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Authenticating the imaginary: Cloaking with history the characters of O'Brian's fiction and Weir's film

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The interaction of scholarly history with popular history has provoked debate over the value and place of the latter in creating historical consciousness. The various issues meet conveniently in the Aubrey-Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian and the Peter Weir film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003). Using the critical work of Robert Rosenstone on historical film and David Harlan on historical fiction, this paper identifies ways in which the novelist and movie anchor historically credible narratives, noting which devices are particular to the novel and which to cinema. It also explores the interplay of historical facts with literary and cinematic devices, an interplay which creates an apparently seamless narrative where historical and fictional genre characteristics mutually reinforce an impression of historical realism. It then critiques this realism to uncover ways in which it is used to cloak invention, but also discusses ways in which the fictions of both literature and cinema can enhance historical understanding, particularly by creating an emotional reality that gives an access to the past.

Alternate ways of telling history, such as historical fiction and historical movies, traditionally have been viewed with suspicion by many historians, who at times have accused popular history of being 'destructive', a representation that 'opens the heart but castrates the intellect'.[1] Yet, just at the moment that Western historical modes of thinking achieved global dominance in the academic world, popular history in the form of novels, movies, comics, museums and electronic games have emerged as the most potent communicators of history to most people.[2] A number of historians have called for the profession to embrace these alternate ways and, instead of listing their failings, explore the ways in which different kinds of historical representation can capture different aspects of the past. For example, Australian Aboriginal historian Tony Birch has chosen the medium of literature for his work, arguing that 'the past is sometimes represented equally, or at times, more accurately through a range of textual forms, including story-telling and poetry', a view endorsed by fellow historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.[3] David Harlan calls for historians to outline how the various popular and academic modes of history should relate to each other, noting that each form 'has its own particular region of the past … and its own criteria for determining what counts as fact, its own research procedures and its own criteria of evaluation'. He argues that each medium offers unique historical perspectives that cannot be gained from the others, and so for example popular-history film 'stands adjacent to written history'. For this reason he asks that historians 'delineate and describe the relationships between the primary modes of historical representation'.[4] Similarly, Robert Rosenstone argues that film makers are historians, 'people who confront the past … and use

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[1] D. Harlan, 'Historical fiction and the future of academic history,' in K. Jenkins, S. Morgan and A. Muslow (eds.), *Manifestos for history* (London & New York, 2007), pp. 108-131, p. 120.
[2] Ibid., p. 108.
[3] D. Chakrabarty, 'History and the politics of recognition,' in Jenkins, Morgan and Muslow, *Manifestos*, pp. 77-88, p. 80.
[4] Harlan, 'Historical fiction', p. 121-122.

[films] to tell stories that make meaning for us in the present', but that they use evidence in different ways to traditional history.[5] His book explores how this happens in a number of key films.

Harlan's call for a delineation and definition of the relationships between history, fiction and film could be done in the abstract, but Rosenstone's example suggests that analysing specific texts is perhaps the most concrete way of exploring the ideas. The intersection of history, fiction and film found in the Aubrey-Maturin texts of Patrick O'Brian and Peter Weir offers a compact example of the relationships at stake: popular fiction and film grounded in serious history.

O'Brian's achievement in the twenty principal novels of his Aubrey-Maturin series has been widely acknowledged and praised, with some critics verging on hyperbole.[6] Not only has his writing been acclaimed for its usually impeccable historical fidelity, but he has won plaudits for his literary achievement as well. He has mastered perhaps the most challenging aspect of historical fiction: being true to the demands of both history and of fiction, and has been named the greatest historical fiction writer of all time by one influential reviewer.[7] Critics as formidable as T. J. Binyon, a literary scholar, crime writer and biographer in his own right, and Professor John Bayley, also a scholar and novelist, praised his historical accuracy, Binyon calling the series a 'brilliant achievement', displaying a 'staggering erudition on almost all aspects of early nineteenth century life, with impeccable period detail'.[8] He has been favourably compared to writers such as Jane Austen, Herman Melville and even Leo Tolstoy.[9] His stepson and biographer, historian Nikolai Tolstoy (distantly related to the Russian novelist) observes that he wrote of the history of the Napoleonic period 'with an effortless flow of instinctive realism'.[10]

O'Brian's expertise in so many arcane areas of Napoleonic-era life has inspired a minor publishing industry. Apart from two biographies of O'Brian, books have been written on the language and terminology of the series, on its geography, and its characters—human, animal and inanimate. There is the delightfully named cookbook, *Lobscouse and Spotted Dog: Which It's a Gastronomic Companion to the Aubrey/Maturin Novels*, and CD recordings of music from the novels. Academics and admirers have written critical essays on various facets of O'Brian's fiction, such as the nautical background, medicine, astronomy, marriage, natural science, law and politics, while fans have created websites and fan clubs devoted to his work.[11]

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[5] R. A. Rosenstone, *History on film/film on history* (Harlow, 2006), p. 30-31.

[6] O'Brian died in January 2000. The three partly-completed chapters of the unfinished twenty-first Aubrey-Maturin novel were published posthumously in 2004.

[7] R. Snow, 'An author I'd walk the plank for,' *New York Times book review*, 6 January 1991.

[8] T. J. Binyon, 'Review of *The Mauritius command*', *Times literary supplement*, 24 June 1977.

[9] R. Ollard, 'The Jack Aubrey novels: an editorial report,' in A. E. Cunningham (ed.), *Patrick O'Brian: critical essays and a bibliography* (New York & London, 1994), pp. 23-33, p. 24-25; J. Bayley, 'In which we serve,' in *Patrick O'Brian: critical essays and a bibliography* (New York & London, 1994), pp. 33-43, p. 35-36, 39; D. King, *Patrick O'Brian: a life revealed* (London, 2000), p. 269.

[10] N. Tolstoy, *Patrick O'Brian: the making of the novelist* (London, 2004), p. 298.

[11] See for example D. King, J. B. Hattendorf and J. W. Estes, *A Sea of words: A lexicon and companion for Patrick O'Brian's seafaring tales* (3rd ed., New York, 2000); D. King and J. B. Hattendorf, *Harbours and high seas: an atlas and geographical guide to the Aubrey-Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian* (2nd ed., New York, 1999); A. G. Brown, *Persons, animals, ships and cannon in the Aubrey-Maturin sea novels of Patrick O'Brian* (Jefferson NC & London, 1999); A. C. Grossman and L. G. Thomas, *Lobscouse and spotted dog: which it's a gastronomic companion to the Aubrey/Maturin novels* (New York & London, 1997); *Musical evenings with the captain vols I & II* (Dobbs Ferry, NY, 1996 & 1997); M. Tenenbaum and Y. Fiegelson, *Musical evenings with the captain: more music from the Aubrey-Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian* (Dobbs Ferry, NY, 2003); B. Surawicz and B. Jacobson, *Doctors in fiction: lessons from literature* (Oxford, 2009); J. R. Simmons, 'Jack, Steven, and Jane: Austen's domestic discord and Patrick O'Brian's *The Mauritius command*,' *ANQ*, 22, (2009), pp. 53-58; A. M. Sulentic, 'Law and morality in Patrick

In the author's note in several of the earlier novels in the series, O'Brian speaks of his devotion to authenticity, and how he writes with contemporary documents to hand, borrowing plots, poetry, and battle descriptions for his fictions, sometimes quoting them directly if he feels his own prose could not do justice to a scene.[12] Where he deviates from history, he usually scrupulously notes the fact, admitting for example that he edited out unimportant and irrelevant ships in the history of the Mauritius campaign, or that he would need to invent an 1812a or even an 1812b in order to continue his series. Eventually, he abandons chronological time and crams eleven novels into 1813-1814. With his characteristic wit, he concludes however that:

> *the reader will meet no basilisks that destroy with their eyes, no Hottentots without religion, polity or articulate language, no Chinese perfectly polite and completely skilled in all sciences, no wholly virtuous, ever-victorious or necessarily immortal heroes; and should any crocodiles appear, [the author] undertakes that they shall devour their prey without tears*.[13]

O'Brian's attention to detail is key to his extraordinary achievement in historical realism. By recording the minutiae of the world of his characters, he creates a sense of authenticity. His novels are replete with incredible detail, particularly nautical, but also in virtually every area of the period: national and regional social customs, music, food, politics, science, philosophy, military intelligence — and the list goes on. His publisher, Richard Ollard, and literary critics John Bayley and T. J. Binyon note how this accumulation of 'impeccable period detail' worked to create the sense of a real world.[14] Bayley compares his work to Jane Austen's: 'two or three inches of ivory…turning into art the lives of … a wooden ship of war',[15] although by the end of the series, O'Brian had created a canvas far bigger than Austen's, without losing anything of the fineness of detail. With the more technical aspects of his detail, O'Brian sometimes uses one of his characters to gloss terms that would be unfamiliar to common readers. By creating his two chief characters as masters of separate spheres (Aubrey of the sea and of his own limited social world, and Maturin of the scientific and political worlds) but pitifully ignorant in the other's specialities, O'Brian has reason from time to time to intrude exposition into his story without the reader feeling manipulated. Unlike another respected nautical fiction writer C. S. Forester, who habitually halts his story while he sermonises, O'Brian convincingly advances plot, mood and character development through these situations. Thus, Maturin is slowly inducted into the complex universe of a warship over many novels, his grasp of terms gradually increasing but never becoming secure or reliable, which in turn becomes the focus of humour and plot development. For example, in *The Thirteen Gun Salute*, Maturin in a moment of vanity attempts to dazzle government envoy George Fox with his mastery of nautical jargon, but when his explanations are accidentally revealed to be inaccurate by the sailors, the proud Fox considers himself to have been deliberately misled, causing complications in the professional relationship. Similarly, various major and minor characters require or give exposition within the novels, thus usefully informing the reader as well.[16]

But O'Brian is also confident enough to allow arcane language to have its own effect, even if it is obtuse to most readers. Biographer Dean King notes that 'He trusted the power and poetry of words. Standing alone, they accomplished more, even if only partially understood, than they would with prosaic

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O'Brian's *Post captain*,' *Journal of maritime law and commerce*, 34, (2003), pp. 583-613; K. Morrison, 'Patrick O'Brian: (dis-)United Irishman at sea', *Irish studies review*, 8, (2000), pp. 339-351; G. S. Mumford, 'Patrick O'Brian's astronomy,' *The astronomy education review*, 2. (2004), pp. 127-137; www.patrickobrian.com; www.cannonade.net; www.hmssurprise.org.

[12] See for example the author's notes in *Master and commander* (Waukegan Il, 1977); *The Mauritius Command* (Waukegan Il, 1979); *The Ionian Mission* (Waukegan Il, 1982); *The Far Side of the World* (Waukegan Il, 1985).

[13] Author's note, *The Far Side of the World*.

[14] Ollard, 'The Jack Aubrey novels', p. 24-25, 29; Bayley, 'In which we serve', p. 35-36; Binyon, Review of *The Mauritius command.*

[15] Bayley, 'In which we serve', p. 36.

[16] King and Hattendorf, *Harbours and high seas,* p. 1.

definitions'.[17] O'Brian also tries to have his characters speak in the various dialects of the time, and even his own prose to some extent reflects the diction of his chosen period. He avoids anachronism, both in the world of his characters and in the language, he uses to describe them. Ollard notes the extraordinary achievement of having every element of the novels, from surface external details to ideas and manners, 'observed and described with the exactitude of an expert', and it is the assurance with which O'Brian handles such matters that convinced one reader that 'we are in the safest possible historical hands'.[18]

His dense use of detail and jargon creates the effect of overwhelming authenticity, but also occasionally of intimidating scholarship and of preening. Critical reactions are divided on this score: some praising his ear for just the right dialect and tone while others note his comic ineptness at reproducing certain dialects and his combative need to crush others into submission with the weight of his knowledge.[19] However, there is no doubt that, despite occasional lapses, O'Brian's capacity to create a complete sense of a former age is vital to the success of his novels. Film mogul Sam Goldwyn accurately observes, 'Lifestyle was the essence of his books. He really wasn't interested in plot. He said it himself. He said he was far more interested in fabric'.[20]

Underpinning the fabric is the way O'Brian closely models his stories on historical events. The flamboyant life of Lord Cochrane provides inspiration for Aubrey and Maturin at the start of their career in *Master and Commander*, and also in the later *The Reverse of the Medal*, while *HMS Surprise*, *The Mauritius Command* and *The Fortunes of War* are also closely grounded in historic events. Many supporting characters, ships and events are drawn from history, strengthening the impression of actuality. In the early novels, where O'Brian has tweaked events to suit his purpose, he usually alerts the reader in a foreword, thus improving the credibility of the rest of the material with the admission. However, when he enters his extended fictional time of 1813-1814, he trusts his authorial credibility and largely abandons the practice of justifying himself to his readership.

Alongside the formidable accuracy of his historical material, the impression of historicity and realism is also built through the literary dimensions of the series. O'Brian has created work which compares with great literature, primarily through his wonderfully engaging, complex characters, but also through his carefully constructed plots and mastery of style. It is through this persuasive interior world, the psychological reality of his characters, that O'Brian maintains the reader's illusion of having entered into an earlier age. Comparisons with other writers in the popular Napoleonic naval fiction genre highlight this. Forrester's Hornblower is an interesting character, if somewhat anachronistic at times, but the novels are otherwise populated with stock figures. Authors such as C. Northcote Parkinson and Alexander Kent are accurate enough with nautical detail but create heroes as wooden as their ships inhabiting a social world as flat as their personalities. Despite being notorious for his inability to maintain close male relationships in real life, O'Brian has realised one of literature's most dynamic friendships in Aubrey and Maturin, characters as interesting and complex as any in literary art.[21] He himself said, 'The essence of my novels is human relationships and how people treat each other. That seems to me to be what novels are for. They permit some pretty close examination of the human condition'.[22]

O'Brian's development of female characters has sometimes been criticised, and his personal antipathy to children finds repeated voice in the novels.[23] The exception is Maturin's emotionally deprived daughter Brigid, who may reflect O'Brian's own sense of a lonely childhood.[24] There may be

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[17] King, *Patrick O'Brian*, p. 65.

[18] Ollard, 'The Jack Aubrey novels', p. 24; W. Waldegrave, 'Introduction,' in *Patrick O'Brian: critical essays and a bibliography* (New York & London, 1994), pp. 9-15, p. 11.

[19] Bayley, 'In which we serve', p. 39, Waldegrave, 'Introduction,' p. 12; J. Symons, 'Review of *HMS Surprise', Sunday Times*, 19 August 1973; T. Flanagan, 'Review of *The thirteen-gun salute*, *New York times book review*, 4 August 1991; King, *Patrick O'Brian*, p. 211, 229-230, 273; Tolstoy, *Patrick O'Brian,* p. 180-181.

[20] Cited in T. McGregor, *The making of Master and commander: the far side of the world*, (London, 2003), p. 5.

[21] King, *Patrick O'Brian*, p. xvii.

[22] Cited in McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 3.

[23] Bayley, 'In which we serve', p. 29; Tolstoy, *Patrick O'Brian,* p. 399.

[24] P. O'Brian, 'Black, choleric and Married?', in Cunningham, *Patrick O'Brian,* p. 16.

some reservations about the two central characters of Aubrey and Maturin. Aubrey's innocence ashore and brilliance at sea at times is carried too far, as is Maturin's intellectual and moral superiority.[25] Both suffer an extraordinary number of severe wounds and illnesses, and a pair of medical reviewers describe Maturin's heroic self-surgery of extracting a bullet from under his own ribs as 'pure fantasy'.[26] Other fantastical elements are the monastic garden that Maturin discovers in *The Thirteen-Gun Salute* and his massive overreaction to the sting of a platypus in *The Nutmeg of Consolation*. The two characters find themselves in an amazing number of sea battles, but in defence of O'Brian, his battles are sometimes few and far between; it is only the cumulative effect of twenty novels that produces this impression, and any given novel is realistic in the frequency of its action scenes.

Despite these criticisms, O'Brian's characters are a major achievement, which a few indulgences do little to undermine. The medical critics, while unconvinced by aspects of Maturin, conclude that his polymath accomplishments are not far off the mark compared to some sound historic examples of the era, while Ollard considers the magical garden as 'useful in undercutting the high degree of historical accuracy'.[27] The characters of Aubrey and Maturin reflect to some degree the author's own highly complex personality, with Maturin in particular increasingly acting as the author's alter ego, even to being the Irishman that the Anglo-German O'Brian affected to be.[28] Critics note the general absence of sentimentality in the portrayal of the characters, for O'Brian endows his heroes with their fair share of the weaknesses and follies of humanity, and he can kill off major supporting characters such as Maturin's dashing wife Diana or Aubrey's faithful coxswain Barrett Bonden with a chillingly distant cold-bloodedness that leaves the devoted reader stunned.[29] Even the minor characters shine with individuality. Richard Snow summarised the importance of O'Brian's characters:

> *But in the end it is the serious exploration of human character that gives the books their greatest power: the fretful play of mood that can irrationally darken the edges of the brightest triumph, and that can feed a trickle of merriment into the midst of terror and tragedy. O'Brian manages to express, with the grace and economy of poetry, familiar things that somehow never get written down, as when he carefully details the rueful steps by which Stephen Maturin falls out of love.*[30]

O'Brian's sure handling of plot also contributes to the sense of historicity. By refusing to formularise, he reproduces the randomness of real life. His narrative skill is praised for its 'endlessly varying shocks and surprises – comic, grim, farcical, and tragic', and his light ironic humour distinguishes him from his nautical fiction competition and again raises the comparisons with Austen.[31]

O'Brian's historical persuasiveness is based on his layering of minute, acutely observed historical detail, couched in the language and sentiment of the period as well as grounded in historic actions. While he pays attention to accuracy in his general portrayal of the period and of particular events within it, he is even more attentive to an aspect of history too frequently overlooked by conventional historians: the minutiae of little facts that shaped the daily lives of ordinary people. By marrying this attention to domestic detail to his outstanding literary skills, working within yet transcending the established codes of literary realism to create an astonishingly realistic emotional fictional world, O'Brian generates the impressions, sensations and emotions of inhabiting a past age, and blurs the genre boundaries that could otherwise define his period fiction.[32]

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[25] Bayley, 'In which we serve', p. 39.

[26] Surawicz and Jacobson, *Doctors in fiction,* p. 19.

[27] Surawicz and Jacobson, *Doctors in fiction,* p. 20; King, *Patrick O'Brian*, p. 308.

[28] King, *Patrick O'Brian*, pp. xvii, 207, 349-350; Tolstoy, *Patrick O'Brian,* pp. 166-167.

[29] Ollard, 'The Jack Aubrey novels', p. 25; Snow, 'An author I'd walk the plank for.'

[30] Snow, 'An author I'd walk the plank for.'

[31] King, *Patrick O'Brian*, pp. 329-329; Binyon, 'Review of *The Mauritius command'.*

[32] King, *Patrick O'Brian*, p. 260.

The movie *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (Peter Weir, 2003) has a very difficult task to accomplish. Being based on O'Brian's fiction, its representation has a twin standard to meet: that of being true to history and to O'Brian. Furthermore, it also has to work as a stand-alone movie for the many who know little of either. For all audiences, however, it has to create a sense of historical realism. Weir and his film crew went to considerable effort to achieve this, and the techniques used form an interesting comparison with O'Brian's fiction. Again, a publishing industry sprang to life with several volumes explaining the making of the film and the history of the Navy of the period.[33]

The difference in approach of course was that O'Brian's fiction is made up of words, whereas the film is constructed primarily from images. Weir makes the beautifully informative observation about a film maker working from a novel:

> *And the first thing you do when you pick the book up as a film maker, [holding an O'Brian novel by the spine and gently shaking it] all of the words fall out onto the table, and all you're left with is, you know, the cover, the front cover and back cover and the skeleton of the plot and the ghostly shape of the characters, and you have to replace that prose with images. And it is the most extraordinary experience to attempt to do that. And I think that has been the great challenge with O'Brian, is to provide a kind of way of telling his story visually that would equal his prose or at least do it justice.*[34]

Historians, and literary critics, can overlook the essential truth that Weir highlights here: that film is not a written text and requires a different starting point. History books and novels use words; to that extent one can compare the genres. But film uses images as its primary means of communication, with dialogue and other sound effects as additional means. The change of medium requires film makers to seek the visual equivalent of the words of a book. Because images, especially moving images, are simultaneously more literal and more general than words, the way in which meaning is generated, shaped and understood in film follows a different process. When a book speaks of a historical artefact, it can describe it in words with some precision; however, a film shows an actual, specific artefact (even if it is a constructed prop imitating a historical one), thus being a more concrete particularisation of history. At the same time, an image's meaning is more open to interpretation, thus a film is typically more polysemic than the written text. And, as with translations from one language to another, translating a written text to a visual medium raises the problem of combining both the denotative and connotative dimensions of the original text. Images, by their very nature, are significantly more connotative than words, leading to film generally having a greater emotional impact in comparison to the written text, which usually has a greater capacity for conveying facts, data and rational thinking.

Despite the differences, the media-specific techniques resemble each other to some extent. Weir and his crew tried to match O'Brian's attention to detail, both because this is what is required to give a film the look of authenticity and because they were dealing with O'Brian's material. Weir comments, 'It was the fabric, the clothes, the very nails on the deck … it was that I thought I had to acknowledge'. Leon Poindexter, the shipwright engaged to transform the frigate *Rose* into *HMS Surprise* for the film remarks, 'Often a movie is ruined because the details aren't right … The historical accuracy just isn't there and there are so many flaws that it just becomes kind of silly. Also, Patrick O'Brian was very fussy about detail and getting it right, and I think we've also gone to great lengths'.[35]

Like O'Brian, Weir surrounded himself with the paraphernalia of the period to help create the mood while he was script writing. When it came to visual detail, the film makers had a replica of Admiral Lord

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[33] For example, B. Lavery. *Jack Aubrey commands: a historical companion to the naval world of Patrick O'Brian*, (Annapolis MD, 2003); McGregor, *The making of Master and commander.*

[34] Weir interview in D. Prior and J Campbell, *The hundred days: Being a document of Peter Weir and Co. during their production of Master and commander: The Far Side of the World*: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003.

[35] McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 11; Poindexter, in McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 28.

Nelson's cutlery set made, though it appears in shot only momentarily. Rope for the ship was custom-made to have the left-hand lay of the period. Clothing, hammocks, shoes, lanterns, guns and the rest of the paraphernalia that cluttered an early nineteenth-century frigate were handmade at great expense to create the right 'look'. Similarly, the sound crew went to great lengths to record the actual sounds of various cannon and the sounds of shot hitting timber or flying through the air. The Horn storm sequences were carefully assembled from an amalgam of actual storm footage from the Horn, footage shot in the Fox Studio tank at Baja, Mexico, and Computer Generated Images (CGI) in order to create a 'realistic' storm for the movie. The makeup was carefully researched, and even teeth were distressed to match the period's standard of dental care.[36]

Weir made no attempt to portray O'Brian's physical descriptions of Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, considering this to be a side issue to capturing their essential character and friendship. However, in another feature specific to film, he went to great lengths to hire extras from the newly opened Eastern European nations, mainly rural Poles, having noticed while watching footage of the fall of Communism how: 'They've not had those 'Kodak' moments; no concept of an image to project to the screen'. He felt this captured an innocence and authenticity of a pre-media age.[37]

To create the illusion of realism, Weir and his crew had to bend reality in many ways. For example, the literal realism of the storm footage from the Horn was enhanced with tank and CGI footage to create a storm that would impress movie goers. Similarly, while the sound crew went to great lengths to record actual guns firing, they were not always happy with the results, and edited them in order to generate a kind of hyperrealism, a sound which audiences would think was realistic, and which would match the effect they wished to achieve in the film. The balance between authenticity and cinema was exposed by a crew member's comment, 'you realise that these things are well researched and they actually work on camera'.[38] In the end, a movie must *appear* realistic, regardless of how realistic that actually is.

This is an important element to keep in mind when discussing the way in which cinema and history interact. The impression of historical reality has taken on its own proportions as multiple historical movies have created particular genre expectations which, if not fulfilled, can leave audiences claiming that it was not 'realistic'. Of course, most movie goers have no experience of the actual realism of what they have seen; the realism is measured against what they have come to expect from other similar movies. Hence for example, the huge sprays of splinters when cannonballs strike the ship are grossly exaggerated, but necessary to create a cinematic impression.

While Weir and his crew followed a similar principle to O'Brian in authenticating their story by the accumulation of thoroughly researched minute detail, film has its own unique codes of authenticating its representations. As film imitates the process of human visual perception, and as sight is our most trusted sense, it has a high degree of self-authentication through this mimicry. Add to this the codes of realist cinema, whereby the process of film making is largely hidden from the audience, and film develops a naturally high level of credibility. And because cinema's primary appeal is emotional, rather than rational, the impression of reality is stronger through reduced analysis.

And just as O'Brian added significantly to the power of his history through the successful exploitation of the literary conventions of his writing, so too Weir has used the cinematic conventions of film in attempting to authenticate his work. However, his efforts are markedly less successful than those of O'Brian. Weir has followed the conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema too closely to the detriment of the impact of the film, both as a movie and as history. The historical flaws result from attempts to make exciting the drama of the film, such as the time it takes to decide to cut loose the fallen mizzen-mast at the cost of the life of popular sailor Warley, or the French launching a surprise attack when the British

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[36] D. Prior, *In the wake of O'Brian, in which Peter Weir and co. embark on adapting the Far side of the world to the screen*, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003; McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 28-29, 42; *The hundred days*; D. Prior, *On Sound Design: a first-person account of the efforts of Richard King in his endeavour to bring to life the aural world of Aubrey and Maturin*, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003.

[37] Prior*, In the Wake of O'Brian*; McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 154.

[38] McGregor, *The making of Master and commander,* p. 88.

board the Acheron. Making Aubrey think of disguising his ship after seeing one of Maturin's insect specimens also runs against the grain of both history and the novels, and weakens its effectiveness. The worst is when the ship's master, Mr Allen, commits screen suicide by saying out loud when boarding the Acheron that no-one is there. Predictably, sadly, he is instantly shot in the head. Yet the film has its moments of subtlety and texture, as when Aubrey casts a lingering admiring look at an Indian beauty in a canoe alongside, having just bellowed an order about not letting women aboard. Unfortunately, despite all the loving attention—or perhaps in part because of it—the movie is nobly tame and predictable. Nikolai Tolstoy approved of it on behalf of his stepfather, arguing that O'Brian 'would have been delighted with his meticulous concern for historical accuracy and, much more importantly, the subtle nuances of the attractively eccentric friendship between the principal characters'.[39] But as a number of reviewers noted, it is filled with outstanding elements, yet the whole fails to satisfy.[40] Its mixed reviews more or less matched its box-office reception. In this sense, it is perhaps the opposite of Weir's greatest piece of historical movie making, *Gallipoli*, which was hugely successful as a piece of cinema, yet disappointing in aspects of its history.

So, unlike O'Brian, the film fails as a convincing historical piece not so much because of its few historical lapses, but because it fails to persuade as a piece of cinema. According to some reviewers, it was too boys-own.[41] But in the process it illustrates the strong similarities to historical fiction, although it uses a different medium to achieve it. Both historical fiction and historical movies must succeed both as history and as fiction. The history is achieved through the layered accumulation of acutely observed, minute, usually domestic, detail, while the fictional dimension is achieved by creating an emotionally and psychologically believable world. Both novelist and film maker achieve the first; only O'Brian succeeds completely in the latter, by respecting genre conventions but refusing to bow to them. With character-driven, realistically unpredictable plots, O'Brian creates a world that resembles the real; Weir's plot is more linear, its outcomes are more predictable and his characters more limited in scope.

Perhaps the element of historical fiction with which historians struggle the most is the fictional recreation of an interior emotional world. Yet as this study demonstrates, historical fiction has the power to reimagine the lost interior emotional world of the past, offering a historical insight that conventional history can rarely give. To be successful, historical fiction must respect two superficially separate disciplines, that of history and that of fiction. In fact, failure in either can undermine the historical impact. It is O'Brian's great achievement that he has been able to marry the facts of history to a fictional mode while maintaining every appearance of reality in both historical and fictional genres. In this dynamic, each element acts to reinforce the other, indeed sometimes covering for minor lapses in the other. Weir has impressed with his efforts to recreate a cinematically historically accurate world, but has failed in the attempt to create a truly persuasive fictional world. But in that failure, one can still see clearly the dynamic interplay of history, fiction and film which gives to modern audiences' emotional immediacy to an otherwise distant past.

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[39] N. Tolstoy, 'Master and deceiver,' *Times of London*, 30 November 2003.
[40] M. LaSalle, 'Grab your breeches, hoist the mainsail and prepare for an epic ride - but is 'Master and commander' seaworthy?' *San Francisco chronicle*, 14 November 2003; J. R. Jones, 'Review: Master and commander: The far side of the world,' *Chicago Reader*, 1 July 2003; E. Taylor, 'Crowe Becalmed,' *LA weekly*, 20 November 2003.
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