

## *A Contentious Genre: Defining the Historical Film*

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### **Abstract**

On its surface, the historical film genre appears easy to define as a film that depicts historical events. However, after many decades of research into the film and history discourse, a concrete definition of what constitutes a historical film continues to elude film scholars. There is no singular answer as to what defines a film as ‘historical’, as nearly every notable film and history theorist, such as Robert Rosenstone, Natalie Davis and Robert Burgoyne, have their own proposition as to what defines a historical film. Elements such as the amount of accurate history contained in a narrative, how many years in the past a film has to be set, and whether the term ‘historical’ should be used in the genre’s description, have fluctuated between theorist to theorist. While the function of the historical film is understandably contended, the lack of definition regarding what a historical film actually constitutes is a major deficit in the film and history discourse. Yet in order to find this singular definition, it must first be known why this definition has not yet been found. Using South Korean historical cinema as key examples, this paper seeks to not only answer why a singular definition has not yet been determined, but also, through the examination of the works of notable film and history theorists, aims to propose an alternative way of classifying films as historical.

Keywords: Film, Historical Film, Film and History, South Korea, South Korean Cinema

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## **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, numerous film and history theorists have contemplated the position of the historical film genre as a source of reliable historical information (Rosenstone, 2006, p.7). Over decades of this research, the film and history discourse has become vast. As the historical film is at the heart of this discourse, it would be safe to assume that what makes a film historical has been explicitly defined. However, within the majority of the discourse's literature the historical film curiously lacks a singular definition utilised by all theorists. Much of the research that is conducted into film and history does not define the historical film and instead builds its research around a layman definition, specifically that the historical film is any film that is consciously set in the past. Yet this simplistic definition does nothing to separate the historical film from a film that is merely set in history. However, there are efforts made by notable film and history theorists, such as Robert Rosenstone, Natalie Davis and Robert Burgoyne, that do attempt to define the historical film in an effort to clearly separate the films that have legitimate historical information from those that 'add nothing to our comprehension of the past' (Ashkenazi, 2014, p.293). These theorists outline when historical films should be set, what their narratives should depict and whether or not the term historical should be used in the genre descriptor. However, the definitions offered by these theorists are often significantly different from each other and are regularly contradictory. While the function of the historical film is understandably contended amongst theorists, the lack of cohesion regarding how historical films can be defined constitutes a major deficit in the film and history discourse. However, it can be argued that a singular definition of the historical film has not yet been agreed upon as it can artificially restrict the type of research conducted into the film and history discourse whilst also alienating research that has already been conducted. Using South Korean historical cinema as a case study, the arguments presented by notable film and history theorists towards historical film definition will be distilled to their core concepts to explore how and why a singular definition can potentially limit the film and history discourse. Furthermore, an alternative method of delineating the historical film will be proposed.

### **The conflicting definitions of the historical film**

The definition of what can be considered as a historical film has evolved significantly since the early stages of the film and history discourse. In the 1960s, the narrative historical films made during this decade, such as the South Korean films *Five Marines* (Cha & Kim, 1961), *The Sea Knows* (Kim & Kim, 1961) and *Nameless Stars* (Lee & Kim, 1959) were not considered as historical films, but were instead referred to as 'fictional films' (Ferro, 1968, p.46), 'reconstructed films' (Ferro, 1968, p.47) or 'costume reenactments' (McNeill, 1968, p.389). These historical films, that contained a cinematic reconstruction of the past and a fictional narrative inspired by history, were said to 'simply invite disaster' and that these types of films 'should be left to the entertainment industry' and out of historical scholarship (McNeill, 1968, p.390). This position was maintained due to the belief that the fictional nature of these films rendered its historical details false and superfluous. Nowadays the historical film is acknowledged to be historical fact fused with fiction and the genre has become synonymous with fictionalised

narratives with imagined dialogue and actors portraying historical figures. Where the film and history discourse of the 1960s created a clear division between the entertainment industry and historical scholarship, as the discourse matured these two opposing elements combined so that the intertwining of historical information and fictional storytelling devices became the central focus of historical film definition.

As many films are set within a historical setting, for instance the Japanese Occupation of Korea, World War II or the Korean War, it is important to have a clear definition of what constitutes a historical film in order to differentiate between the films that contain legitimate historical information and those that do not. However, after decades of historical film theory this central definition still remains elusive amongst film and history theorists. As stated by Constantin Parvulescu and Robert Rosenstone, '[o]ddly enough, for all the scholarship on the topic, attempts to define the historical film have been few and far between' (2013, p.1). Numerous film and history texts do not provide a definition of the historical film instead relying on the layman definition, specifically that a historical film is any that cinematically recreates documented eras or cultural events such as the Joseon Dynasty or the Second Battle of Yeonpyeong respectively. However, the theorists that do attempt to define the historical film frequently contradict each other, offering numerous different approaches to defining the genre. As a result, a definition that clearly outlines what a historical film consists of does not exist.

Despite decades of debate regarding film's place as a receptacle of historical information, Parvulescu and Rosenstone posit that it is still too early within the historical film discourse to be entirely accurate and comprehensive (2013). Consequently, this stubborn view has meant that the definition of the discourse's key concept remains vague (Peacock, 1991, p.11). However, Parvulescu and Rosenstone do offer a definition of the historical film genre, but it is one that aligns with the layman definition, stating that the historical film is any film that is 'consciously set in a past, some time before the production of the specific work itself' (Parvulescu & Rosenstone, 2013, p.1). Therefore, a historical film is any that has a narrative which takes place before the year of the film's production. As a result, films such as *Taegukgi* (Lee & Kang, 2004), a film set between 1950 and 1953, and *Northern Limit Line* (Jung & Kim, 2015), a film set in 2002, are considered historical as they were set before the year of the film's production. This sentiment is expanded upon by Marcia Landy who states that media practitioners who create historical content, including filmmakers and authors, recreate, interpret and re-examine historical crises in their craft and invest these events with 'great importance' (2001, p.1). Through this idea the function of the historical film becomes clearer, namely that these films cinematically recreate a crisis event from history. These crisis events can either be major, such as the Korean War, or minor, such as the Battle of Incheon, which the film recreates by interpreting it into a narrative to re-examine what truly transpired, and invests the event with emotion through themes and characters. Essentially, the amalgamation of the definitions provided by Parvulescu, Rosenstone and Landy, positions the historical film as any that recreates a historical event which took place before the year of production, and retells it through a fictional narrative.

While the aforementioned theories are a feasible definition of the historical film, for many theorists, such as Natalie Davis and Robert Burgoyne, it is too broad. For many scholars a historical film cannot simply be set in the past, but has to actively engage with the historical discourse. According to Davis, the historical film's narrative has to be either based on documented historical fact or have historical events play a centralised role within its story (2000, p.5). Under this requirement, a film such as *Private Eye* (Han & Park, 2009), which details the struggles of the Korean citizenry against the Japanese Colonial Government in the 1910s, would be considered a historical film as it details the factual struggle between these two factions despite not including any documented historical events or figures in its narrative. Burgoyne expands upon this definition by arguing that the historical film needs to be built upon 'documented historical events' and have direct references to relevant historical incidents (2008, p.4). Burgoyne elaborates that the 'events of the past constitute the mainspring of the historical film, rather than the past simply serving as a scenic backdrop or a nostalgic setting' (2008, p.4). Through this definition, films that faithfully recreate documented historical occurrences, such as *May 18* (Yoo & Kim, 2007) which recreates the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, would be considered historical as it 'draws its authority from recorded history' (Oscherwitz, 2011, p.44). However, as Davis and Burgoyne argue that historical events only need to play a centralised role in the narrative, the plot that surrounds these events can be fictionalised. For example, the film *Ode to My Father* (Stojáková & Youn, 2014) contains imagined characters who interact with factual historical occurrences. The film's fictional protagonist, Yoon Duk-soo, endures numerous documented historical events such as the Hungnam Evacuation of 1950 and the Vietnam War. Yoon and his actions within these events are fictional, but the events themselves are based on documented fact. As a result of this, the historical film becomes a hybrid of factual events and fictional storytelling devices (Kremmer, 2015).

While theorists like Davis and Burgoyne assert that the historical film has to reflect documented historical events, Robert Rosenstone widens the genre into two distinct types of filmic representation. The narratives of the first type can ask critical questions about history such as 'how and why political decisions [were] made in different historical regimes' as, in accordance to Davis and Burgoyne, its characters, plot and thematic content are filtered through documented historical events (2006, p.25). The second type of historical film does not focus on this historical evidence and instead uses the historical setting as a backdrop to frame its imagined narrative and characters in order to provide insights into past cultures through the depiction of day-to-day life and family dynamics. These narratives use filmmaking techniques such as a 'realist mise en scene [...] seamless narration and continuity editing' (Oscherwitz, 2001, p.53) to create visual images of past societies. Within these images the social environment of this historical culture, such as the interactions and reactions of average citizens to themselves, others and their possessions, are displayed naturally and spontaneously, resulting in a diegesis that reflects the reality of living in this specific historical era. However, this second type of historical film is constructed from speculation and invention, where historical evidence is repurposed to serve a fictional narrative (Kremmer, 2015). As Rosenstone states, 'the past on the screen is not meant to be literal [...] but suggestive, symbolic, metaphorical'

(2006, p.30) and as a result, the presence of this imagined narrative allows the film to explore a past culture without being tied directly to the historical discourse.

Despite the differences in historical film definition outlined thus far, no theorist has attempted to limit when a narrative has to be set in order for it to be considered historical. For instance, a film can either be set in the modern day or during the Stone Age, and still be classed as a historical film. By extension of this idea, several theorists posit that every film can be classified as a historical film. The theorists Michael Martin and David Wall argue that while the expected function of the historical film is to present a cinematic representation of historical events, people and locations, the historical film's second function is their documentation of 'the historical and cultural moment from which they emerge' (2013, p.448). The historical film is therefore a document in and of history (2013, p.448). Through their fictionalised narratives and cinematic depictions of past eras the historical film is a representation of history. However, by existing the same film is an artefact in history. The reason for this occurrence is that the process of constructing the historical film's representation of history imbues the text with the concerns and anxieties of the society that produced it (Burgoyne, 2008, p.6). As these concerns inevitably change, the representation of the past within each subsequent cinematic representation changes with it, resulting in an ever evolving history of the same event or era. For example, the 1961 film *Five Marines* reflects the staunch anti-North Korean stance South Korea's government held during this period through its repositioning of the Korean War as a holy crusade against the North. Yet, fifty years later *The Front Line's* (Jeong & Jang, 2011) representation of this conflict contained sympathetic characterisations of the North Korean infantry to reflect the humanitarian stance the South Korean government had towards the North during the 2000s. As stated by Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter, 'ideology shape[s] our perception of the past, and transform[s] raw facts into stories with causation and meaning.' (2001, p.1). This meaning is shaped by the concerns of the film's present context, and as such they can be studied to understand the culture that produced it. In this way, the first films that cinematically represented an event, such as the Korean War, were the 'first draft of history' as they contain the cultural concerns of the society that was temporally closest to the event (Westwell, 2013, p.384). This 'draft of history' is revised and rewritten through subsequent cinematic representation resulting in a history that is in near constant flux (Pramaggiore, 2013).

Amongst the debate surrounding what constitutes a historical film, there is also contention surrounding the title of the historical film genre. For some, the term historical film is not accurate and instead propose alternative terms. Two decriers of the term historical film are Thomas Keirstead and Marcia Landy. Keirstead proposes the alternative title 'period film', limiting the genre to the films set in a documented past, identifying the films that depict the Japanese Edo period as an example (2013). Likewise, Landy proposes the term 'heritage film', in which the past is reflected through the intricate detail of period reconstruction (2001). Under these reclassifications, the only films deemed worthy of inclusion within the historical film genre are those that are set within a past that is both temporally distant from modern society and requires a total physical recreation of antiquarian period details such as clothing, tools and buildings. As a result, films set in the 1930s, such as *Assassination* (Shen & Choi, 2015), would not be

deemed historical as the 20th century is not far enough in the past. Also, films set during the 1990s, for example *The King* (Han & Han, 2017), would not be considered historical because they do not require the total recreation of period details. In a discourse that is already characterised by much contention, the debate regarding the genre's title works as a microcosm of the contested nature of historical film definition.

### **The issue with the conflicting definitions**

The debate surrounding the definition of the historical film is expansive and the aforementioned theories are only a minute example of the arguments surrounding what does and what does not classify a film as historical. As Hayden White states, 'there is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything', and the contention surrounding historical film definition is an example of this (1978, p.127). The scattershot approach of film scholars towards defining the historical film has characterised the genre as inconsistent as films that are defined as historical by some, would not be by others. Consequently, in the film and history discourse any film can be considered historical depending on which definition is used. Yet these definitions not only dictate which films are historical, but also how the film's historical content is viewed and studied. For example, the film *Once Upon a Time in Corea* (Kang & Jeong, 2008) is an amalgamation of factual evidence and fictional narrative devices. The film's narrative concerns a diamond heist that occurs in the mid-1940s. While documented historical events and movements are included in the narrative, such as the Korean Independence Movement, the Japanese Colonial Government and the liberation of Korea from Japan in 1945, the main characters do not influence these historical occurrences. The usage of the mid-1940s as a narrative backdrop reflects the definitions of Landy (2001) and Rosenstone (2006), as the film recreates and repurposes historical crises to construct its narrative and reflect the culture of the Occupation period through its realist aesthetic.

However, the film assumes the audience has a knowledge of this historical period as the narrative's protagonists and antagonists draw their animosity from the documented tension between the Korean Independence Movement and the Japanese Colonial Government. As a result, the film also embodies the theories of Davis (2000) and Burgoyne (2008) as its narrative is intrinsically linked with documented historical fact. The film uses the Occupation period as a backdrop to its fictional narrative, but the dynamics of the characters are based firmly in history. As a result *Once Upon a Time in Corea* embodies the contradictions of historical film definition. It is a film that contains a fictional narrative, concerning itself with the reconstruction of period antiquarian details, while also using documented history to influence the dynamics of its characters and recreate historical events such as the liberation of Korea. The film can be viewed under both Landy's (2001) and Rosenstone's (2006) definition as equally as Davis' (2000) and Burgoyne's (2008). However, if only one of these definitions are used while studying the film, the historical focus of the definition that is not used is potentially ignored and, as result, this historical information can be lost. For instance, if the definition sways research towards how the historical culture is represented, there will be a lack of focus towards how the film recreates the historical event. Instead of studying both ideas equally, one is potentially ignored due to the definition chosen. This is the main issue with the

differing and contradictory definitions of the historical film. To frame historical texts under one of these definitions is doing a disservice to the discourse as it is needlessly rejecting other facets of vital historical research.

### **Possible reasons behind the inconsistency**

Since the 1980s countless research has been conducted into the film and history discourse using a variety of historical films to analyse certain facets of history (Rosenstone, 2006, p.7). During this period the historical film has remained undefined, resulting in a discourse that has built its research off of a core concept that is largely subjective. Yet while the issue with the multitudes of differing and contradictory definitions has been outlined above, there appears to be two main reasons why this concept lacks a central definition, namely to keep the historical rhetoric fluid and to not alienate past research from the discourse. The historical film's lack of a central definition keeps the film and history discourse both wide and deep. In fact, it is the widespread use of the layman definition which keeps the discourse from stagnating. Under the layman definition, countless films can be classified as historical. As a result, any film that depicts a certain historical era or individual can be studied as a part of the film and history discourse. The layman definition of the historical film has been utilised by theorists to adapt their theories and topics, such as genre theory and class representation, into the discourse. As a result, the only limitation placed on film and history scholars is deciding what historical film will best complement their research. The layman definition of the historical film is both open and flexible allowing theorists to discuss any topic in any multitude of historical films. If a complex, central definition of the historical film was to be applied to the discourse, under the likes of Davis, Burgoyne, Rosenstone and Keirstead, this flexibility will be greatly reduced. As a result, the theorist may no longer be able to pick a historical film that best represents their chosen topic, but will have to pick a topic that best fits into the films that are firmly defined as historical. Therefore, if a singular definition was to be applied, the discourse would narrow significantly and limit the research that could be conducted into the historical film.

The narrowing of the discourse leads into the second reason the historical film remains largely undefined, as this precise hypothetical definition may eject the majority of film and history research from the discourse. If a central definition of the historical film is eventually agreed upon, the layman definition will no longer be valid. Consequently, the films that were considered historical under the layman definition, and do not meet the requirements of the new central definition, would stop being characterised as historical films. Therefore, as these films are not considered historical, the research conducted into them would not be a part of the film and history discourse. For instance, research that frames its theories through the textual analysis of specific historical films, such as Chris Berry's 'All at Sea? National History and Historiography in Soul's Protest and Phantom, the Submarine' (2005), may no longer be considered research into the historical film, as the films they are analysing would cease to be considered historical. However, works like Hayden White's 'Historiography and Historiophoty' (1988a), that detail how the historical film constructs its representation of history would still be included in the discourse as this research concerns the function of the historical film and is not based

upon the analysis of a specific historical film. In turn, the film and history discourse will inevitably divide into two separate discourses. The first will be the traditional film and history discourse that examines the films that can be defined as historical, and the second will contain the research conducted into the films that are merely set in history.

The fluidity and inclusivity of the current film and history discourse clearly demonstrates why a central definition of the historical film has not yet been agreed upon. A central definition will limit the academic freedom of film and history scholars, artificially shrink the pool of knowledge that the discourse offers and irreparably divide film and history theory. In order to keep the discourse open and not alienate past and future research it is reasonable to conclude that a central definition never will, or should, be agreed upon.

### **Possible solution to the historical film issue**

Initially, a centralised definition of the historical film appears desirable. Theoretically, this definition would focus the discourse by concluding definitively what films are and are not historical. It is evident though that such a definition is as close to being found today as it was back in the 1980s. Yet the reasons dictated above demonstrate that the introduction of a central definition could prove detrimental to the discourse. However, as exhibited through films such as *Once Upon a Time in Corea*, the absence of a concrete definition creates issues when studying a film for its historical content, as depending on the definition of the historical film used to frame the research, artificial limitations restrict the study of important historical information. The historical film therefore faces a dichotomy. The current diverse range of historical film definitions, along with the hypothetical central definition, both actively limit the research potential of the historical film. However, a possible solution to this issue can be proposed after distilling the ideas of notable film and history theorists down to their base concepts. Rather than defining what type of history a historical film needs to depict, assessing a film's historical focus allows scholars to clearly separate the films with valid historical information from those without it. The research conducted by theorists such as Davis, Landy and Rosenstone reveals the three main foci of a historical film, namely the film's adherence to historical accuracy, its depiction of a past culture and its commentary on the culture that produced it.

The first focus assess the film's adherence to historical accuracy. This is in regards to whether the information contained within the primary sources of historical information, such as the correct names and personalities of historical figures, and the essential dates and outcomes of historical events, are maintained within the film or if the film's narrative relies on anachronism as a driving force. The second focus concerns the film's visuals. By analysing the film's mise en scene and iconography in regards to the era's tools, costumes and buildings a visual image of a historical culture begins to form. Then by studying why and how certain items are used and ignored, and how primary and background characters interact with each other, the film can visually depict the rituals, religion, government and social hierarchy of that culture. Unlike the first focus, this cultural study does not need to be contained in the narrative, but can be viewed in the background of scenes through actor performance. Finally, the historical film's third focus



is how the concerns and anxieties of the culture that produced the film are imprinted onto its narrative content. For instance, the positive or negative representation of war can reflect the political climate of the country that produced the film at that time, as reflected by the Korean War films produced by South Korea before and after the nation's democratisation. Using metaphor and themes, the contemporary anxieties of the film's present context is always somehow depicted in the film, such as how the American war film *M\*A\*S\*H* (Ericksen & Altman, 1970) used the Korean War as a metaphor for the Vietnam War through its thematic depiction of childlike soldiers, an ineffectual military bureaucracy and the frustration of mandatory conscription (Donald & MacDonald, 2014, p.232). As the definitions outlined by numerous film scholars can be categorised into at least one of these foci, it can be argued that if a film that depicts a historical period contains all three, including any potential subversions, it can be considered to be worthy of studying under the film and history discourse. As a result, the aforementioned definitions of what constitutes a historical film becomes secondary as long as the film or films being studied in some way embody these historical foci.

## **Conclusion**

The desired function of the definition of the historical film is to clearly differentiate the films with viable historical information from those whose narrative is merely set in a historical era. However, as demonstrated throughout this paper, this definition remains elusive. The existing definitions of the historical film range from a layman definition, which states that any film set in the past can be considered historical, to numerous strict definitions that can only be applied to a small subset of films. This paper has demonstrated that a singular definition of the historical film has not been agreed upon as it artificially alienates past research and restricts the type of research that can be conducted into the film and history discourse. The proposed three foci of the historical film genre are a potential solution to this issue, yet this is still far from definitive. After conducting decades of research without a central definition it is easy to conclude that the historical film will forever remained undefined by a single clause. Yet, through understanding the repercussions such a definition can bring to the discourse, it is understandable as to why the historical film is best left without a central definition.

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