Screening the Past: Film and History

All works of art and popular culture convey information about the condition of humankind at particular points in time, as each artefact is shaped by the cultural circumstances and dominant ideologies of the time it was produced. Consequently, the interpretation of a popular culture text in a historical context establishes relationships between the work and the social, political, and artistic developments at a certain time. While certain works are conscious reflections on contemporary historical and social developments, others convey dominant world-views in an unintentional or indirect way.

The study of mass media examines and interprets the influence of the mass media on our perception of reality. The matter has been approached in various academic disciplines, from sociology to literary criticism, and the research in this field has produced numerous insights as to how the media and contemporary societies interact in the creation of what we call reality. In order to convey content without the necessity of extensive explanation, the mass media make use of popular myths and stereotypes.

In every part of the world, traditional mythology offers symbolic and metaphoric explanations for the existence of human beings (vgl. Campbell/Moyers 1994: 42). Mythology is closely linked to religion and proposes certain value systems designed to guide people through life. Ancient stories convey moral guidelines and models of behavior, which have been repeatedly reinforced throughout the ages. Thereby, numerous myths have acquired a status of factuality for many people. For instance, in the United States, the widespread belief in the myth of creationism still poses a problem in the scientific debates about the evolution of the planet Earth. Consequently, once integrated in the common conception of reality, a myth can hardly be extinguished.

In the contemporary world of mass media, the dominant set of world views and beliefs in a society is repeatedly presented by all kinds of media. Roland Barthes describes how the continuous repetition of certain representations in mass media leads to the creation of contemporary myths. According to his theory, any kind of semiotic units, such as symbols, words, pictures, et al. can acquire additional connotations which 'charge' them with ideology (vgl. Biguell: 1997: 16). The set of values conveyed by these connotations constitutes modern mythology and

represents the ideology of the dominant class in a society: "[M]yth consists in overturning culture into nature, or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural'. What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a 'matter of course'" (Barthes: 1977: 165). This suggests that the pluralism of opinions in democracies is also always subordinated to a dominant system of values.

Every semiotic system is an expression of cultural, political, economical, and social myths in society. According to Barthes, the creation of these myths is a social phenomenon achieved by constant repetition and reinforcement of certain ideological messages (vgl. Barthes 1977: 165). People perceive everyday life 'filtered' by their basic value system.

Today, in our 'global village', film and television play an increasingly significant role in the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Most major blockbuster movies and television shows continually reinforce contemporary social values and conceptions, expressing as well as shaping the dominant value system of the social system they are part of. Dramatizations of history have always been among the most successful genres in the history of the moving image. From the classic *Gone with the Wind* to the more recent *Gladiator*, the movie industry has been a continuous re-interpreter and projector of history, feeding its audience with visions of the past, which have contributed considerably to the way we imagine what went before. Although many producers of popular culture texts dealing with the past like to point out that it is not their intention to re-create an authentic account of past events, because they mainly consider their products as entertainment, their influence on the audience's conceptions and imagination cannot be denied. John E. O'Connor explains how continual reinforcement shapes the public's notion of the past: "What a series such as *The Waltons* has to say about life in the Depression is likely to have a far more penetrating and long-lasting effect on the nation's historical consciousness than any number of carefully researched articles or books" (O'Connor 1983: xxxiii). While 'docudramas' may convey a certain flair of historical setting, historical films and television series are always limited by the conventions and codes of the genre they are part of. Therefore, they often merely represent stereotypical characters, settings, and storylines, which enable the audience to relate to what they see. Stereotypes, as defined by Walter Lippmann, are a form of "'ordering' the mass of complex and inchoate data that we receive from the world" (Dyer 1995: 11). This definition corresponds to Roland Barthes' definition of myths, as stereotypes are "a very simple, striking, easily-grasped form of representation but are none the less capable of condensing a great deal of complex information and a host of

connotations" (Dyer 1995: 11). Consequently, a myth is a repeatedly reinforced stereotype – a simplified representation of reality that becomes accepted by the audience as a natural fact. Seymour Chatman has called this process of accepting (literary) conventions as reality 'naturalization':

"Audiences come to recognize and interpret conventions by 'naturalizing' them [...]. To realize a narrative convention means not only to understand it, but to 'forget' its conventional character, to absorb it into the reading-out process, to incorporate it into one's interpretive net, giving to it no more thought than to the manifestational medium, say the English language" (Chatman 1980: 49).

In film, these conventions contain everything from the characterization of the individual characters to the way the plot is constructed. By using stereotypical elements of various kinds, the producers of popular culture texts enable the audience to relate to what is presented, as large segments of mass audiences have naturalized the conventions of the genres they prefer. Therefore, the audience will not be estranged by the way a storyline develops, or the way a protagonist is characterized. However, as pointed out by Richard Dyer, the need to order "'the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality' is liable to be accompanied by a belief in the absoluteness and certainty of any particular order, a refusal to recognize its limitations and partiality, its relativity and changeability, and a corresponding incapacity to deal with the fact and experience of blooming and buzzing" (Dyer 1995: 11). This means that the audience will accept continually reinforced myths as reality, which is highly problematic in the context of representing history on the screen. O'Connor points out that "[r]ather than plumb the complexities of issues, analyze the contradictions of human motivation, and interpret events from various perspectives in the context of their own time, film and television producers work to reduce complex issues and motives to simple ones and to present one view of events in a context with which the audience will feel immediately at ease" (O'Connor 1983: xxxvi). In film, history has always got a fictional dimension. Gaps in the historical record are filled, and ambiguities and complexities become polished (vgl. Carnes 1996: 9), in order to enable a conventional progression of the storyline and to meet the audience's expectations. Laura Seger explains the difficulty of turning historical events and biographies into movies.

"Film is a story medium. Aristotle told us that drama is about 'one action,' one consistent story line. Clearly he wasn't thinking of the true-life story. There are many stories within one life; a life defies cinematic neatness and creates difficulties for anyone choosing which story to show. If you're doing a film on Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, are you going to tell his whole life story or

only emphasize his part in the civil rights movement? Are you going to focus on his relationship with Coretta Scott King? Or perhaps it should be the story of the theological journey that led him to make a number of decisions about the relationship of religion and social action" (Seger 1992: 49).

In addition to the restrictions implied by a particular popular culture genre and the selective nature of biographical texts, historical accounts of a phenomenon such as The Beatles are also predominantly shaped by the particular point of view of who tells the story. In his recent cultural history of The Beatles, Steven D. Stark points out that one of the problems of re-creating the band's history is posed by the fact that The Beatles were already considered a historic phenomenon in their own time, and that it may be "close to impossible to write an objective history of the Beatles after 1963 that is unclouded by the revisionism of the participants, whether intentional or not. [...] Because of the group's unique kind of fame, those who knew the band tend to have an even stronger than usual stake in placing themselves at the center of the narrative" (Stark 2005: 7). Stark goes on to explain that the distortion of The Beatles' history was caused by the group's immense popularity.

"[T]here's a process with any historical figure by which those associated with the figure color their memories through the lens of subsequent events. With the Beatles, however, this process was exponential. The group reached a level of celebrity and adoration never seen before or since in modern times (Marilyn Monroe would be the closest, not Elvis). [...] Their aura was so blinding – they were just too famous and mythologized even then – that anyone around them formed impressions and recollections with the implicit awareness that these reminiscences would become instant fodder for the once and future gospel"(Stark 2005: 7).

As individual recollections of The Beatles' history are shaped or at least influenced by the impact of early mythologization, all histories of the band are to some degree clouded by myth. This is true for the countless books on the band as well as for documentaries and dramatizations of the band's history. While documentaries often contain interviews that express or reflect the particular point of view of the person interviewed, the producers of movies about The Beatles only consulted one or two people close to The Beatles at some point in their career, in order to emphasize the movie's authenticity. In fact, however, the choice of depending on the recollection of a few individuals limits a movie's objectivity. Although movies are generally not produced with the intention of educating the public's historical awareness, they literally project a vision of the past which is accepted as authentic history by large segments of the audience,

because they may not have the opportunity or desire to compare what is presented in the movie with other historical accounts or alternative sources. As pointed out by O'Connor, the historical film does not question or explain what is presented. Instead, it "establishes relationships between the facts and offers a more or less superficial view of them" (O'Connor 1983: xxxvi). These simplified and often subjective accounts of history are accepted as authentic portrayals by a less critical audience because of the power of the visual media. O'Connor explains that "unlike the historical monograph that invites response and rebuttal, the completed film or broadcast docudrama has a more powerful presence – the quality of a final statement" (O'Connor 1983: xxxvii).

Taking into account all the factors mentioned above, the dramatizations of The Beatles' history are necessarily characterized by the limitations of popular culture genres, the distortion of historical facts by individual perspectives, over-simplification of facts due to the medium's restrictions, and the film teams' interpretation of the events and circumstances constituting the group's history. Consequently, they perpetuate different versions of The Beatles' history, contributing to the confusion of fact and fiction and to the creation and modification of contemporary popular cultural myths.