directed activities. Writing an argument.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide using the 'compare and contrast' graphic organisers, 'Is she the real Pocahontas?' | <p>Assessment Task/s</p> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>6 New Insights and Understandings Presenting and evaluating.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present the solution to scenario. • Explain how their solution supports their new insights, understandings and how it relates to the scenario. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the depth and quality of the evidence in their convincing argument using the rubric. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Unit Evaluation Implications for next unit

ASSESSMENT TASK – SOCIAL STUDIES – YEAR 7 AND YEAR 8
SOCIAL ORGANISATION
THE REAL POCAHONTAS?



Key Achievement Objective: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.

The scenario is: Many books and movies are based on historic events and the lives of real people. Disney has produced a movie called 'Pocahontas' which they say is based on the life of a real person who lived over 400 hundred years ago. Use skilful compare and contrast to decide, is she the real Pocahontas?

| ASSESSMENT | BELOW EXPECTATIONS | WITHIN EXPECTATIONS | ABOVE EXPECTATIONS | Effort A B C |
|--|--|---|--|-----------------|
| Your argument shows: | <p>Their view of the real Pocahontas was not clearly stated.</p> <p>Their view was not clearly explained with less than 3 important similarities or differences given.</p> <p>Did not comment on the way film makers interpret historical events and the consequences of this.</p> | <p>Clearly stated their view of the real Pocahontas.</p> <p>Explained and justified their view with 3 - 4 important similarities or differences.</p> <p>Commented in on the way film makers interpret historical events and the consequences of this.</p> | <p>Clearly stated their view of the real Pocahontas.</p> <p>Explained and justified their view with 5 or more important similarities or differences.</p> <p>Commented in depth on the way film makers interpret historical events and the consequences of this.</p> | |
| Student Evaluation | | | | |
| Teacher Evaluation | | | | |
| Your new insights and understandings show: | <p>You only explained what kind of thinking you did but not how you did it.</p> <p>You explained only how it connected with your thinking, the things you already knew about the way people remember their history and the problems this may cause.</p> | <p>You explained what kind of thinking you did and how you did it.</p> <p>You also explained how it extended your thinking, how your thinking went in new directions around the way people remember their history and the problems this may cause.</p> | <p>You extended this by saying why this way of thinking helped you, including how you would do it next time.</p> <p>You also explained how your thinking was challenged, the questions you still have about the way people remember their history and the problems this may cause.</p> | |
| Student Evaluation | | | | |
| Teacher Evaluation | | | | |

TEACHER FEEDBACK - MEDALS AND MISSIONS

Discuss with your class why skilful comparing and contrasting is needed.

'Comparing and contrasting is helpful to gain a deeper understanding of the things compared in order to make well-considered decisions or to clear up confusion'

'We compare and contrast for a variety of purposes. Many everyday decisions, like shopping or choosing a route to work, involve comparing and contrasting. A manufacturer might compare and contrast his firm with more successful firms to get ideas about improving productivity.'

'We compare and contrast with varying degrees of thoroughness. Sometimes we attend only to surface characteristics, like how things look, when other factors are more relevant.'

'Our goal in comparing and contrasting is to gain insight and understanding.'

Robert J. Swartz and Sandra Parks

Common Defaults in the way we Compare and Contrast

1. We identify only a few similarities and differences.
2. We identify only superficial similarities and differences.
3. We make rough and imprecise judgments of similarity and difference.
4. We don't draw out the implications of the similarities and differences we have identified.

Develop with your class the thinking steps for skilful comparing and contrasting.

Skilful Compare and Contrast

1. How are they similar?
2. How are they different?
3. What similarities and differences seem significant?
4. What conclusions can you make from the significant similarities and differences?

For more detail see Chapter 4 - Comparing and Contrasting in 'Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Instruction - A Lesson Design Handbook for the Elementary Grades' Robert J. Swartz and Sandra Parks, The Critical Thinking Co. ISBN 0-89455-481-6. For classes and teachers new to skilful compare and contrast the Lincoln/Douglas activity on page 126 is worth considering.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

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SIGNIFICANT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES:

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CONCLUSION OR INTERPRETATION:

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Integrating Skilful Compare and Contrast into an Argument.

Use the template below to help your students decide what to write in their argument. Their argument must be clear to the reader and include researched evidence to back up their position. The template is based on Whiteheads (2003) model in Writing Frameworks: Book B. Revised edition.

Skilful Compare and Contrast

1. How are they similar?
2. How are they different?
3. What similarities and differences seem significant?
4. What conclusions can you make from the significant similarities and differences?

Before writing, have you gone through the 'Skilful Comparing and Contrast Thinking Map?'

Title

- Give your argument a title.

Introduction Paragraph

- Describe the context of the argument. This is where you make a link to the scenario.
- Tell your reader why you are making this argument.

Thesis Paragraph - state your position

- Write a paragraph that says what you are arguing for or against. This is where you are stating your position. You could use ideas from 'Significant similarities or differences' to write this.
- Sentence starters could include:
'I believe that...'
'I believe this because...'

Body Paragraphs 1, 2, 3 4 and 5*

- These paragraphs should say why you believe this. You should use the ideas from the differences you found. Make sure you explain why you think the differences support your position.
- Sentence starters could be
'First I believe this because...'
'The second reason is...'
'Another reason I believe that is...'
'The final reason is...'
- Describe the evidence which backs your position up for each reason.

Conclusion

- Here you will write a brief summary of your position and what action should be taken.
- Sentence starters could be
'For these reasons I believe that...'

* To achieve an 'Above Expectations' you will be aiming to write **5** or more 'body' paragraphs.

Now add your:

New Insights and Understandings.

- Use the Ladder of Metacognition to comment on your ability to skilfully compare and contrast.
- What have you learnt about the way people remember their history and the problems this may cause.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

HOW ALIKE?

HOW DIFFERENT?

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SIGNIFICANT SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

CONCLUSION OR INTERPRETATION

Additional Scaffolding Suggestions

- Experience shows our students have little understanding of historical time. Put up and discuss a time line from 1100s to present (in hundred year intervals) so they can place this Quest in its historical context.
- Do not allow any e-mail, fax, video conferencing or phone calls to be made until teacher contact has been made with the expert involved. Set it up for success.
- Remember an expert does not have to be seen in adult terms. It could be another staff member, family friend, parent, grandparent - any knowledgeable adult who has the time to reply.
- Library Display - we have a collection of movie memorabilia, settler and Native American artifacts.
- This Quest suits student search on the Internet as the keywords Pocahontas, Jamestown, John Smith and Powhatan bring up relatively clean hits (the task is not overly complicated with erroneous sites). On these sites remind students to check any FAQs before sending e-mails.
- Learning Conversations on Moodle

Ideas for teacher initiated learning conversations can be found in questions 4, 5, 6, and 8 from the email POCAHONTAS - Myth and History in the Movies by Cathy Schultz, Ph.D. (see following pages) and around Disneyfication.

The Disneyfication of Information

The term Disneyfication refers to information that has been prettified and made more fun, more entertaining and easier to digest than the real version. Information has been glamorized and beautified to make information, history, literature or reality easier to swallow, read or watch.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame becomes a lovable character. The pirates stop acting in sexist ways. Times Square becomes a haven for family entertainment. Battlefields become great spots for a picnic (theme park).

FNO Press® Dictionary of Trendy Terms©

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Life Becomes the Movie

The lines between Hollywood, Disney, ABC, MicroSoft, and Simon & Schuster (publishing house) blur as entertainment becomes news, news becomes entertainment and "life becomes the movie."

Neal Gabler's book, 'Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality.'

For your own interest you might like to compare the movie Avatar with the Pocahontas story. Please remember that Avatar is rated M Suitable for Mature Audiences 16 years and over so no part of it can be shown at school.

JAMES CAMERON'S
Disney's
Pocahontas - AVATAR!

2154
In 1607, a ship carrying ^{Jake} John Smith ^{undotanium!} arrives in the lush "new world" of ^{PANDORA} North America. The settlers are mining for ^{undotanium!} gold; under supervision of ^{Colonel Quaritch} Governor Ratcliffe. ^{Jake} John Smith begins exploring the new territory, and encounters ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas. Initially she is distrustful of him, but a message from ^{the Tree of Souls} Grandmother Willow helps her overcome her trepidation. The two begin spending time together, ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas helps ^{Jake} John understand that all life is valuable, and how all nature is a connected circle of life. Furthermore she teaches him how to hunt, ^{hunt dragons} grow crops, and of her culture. We find that her father is Chief ^{Eytukan} Powhatan, and that she is set to be married to ^{Tsu'tey} Kocoum, a great warrior, but a serious man, whom ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas does not desire. Over time, ^{Jake} John and ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas find they have a love for each other. Back at the settlement, the men, who believe the natives are savages, plan to attack the natives for their ^{undotanium} gold. ^{Tsutey} Kocoum tries to kill ^{Jake} John out of jealousy, but he is later killed by the settlers. As the settlers prepare to attack, ^{Jake} John is blamed by the ^{Na'vi} Indians, and is sentenced to death. Just before they kill him, the settlers arrive. Chief ^{Eytukan} Powhatan is nearly killed, and ^{Jake} John sustains injuries from ^{Colonel Quaritch} Governor Ratcliffe, who is then ^{shot with arrows! yo} brought to justice. ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas risks her life to save ^{Jake} John. ^{Jake} John and ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas finally have each other, and the two cultures resolve their differences. IMHO - MATT BATEMAN

BBC History Magazine

So what?

ALISON KITSON reviews recent research on children's perceptions of history and asks if we can make it more enjoyable and relevant.

In many ways, school history is in a good place. The quality of those training to become history teachers is high and Ofsted regularly cites history as one of the best taught subjects in school. And yet, when asked to rank history against other subjects for usefulness and importance in a recent survey, students placed it sixth – about halfway down.

This does not constitute any great crisis. There is evidence that many children enjoy history and believe it to be useful. Despite an increasing choice post-14, history is holding its own. But are the feelings of our students about history best described as neutral?

Tim Lomas, principal adviser with the Lincolnshire School Improvement Service, has spent the last seven years recording the views of over 500 students about history. His conclusion is that "although history has very high levels of impressive teaching, evidence suggests that students are not always enthused". He has found plenty of examples, however, of what does enthuse them. Stories are popular, followed closely by lessons which focus on people. Working with artefacts, visits outside the classroom and "detective" approaches also go down well. Tasks are enjoyed if there is a clear and valuable point to them and enable students to engage actively. All in all, it's what I call the "people, puzzle and point" approach to motivating children. Lomas summarises it as "a mix of the human soap opera and the detective story".

Whilst many teachers successfully motivate students, there remains practice in history classrooms that turns them off. An excess of writing (especially tasks with no clear purpose), an over-dependence on textbooks, too much teacher talk and reading aloud were all approaches that students liked least according to Terry Haydn, senior lecturer in Education at the University of East Anglia. He has recently completed a report on student perceptions of history based on nearly 2,000 completed questionnaires by students in the first year of secondary education. Most interesting in Haydn's report are the students' comments about what they think history lessons are for: 69.3 per cent of respondents described history as "useful". This was, it should be noted, a more promising finding than earlier surveys had identified. However, history lagged behind English, maths, science, ICT and PE and students struggled to pin down what it was that made history useful. More worrying were those children stumped entirely by the question: the student, for example, who claimed that "they teach us history because they think we might enjoy it" or the student who thinks that history is pointless: "why learn about the past when you need to concentrate on the future?" The likelihood of students identifying clear reasons for learning history depended partly on the school they attended. This suggests that some departments are handling the "so what?" question better than others.

Of course, the "why do we learn about history" question is not always easy to answer. Indeed, to answer it properly may require a level of maturity and experience that we cannot generally expect in young people. But the current emphasis on how learning is relevant and applicable beyond classrooms means there are compelling reasons to tackle the "so what" question more directly with students.

In Northern Ireland, is it easier to explain the relevance of history lessons? In a study led by Alan McCully (lecturer in education, University of Ulster) and Keith Barton (professor of teacher education at the University of Cincinnati), Northern Irish students generally valued school history because it provided a more balanced alternative to "community" history. One girl talked of "hearing about it for real in school". My own research, however, suggests that some teachers in Northern Ireland are inclined to play safe in their teaching and not address controversial aspects of Irish history directly. In doing so, are they missing an opportunity both to promote history's value and to explore the different perspectives that underpin current divisions more directly?

Added together, these three pieces of research raise some big questions. How can we enthuse students in history lessons more consistently? Are we ambitious enough in what we seek to achieve through history education (and are we prepared to take risks in achieving them)? And how can we communicate the purpose of studying history better, so that students can answer the "so what" question?

Thinking about Historical Film - Is it Worth the Trouble?

Dr Paul Halsall, Historian

Reprinted from the University of North Florida Website

Film is perhaps the most common way the modern American public is exposed to history, but many people still think that it is a waste of time to think seriously about "movies," since, after all, movies are just entertainment. One Internet poster put it this way:

..the idea of the movie is to let the people who go to the cinema have a good time and (if possible) learn something without being too serious.

This position -- that film is primarily entertainment -- is often made by students. The position is wrong.

Some films, it is true, are simply a matter of entertainment (American Pie II for instance), but many others use a particular artistic form to take part in a cultural discussion while also being entertaining. A large number of successful entertaining films have involved a good deal of political commentary, and entire genres are concerned with how we, as human beings, deal with pain and suffering.

There is no reason that a film cannot be both entertaining and participate in the "cultural conversation about the past that we call history."

More than this, the dichotomy between "entertainment" and "a good time movie" really involves a denial that film is a legitimate art form. By now, after a century of cinema, it is clear to most thinking people that film can be an art form, and is quite often "high art."

It is true that unlike a number of arts -- poetry, drawing -- film is heavily dependent on both technology and truly enormous amounts of funding, and also true that film is a collaborative to an extraordinary degree. But so is a play, and no one would assert that plays are "just for fun."

It is perhaps worth noting that academic history itself is a form of intellectual entertainment. It is true that many historians write badly, or at least do not prioritize writing, but in its presentation of ideas to the mind for consideration, its effort to engage its consumers in thought about things apart from the mundane details of life, I think there is more in common between history and other arts than many people realize.

The important thing is not to mistake "amusement" for "entertainment." Amusement means nothing but passing satiation, but some of the greatest achievements of human beings have been "entertainments." Good films can be great "entertainments" also: the sadness is when they are only amusements. For all its faults, Braveheart was an entertainment, while A Knight's Tale was merely amusing.

[Let's not be too hard on "entertainment"! There are many ways of being "entertained" by a historical movie. One of my students who had never really heard of Scotland was inspired by the film to start reading biographies of Wallace, and then to enroll in multiple classes in order to expand an interest that began in his imagination and made him want to care about the people he imagined. Another viewer, say someone with a wide knowledge of Scottish history and the genealogy of its myths, could be "entertained" by the movie simply by contemplating his or her knowledge of the multiple deflections to bring a myth to its current state. And

yet another person could just enjoy men in woad slicing heads off.]

Could a historical film be better than a book?

It might be possible to mount not just a defense of film, but a real challenge to those who claim that film cannot, by its nature, do history. Perhaps historical film can be better than historical books? Let's try a small thought-experiment.

Both a film and a book are imperfect ways of presenting an understanding of the past. The problems that film faces in doing so is that, at least in the case of feature films, a single narrative is usually imposed on complex events, dramatic needs force compression of events and personalities, and cinematographic needs require that all the blanks in the record (what people were wearing, who was standing in the background, how someone's voice sounded) be filled in. The problems that books face in doing history include a complete lack of a three dimensional vision, the requirement that readers be able to read in a particular way, very often the imposition of a single point of view, the imposition of analytic simplifying on an actually infinitely complex reality, and finally the presentation of inaccurate information to readers whose first contact with that period is through a particular book.

Just then as it is impossible for film to do accurate history, so also is it impossible for a book to do accurate history. Both forms, however, have advantages and disadvantages. Just as it is absurd to criticize a scholarly book for its failures in cinematography, so it is absurd to criticize a film for its failures in detail, etc.

A parallel might lie in the rival claims of stage drama and opera. I think a claim could be made that great opera is a more "realistic" form than spoken drama. It is true that in spoken drama, there can be more scenes and more detail, and it is also true that most people do not go through life singing out their emotions. However, the norm in drama is for person A to speak, then person B. While person A is speaking, we have no real idea what person B is thinking. Occasionally a dramatist might have two speaking at once, but any more than that and it becomes a hubbub. Famously in 'The Marriage of Figaro,' Mozart is able to construct a scene in which the emotional states of six characters are presented to the audience simultaneously. In that scene, since in real life multiple people are present at a given event, Mozart is more realistic than Beaumarchais could ever be.

The point is of course that spoken drama and opera are two different ways to present a dramatic event (a novel is yet another), and each has its advantages. Academic history is an important way to present the past, but all too often the past that is presented is drained of human vividness. Good film, and even Hollywood feature films, can present a humanly vivid past that is true in its own way.

Let me give an example. Gladiatorial games and staged chariot races have been of interest to both academic historians and filmmakers. Academic historians are excellent at getting the details right, documenting the social and class structure of mounting the games, and so forth. Equally, if you want to understand the political implications of the hippodrome, you need to read academic historians on Circus factions.

But in the case of the gladiatorial games, academic historians are simply unable to present the horror of human beings deliberately going to watch other human beings die as well as Cecil B. DeMille did in 'Sign of the Cross.' One might claim that DeMille was being ahistorical, and that the games were normal to the Roman viewers, but we have ample sources documenting contemporary horror -- think of the 'Passion of Perpetua' or Tertullian's 'On the Spectacles.' In this case, DeMille is in some respects a better historian than an academic writer can be.

In the case of chariot races, little can be understood until one understands the thrill -- and in that respect Fred Niblo's 1927 'Ben Hur,' and even the 1959 version, are better or at least equally as good as any academic history.

The Problem with the History vs. Hollywood Approach

In 2001, the History Channel initiated a series called 'History vs. Hollywood.' Although the show turned out to be remarkably uncritical about historical inaccuracies in Hollywood movies, its title encapsulated the dominant model in professional historian's thinking about historical film -- that they are to be judged by how "accurate" they are.

Since I first taught a class on medieval history and film in the summer of 2001, I have become increasingly unhappy with judgments on historical or period films that are based entirely on "accuracy."

I am not the first to reject the model. Robert Rosenstone's work is always cited as crucial, and he has long argued that film is a potentially better way to relate history than text. For me, however, his work is singularly unconvincing, or at least irrelevant, since he ends up endorsing not history films as they are actually produced, but specialist documentaries hewing to a programmatic formula.

I want to argue, instead, that there are ways to think about historical movies as they actually are that might make sense to a professional historian, and perhaps more importantly to anyone who enjoys a movie but wants also to be able to think about film critically.

Here are my suggestions about how to view historical movies.

1. Realize that the past is not owned by historians.

All sorts of other valuable cultural producers also make claims on the past -- poets, visual artists, theologians, novelists, and politicians. The assumption that "we" as historians own the past is simply not admitted by all others who use the past, and there is no intrinsic reason why film makers should credit historians claims more than others.

The usual assumption is that Academic Historians own the past because they have more accurate information and better skills of interpretation. In the field of academic publishing, this is certainly true, but standing beside the past as determined by academic historians are "other pasts" that actually matter to people. These other pasts are constructed through a series of filters and distortions, amplifications and deletions, censorships and romanticizations.

Given that academic history is, more or less, only 200-300 years old, it was these "other pasts" that were almost exclusively the way that people in the period we study (i.e. the "middle ages") actually conceived of their own past. Charlemagne, for example, was in pretty much the same legendary position in thirteenth century France that Wallace was in eighteenth century Scotland.

I would insist that academic historians who insist on sweeping away all the "later myths" are missing the richness of the past, rather like "archeologists" who to get to Periclean ruins used to sweep away the later Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Serb, and Ottoman accretions.

There are many ways of looking at the past. I am in no way suggesting that academic history is deficient, but the way some academic historians talk about historical films reminds me of the Catholics who, upon arriving in heaven, have to

be sneaked past the areas holding those of other faiths because they just won't believe its heaven if anyone else is there.

2. Use a multiplicity of ways in which to view the connection of a film and history:

A: A historical film is usually made using topoi (literary or cinematic conventions) established within the history of cinema.

'Gladiator' for example owes a lot to previous films such as 'Ben Hur' (1927), 'The Sign of the Cross,' 'Ben Hur' (1959), 'El Cid,' and so forth. It is also an expression of a particular director's outlook. Compare the sweep over Los Angeles in 'Blade Runner,' for example, with the sweep over Rome in 'Gladiator,' and the role of director Ridley Scott's own art becomes clear.

Medieval historians who comment on movies are often painfully unaware of both the importance of conventions in the history of cinema, not to mention the significance of understanding that particular directors may manifest a distinct auteur style. One of the many films made about St. Francis -- Francesco -- features Mickey Rourke as the saint, a casting choice that caused much hilarity. That hilarity illustrates what I have come to see as a major flaw in the way medievalists typically view movies. Counter type casting is in fact a very common technique, and we should not make too much of the fact that Mickey Rourke plays Francis. We might indeed celebrate how such casting forces a break with overly pious representations of the saint. (Keanu Reeves, for instance, has performed well in two of the most successful Buddhist movies ever made: as the Buddha in 'Little Buddha' and as the Buddha-to-be in 'The Matrix'). For any serious historical critic of Francesco, however, the really important thing is that it is the product of one of the most important female "auteur" directors, Liliانا Cavani. If historians are going to use the film for more than classroom clips, they need to consider the film in relation to Cavani's other interests. Her film on the Tibetan religious figure Milarepa, for instance, must be taken into account when considering her view of Francis.

B: A historical film, like other films, often reflects the period in which it was made.

Sticking with previous examples, it is interesting just how normative an "early Christian" connection was in almost all Hollywood Roman movies (even 'Spartacus'), whereas Ridley Scott, part of a largely secularized international elite, seems deliberately to avoid that particular topos.

The contemporary reception of movie might also be an interesting area for historian's consideration. 'Braveheart,' for example, boosted the polls for the Scottish Nationalist Party, and was extensively used in its advertising

C: A historical film can be considered as the product of a cinematic historian.

This is the category where straight forward considerations of accuracy and intent do come in.

Historians need to be careful, though. In the case of 'Braveheart,' the star and director Mel Gibson was asked in one interview how he had learned about Wallace, and he responded that the "script had a lot of information." In this case, the "historian" was the scriptwriter rather than the director.

A film such as 'Gladiator,' which caught a lot of flak from historians, in fact contained a good deal of accurate information, mixed in with inaccuracies, while 'The Seventh Seal,' almost universally praised, has no relationship to its supposed period whatsoever (on the other hand, it is a pretty good way to consider Swedish existentialism in the 1950s).

When evaluating a film as "cinematic history," it cannot be just a matter of checking off points on an accuracy list.

Many historical films concern war and warfare. Military realism has little to do with wider historical accuracy. Taking the example of Mel Gibson's 'The Patriot,' it may have had quite a lot right in terms of uniforms and buttons, but was wildly off target and full of simply atrocious lies in its presentation of race relations and British military actions against civilians. Still, so is the Declaration of Independence in its description of George III and two-timing assertion of human equality in slave-owning society, so perhaps Gibson was being more subtle than I give him credit for in celebrating a revolution that was supported at the time by myths with a film that was entirely fallacious. But I doubt it.

In regard to Joan of Arc films we have a figure who, after Jesus, is perhaps the most celebrated historical personage in cinema. Almost everyone's favorite Joan film is Dreyer's 'Passion of Joan of Arc' (1928), which with the current addition of Einhorn's cantata can reduce a class of students to whimpering pieces of jelly/jello. It is true that 'Passion of Joan of Arc' did stick entirely to trial transcripts. No one, however, could claim that 'Passion' is historically accurate, but almost everyone understands that Dreyer did capture an aspect of Joan's importance.

D: A historical film can be considered in terms of its way of presenting the past.

This approach directly challenges the primacy of the "historical accuracy" school. Instead of viewing a historical film as a product of "cinematic history," let us consider that a given film might manifest quite different genres of historically-oriented literature - myth, epic, romance, gossip, and inspiration. Indeed an awareness of the multiplicity of historical genres in film brings us closer to how "the past" was thought about in the past. Ancient and medieval historical literatures in particular consisted not only of "rational history" (e.g. Thucydides, various medieval writers), but also myth and epic (Beowulf, The Iliad, Anna Comnena in one light), gossip (Suetonius, Michael Psellus), chronicle, miracle story, moralizing (Plutarch, Tacitus) and even nationalist evocation.

Thinking about historical film in this way gives us an opportunity to think about the ways that people in the past understood their own history. The modern study of history is a scientific enterprise to understand things "as they really were." The various approaches of modern historians -- political history, women's history, social history, or even cultural studies -- all fall into this "let's get to the truth" paradigm. But the "past" that was important to medieval audiences was not the "past as it was" but the "past" as a series of somewhat disconnected explanatory myths, epic stories, legendary figures, and entertaining romances. In some respects, then, just the sort of "past" that enthalls modern filmmakers and audiences.

In the case of 'Braveheart,' our opinion of the film's "inaccuracies" becomes more complex when we realize that the "sources" for the screenwriters were not "the historical records of the early fourteenth century" but the writings about Wallace by "Blind Harry" at the end of the 15th century, writings intended to arouse patriotic passions against English penetration. Faulty as it might have been as early fourteenth century history, as a reproduction of a late medieval "nationalist" use of history, it is hard to think of a better "historical movie" than 'Braveheart!'

I do not propose that any one of these ways of thinking about film and history is better than another. Rather I suggest that by using all of them, we can think more clearly about advantages and disadvantages of film as a way to present pre-modern history; assess more critically the different approaches taken by directors; and come away from a historical movie with understanding rather than nit-picking concerns about accuracy.

The Pocahontas Myth

In 1995, Roy Disney decided to release an animated movie about a Powhatan woman known as "Pocahontas". In answer to a complaint by the Powhatan Nation, he claims the film is "responsible, accurate, and respectful."

We of the Powhatan Nation disagree. The film distorts history beyond recognition. Our offers to assist Disney with cultural and historical accuracy were rejected. Our efforts urging him to reconsider his misguided mission were spurned.

"Pocahontas" was a nickname, meaning "the naughty one" or "spoiled child". Her real name was Matoaka. The legend is that she saved a heroic John Smith from being clubbed to death by her father in 1607 - she would have been about 10 or 11 at the time. The truth is that Smith's fellow colonists described him as an abrasive, ambitious, self-promoting mercenary soldier.

Of all of Powhatan's children, only "Pocahontas" is known, primarily because she became the hero of Euro-Americans as the "good Indian", one who saved the life of a white man. Not only is the "good Indian/bad Indian theme" inevitably given new life by Disney, but the history, as recorded by the English themselves, is badly falsified in the name of "entertainment".

The truth of the matter is that the first time John Smith told the story about this rescue was 17 years after it happened, and it was but one of three reported by the pretentious Smith that he was saved from death by a prominent woman.

Yet in an account Smith wrote after his winter stay with Powhatan's people, he never mentioned such an incident. In fact, the starving adventurer reported he had been kept comfortable and treated in a friendly fashion as an honored guest of Powhatan and Powhatan's brothers. Most scholars think the "Pocahontas incident" would have been highly unlikely, especially since it was part of a longer account used as justification to wage war on Powhatan's Nation.

Euro-Americans must ask themselves why it has been so important to elevate Smith's fibbing to status as a national myth worthy of being recycled again by Disney. Disney even improves upon it by changing Pocahontas from a little girl into a young woman.

The true Pocahontas story has a sad ending. In 1612, at the age of 17, Pocahontas was treacherously taken prisoner by the English while she was on a social visit, and was held hostage at Jamestown for over a year.

During her captivity, a 28-year-old widower named John Rolfe took a "special interest" in the attractive young prisoner. As a condition of her release, she agreed to marry Rolfe, who the world can thank for commercializing tobacco. Thus, in April 1614, Matoaka, also known as "Pocahontas", daughter of Chief Powhatan, became "Rebecca Rolfe". Shortly after, they had a son, whom they named Thomas Rolfe. The descendants of Pocahontas and John Rolfe were known as the "Red Rolfes."

Two years later on the spring of 1616, Rolfe took her to England where the Virginia Company of London used her in their propaganda campaign to support the colony. She was wined and dined and taken to theaters. It was recorded that on one occasion when she encountered John Smith (who was also in London at the time), she was so furious with him that she turned her back to him, hid her face, and went off by herself for several hours. Later, in a second encounter, she called him a liar and showed him the door.

Rolfe, his young wife, and their son set off for Virginia in March of 1617, but "Rebecca" had to be taken off the ship at Gravesend. She died there on March 21, 1617, at the age of 21. She was buried at Gravesend, but the grave was destroyed in a reconstruction of the church. It was only after her death and her fame in London society that Smith found it convenient to invent the yarn that she had rescued him.

History tells the rest. Chief Powhatan died the following spring of 1618. The people of Smith and Rolfe turned upon the people who had shared their resources with them and had shown them friendship. During Pocahontas' generation, Powhatan's people were decimated and dispersed and their lands were taken over. A clear pattern had been set which would soon spread across the American continent.

Chief Roy Crazy Horse

It is unfortunate that this sad story,
which Euro-Americans should find embarrassing,
Disney makes "entertainment" and perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth
at the expense of the Powhatan Nation.

Disney's History Lesson 'Pocahontas' Has Its Share of Supporters, Detractors

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.

Author: ELAINE DUTKA

Date: Feb 9, 1995

If the Walt Disney Co. incurred the wrath of Arab Americans angered at their portrayal in "Aladdin," the studio seems to have played it safe when it comes to the depiction of Native Americans in its upcoming animated movie, "Pocahontas." While the film has yet to be viewed in its entirety, those who have seen snippets suggest that the portrait gives new meaning to the phrase "politically correct."

The studio hired Native Americans to record all the Native American roles, most notably activist Russell Means as Pocahontas' father, Powhatan. And, to ensure accuracy, Disney consulted with historians and the primary Native American organization in Virginia, where the story is set.

Though Disney denies any link, the studio's approach seems intent on avoiding the brouhaha that erupted in 1993 over "Aladdin." Following protests by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Disney changed two lines in the opening song of the film's home video version, a move that only partly mollified the group.

The aim of "Pocahontas," says Disney animation president Peter Schneider, is to "celebrate" Native American society.

"We wanted to offer an ennobling and empowering view of Native Americans that hadn't been provided in cinema before," he says of the 78-minute feature that is scheduled for release June 23. "This is a stupendous reaffirmation of a culture and language that's been lost."

Still, some Native Americans have bones to pick. "This is a nice film if it didn't carry the name 'Pocahontas,'" says Shirley Little Dove Custalow McGowan, a key consultant on the movie who teaches Native American education at schools, including the University of Virginia. "Disney promised me historical accuracy, but there will be a lot to correct when I go into the classrooms."

Sonny Skyhawk, founder of the Pasadena-based American Indians in Film, is peeved that the film's producer ignored his offer of help. "With few exceptions, the movie industry hasn't got it right," he explains. "And Hollywood has a long track record of not letting us see the product until it's too late to make a difference."

"Pocahontas" producer Jim Pentecost says he spoke briefly with Skyhawk and was under the impression that using Native American actors was the concern.

In the minds of many, filmmaking has in some ways become a no-win proposition, a morass of conflicting agendas. "I don't care what you do . . . someone will be offended," admits Raymond Adams, past chairman of the United Indians of Virginia, which served as a consultant on the film. "Some of us even have problems seeing feathers, or for that matter, naming a baseball team the Braves."

Dick Cook, president of domestic distribution and worldwide marketing for the studio, takes a philosophical approach. "Everything's under a microscope these days," he says. "But that's part of the deal. This was our first animated feature based on a historical figure and the 'Pocahontas' legend is open to interpretation."

The movie, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, tells the story of the Native American maiden Pocahontas who achieved "heroine" status by rescuing Capt.

John Smith, whom her father was about to behead. She served as a peacekeeper during the early 1600s, warning the English settlers of impending hostility.

The filmmakers took pains to incorporate suggestions of Native American actors. Rather than "thanking" her father for her wedding gift as she did in an early version of the script, Pocahontas now says she felt "honoured" to be given her dead mother's necklace. Instead of referring to Pocahontas by her proper name, Powhatan calls her "my daughter," as Native Americans do.

"Though this country is supposed to be a big soup made up of different peoples, it's only in the past 15 to 20 years that we've gotten over the notion that we're not all related to Barbie (dolls)," observes Native American Irene Bedard, the voice of Pocahontas.

Means calls "Pocahontas" a vast improvement over the "savage" portrayals in Walter Hill's "Geronimo"-not to mention Bruce Beresford's "Black Robe," at which his American Indian Movement took aim.

"'Pocahontas' presents a host of lousy settlers . . . and there's not a bad Indian in sight," Means says. "But there's nothing wrong with telling the truth."

Not everyone buys into the same definition of "truth," however. Disney was on track when it approached her, claims Shirley Little Dove Custalow McGowan, but mid-course, it lost its way.

"Disney originally told the story of Pocahontas as we know her, a child between the age of 10 and 12 who showed reverence, but certainly no love, for John Smith," maintains McGowan. "By making her older and creating a romance you lose the notion of children as our future, a way of bridging the gap between cultures."

McGowan raised some objections last August, but was told by the studio that the project was too far along. "Disney left out the most interesting part," she says. "Before dying in England at the age of 21, Pocahontas was kidnaped, baptized into Christianity and married John Rolfe, a man far more appropriate than John Smith, who was a barbarian and a troublemaker. My people are concerned because our story has already been changed so much."

"Pocahontas" producer Pentecost admits the movie is more love story than history lesson and that the relationship between the heroine and John Smith (whom Disney graced with the voice of Mel Gibson) has never been clear.

"People are still arguing about who killed Kennedy and Lincoln," he says. "The further back you go, the more complicated it gets. We never say that the two end up together . . . but, as in all great romances, the implication is there."

That's exactly what veteran actor Sonny Skyhawk was hoping to avoid. "In the name of creative license, we lose historical truth," he maintains. "When a young Indian child roots for the cowboys something's wrong with this picture. Hollywood gets bothered when we exert some control because they can't go about business as usual."

Working as the choreography consultant on "Pocahontas" gave Hanay Geiogamah, artistic director of the American Indian Dance Theater, an inside perspective.

"Though Disney rearranged history, the thrust is authentic," he says. "And since Russell Means is a tough cookie, they ain't going to be profaning or defaming too much. Sonny Skyhawk is a self-appointed monitor of Indian purity whose job is to

see to it that the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed. But the movie business can't involve everyone at the slightest hint of protest."

While UCLA's Angela Aleiss is not a Native American, as the instructor of a course titled "American Indian Images in Film," she has strong feelings on the subject.

"Judging from the trailer, 'Pocahontas' looks like another rehash of the 'noble savage' image," she says. And if 'Peter Pan' depicted Indians with exaggerated features, 'Pocahontas' is the opposite extreme. She's a latter-day Snow White—much more 'Disney' than Indian."

The studio asks that judgment be reserved until early May when the movie, four years in the making, will be completed and screened.

"This is entertainment, not a documentary," Pentecost says.

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Myths Abound in “The New World”

By Cathy Schultz, Ph. D, History Professor, University of ZSt Francis, Joliet, IL

It would be logical to assume that Terrence Malick’s ‘The New World,’ the latest retelling of the Pocahontas-John Smith story, would share little in common with Disney’s 1995 animated feature, Pocahontas. Malick, after all, is a legendary auteur, while Disney is, well, Disney.

Logical, perhaps, but wrong. For though stylistically the films are worlds apart, there are uncomfortable similarities in the romanticized history each offers.

Take the costume notions, for one. In both movies, Pocahontas sports a cute, midriff-baring little number, complete with strategic slits to show off her toned thighs. Sexy? Quite. But historical? Um, no.

And while Malick’s film doesn’t have a chatty Grandmother Willow and a cuddly raccoon buddy, Pocahontas still cavorts. A lot. In fact, according to these films, Pocahontas apparently had little else to do than gambol around with John Smith, teaching him to appreciate nature.

Here are other ways The New World romanticizes early America history.

Q. Was John Smith such a pensive, introspective chap?

A. Hardly. The real John Smith was an opinionated, forceful soldier, who is credited with saving the Jamestown settlement by cracking down on lazy settlers who would rather hunt for gold than grow food.

Smith also had a wide self-promoting streak. He penned thrilling adventure stories of his exploits, with himself as the swashbuckling hero. It worked, though. We still know his name today, while contemporaries like Christopher Newport (who?) are forgotten.

Q. In the film, the Indians are said to “lack guile, treachery, or greed.” Is that true?

A. Far too romanticized. The movie depicts the Indians living in harmony with nature and one another. They’re peaceful, except when the English goad them. And they all do lots of playing and dancing.

In reality, Powhatan, Pocahontas’s father was an astute and tough chief, who ruled by conquest over the surrounding tribes. Politically savvy and fierce in battle, his people were far from the innocent, childlike creatures we see in the film.

Nor were they primitive environmentalists. Indians worked the earth the same way the English did, only with different tools. They farmed, felled trees, reshaped the land around them and rather than cavorting all day, everyone in the tribe worked hard.

Q. How did Smith get along with the Indians?

A. It was a complex relationship. On the one hand, Smith admired Powhatan, and may even have been ritually adopted into his tribe. And since the English were greatly outnumbered, and starving to boot, Smith had no choice but to negotiate with the tribes for food.

But Smith could be sneaky, promising muskets for food, for example, with no real intention of providing them. And his own letters proposed a dire fate for the natives,

suggesting that the best way to treat Indians was to force them to do “all matter of drudgery worke [sic] and slavery.”

Q. Did Pocahontas really save John Smith when her tribe captured him?

A. Probably not. The famous tale of Smith’s capture by Powhatan and his subsequent release was one Smith told many times. But interestingly, he never added the bit about Pocahontas’s “rescue” until 1624, seventeen years after it purportedly occurred, and years after Pocahontas herself died.

Smith also liked to exaggerate. It’s suspicious, for instance, that apparently Pocahontas wasn’t the only beautiful woman to save Smith from almost certain death. According to his writings, a Turkish noblewoman, a Cossack chieftain’s wife, and a lovely Frenchwoman (among others) also rescued him during his various globe-trotting adventures. Most of them, of course, then fell madly in love with him.

Q. So Pocahontas and John Smith didn’t fall in love? Say it ain’t so!

A. One big obstacle to the Romeo and Juliet love story presented by Malick is that when they met, Smith was about twenty-seven, and Pocahontas probably only eleven.

But she was a precocious child by all accounts, and she and Smith did build a friendship, despite the age difference, and taught one another their languages. But their great love affair almost certainly didn’t happen. Two years after they met, John Smith was headed back to England, and Pocahontas was married to Kocoom, an Indian who died soon after.

Q. Was Pocahontas kicked out of her tribe for helping the English?

A. Never occurred. She did end up living in Jamestown, though. But only because she had been kidnapped at fifteen by the English, and was held there as a royal hostage.

Her captors allowed her much freedom, however. And it was in Jamestown that she met and married John Rolfe. And as the film shows, she travelled with him to London, and was feted by the King as a princess.

Thus Pocahontas cast her lot with the English. The sources suggest that she did love Rolfe. But her marriage was also designed to forge an alliance, and foster a peace between her people and her husband’s. It worked, at least in her lifetime.

Q. Where to find more information about her?

A. Try Camilla Townsend’s wonderful ‘Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma.’

By Cathy Schultz, Ph.D.
Malibu Times, 1/26/06

Disney's 'Politically Correct' Pocahontas

(Race in Contemporary American Cinema: Part 5)

by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick

Cineaste v21, n4 (Fall, 1995):36

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When I walked into the theater to see Pocahontas, I had my choice of venue. It was playing on three of six screens, and the line waiting to get in never seemed to diminish. Later, I looked at the film section of the local paper and found that somewhere in the vicinity the movie was starting every fifteen minutes. Now that was a depressing thought.

In an interview with The New York Times, Eric Goldberg, the film's codirector (with Mike Gabriel), said, "We've gone from being accused of being too white bread to being accused of racism in 'Aladdin' to being accused of being too politically correct in 'Pocahontas.' That's progress to me." As much as I wanted to like Disney's production, I must disagree with Goldberg. Instead of progress in depicting Native Americans, this film takes a step backwards - a very dangerous step because it is so carefully glossed as "authentic" and "respectful."

The visual is emotionally more compelling than the written word, to say nothing of being more accessible, and since few people will read about Pocahontas, this film will exist as 'fact' in the minds of generations of American children. They will believe in the Romeo and Juliet in the wilds of North America that Disney has presented, which, as Robert Eaglestaff, principal of the American Indian Heritage School in Seattle, has said, is much like "trying to teach about the Holocaust and putting in a nice story about Anne Frank falling in love with a German officer."

It might seem a moot point at best to debate the authenticity or reality of an animated film in which a tree speaks words of wisdom and the protagonist guides her canoe over a deadly looking waterfall without mussing her hair. If this were a story about a fictional character in a fictional situation, I would agree. I like Mickey Mouse, too. But Pocahontas was a real woman who lived during the pivotal time of first contact with the outside force that would ultimately decimate her people. Although we know of her only from the English reports, and some of the details are a bit hazy, there are some facts that are well supported. For one thing, she was not a voluptuous young woman when she met John Smith but a ten- to twelve-year-old girl, and John Smith was a thirty-something mercenary who more resembled a brick than a blonde Adonis.

Smith's report of Pocahontas's brave act in saving his life was nowhere to be found in his initial description of his capture by Powhatan in 1608, surfacing only eight years later in a letter to the queen. There are a couple of possibilities to explain why that might have been. He could have been embarrassed, given the macho community of Jamestown boys, to admit a child had saved his life, or he might have stolen the story, possibly from the account published around the same time about Juan Ortiz and the Utica woman who saved him about eighty years before Smith met Pocahontas.

Assuming she did save his life, it could have been her idea, or it could have been her father's. If Powhatan had his own reasons for wanting Smith to live, he might have instructed her to do as she did to save face. Smith's report said she wanted her father to keep him alive but in captivity so he could make bells and beads for her, which, according to John Gould Fletcher (John Smith - Also Pocahontas, 1928), would have provided a cover story to eliminate the censure of the tribe for Powhatan's benevolent act and which would have been in keeping with their traditions.

Assuming Smith stole the story, he could have done so because he turned into a chronicler of his adventures in the New World after it became clear he was not going to be able to return to America to have more of them. He tried repeatedly to return, but even the first settlers in New England were happy to accept his advice but refused his company.

What we do know of Pocahontas is that she met John Smith in 1608, was probably responsible for some trading between the settlers and her people, was kidnapped and raped by the English but later married a tobacco planter named John Rolfe, had a son in 1615 and sailed to England in 1616. She was introduced to Ben Jonson and made such an impression that he wrote her into one of his comedies, 'The Staple of News' she attended a court masque that he wrote and evidently impressed the king and queen as well. She attempted to return home but became ill on the voyage and had to turn back to England, where she died, probably of smallpox, at the age of twenty-two. We have no idea how she or her people felt about any of this, except that some of the contemporary reports said she died "of a broken heart."

That's a pretty interesting story, but not the sort of thing animated Disney films are known for. For one thing, it's much too violent and sad. According to James Pentecost, the film's producer, the changes that were made were due to the fact that Pocahontas's real story was simply too long. He said, "We decided to dramatize what we felt was the essence of Pocahontas." Now the logic may be a little tough to follow here, but evidently what that means is that they changed her age, her body, and gave her a motive for her actions that boils down to going gaga over the first white man she sees.

Ignoring for a moment the very non-PC, nonfeminist content of that change, there lies within it a very old stereotype of Native American women. In hundreds of films made during the last century, Indian women have been seen sacrificing themselves and their tribal communities for their white loves. I'm sure the irony is unintentional in Pocahontas as she paddles her canoe along, having just refused to marry the stereotypically stoic and noble Kocoum, singing about the change that is waiting "just around the river bend." The change that waits is another man and another culture in the form of John Smith.

The Disney folks have made much of the fact that Pocahontas is the driving force of this movie, which is, I suppose, to mean it makes some sort of feminist statement. She does sing to John about living naturally in tune with the Earth - also skirting dangerously close to another stereotype, that of the 'natural ecologist' - but does she have to do it in an off-the-shoulder miniskirt? And I would love to see a report on the physics of her body. Would she, like Barbie, fall over if really given those dimensions? Glen Keane, the film's supervising animator, researched the paintings of the real Pocahontas but wasn't very impressed, so he made a few "adjustments." Besides her beautiful "more Asian" eyes, he gave her a body with a wasp waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts that are truly impressive. He says, "Some people might see her as sexy, but she's not Jessica Rabbit. I think she looks rather athletic." Uh huh. Mel Gibson (the voice of John Smith) put it more succinctly when he said, "She's a babe." Or, what the heck, maybe she's just drawn that way.

To give the Disney folk their due, they apparently made some effort to be nonoffensive, hiring Native Americans to work on the film and to act as consultants. Unfortunately, there seems to have been some miscommunication of concept. The Disney people were making an animated film about a fictional character. They knew she was fictional because they created her. The Native Americans on the team had other interests. Russell Means, the voice of Powhatan, likes the film, even though they were willing to take his advice about a detail such as the father referring to Pocahontas as Daughter instead of her name, but were unwilling to

change important aspects of the image of the Indians as warlike, as established by the return from war at the beginning of the film. He says, "There are scenes where the English settlers admit to historical deceit...their animated settlers say they are here to rob, rape, pillage the land and kill Indians. This is the truth that Disney is entrusting with children while the rest of Hollywood won't trust that truth with adults."

As a mixed blood woman, I too am concerned with the truth of the colonization of America, but establishing another stereotype isn't the way to go about it. Even given that Disney's animated characters are by nature larger than life, the English in the film are extremely one-dimensional in their bumbling greed. As Terry Russio, a screenwriter for Disney, said, "You can judge the sentiments of the country by who you can confidently make fun of. Nowadays the ultimate villain, I suppose, would be a fat, white male terrorist who ran a Fortune 500 company on the side." That fairly well describes the governor in Pocahontas, a description which renders the history of first contact literally cartoonish.

Disney also hired Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan, a Powhatan who travels through Virginia teaching the history and culture of her people, to work as consultant for the film. When she saw the early rushes, she said, "My heart sorrowed within me...Ten-year-old Pocahontas has become twenty-year-old Pocahontas. The movie was no longer historically accurate."

According to the film's producer, James Pentecost, all this talk about historical accuracy is somewhat irrelevant. He believes that "Nobody should go to an animated film hoping to get an accurate depiction of history." Okay, I'll buy that, as long as you're talking about 'The Lion King,' but Pocahontas was real, and most people have heard her name even if they know nothing about her reality. Most of the adults who view this film, however, will not have the background to judge whether it is accurate or not, and since the hype has been toward the 'political correctness' of the film, I would think they'd be more apt to trust it than not. And those are the adults. What about the children? As Linda Woolverton, screenwriter for 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Lion King' said, "When you take on a Disney animated feature, you know you're going to be affecting entire generations of human minds." In this case, the effect is one more misconception advertised in the guise of authenticity and respect for Native American values.

As Custalow-McGowan said, "History is history. You're not honoring a nation of people when you change their history."

POCAHONTAS

Myth and History in the Movies

Email written especially for our school by Cathy Schultz, Ph.D.
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Columnist: "History in the Movies"

I rewatched Disney's Pocahontas last night, and I was planning to write up a Q and A, in the same way I do for my newspaper column. But then I found this website, which answers kid-friendly questions more completely (for both the first Pocahontas film and its sequel!) than I have time for. So, I suggest using this.: <http://pocahontas.morenus.org/> to help with the "what's real; what isn't" questions.

But there's another way to explore this with the students, and while I'm sure you folks have thought about this already, I'll share my thoughts anyway. I rewatched the film with my daughter (who is 10) and we ended up discussing not only what was changed in the history, but WHY the film changed the history. So, along those lines, here are some questions that I think might be helpful to have the students think about and discuss.

- 1) Pay attention to how the film portrays John Smith. What does he look like? What kind of personality does he have? Do you think he was exactly that way? If not, why does the movie show him that way? How does the film want us to feel about him?
- 2) What about Pocahontas? The film shows her as a beautiful young woman, who is adventurous and brave. She doesn't want to be just like everyone else, and she isn't. She dives off cliffs. She talks to animals. She learns English in about thirty seconds flat. How much of this is exaggerated? And why does the movie exaggerate it? How does the movie want us to feel about Pocahontas?
- 3) Now look at Ratcliffe. What does he look like here? Do you think he dressed so goofy like that? Do you think he really acted so mean? Did he really carry around a little dog? And if not, then why does the movie make his look and act like that?
- 4) In the movie, there's a lot about Pocahontas listening to the wind, and talking to Grandmother Willow, and talking to animals. Do you think this actually happened? What was Indian religion really like? What's the movie trying to say about it?
- 5) What was Pocahontas's world like? Pay attention to the Indian homes, and the way they lived. What was growing in their fields? What kind of work did Pocahontas do? What did the men in the tribe do?
- 6) Also, think about how beautiful nature is in Virginia, where Pocahontas lived. There are forests, and rivers, and high waterfalls. It looks like paradise. But in real life, that part of Virginia is kind of flat and swampy. So, why do you think the film changed it? Also, pay attention to how the movie contrasts the

way the Indians saw nature, and the way the English saw nature. Do you think that's true?

- 7) The movie has a lot to say about how people hate those who are different from them. In that last song, as each side is preparing to fight, both sides sing, "they're not like you and me, so they must be evil." It's pretty scary and tense, and then suddenly everything is fixed. Do you think that really happened? Did those bad feelings go away so fast? And if not, why does the movie show it that way?
- 8) Last question. This movie (and a lot of other stories and movies) show Pocahontas and John Smith falling in love. But in real life, they didn't. So why do you think it got changed? Why do most people like the story of them falling in love?

These questions are ones that go beyond the "truth vs. make believe" of a film, but hopefully get kids to think about WHY history gets changed in movies and stories. And that sort of critical awareness is a really great skill, no matter how young (or old) they are.

Hope all of this is helpful!

Cathy Schultz

Picturing Pocahontas

An image at the National Portrait Gallery may be the truest account we have of the Indian princess

By John F. Ross
Smithsonian.com, January 01, 1999

The corpulent visage of Henry VIII peers at me across the centuries from the pages of 'Baziliwlogia: A Booke of Kings.' As I leaf through the 1618 edition, another engraved portrait jumps out at me — a New World princess from Virginia. Though nobility radiates from her resolute eyes, Pocahontas couldn't be more different from the other royals. A Jacobean stovepipe hat and lacy ruff can't hide her non-Anglo roots. Was this the face that launched a thousand myths?

"Yes," answers Wendy Wick Reaves, a curator at the National Portrait Gallery. This engraving of Pocahontas is the only known life portrait. "Life portraits," Reaves continues, "are our greatest treasures." The engraving is the oldest item in the NPG's 18,000 - piece collection.

The Portrait Gallery also owns a more recent image, an oil painting of Pocahontas done more than a century later by an unknown artist who probably worked from the engraving. Mythmaking has begun to work its subtle magic on her face: the complexion is fairer and anglicized; the high cheekbones no longer seem so prominent. The hair is European brown not Native American black; the intensity in the eyes has softened. Anyone trying to get a reasonable fix on the lady, somewhere between dry history and the Disney version, soon finds out that none of the details of her real life come from her own words. Historians have pieced together her life from the accounts of others, most notably her friend, Capt. John Smith, whose veracity of detail and recollection is, to put it mildly, questionable. During the intervening four centuries others have showered her with virtues. Poets and writers from Thackeray to Hart Crane celebrated her charm. More lately rocker Neil Young sang, "I would give a thousand pelts / To...find out how she felt." And now we have the animated eco-warrior princess from Disney.

Needless to say, many fabled stories of her life are partly fiction. Top among them is her rescue of Capt. John Smith from execution, romanticized in eternal stone relief in the U.S. Capitol. Their celebrated love affair probably never happened, either. We do know that Pocahontas was born Matoaka, the favoured daughter of Powhatan, the powerful chief of the Powhatan Confederacy of Tidewater Algonquian tribes. "Pocahontas" is a pet name meaning "frolicsome." In 1607, when she was about 12, she first saw the 104 Jamestown colonists struggling to survive on a low-lying peninsula (now an island) in the James River. Virginia's stifling summers and the swampy ground bred disease. With remarkable lack of foresight, the colony had far too few workers skilled in the basics of survival, and those not brought low by disease (more than half succumbed by the end of the first summer) lived in fear of random Indian arrows. Both English and Powhatans murdered each other in periodic skirmishes and reprisals. Far from being a peace-loving Indian leader, Powhatan hacked and tortured his way to power. He even hired Indian warrior mercenaries to butcher his rivals. In shooting Indians, the English proved no better. Twice a day by royal decree, they recited a prayer for the "plantation" that declared its aim to "display the banner of Jesus Christ, even here where Satan's throne is...."

Pocahontas managed to visit the fort during sporadic peaceful moments. William Strachey, secretary of the colony, described the little girl as "wanton," because she cavorted with young colonists, cartwheeling naked "all the Fort over."

One Englishman, Capt. John Smith, proved an exception to the general haplessness of the little colony. A man of action and a veteran of foreign wars, Smith saw Pocahontas as a possible bridge to the Indians, and perhaps a key to the survival of the colony. No one at Jamestown could forget that the 116 English colonists of Sir Walter Raleigh's Roanoke Colony from the 1587 expedition had vanished without a trace. Smith learned Algonquian words and customs from Pocahontas, and her friendship brought tangible benefits to the English. This much of the standard story is true.

And so is the part that tells how Smith wandered into a Powhatan ambush. The Indians killed his comrades, took him prisoner and led him before Powhatan, who treated him to a feast. Whether Powhatan intended it as the last meal of a condemned man or the celebration of an honoured guest is still debated. Years after the rescue, Captain Smith — eccentrically writing about himself in the third person in his 'General Historie' — recalled how Indian warriors brought out "two great stones . . . and thereon laid his head," preparing to smash it with their war clubs, when Pocahontas took it "in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death."

Many historians doubt Smith's life was ever in peril. A popular theory, based on tenuous evidence, holds that Smith unwittingly participated in an adoption ceremony in which ritualized death brought symbolic rebirth as an Indian. "Clubbing," notes ethnohistorian Helen Rountree, "was a punishment for disobedient subjects, not a treatment for foreigners." Slow torture and execution by flaying, burning and dismemberment should have been the fate of an adversary of Smith's stature. In any case, Powhatan gave Smith the Indian town of Capahosic to rule, called him a son and returned him to Jamestown unharmed.

For a while, there was a measure of peace. Powhatan supplied the colonists with food, often brought by Pocahontas. When relations worsened, she shuffled back and forth, trying to explain how each side felt. She saved the life of a young colonist who wandered into an Indian camp. Perhaps the boldest act of her life was warning Smith about her own father's impending act of treachery, probably saving his life and ensuring the survival of the colony. He later wrote Queen Anne that Pocahontas "was . . . the instrument to preserve this Colonie from death, famine and utter confusion." The colonists repaid her kindness by kidnapping her to get concessions from her father. By this time, Smith had returned to England.

Pocahontas eased relations between Indians and colonists by marrying widower John Rolfe, the founder of English tobacco-growing in Virginia. An able student of English, she was baptized and took the Christian name of Rebecca. Eventually, the sponsors of the Jamestown Colony saw marketing possibilities in this regal, converted, English-speaking princess. Luring new colonists to Jamestown and finding investors for the venture was a hard sell. What better "poster girl" than Pocahontas?

In the spring of 1616, Pocahontas, Rolfe, their infant son, Thomas, and a retinue of Indians sailed for England. Pocahontas was presented to King James I and the court. She became America's first celebrity. Poet and dramatist Ben Jonson met her, asked her several questions, then stared at her intently for 45 minutes without saying a word. She finally got up and walked away.

But the damp English weather and the smoke from London's coal fires began to take a toll on her health. Several coughing spells forced her to bed. After seven months, though Pocahontas was very ill, Rolfe's family prepared to sail back to Virginia. Rolfe wanted to get back to raising tobacco. Pocahontas had helped the colony win more backing and royal favour for Virginia, but she paid a tragic personal price. While the anchored ship waited for a fair wind, she died of

tuberculosis or pneumonia in Gravesend. She was about 22 years old. After the funeral, Rolfe, who was told their baby son wouldn't survive the journey, left Thomas with an uncle and sailed back to the colony, never to return.

Sometime during Pocahontas' stay in England, Simon Van de Passe, the 21-year-old son of a famous Dutch engraver, did her portrait on a copper plate. Prints were sold to the curious, eager to feast their eyes on the exotic princess who had so bravely assisted the colonists.

By John F. Ross

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Library Display Cabinet.



Disney Movie Memorabilia.



Pocahontas on a stamp 1907.



16th Century English coins.

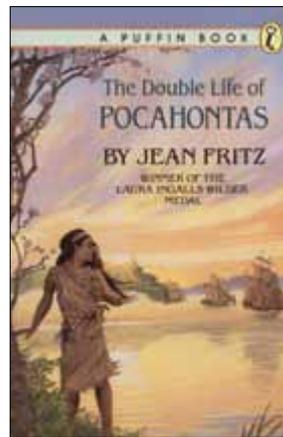
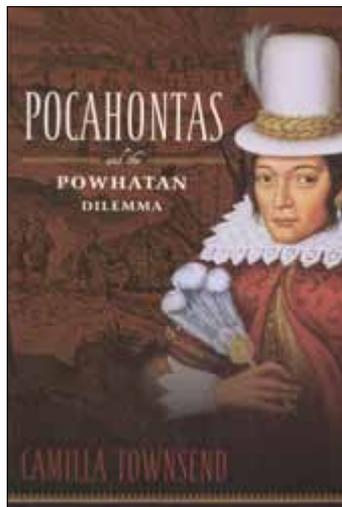


Trade beads 1700s.



Original animation cel from the Disney Movie Pocahontas.

Books



Teachers need to read and view some of these resources.

DVDs

