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# Teachers' Introduction

## Issues of Film & History

What sort of history do feature films give us? Do they do no more than show us what the period depicted in the film would have looked like? Do they tell us more about the values of the current culture which produces them as opposed to the culture that they seem to represent?

For the historian and students of history, the feature film presents many challenges and offers lots of problems. However, if we are looking at feature films as a possible source of evidence, then they pose no more difficult questions than say paintings, photographs etc., in fact any other historical source that historians might use. We must question the basis of the approach to the subject being shown and the ways in which the filmmaker has decided to construct meaning within a film.

One way of looking at this is to pose a number of questions that one might ask if carrying out a piece of film analysis.

A filmmaker has carefully planned the elements of the film he/she will produce. They have considered what to put in the film, composed the structure of the film and decided at what distance to shoot the story of the film etc. Films are **constructed** - they do not just happen.

As viewers, we do not usually know about the decisions that are made during the creation of a film or a sequence within it, but we can usually decipher why a film appears the way it does. Without being conscious of what we are doing, we automatically **read** films and images, making sense of them and their messages.

Many would complain that the filmmaker is giving only one view of the past - their own. Yet is this very different from the historian? True, the historian will be looking far more closely at the causes and effects of historical events, but the good historian will interpret them from their own ideological viewpoint.

When we talk about **history** and its representation by historians we are looking at a very wide range of historical writings for very different audiences. Does the historian who is writing for a wide audience adopt a different approach, deal with sources in a different way to the historian writing for a learned journal? Is the filmmaker not in the first category of historians? A film must attract audiences, must relate to audiences in a way that they expect. The interior logic of a feature film is self-contained, its narrative discourse aiming for completion and resolution. Its logic, as has been suggested earlier, is founded on the values and beliefs of the society which produces it.



## Points of View

It has been said that the historian has an obligation to relate all known evidence to his/her theme, not forgetting that which contradicts it. Thus, the historian has to present as many views of a particular event or subject as possible before coming to judgements. Can a filmmaker present many points of view?

## K-19 – The Widowmaker - A contribution to the study of the Cold War

The film K-19 – The Widowmaker raises a number of interesting issues regarding cinema's portrayal of historical subjects.

Firstly, there is the choice of subject; it is inconceivable that fifteen years ago Hollywood would have produced a film which celebrates the heroism of Soviet (and by implication Communist) submariners. Consequently, issues of what constitutes history are raised as well as what perspectives on history prevail at any one time. This could be linked with German cinema's exploration of its nation's past in films such as *Das Boot* (d. Wolfgang Petersen, 1981) or *Stalingrad* (d. Joseph Vilsmaier, 1992).

Secondly, it is interesting to view the film as a vehicle for representation of Soviet society at that time. Whilst celebrating the heroism of the Soviets it also manages to offer a critique of Soviet society. The representation of conditions on the submarine and also within the shipyard offer a view of a society which cannot deliver the basic technological requirements for safety and also basic working conditions.

This study guide explores these issues as well as more general issues around the Cold War and the Arms race. A separate study guide on this CD Rom explores the dramatic elements of the film.

## A Final Point

Professor Donald Watt proposes three criteria for judging a feature film from a professional historian's position.

*Firstly, the subject must be completely covered, within the limits of programme lengths and material availability. Secondly, it must be objective as defined by a historian's practice, avoiding anachronism and bias, and it must seek to understand rather than to condemn. Thirdly, the facts must be accurate, and hypothesis, reconstruction and inference must be presented under their own colours.*



## Introduction

The film K-19 – The Widowmaker deals with one incident in the Cold War - a minor incident but one that could have had cataclysmic consequences. The film highlights not only the actual incident itself but also gives an insight into life and ideals in Soviet society. One must bear in mind, however, that it is a film made in America about an incident involving a Soviet submarine from a period of high tension between the USA and the old Soviet Union - a conflict based on a clash of two ideologies - capitalism and communism.

Therefore let us start by considering, in general terms, what the advantages and disadvantages are for historians in using feature films as a possible resource for looking at historical events.

## Film & History

Documentary films are often used when studying history.

How do documentary films differ from feature films?

What do feature films accomplish which documentary films do not, and vice versa?

Historical events have always attracted filmmakers however, studying and 'filming' history holds certain accuracy problems for the filmmaker. Similarly films create problems for the historian. Even the construction of documentary films have to be treated carefully.

Do we always assume that a documentary film will always tell the truth?

Think about the subject of K-19 – The Widowmaker - an accident on a Soviet nuclear submarine. Imagine two documentary films about this - one made by Soviet (and thus Communist) filmmakers and one made by the United States Navy. How would they be different? What sort of language would each use? What would be the different **truths** that each would be trying to put across? What would each documentary be trying to persuade its audience to believe?

In relation to this, it is worth considering that when the accident happened aboard K-19 in 1961 the Soviet authorities covered up all mention of the accident. In fact the accident on K-19 was one of many disasters and accidents which happened to Soviet ships and submarines - all of which were covered up by the Soviet authorities.

In order to consider these ideas further answer the following questions:

- 1 What do you think is the main task of a historian?
- 2 What do you think is the main task of a feature filmmaker?
- 3 What do you think are the problems that face a feature filmmaker when he/she comes to make a film based on a historical subject?
- 4 In what ways are feature films reliable/unreliable sources for historians?



In the chart below, fill in each column with ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of using feature films as a historical resource.

<b>ADVANTAGES</b>	<b>DISADVANTAGES</b>



## The Actuality Effect

The filmmakers have gone to enormous lengths to capture the **actuality** of the historical period by close attention to surface detail. What historical facts would the filmmakers have had to research before making K-19 – The Widowmaker? What else would they have had to find out? What gaps would have had to be **filled** in constructing the story for the screen?

- a) What problems do you think the filmmakers would experience in attempting to recapture the period of the film through location and costume?
- b) If filmmakers take so much care in order to create this surface **reality** then why do they feel free to alter or only show certain aspects of actual events?

## Cold War

Following the end of the Second World War, tensions began to mount between the former allies - the Soviet Union wished to increase its control, not only over Eastern Europe, but also in many of the former colonies of western powers. Below are some of the key moments in what became known as the Cold War.

### Cold War – Key Events

- 1945 – end of the Second World War in Europe
- 1946 – Churchill's speech about an iron curtain descending across Europe
- 1948 – Soviet troops block all road, rail and water traffic between West Berlin and the West
- 1949 – China turns Communist under Mao Zedong's leadership
  - forming of East and West Germany
  - first atom bomb in the USSR
- 1950 – North Korean troops invade South Korea. US and 16 UN countries fight alongside South Korea until July 1953
- 1952 – first British atom bomb test - first US hydrogen bomb test
- 1953 – Khrushchev becomes the Chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
- 1955 – forming of the Warsaw Pact
- 1956 – Soviet army enters Budapest to crush rebellion against communism
- 1957 – USSR announced the release of Sputnik 1



- 1960 – U-2 plane shot down over USSR. Gary Powers survives and is sentenced to 10 years confinement in USSR. In 1962 he is exchanged for Soviet spy Rudolph Abel
- JFK wins president election
- 1961 – East Germany erects the Berlin Wall
- Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin is the first man to travel in space
- US sponsored invasion of Cuba by 1500 exiles opposed to Fidel Castro fails at Bay of Pigs
- 1962 – Kennedy orders Naval blockade of Cuba to prevent Soviet shipment of nuclear missiles
- 1963 – Kennedy is assassinated
- USA and USSR sign nuclear testing ban
- 1964 – Brezhnev becomes Chairman of Communist Party of Soviet Union
- Johnson wins US Presidential election
- Congress authorises expansion of US involvement in Vietnam
- 1967 – Six Day War: Israel seized territory from Egypt, Jordan and Syria.
- 1968 – Soviet Union, East German, Polish, Hungarian and Bulgarian troops invade Czechoslovakia to prevent political reforms
- Nixon elected for president
- 1969 – Soviet-Chinese conflict (Chinese assault on the Ussari River)
- 1972 – President Nixon opens up severed ties with China during 10-day official visit
- USA and USSR sign biological weapons ban treaty
- 1973 – oil producers in Persian Gulf double the oil price
- 1974 – Nixon resigns and is replaced by Ford
- 1975 – end of Vietnamese war
- 1976 – Carter wins US presidential election
- 1979 – Soviet army invades Afghanistan.
- Soviets suffer 60,000 casualties in 9-year war against Afghan guerillas
- USA and China begin to establish diplomatic bonds
- 1980 – start of the Iran-Iraq war
- Reagan elected as US president
- 1982 – Brezhnev dies and is replaced by Andropov
- 1985 – Reagan requests three times budget rise to support SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative)
- Gorbachev named as Chairman of the CPSU
- 1987 – Gorbachev and Reagan meet in Washington, middle-range missiles ban treaty signed





- 1989 – fall of the Berlin wall
- full retreat of Soviet forces from Afghanistan
- 1990 – re-union of Germany
- 1991 – Soviet reformer Gorbachev resigns from office
- the Soviet Union collapses, ending 74 years of Soviet Communism

The events portrayed in K-19 – The Widowmaker occurred in 1961.

### **Research Task**

Look at the events in the time line which occurred between 1959 and 1962. Try to find out a few basic facts about each event. When you have done this, can you say why the K-19 incident could have potentially set off a world war or have escalated into a world crisis?

Fighting never broke out directly between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War was more a psychological conflict. One interesting point raised in the film K-19 – The Widowmaker is that the Soviet Union wanted the United States to know that they had a nuclear submarine capable of launching nuclear missiles.

Why do you think this was the case? Why did the Soviets not want to keep this a secret?





## Contexts & Ideology

All films show a certain set of beliefs which it assumes the audience will take for granted. We can call this the **ideology** of the film. Consequently mainstream Hollywood films will rarely criticise American society - they will show its society and beliefs in a positive aspect. Concepts of what is right and wrong, the qualities of a hero and heroine, roles in society played by certain types of people will reappear across a range of films. This does not mean that beliefs alter or that different societies might have different belief systems.

### Task

Look at the list of events in the Cold War around 1961-1963. Imagine that Hollywood had wanted to make a film about K-19 during this period. How do you think that the Soviet submarine and sailors would have been portrayed then? Do not forget that at that time the USSR was considered to be the **enemy**.

Do you think that the story would have been told from the point of view only of the Soviet submariners? How might the **history** have been told in a different way?

Let us take the idea of ideology one stage further.

Originally ideology was a term used in political and economic debate to describe a set of beliefs or principles e.g. socialism or capitalism. Its meaning has gradually been extended to other academic fields and is a concept increasingly called upon in Media and Film Studies. Basically ideology refers to the values/viewpoints and meanings/messages that a media text such as film might communicate to the viewer. It can be helpful to think of these values in two ways:

- a) explicit - what a character in a film or a director/producer/writer themselves, declare to be the subject of the film
- b) implicit - the more debatable meanings of a film, possibly beyond the conscious intentions of the filmmaker, that require analysis and reasoned argument

### Task

Think about the film K-19 – The Widowmaker. Try to analyse the film from the point of view of the two categories above - the explicit beliefs shown in the film and the implicit beliefs shown about Soviet society.

Whose beliefs are these, the actual characters or the filmmakers of the society in which we live today? Would these beliefs have been different if the film had been made in Russia today? What do you think the concerns of Russian society today would be about what happened aboard K-19?



# Ideology and You

## Expectations

When you see a film in the cinema or on video, do you sympathise with certain characters? Do these characters work hard, act dishonestly or are they physically tough? We all bring to a film certain expectations of what values the main characters will embody. Studios are primarily in the business of making money and once a successful formula has been found, it tends to be repeated, producing **type casting**, where actors fall into expected roles. With the efficiency of film marketing and promotional material through every conceivable media, often simultaneously, it is virtually impossible to see a film without any knowledge of its content or its main stars.

The blend of marketing power and studio reluctance to take risks means that certain stars come to represent a predictable ideological package, a kind of cinematic shorthand. Accordingly, in an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, the audience might expect a multi-million dollar budget with high production values, advanced special effects, a driving narrative and the ruthless dispatching of countless **baddies**, whose violent death we are not encouraged to worry about.

## Pleasures

Part of the pleasure of experiencing a film is that we tend to identify or reject certain characters and share the excitement or pain of their adventures without having to risk any **real** pain ourselves. It could be said that the key to whether we enjoy, remember or even understand a film depends upon this level of identification i.e. whether we care about their character. In films characters can do/say/think things that we feel we should condemn as wrong or unlawful and yet we still find them interesting (indeed we probably find them more interesting than so-called **good** characters). Film's ability to allow us to share a breaking free from emotional, legal and social boundaries without leaving the safety of our seats has led to much concern over the effects of viewing certain types of films.

The films we enjoy or dislike say something about our own personal ideologies, leading us to favour certain characters over others. Can you think of a film or sequence from a particular film that you really like but someone else absolutely hates? As you will find, the main reason for this difference is the range of different experiences and feelings that each individual brings to the film. This allows for what is called 'intrapersonal' or 'negotiated' readings i.e. there is not necessarily one single definitive meaning of a particular image or sequence therefore it is the audience who play a crucial part in constructing the meanings of films.



## Task

After you have seen the film K-19 – The Widowmaker think about the following:

- Consider which characters you like. What is it that you like about them and what has the filmmaker done to encourage you to feel this way?
- Who do you not like and why? What do they represent?
- What values am I being asked to share or reject?
- How are my feelings being manipulated to prefer one viewpoint over another?
- Why might the filmmaker want me to prefer one viewpoint to another?



## Ideology and the 'Effects' Debate

One of the complexities of looking at ideology is the way certain figures, particularly politicians, refer to **family values** or use slogans like **back to basics** as if there was a clear code of common values we all practice. In his 1992 book *Hollywood versus America*, critic Michael Medved provoked widespread debate about the effects of modern Hollywood films, which he felt were undermining traditional family values. One of the problems with examining our own ideologies is that they are often blended with terms like **common sense** or **knowing right from wrong**, which are really a minefield of ideological choices that we have made (or that have been made for us) from such an early age we are not fully aware of them. If these issues were clear cut then all the tasks on this digital CD Rom would be quick and easy and each group would produce identical results.

It is tempting to think that we are not affected by what we see and hear on screen. Often students admit that their younger brothers or sisters should not watch particular films (usually because it would scare them), but once past a certain age, often mid-teens, they feel they are old enough to choose and see what they like.

Two interesting points arise from this, to enjoy any film, whatever the genre, you need to go along with it. Therefore you are being affected although you may not be conscious of it. Firstly, the effects of watching a film are often expressed in negative terms but even to enjoy a comedy, you will need to share the prevailing ideology of the film so that you know when to laugh and what/who to laugh at. Secondly, much is made of the effects of film on the young but not all adults are affected in a similar way.

## Ideology and Realism

Some of the ideological assumptions which we make about film are related to whether we believe the fictional world of a film is real. What we think of as realism is sometimes cinematic convention that has evolved for financial, artistic or technical reasons. Sometimes we have no personal experience in reality of what we see on screen (and in some genres like horror or science fiction, we never could) and yet we accept it as real.

### Task

Make a table with **Cinema** on one side and **Reality** on the other. For K-19 – The Widowmaker try to list all the **reality gaps**. Some of these are for financial reasons e.g. the average 90 mins running time allows an optimum number of programmes per day, others are artistic e.g. traditionally characters do not look directly at the camera (called breaking the fourth wall) as this would destroy the illusion of watching a drama. Consider what the characters do or do not do (e.g. go to the toilet) and what they say or do not say.

