

Unit 6203 Screen Analysis 3  
OzScreen: Constructing Histories

# EMOTION PICTURES

An examination of the ways in which history films emotionalise the past,  
with particular reference to *Phar Lap*, *Gallipoli* and *Strikebound*

A paper

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Filming historical stories is a risky business; commercially, dramatically and culturally. Unlike most written history, the history film is concerned with an emotional journey, as well as an ideological and sociological one. The concerns of history and drama overlap, but do not match, and film's uneasy balancing act between art and commerce can easily become perilous when history is added to the load.

Some believe that only film can "recover the past's liveliness".<sup>1</sup> Others question whether it is possible to tell historical stories on film without losing "our professional or intellectual souls".<sup>2</sup> Despite the risks, film-makers continually delve into the past as a source of inspiration and subject matter.

Australian film-makers have traditionally had a particular interest in historical stories. Our desire to stand alone and establish an independent identity from Britain and the United States led to a spate of films in the 1970s and early 80s which focused almost exclusively on local historical subjects. *Phar Lap*, *Gallipoli* and *Strikebound* were among the most important of these films.

Unlike some other examples that come to mind, like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Man From Snowy River*, these three films attempt to deal with undisputed and actual events. The creators of the films took on the difficult task of melding drama and history at a time when the search for an Australian identity was more intense than ever before. I believe the success of these films was due to the film-makers' attention to the needs of history *and* drama. Instead of one element overwhelming the other, as is so often the case, the history supported the drama and vice versa.

The key element of drama is conflict. Conflict leads to an emotional response in the viewer. In this paper I will examine the ways in which the films *Phar Lap*, *Gallipoli* and *Strikebound* bring history alive by imbuing historical conflict events with a sense of meaning and emotion.

As someone who has written both formal history and film screenplays, my focus will be on the elements that film does not share with written history; sound, cinematography and dramatic structure. When correctly used, all of these add up to something I call emotional truth - a much greater and more important thing, in my view, than plain historical fact.

### SOUND

In the hands of a clever writer, and in the mind of a reader with a good imagination, sound can often play a part in a literary experience. But where history is concerned, sound becomes a problem. There is always the pressure to only describe that which can be proven to have happened; or at least that which is suggested by the available evidence.

The film-maker is not bound by these strictures. Historical research can be used as a foundation, but need not be a burden. Film and television viewers in the late twentieth century have shown themselves to be able to cope with visual and auditory information that their predecessors could not have hoped to understand. All of this means that the only rule these days, in sound design as in everything else, is that if it works, use it.

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The soundtracks of *Phar Lap*, *Gallipoli* and *Strikebound* each have an emotional and historical resonance, but for quite different reasons. In *Strikebound* most of the sound is grounded within the frame. The first thing we hear is a low, ominous rumble as the miners' lights approach, reminiscent of the synthetic sounds Walter Carlos used to great effect in *A Clockwork Orange*. However most of the music in the film comes from the era; workers' songs, marching band music, solo melodies on tin whistles and banjos. Music is used to enhance the strong feeling of community that permeates the film, and is often generated by the characters themselves.

The voices in *Strikebound* also have a musicality to them (no doubt informed by the oral history origins of the project) from the lilting Scottish accent of Chris Haywood's Wattie Doig, to the rich tenor of Hugh Keays-Byrne as Idris Williams, to the staccato voice of Birch, the boss of the mine.

Visually, the Sunbeam Colliery is a murky, shadowy place, but it is aurally rich; full of dripping water, picks on rock, throbbing machinery sounds, horses breathing, sudden blasts. There is an impression that the mine is a living organism, with the men like ants at its service. The other key soundtrack element is a bass guitar, always playing the same note. Sparingly used, the bass builds a sense of tension at key moments in the film.

The soundtrack of *Phar Lap*, by contrast, is modelled very much on the traditional Hollywood model; pure realism with orchestral melodies to press emotional buttons in the audience at the right moments. It's an old method, and a good one, used to great effect here. Bruce Rowland's score suggests both the awesome power and magical beauty of the famous horse in flight. Long sequences in the film, such as the slow motion training run in the sand dunes, are treated in a very visceral way - almost like a video clip. Delicate piano, guitar and flute often work in opposition to big horns and orchestral effects - underlining Phar Lap's extraordinary combination of great strength and fragile grace.

Initially there is only a hint of the beautiful and sentimental main theme, when Phar Lap (Italian for lightning) is named by his trainer to jeers from his mates. As the horse fulfils the faith placed in him, the theme becomes more and more confident, until eventually it becomes a huge and mighty anthem. These are the sorts of things that written histories can only hint at, and help to make explicit and understandable what might otherwise seem an unjustified fascination with an animal who was, as a journalist points out early in the film, "just a horse".<sup>3</sup>

When dealing with a mythic story, such as this one, the film-maker's task is at once to do justice to the myth and surprise the audience with new revelations. The use of iconic music in the film - "The Last Post" after Phar Lap's death; "The Road to Gundagai" after a victory - counterpoints new and old in surprising combinations which produce emotional responses in the viewer. At other times the soundtrack is used to fast-track the narrative, such as the newsreel and radio voices which are run together, montage-style, at various times.

In *Gallipoli*, another historical story of mythic dimensions, Peter Weir and his collaborators took the soundtrack a step further. For the main theme they chose one of the most tragic pieces of music ever written, Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor". Other surprising musical

choices included Georges Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" and French electronic musician Jean-Michel Jarre's "Oxygene". These diverse sources come together to create a surprisingly unified musical landscape for the film, as strange and alien as the various deserts of the story.

*Gallipoli* is about the painful emergence of a nation out of the wreckage and destruction of war. Rhythmic, pulsing synthesisers and weeping strings set this counterpoint up perfectly in an aural sense. At the same time the sound effects work hard to take the audience with Archie and Frank on their journey from Australia to the Dardenelles, from innocence to tragedy. The minimal, sparse soundscape of the opening sequence is transformed by the end into an aural assault of exploding shells, screaming men and rattling machine guns. The overall effect is of a painstakingly researched, three dimensional, moving diorama.

### MOVING PICTURES

Just as music, dialogue and effects each play a role in defining the emotional world of the history film, so do the visual elements of composition, colours, texture, locations, movement and spectacle. Peter Weir has said of *Gallipoli* that he "wanted to give the film an abstract start", and attempted to "free it from a period feeling to increase that quality".<sup>4</sup> In practice this seems to mean staying out of the cities, working with a palette of khaki, blue and sand colours, and avoiding conventional battlefield set pieces.

The widescreen format allows the landscape to become a character, as is so often the case with Australian films. Whether it is viewed as an aggressive force, or a sublimated feminine thing which needs to be dominated and controlled, is up to the viewer. In either case, the physical landscapes of *Gallipoli*, from the Western Australian salt lakes to the Turkish cliffs themselves (actually filmed in South Australia), are treated in very stark physical terms which go far beyond anything possible in a written history.

*Phar Lap* also uses the widescreen to great effect. The bodies of the horses are photographed like dancers, or the athletes in Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, all rippling muscles and flying manes. There is a physical dynamism about the film which is pure cinema, and has much in common with the treatment of the beautiful young runners in *Gallipoli*. Tommy Woodcock, the humble trainer, is presented as a pure masculine hero in the best Hollywood style. There is also a slightly seedy note in the visuals which underlies the often sumptuous settings (such as the Mexican racing palace at the end), reinforcing the subtextual idea of dark forces working to bring about the downfall of that is pure and noble in the world.

If films are mainly about moments, as William Goldman has suggested,<sup>5</sup> then the classic moment in *Phar Lap* is the one near the end where the mighty horse keeps going to win even as he bleeds through the bandages on his foot. It is a purely visual idea, almost abstract in its simplicity, without any human element, and yet it sums up what made this horse so different more eloquently than the proverbial thousand words.

*Strikebound* presents a grittier view of things. There is none of the panoramic feeling of the other two films. The window is an Academy frame. Everything is claustrophobic and contained. The characters exist within a series of walls and cages; the mine, house, church and meeting rooms. Even when people are outside there is a sense of containment - Wattie

and Agnes always seem constrained by barbed wire, fences, bridges and alleys. Of course all this perfectly suits the subtext (as well as the budget) of the film. Whether it is true to the historical facts is another matter, but what is important is that it *seems* true.

Film is often criticised for its shortcomings as history. Critics argue that it lacks the ability to compare, judge, and review. But these weaknesses are more than made up for by the medium's ability to give a "feeling" for what things were actually like.

One long scene in *Strikebound* perfectly demonstrates this; it simply shows Wattie washing the coal dust off his body after work. The scene gives little in the way of facts and figures, but supplies a world of detail about how it must have felt to be a coalminer in the 1930s. There is also the continual visual counterpoint in *Strikebound* between life on the surface and life below. The film's sparks come from the collision of these two worlds, represented by Agnes and Wattie.

### COMPROMISE OR TRAVESTY?

The first challenge for the screenwriter dramatising any piece of history is choosing whose story you're going to tell. Apart from biography, history is generally concerned with movements and big forces rather than individuals. Cinema, on the other hand, demands individual heroes, apart from rare examples such as *Battleship Potemkin* and *Oktober*.

David Williamson's screenplays for *Phar Lap* and *Gallipoli* both present heroes in the classical mould. Both are also love stories in a sense as well. *Phar Lap* presents the love between a strapper (Tommy Woodcock) and the horse he knows as Bobby. *Gallipoli* deals with the close friendship (and some suggest sublimated homo-erotic relationship) between two young runners, Frank and Archie.<sup>6</sup> In *Strikebound* we witness the love between Agnes and Wattie Doig, who initially appear to represent opposite ends of the political spectrum, but who are unstoppable when they unite. Each of these relationships represent both simplifications and complications of historical "truths".

There is also the relationship between the leading characters and the "masses"; the people in the racing crowds in *Phar Lap*, the people at home and the soldiers in *Gallipoli*, the workers in *Strikebound*. Each film presents these groups as unified masses. The whole country is with Tommy Woodcock as he cheers Phar Lap on. There is no division amongst the workers in *Strikebound* about whether or not to go out on strike. There is little sense in *Gallipoli* of doubt among the wider community as to whether Australia should be in the war. Instead, the divisions are put in the mouths and actions of the leading characters, where they can be butted up against each other in cinema-friendly dramatic moments. Of course, all this is a long way from the actual complexities, layerings and multiple truths of history.

### HISTORICAL AND EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY

In the history film, characters are compressed, people become symbols of movements and ideas, events are edited and manipulated to suit the needs of the drama, and actors replace the people who were actually involved. But I believe that the films I have discussed are historical documents nonetheless. Like academic texts, they take as their evidence the words and

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actions of the people involved. Tommy Woodcock advised on *Phar Lap*.<sup>7</sup> WW1 historian Bill Gammage was closely involved with *Gallipoli*.<sup>8</sup> Wattie and Agnes Doig appear in *Strikebound* and the oral histories recorded by Wendy Lowenstein, the director's mother, inform the screenplay of Richard Lowenstein's film.<sup>9</sup>

These three films prove that the needs of historical authenticity and drama need not necessarily fight for territory. They can support each other, and create an emotionally and historically satisfying result. Richard Lowenstein's desire to shoot in a real mine<sup>10</sup> and the *Gallipoli* design team's insistence on getting every explosion and trench position exactly right<sup>11</sup> represent the lengths to which great film makers will go to be taken seriously as creators of living historical documents.

The success of these films, both critically and at the box office, proves that historical accuracy and emotional strength can support one another.

## FILMS

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