Bachelor of Philosophy Sample Thesis Prospectus

(History)

Title: British War Brides, Hollywood, and Britain’s American Dream

My paper seeks to explore the ways in which the British war brides of World War II were “deceived” by American films but also the ways in which this “deception” was imbedded within Hollywood movies. I will investigate the differences between Hollywood’s America and the American reality of this time by pointing to specific and general examples from films of the era and by doing an in-depth case study of one particular, representative film. The methodology involves a comparison of my in-depth interviews and extended correspondence with war brides themselves, on the one hand, and a study of actual films from the time period, on the other hand. I will attempt to prove my hypotheses through interviews and correspondences with war brides themselves along with studies of actual films of the time period, Mass Observation findings, newspaper advertisements, and a variety of other primary resources. I will also demonstrate films constituted the most prominent source of education about American culture by discussing the few other venues through which brides had an opportunity to learn about America (e.g. Red Cross and other organizations’ classes just before they left their homes, classes in school, newspapers) and discuss the ways in which these sources were either unavailable, lacking in pertinent information, or altogether ignored by the war brides themselves.

As members of a media-driven society, we are affected by popular culture in sometimes small, sometimes dramatic ways every day. Yet because we are so completely inundated with its messages, we often become numb to the impact pop culture has on our ideas, ideals, goals and morals. Moreover, the ideals which the architects of pop culture depict are most often concealed behind an entertaining façade; musicians, directors, and writers often make their biggest impact on society when their messages are more covertly concealed within their artwork. Recent events have demonstrated that entertainers who openly voice political or social opinions are often mocked for believing that they are the appropriate spokespeople for such kinds of opinions. By camouflaging these messages within their artwork, they are able to articulate the same beliefs without the same risk of being viewed as performers on a political soapbox.

The impact of these tactics in films can be especially dramatic and effective. Truly talented directors are masters at guiding their audiences to hold a certain set of beliefs without explicitly demanding it. If directors are doing their job, the average, entertainment-seeking audiences never fully realizes the way the movie’s use of music, costuming, lighting, and camera effects have secretly swayed their emotions. The truly talented are able to change the values of their audiences beyond the context of their picture. They leave the theatre altered without becoming conscious of the change that has taken place. Further, when we view a movie in a theatre, we becomes even more willing to suspend our disbelief and become engrossed in the world of film; the darkened theatre is a place removed from any distractions or reminders of the real world in which we live. And, unlike some other media, films allow their audiences to escape from their own “real” world into the world of the movie for an extended amount of time. Moreover, by playing on several of their senses, film gives directors opportunities to propagate their ideology and ensure that their audiences will be engrossed in the directors’ work.
Young British girls in the 1930s and 1940s, like those who would someday become GI war brides during the Second World War, seem to be a group who, for many reasons, might have been particularly affected by the ideological messages about American life infiltrating popular films of the time. In the age before television and with the popularity of theatre waning among the working classes, movies became an overwhelmingly popular form of entertainment. And the tremendous popularity of American films among Britons at the time meant that growing British audiences were very often exposed to movies about American and Americans.

Simultaneously, the messages directors tried to send were greatly skewed by the tumultuous political scene. American directors worked under great pressure from the US government to portray pro-American stories and images in order to bolster national pride and to rally support for the war. This meant that many Hollywood films often offered overly optimistic portrayals of American life. And for the future GI brides, youth, their limited access to reliable, objective sources on American culture, and the unusually high turnout to movie houses in the war years left British girls especially susceptible to the covert intentions of American directors. These girls, some of whom would marry American GIs and leave their homeland behind for a new life in the states, would find that many aspects of American life had simply been misrepresented. They would arrive in their new homes to find that they knew very little about the country they had grown to love through popular Hollywood films.