The Nature of History
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"My initial prompt, both for writing 'The Nature of History' (aside from the actual essay prompt, handed out in class), and taking the stance that I did, was in the form of a sudden realization that if I didn’t start taking a completely one-sided stance in my essays, my grades would suffer. With that in mind, I took the side of a stance I agreed with a little bit more than the other, and simply proceeded to write a logical, persuasive, biased essay. In creating this, I learned some of the finer points of how to argue a given side in an issue where there is no actual gray area (even though that was not the case for the subject of 'The Nature of History'), which is a surprisingly (and depressingly) useful skill. It was only after writing a completely one-sided essay that I understood why I was being instructed to write them."

Essay Prompt: Write an essay in which you argue about the public interest in, knowledge about, and appreciation of history. In working to prove your point, be sure to incorporate specific examples of history (our awareness, lack of awareness, or false awareness of it). Consider the significance of these examples in relation to the public's overall interest in, knowledge about, and appreciation of, history. (Judy Harper, Instructor)

"Should we fail to study our past, we shall be doomed to repeat it.” This phrase is so common that one could almost consider it to be a cliché, but it is surprisingly accurate. An understanding of history grants common knowledge of what not to do. Many mistakes that have been made by humankind as a whole and by humans as individuals are documented in history, and the more one learns of the past, the less likely one is to repeat mistakes that have already been made. The trouble with learning about history is that history, in the traditional, textbook sense, is a tedious and relatively boring process. Because of this, more entertaining tools such as cinema are much more appealing than textbooks when considered as a way to educate oneself in historical events. While some would argue that using entertaining mediums instead of textbooks provides a flawed, distorted, or biased representation of the facts, overall, there is no more practical way to teach history to the general populace.

The majority of textbooks are rather boring, as they are burdened with obscure dates, names and brutal facts without much incentive for one to read them. The information they contain is presented in a clinical fashion, one piece of data after another, with little room for the reader to stop and let the words soak in. They also, in their effort to provide as much information as possible in the smallest amount of space, strip the humanity away from the past. Historical figures no longer appear to share the traits with the common man that they once did—we are taught only of their memorable accomplishments, and we learn little of their true nature. Because of this, it is often difficult for readers to relate to the issues covered in textbooks, as individuals of the past appear less human and therefore more distant and enigmatic. The reader's inability to identify with the information conveyed by such a medium inhibits his or her ability to learn from it, while more entertaining forms of education would work to remove this barrier.

Historical movies (such as JFK and Nixon) make the information they cover more accessible by touching on the more common human characteristics of the figures they focus on. This allows the audience to better relate to the subject, and therefore gain a better understanding of the facts that are presented. “Look, a movie is supposed to be gripping. It's supposed to be exciting. It's supposed to be watchable” (Atwan 261). This quote by film director Oliver Stone sums up the nature of cinema, specifically that of a historical nature. It must capture the audience’s attention, and when this is done with a historical subject, even those who may not desire to learn would find themselves inadvertently
discovering and retaining accurate historical facts as they immerse themselves in a gripping plot. Because of this, entertaining avenues for an education in history provide those they teach with a much greater ability to understand and retain the information they cover than a textbook covering a similar or identical subject would.

“What Americans want is not genuine history but history packaged as popular entertainment” (Atwan 242). The intention of this quote is to state that Americans do not wish to acquire any kind of historical knowledge unless it is presented in an entertaining fashion. This is true insofar as Americans (and people in general) prefer to learn through avenues that are engaging rather than tedious. While a more accurate account of past events can be gleaned from textbooks, few would endeavor to read them after their departure from a classroom environment, as the act of reading textbooks is typically considered too tedious to be pleasurable. History packaged as “popular entertainment,” is more accessible. Those who would never open a book on the subject eagerly sit at the edge of their seats, waiting for the past to unfurl itself in a way that is very new to them. This makes entertaining interpretations of history a very practical educational tool.

As many would argue, the trouble with such interpretations of history is that they can distort the facts, leaving the audience with a false concept of what really happened. The flaw in this line of thinking is that the past is always subject to interpretation. To again quote Oliver Stone: “As we know from Mr. Kissinger’s memoirs and those of other people, if you had five men in a room when an important decision was made, no two of them will agree later on what happened” (Atwan 260). The older an event is, the more diverse the first-hand eyewitness accounts of the event become. While in some instances one’s memory of a past event may change, it is almost always the case that accounts change due to a greater understanding of what led the event in question to take place as it did. As people grow older and wiser with experience and education, their ability to understand past events and their causes changes. New insights are gained with each passing day, and no two people will ever develop in such a way that their accounts and understanding of an event will be uniform. Different interpretations are therefore necessary in order to gain a more complete knowledge of history. There is no single, correct account of what exactly happened and why; true historical knowledge is subjective. The only objective way to compile as complete an understanding of the past as possible is to accept many different interpretations of it, which cinema allows us to do.

The question then becomes: which interpretations are valid, and which are not?
Since the past has vanished, how do we accurately recover it? How can we capture what it was like to live in another time? Films, photographs, and preserved or restored sites can offer some sense of the texture of the past—and some blockbusters budget astronautically for sets and costumes trying to make us feel the physical presence of the past—but the problem with trying to encounter an authentic past is that history, even just yesterday’s, can only be imagined. It cannot truly be relived because for that to occur the past itself would need to become present, a condition that so far remains only within the realm of science fiction (Atwan 243).

Due to the subjective nature of the study of history, it is often difficult to discriminate between valid and invalid accounts of the past. It is for this reason that we should not shun cinematic interpretations of historical events and figures, for they do nothing but provide a different outlook on what really happened, which we can use to further our understanding of the past.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. received heavy disdain for her work. It was “subjected to such criticism as ‘too pacifist,’ ‘too Asian,’ or ‘too feminine’” (Atwan 312). Many disagreed with her interpretation of the past, as it did not mesh with their own. These remarks came from those who believed that the monument should blatantly reflect the nature of the war. Disagreement over how to interpret history will always exist, but in the end, presentation of the facts is just as important as accuracy. Few would appreciate a violent, white, masculine monument that accurately portrays the death, destruction, and suffering that served as the core elements of the
Vietnam War. While it was indeed a terrible event, the monument to those that died as a result of it does not need to be as horrific as the event itself. Those who see it still learn of the scope of the war—tens of thousands of Americans were killed, and this monument makes that fact known more effectively than one that would portray the exact nature of their death as well. It did not “dull down” history. It made it more accessible. A depiction of the past must not only be accurate, but pleasing as well. We must be enticed to seek out historical knowledge if humankind is ever to remember its past, and an artistic and/or entertaining slant on the facts serves as the best means to this end.

It will always be argued that any interpretation of history that is accessible to the general populace is invalid. These interpretations do not present all the facts accurately. Some facts are distorted and others are excluded in the name of entertainment. The more entertaining an account of the past is, the greater the number of people who are exposed to that account will be. Many of these people would never have even heard of the subject otherwise, and it is for this reason that these accounts are not just valid, but necessary. They allow more people to learn of history, and to learn of the errors that were made in the past. They allow for more people to prevent themselves from making the catastrophic mistakes that have already been made. They prevent history from repeating itself in the worst way, and this is the desired function of an education in history. By understanding what caused the disasters of the past, we can avoid duplicating them in the future. Entertaining mediums allow many to understand what caused these disasters, and thus, entertaining mediums allow us to avoid their grim repetition.

Works Cited

