Simplistic Insight Takes a Biased Turn

The film *Trumbo*, directed by Jay Roach, takes place during the Red Scare in America. It follows the life of an elite Hollywood screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo, as a part of the Hollywood Ten. These ten people were blacklisted and refused work after being accused of being communists by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, also known as HUAC; they were also forced to serve time in a federal correctional institute. Although *Trumbo* provides viewers with simplistic insight into this historical event, the historical inaccuracies and misrepresentation of certain characters and events as well as the biased lens the film is shown through leaves viewers with a shallow perception of the event.

*Trumbo* accurately represents many details, settings, and the general timeline of this historical event which gives viewers knowledge about how it took place. A strong point of the film is how accurately it shows the timeline of events; Trumbo was portrayed as the elite writer he was at the time, details like him being the highest-paid writer in the world were included to increase the viewer’s understanding of the intensity of the event. The film also accurately portrays the way movie studios began firing communists and, eventually, how the Hollywood Ten were charged with contempt of Congress and labelled as communists, leading to their blacklisting in the industry. HUAC was also included in the film as an investigative committee of the United States House of Representatives. HUAC was created in 1938 to investigate allegations of communist activity; government officials and the film industry were specific targets of HUAC’s gaze. The HUAC is accurately portrayed interrogating members of the Hollywood Ten in the film. The scene of Trumbo being questioned in court is especially notable as Trumbo’s answers to the Congressman’s questions were accurately sarcastic; Trumbo, along with other members of the Hollywood Ten, refused to directly answer questions as they thought they would be protected under the law, which was portrayed well in the film. “Roach doesn’t always get the mix in tone right; clever responses to angry congressmen lead to a humiliating full-body cavity search as Trumbo checks into prison. Historically, this is important information,” (Goodykoontz, 2015). The film also included important events taking place after this; Trumbo, struggling financially, began ghost-writing screenplays for B-list directors. “Brave One,” a film written by Trumbo, was nominated for an academy award and Trumbo won the Best Motion Picture award under one of his pseudonyms, Robert Rich. Trumbo then begins to come back into the spotlight. All of this is accurately portrayed in the film. The film then goes to show the events involving Trumbo being hired to write the film *Spartacus* and the protests that take place to boycott Trumbo and the film. Trumbo is also announced as the writer of *Exodus*. Although Hedda Hopper, a strongly anti-communist gossip columnist who protested against Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten, continues to threaten Trumbo and boycott *Spartacus*, the blacklist comes to a partial-ending after *Spartacus* and the praise of the movie by John F. Kennedy. The timeline of events, although simplistically portrayed, is an accurate representation of the historical event.

The inaccuracies in *Trumbo*, including the omission of all viewpoints differing from the Hollywood Ten’s, lead to viewers gaining a shallow perception of the historical event. The film shows Edward G. Robinson betraying Trumbo, his friend, as well as other members of the Hollywood Ten by pointing them out as communists before HUAC. In reality, Robinson never named anyone as a communist. This inaccuracy leads viewers to antagonize Robinson as the person who betrayed Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten, which is false. Another important note about the inaccuracies in the film is the fact that the only point of view included is that of the Hollywood Ten. HUAC’s point of view is never included, nor any other anti-communists; the only viewpoints included are those which lead the viewer to sympathize with the Hollywood Ten and communists. Godfrey Cheshire criticized the film for this point; the film "invites us to the see the Communist Party USA as just another political party rather than as the domestic instrument of a hostile and ultra-murderous foreign tyranny,” (2015). Certain additional incidents in the film could also be viewed as a way for the director to invoke sympathy in the viewers. An example of this would be when people threw drinks in Trumbo’s face and tearing up their pamphlets on communism. These inaccuracies all add to the biased lens the film is portrayed through and make the viewer’s understanding of the film shallow and one-sided.

The effect the inaccuracies have on the representation of the historical figure, Trumbo, as well as the historical event itself, is significant and should be noted. The way the film is presented to the viewer in order to make them sympathize with Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten decreases the historical value of the film. Important viewpoints and facts fail to be included in the film which would give viewers a far deeper and more accurate understanding of Trumbo as a historical figure and the historical event this film portrays. For instance, it isn’t mentioned at all in the film that Trumbo was an open supporter of totalitarianism and dictatorship, most notably the harsh regimes of Stalin in the Soviet Union and Kim Il-sung in North Korea. **“**Trumbo was a Stalinist, a hard-core Communist when the Communist Party USA was run from Moscow by the Comintern, agents of the greatest mass murderer of the 20th century,” (Buchanan, 2015). The inaccuracies of this film lead viewers to antagonize HUAC and other anti-communists as they are presented as the villains in the film; it also causes viewers to see Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten in a shallowly positive manner. When one considers all of these inaccuracies, it is apparent that the film fails to include many important aspects of the historical event which adds to the overall inaccuracy of the film.

The historical figures in *Trumbo* are each accurately represented to their own extent. Trumbo, although quite accurately portrayed in his personality, achievements, and timeline, is overall presented through a skewed lens as a result of certain omissions of his character. Trumbo’s support of totalitarianism, dictatorship, and brutal Soviet-style communism is never divulged in the film. The film fails to show Trumbo’s flaws and only manages to include facets of his character which make viewers more heavily sympathize with him. Hopper, another historical figure, is portrayed as one of the main antagonists of the film. For example, she is shown threatening to boycott Trumbo and his film Spartacus. These parts of her character as someone very openly anti-communist are accurately represented; but, the film fails to include Hopper’s viewpoint of the situation which leads viewers to villainize her. Edward G. Robinson, another historical figure in the film, is heavily mis-portrayed. In the film, he is falsely shown betraying Trumbo and other members of the Hollywood Ten as he spoke their names to HUAC as people he thought were communist. This is inaccurate and never happened, Robinson had never told HUAC any names; this inaccuracy leads viewers to antagonize Robinson. Louis B. Mayer, another historical figure, was accurately portrayed as being the co-founder of MGM Studios. These historical figures are all represented to different lengths of accuracy, but in all except Robinson’s case, their inclusion gives viewers insight into some historical figures who were a part of this event as well as their roles.

A notable fictitious character in *Trumbo* is Arlen Hird, a composite character of multiple Hollywood Ten members. In the film, Hird is a communist screenwriter who is a member of the Hollywood Ten. Hird’s storyline has the possibility of invoking sympathy in viewers; he has cancer and goes through much turmoil because of it, on top of being sent to prison for being a suspected communist. Mick LaSalle writes that they felt Hird’s character wasn’t needed. “… The added fiction feels like an unnecessary concession,” (2015). The fictitious character Arlen Hird is a dispensable addition Roach uses as a method to invoke sympathy in the viewers, one that adds to the biased viewpoint of the film.

Real footage of Trumbo being questioned by HUAC, speeches, as well as real video clips, radio broadcasts, and newspaper stories all enhanced the historical atmosphere and setting of the film. Footage of Trumbo in court before HUAC was blended into the film; some actors were included to fit the scene and it was coloured in order to integrate both pieces of film. Some speeches made by characters in the film by historical figures were also real; for example, Ronald Reagan’s speech in Washington with Robert E. Stripling. Real video clips like, “Red Issue Stirs Film Hearing” which were included also enhances the historical atmosphere of the film. Not to mention, the newspaper article “Hollywood Ten Charged With Contempt” published on November 25, 1947, too. These details all enhance the film’s historical atmosphere and setting.

The bias in *Trumbo* is undeniable; the only point of view represented is that of Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten’s, the communist perspective. HUAC, Hedda Hopper, nor any other contradicting viewpoint is included that may provide more perspective and depth into the viewer’s understanding of the historical event. There is a clear positive bias towards the communist Hollywood Ten; HUAC and the anti-communist Hedda Hopper are both presented as the villains in the film without much exploration into their perspective of the historical event. This omission leaves a lasting effect on the way viewers interpret the historical event *Trumbo* portrays.

Trumbo is portrayed as the protagonist and hero of the film, whereas the anti-communist HUAC and Hedda Hopper are shown as the antagonistic villains. This reinforces the idea that the *Trumbo* is presented through a very biased lens where the communists are victims of censorship and the anti-communists are enforcing their idea of right and wrong on others. In reality, this historical event was not nearly as black and white; the protagonist and antagonistic portrayals of these characters is an overly simplified and biased recount of the historical event which leads viewers to adopt a shallow perspective.

One can point out the contradictory nature of the message of this film. A supporter of dictatorship and totalitarianism is portrayed as a “martyr to the First Amendment,” (Buchanan, 2015). Although this is notable, the message of this film still stands. The importance of rejecting censorship and protecting free speech is an important lesson that continues to be relevant. In an era where free speech is under attack as a result of messages sent to the public by people in powerful positions, often political, a lesson on the importance of protecting free speech is as necessary as ever. Without free speech and increased censorship, society would be forced into a rigid way of thinking which could be the end of us all. *Trumbo*’s message stands regardless of the hypocrisy it may contain.

Overall, the film *Trumbo* is a useful source of knowledge through a simplistic overview of the timeline of events of this historical event. But, the omission of an opposing viewpoint, the biased lens this event is shown through, and certain historical inaccuracies leave viewers with a shallow perception.“Trumbo may be clumsy and overly simplistic at times, but it’s still an important reminder of how democracy can fail,”(Debruge, 2015).

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