

The *Mayflower* Sails Again

- A study on film, history and early Americans

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INTRODUCTION

Now showing: History.

In 1620 the Pilgrims arrived at New Plymouth, on the famous Plymouth Rock, where they would create a peaceful community of devout worshippers, wear pretty buckled hats and wide white collars, feast with the Native Americans and become the roots of America. Or so the story goes. Throughout American history, the story of the Pilgrims' journey across the Atlantic has been well-known to many. Its myths and traditions have been even more popular. The story's main characters are easily identifiable as the passengers aboard the *Mayflower*. Its plot is driven forward by both inner convictions and hostile forces. Surely, such a story is made for the screen? Indeed it has been made for the screen; into children's thanksgiving specials, cartoons, feature-length movies and documentaries, or non-fiction films. Could we watch these representations, illustrations or re-enactments (let's not be particular about phrasing just yet) and gain a good historical understanding of the events that unfolded back in the early 17th century? Or would we simply be entertained for a few hours? Would it be the same as a common Thanksgiving play at an American school? Are feature film versions more likely to re-enact the myths? What about a documentary? Can we trust documentaries to always stick to the facts?

What I am interested in for this study is how the moving-picture media relates to us as historians and as consumers of stories about the past, and how the popular image of the Pilgrims has been represented on film. I want to use three films, each depicting the same story, and examine how we as historians can write about and judge films that use history, either as pure entertainments, or as a way of educating wider audiences, or both.

The crossing of the *Mayflower* is an important event in the history of the United States, and the events surrounding it is very much present in the collective consciousness despite the fact that the Pilgrims were not the first to settle permanently in the new world. How has this event been shown in such a popular medium as film? Historian Robert Rosenstone puts it this way: "what might we learn from viewing a number of films devoted to a single incident or a major subject?"¹

To put my thesis as concisely as possible:

¹ Rosenstone, R. 2006:134

- How has the Pilgrim story been treated in films? If we view the films chronologically, is there some sort of development that can be observed? Are the earlier versions more prone to romanticising while the documentary firmly rejects such notions?
- How can we as historians write and make judgements about these filmic representations? Meaning, how can we judge what the audience is presented with to be good filmic history? All films that deal with history are historical films, but is there some way for us to judge one to be good history and another to be bad?

As you can see, the thesis is mainly divided into two areas, but these two certainly overlap to a strong degree. My examination of the Pilgrim films will provide a “thought experiment”², to use historian Natalie Zemon Davis's phrase, to study how we might write about films.

Out of all possible historical subjects made into films, why the Pilgrims? I have always had a strong fascination for the early settlers of America, and their different yet similar journeys seemed to me very *filmable*, though I was surprised by how few films are set in early colonial America. I chose the story of the Pilgrims specifically because I have already written about the puritans who arrived a few years later.³ Also, despite my enthusiasm for historical films, I had not seen a single film about this very well-known and important group, unlike the story of Pocahontas which was very recently retold in *The New World* (2005). I wanted to study films I had yet to discover.

The first thing I wish to make clear is that this is not an attempt to learn how to simply discern whether a historical film manages to get enough facts straight to satisfy historians, but rather to take the nature of the moving-picture medium into account. As a person who consumes many films, especially historical ones, every week, I was aware at the onset of this study that I could not and did not want to look at these films purely from a historian's point of view. My research into what other scholars have written about the subject confirmed this belief, as I will show below.

A film can never do history in the same way as an academic history book, and we should not expect them to. One thing I have often come across when reading theories concerning historical films is opinions and advice on how a certain film might have been improved. Often, it is useful and even necessary to ask: what if they have done this instead?

² Davis, N.Z. 2002:14

³ Eriksen (2009) *Puritan and Criminal Justice in Colonial Massachusetts, 1629-1684*. Unpublished.

My main goal here, however, is not to make generalisations about what films might do to improve their historical validity, but to study these three specific films to see how they handle this particular set of historical events. Then, I will ask if we can judge one film to be a better history film than another, and why that is. Can a film, which is made for entertainment, economic and educational reasons (among others) appease both the historian, the layman audience and filmmaker?

What follows now in this introduction is first a short presentation of the films I have chosen. After presenting the films, it is logical to present the historical events and characters the films are based on in the form of a summary based on the primary and secondary sources. To make things easier for the reader, I have provided a character reference list in the appendix. A discussion on definitions dealing with films will follow, to clarify wider genres such as historical films, feature films and documentary, and what they mean to our three films. To be able to study history in film, most writers first define what they mean by history, and I do so briefly here, for I have found it a useful step in making certain points about historical films. To be able to place film within the realm of history, one must first decide what definition of history we are operating with, especially if we are ever to find a definition of good history on film, which we will look at in the method chapter. Next is a summary of what historians and other film-minded people have said about history on film, and how historians should approach them. Film, the historical film, is a new invention compared to history writing, and historians have not taken it seriously as a conveyor of historical knowledge for very long.

Film and TV are a huge part of our culture, and whether we watch them frequently or not they are nearly impossible to ignore. Since its invention the moving-picture has featured history in many forms, from the earliest short scenes of the Dreyfus affair,⁴ all the way to the present day, where we can find a large number of big-budget films featuring history in some form every year. More and more historians are getting into the debate because they are realising this fact cannot be ignored. Before we delve into this debate, we must first ask ourselves a few rather obvious, but necessary questions.

The Films.

When writing about films I quickly realised that it is possible to do a whole study on a single

⁴ Rosenstone 2006:11

film (indeed, whole books have been written about individual films), I wanted to examine more than one so I could do a comparison. I wished to see if I could discern any pattern of representation in films about the Pilgrims. Despite the fact that this is a very well-known and important story to many, films about early colonial America are not that many.⁵

I have decided to view two feature films and one documentary, all of which chronicle the story of the Pilgrims' flight from the old world and into the new. They are, in chronological order, *Plymouth Adventure* (1952)⁶, a feature film, *Mayflower: the Pilgrims' Adventure* (1979),⁷ a made-for-television film, and lastly a more recent documentary, *Desperate Crossing: the untold story of the Mayflower* (2006).⁸ I have provided links to the versions I purchased on Amazon in the footnotes. A more detailed presentation of their making will be given at the start of their relevant chapters. I should note now, however, that when using *direct quotes* from the films I will provide time stamps so that the reader may find the quote in the film. For example 1:02:00 means one hour and two minutes into the film. All films were bought in the autumn of 2009. As you can see, these films are well spaced across the decades and are therefore also interesting in terms of how conventions within the medium, as well as historical understanding about the events they depict, have changed over time. They are also cultural artefacts from their respective periods.

These are not the only films ever made about the Pilgrims and I will explain my reasons for singling them out. I have found two short, silent films, both from the very early days of cinema. They are, I believe, dramatizations of a famous poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1885). This poem is important in the films I have chosen, but unlike the early short-films they are not complete dramatizations. Due to the fragile nature of early film, however, most copies of such films are impossible to come by. Film, especially early film-stock, degrades rather quickly, so these films have been impossible for me to even look at. I doubt I would have included them, however, as the poem takes place

⁵ There are a few films based on books set in that time, but compared to other eras of American history, the earliest settlements seems to have been given comparatively little attention. This is based on my own research into the subject.

⁶ *Plymouth Adventure*, MGM (production company), Clarence Brown (director), 1952. VHS version: [http://www.amazon.com/Plymouth-Adventure-VHS-Spencer-Tracy/dp/6304525109/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1298884981&sr=8-1]

⁷ *Mayflower: The Pilgrims' Adventure*, Szygzy Productions, George Shaefer, 1979. VHS version: [http://www.amazon.com/Arch-Triumph-Mayflower-Pilgrims-Adventure/dp/6303699510/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1298885155&sr=8-2]

⁸ *Desperate Crossing: the untold story of the Mayflower*, Lone Wolf Documentary Group, Lisa Wolfinger, 2006. DVD version: [http://www.amazon.com/Desperate-Crossing-Untold-Story-Mayflower/dp/B000JU7JE6/ref=sr_1_1?s=dvd&ie=UTF8&qid=1298885308&sr=1-1]

after the Pilgrims' landing and the shorts are thus not necessarily about the crossing. There are also several animated films, like Thanksgiving specials, which I have ignored since this study focuses on the live-action films for adults. One live-action Disney film, *Squanto: a Warrior's Tale* (1994) I have also discarded as it focuses on the Native American and not the Pilgrims. There is lastly another documentary, *The Mayflower Pilgrims* (1996) which I finally discarded due to its traditional documentary nature. Such a film has more in common with a historical lecture than the feature films.

So there are my choices. All three films are similar in their focus on the voyage across the Atlantic. The documentary is the longest one, and therefore has more detail. In my research it has been difficult to gather information on the feature films, either due to their age (the people involved now gone) or their lack of popularity. However, the main focus will be what we as an audience see on screen or are able to read about it in an advertisement or review, not what can potentially be found in archives. This is not to say that production notes are of no interest in such a study, just that the main focus of this particular study is not a film and its production history, but the history on screen.

The Pilgrims – a romantic and historical tale.

Many, non-Americans especially, might not know much about who the Pilgrims were. They were not the first to settle in the New World, and their colony did not grow into a major city. Their importance today stems from the story that grew from the historical events, and is now celebrated each year at Thanksgiving. What you might learn from a Thanksgiving school play, however, could be far from the historical events. Before we go into the events themselves, I will first present the sources and writings on which this study is based.

There are two primary sources to the Pilgrim story, both written by people who lived through it. William Bradford wrote *Of Plimoth Plantation* (1647). He was one of the original members of the religious group that fled England and became the second governor of the colony after the first, John Carver, died unexpectedly. *Of Plimoth Plantation* is not a logbook of the *Mayflower*, but a history of the group's escape to Holland, crossing to America (which is only one chapter very early on in the book) and a focus on the plantation's early years. It was written a good few years after the Pilgrim's arrival and settlement, and told in a way that makes for an engaging read even after all these centuries.

Bradford's work was not published until 1856.⁹ Before that it had only been viewed by what appears to be a handful of interested scholars. Some of his work made it into other history books about the area, such as *New England's Memorial* (1669) by Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's nephew. These early accounts shaped the coming generations' view of the Pilgrims. The 1952 film's portrayal of certain events might have their inspiration here, as we will examine in chapter three. Bradford also co-wrote, or so it is believed, a book popularly called *Mourt's Relation* (1622) with Edward Winslow. This book details the events after landing and the early years of the colony.

There are some issues with the primary sources. We cannot accept everything Bradford writes as completely accurate, for it is written from his point of view. After many years as the colony's governor, it is natural to assume he would not want to be too hard on himself. Though not published until over two centuries later “it *was* recorded with posterity in mind. For this reason, Bradford included incidents and observations that would enhance his own reputation as governor and omitted those that might cast doubts on his abilities.”¹⁰ *Mourt's Relation* was most likely published as a collection of letters painting the plantation in a favourable light to encourage future settlers. The title includes the description: “With their difficult passage, their safe arrival, their joyful building of, and comfortable planting themselves in the now well defended town of NEW PLYMOUTH.”¹¹ When we know how difficult the first winter was, with almost half of the settlers dying, this sounds more like an advertisement than a chronicle. These two sources have varying degrees of detail. On a couple of details they even disagree, but these are too small to be of interest to film-versions. Edward Winslow also wrote *Good Newes From New England* (1624) which I have not been able to read, but I understand it to be a letter to those back in England in the same vein as *Mourt's Relation*: an encouraging account of life in the New World. Edward Winslow himself is a fascinating person. He joined the congregation while they lived in Amsterdam, helping the congregation's elder, William Brewster, print books. When Winslow came to America he developed an interest in the Native Americans, and eventually became America's first diplomat to the rest of the world.¹²

⁹ Philbrick, N. 2006:354

¹⁰ Abrams, A. 1999:24

¹¹ Johnson, C. (2003) electronic version, *Mourt's Relation* (1622) title page. Found at [www.mayflowerhistory.com] (downloaded at 19.01.10)

¹² Philbrick, N. 2006:184

Other sources include archives on both sides of the Atlantic, but this is not an extensive study into the sources on the Pilgrims, and so we must limit ourselves on this point. The focus is on how the films tell history, but one does need a grounding in the history of the Pilgrims to be able to answer this question. We must also consider if there is a difference to what history books were saying about the Pilgrims in 1952 compared to 2006. One must therefore read both old and new books chronicling the events in question.

Some of these are of special interest, like *The Plymouth Adventure* (1951) which formed the basis for the film with the same title. This is a historical novel, not an academic history book, and includes many plot-points the film recreates. The focus of the study, however, is not on the translating of novel to film, and so the book will be treated as a source of inspiration for the film. There will not, however, be an in-depth analysis of the differences between them. *Saints and Sinners* (1945) is a history book that uses the primary sources to tell the story of the Pilgrims in their own words. It is of special interest because of the characterization of the captain of the *Mayflower*, Christopher Jones. Again, since this book is of special interest to one feature film, the 1952 version, the book will be presented more thoroughly in the relevant chapter.

For the other films, knowledge of the Pilgrims comes from the primary sources already mentioned as well as a few recent popular history books on the Pilgrims. Nathaniel Philbrick's *Mayflower: a story of courage, community and war* (2006) proved a good starting point. He is also interviewed extensively in the documentary. The book is a popular history book, and was my own introduction to the topic when this study began. Christopher Hilton's book, *Mayflower: the Voyage that Changed the World*, is much in the same vein, and follows the primary sources very closely. One last modern popular history book, *Making Haste from Babylon* (2010) by Nick Bunker includes vast amounts of detail not only on the story of the Pilgrims, but of the lives and times they lived in. It places the endeavour into a wide context of economic and spiritual motivations. It also dives deep into the motivations of King James's persecution of separatists and introduces us to lesser known separatists who were instrumental to their cause. Since this amount of detail rarely makes it into films, this book is more useful as a fact-checking book to find the original sources of ideas and myths.

There are other books that these popular versions rely heavily on, but for a study such as this I have not found it necessary to go beyond these versions and the primary sources which form the story's base. The story I will now present in summary form, based on the books

listed above.

The Pilgrims were a group of separatists, meaning they thought the protestant reformation had not gone far enough in England, and wanted to separate from the Church of England and create their own congregations. Feeling persecuted in England, they attempted to escape to Holland. Some of them were even thrown in jail after one attempt, but eventually they all managed to cross the channel sometime during 1612. There they lived some years in Amsterdam before moving to Leiden. They lived hard lives, but free from the Church of England. Still, they hoped they could find a better place, and worried their children were losing their English heritage. Bradford, the principle writer of the primary sources, also mentions the desire to spread the word of God.¹³

The choice was made for Northern Virginia, by the Hudson River, which was within the Virginia Territory, and still far enough away from the Jamestown colony founded in 1614. The Pilgrims did not arrive in the New World until 1620. It is their journey, the sea-crossing especially, that the films all focus on. The documentary, being much longer, has the time to show us the events that lead up to the crossing. Both feature films, however, ignore the Pilgrims' time in Holland completely.

How did they get to the New World? Such an enterprise could hardly be a cheap endeavour. To finance the venture, they were originally approached by the Dutch, eager to make a settlement at the Hudson, but an English merchant named Thomas Weston offered his services instead, representing a group called the Merchant Adventurers. The Pilgrims agreed to make a joint-stock company. They would labour for five days a week (Sundays were never worked on, and they had to have a day to work for themselves) to produce commodities that could be sold for profit. At the end of seven years these profits would be divided among the settlers and the merchants. Getting the venture under way, however, would prove no easy task. Bradford transcribes several letters to and from England that illustrate the disagreements and difficulties in getting supplies bought and the terms of the venture. The main problem was the last minute change from five days to six, with no day for themselves, and that the houses and land should belong to the company as well. Bradford also did not like the new “strangers” who were going with them. They were not separatists, but went for other reasons, like monetary gain and adventure. In the end, only about half the *Mayflower* passengers were

¹³ Hildebrandt, T. 2002:104 (electronic version of Bradford's original manuscript) Found at: [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NEReligiousHistory/Bradford-Plimoth/Bradford-PlymouthPlantation.pdf]

separatists.

Due to continued disagreement the merchants would give them no more money, and they sold off some of the stores to pay off their debts, and get under way. They had a hard time of it, and the ship they bought in Holland to stay with them in the New World, the *Speedwell*, was forced to turn back twice and in the end they abandon her. Some passengers decide to stay behind as well. Bradford wrote only a single chapter on the crossing itself, but he does mention a fierce storm and the braking of the main beam of the ship. It was mended by a screw brought from Holland. They attempted to make it south to the Hudson, but dangerous shoals forced them to turn back. They came inside Cape Cod and anchored at today's Provincetown Harbour.

Before they could start exploring there was a legal matter to attend to. Some of the non-separatist, or strangers, insisted their patent did not apply to the area which was outside the Virginia territory, and so they wanted it to be every man for himself. To solve this they created what became known as the Mayflower Compact; an agreement to abide by the laws and the elected governor.

The exact details of the first few expeditions into the New World are not that important. The main events are as follows. They did at first only glimpse the natives, and found corn stores, which they took. They also dug up what turned out to be graves (and took some things from them as well, according to *Mourt's Relation*). They did have a small encounter with the natives during the night. Arrows and firearms were both shot, but none were injured. Eventually, they came across New Plymouth harbour and decide to settle. Their stores were dangerously low by this point, and Master Jones, the captain, was anxious to get back to England.

During the first year they built their settlement and properly met the natives. One of them, Squanto, taught them to plant corn. The plantation became involved in the local politics of the tribes due to an alliance with the leader, whose title was Massasoit. They promised to defend each other should either of them be attacked. John Carver, the first governor, died unexpectedly after collapsing while out in the field, and William Bradford is voted the new governor.

New Plymouth eventually became much more embroiled in the local politics and even engaged in attacks on rival tribes. Years later, the plantation's importance would be diminished thanks to the founding of Boston a bit farther north by the puritans in 1629. None

of these events are mentioned in any of the films, and so I leave these fascinating events to be studied further at the discretion of the reader.¹⁴

The Pilgrims did not call themselves the Pilgrims, of course. The term is not used to describe them until many years later.¹⁵ They are sometimes confused with the term puritans. The group called puritans arrived in 1629, and although they too wanted to escape the influence of the Church, officially they wished to *purify* the Church of England. They are sometimes portrayed as the more strict neighbours to the north. Since the puritans settled in Boston, which would soon overshadow New Plymouth in importance and become the centre of New England, people tend to blur the distinctions. This is a common misconception.

There exists several other common misconceptions about the Pilgrims. It is a very popular story in America, celebrated every year at Thanksgiving. The centuries have distorted the popular tale, however. Myths are persistent. Another popular story is that the Pilgrims landed on the famous Plymouth Rock, but this has no basis in fact as we will examine in detail in the next chapter. They are also often depicted in a particular style of clothing that many American easily recognise today: black and white clothes with buckled hats. These are but some of the many elements to the Pilgrims story that are not historically accurate, but popular nonetheless. The Pilgrim story or *romantic* Pilgrim story as it will be referred to here to avoid confusion, has been told through generations, through art and writing, and evolved from the historical events it inspired. It is such a well-known tale, and can be considered an origin myth of America. Since this story appears almost to have two versions, one romantic and one historical, our analysis of the films must include these myths. A discussion of such Pilgrim myths will follow in the next chapter.

Now that the subject matter for these films has been presented in some detail, we should move on to the medium by which this tale is presented to us. What is it about film that makes the story of the Pilgrims come to life?

Film: the medium

Perhaps the first question we should ask upon beginning to study film is: what are they? Of course, we all recognise a film when we see one, but the question is nevertheless important. John O'Connor is good to remind us that film footage is made up of still photos sequenced

¹⁴This summary of events is taken both from the primary sources, *Of Plimoth Plantation* and *Mourt's Relation* and history books by Philbrick (2006), Hilton (2005) and Bunker (2010)

¹⁵ Abrams, A.U. 1999:5

together, and that “the moving images exist only inside the mind of the viewer.”¹⁶ Not only is film a unique artefact compared to the usual documents historians deal with, it is also different in its production. Chopra-Gant, in his introduction book on film studies, cites the following quote that we should keep in mind: “film is a complex historical phenomenon (an art form, economic institution, technology, cultural product) which, since its inception, has participated in many networks of relationships.”¹⁷ Making a film is not as simple as writing a book (although an academic work of any length is hardly a simple endeavour either). The studio system affects how a film is made, and what it contains. A director is never alone in making a film, despite their names carrying so much weight in Hollywood. The production company, for example The History Channel in the case of one film in this study, may have something to say on how the film is presented, and therefore how we see it. Because so many have a stake in a film what finally ends up on the screen can have many different reasons behind it. Budget constraints or technology's limits must rarely be thought of when writing a book. To further complicate matters, films are divided into a myriad of genres and sub-genres. In this study there are two fiction or feature films and one documentary. I prefer to use the term feature film in most cases since the films depict stories that are not entirely fictitious. By feature film I mean a full-length film (1,5-2,5 hours usually) made for either theatrical release or direct to TV (which some distinguish as TV-movies). Whether feature film or documentary, they are historical films, meaning their plot is taken from historical events. Some scholars consider historical films that use history simply as a backdrop to a made-up plot to be in a separate category. We could go into that debate here, but it is a moot point in this case, as our three films are not in that category. The category we should concern ourselves with is the singling out of the documentary from the two fiction films. At first glance it seems simple.

The documentary in this study, called *Desperate Crossing: the untold story of the Mayflower* (2006), uses many feature film techniques, which I will examine in the relevant chapter. A lot of people might say, quite rightly, that a documentary is necessarily the more historically correct film, as they tend to stick to the facts. We expect more from a documentary about a historical person than a feature film about that person with the tag-line “based on a true story.” The documentary in question is a good historical film, I believe,

¹⁶ O'Connor, J. 1990:4

¹⁷ Chopra-Gant, M. 2008:6

despite that fact that it uses many techniques that do not completely follow what we can establish as fact, and in fact invents and alters the accepted record. By studying how the Pilgrim image has evolved both on and off the screen, I hope to show that this assumption did not prove a given as I expected. I wish to see if these three films, put in their contexts, can be both entertainment and good history. What we mean by good history (on film) will be discussed in the method chapter. First, we will take a closer look at the documentary.

On the surface, it seems simple. The feature films are fiction, while the documentaries are non-fiction. However, as Carl Plantinga writes: “A common position among both film scholars and nonfiction filmmakers is that the distinction between the fiction and nonfiction film is illicit.”¹⁸ But having no distinction makes things very difficult, for we do distinguish between them, for example when we go to see a documentary at the cinema, we have certain expectations. We can all recognise a documentary when we see one. Plantinga puts his definition thusly: “nonfictions assert a belief that given objects, entities, states of affairs, events, or situations actually occur(red) or exist(ed) in the actual world as portrayed.”¹⁹ Another important point he makes is that the nonfiction film can be identified through the “*situation* of the film in its sociocultural milieu – its indexing and the spectator response to these cues, and not according to an ostensible imitation or recording of the real.”²⁰ Let us take this definition to our films. *Plymouth Adventure* (1952) is dedicated to the Pilgrims in its opening credits. How are we to interpret its stance towards the events portrayed? To me, the film is, as Plantinga defines, still taking a fictive stance – the film does not pretend to be a true account – but there is a slight blurring too. The Pilgrims existed, and journeyed across the Atlantic in 1620, just as the film shows. The definitions become even more problematic when we consider that *Desperate Crossing* includes events and did not actually occur in the world “as portrayed.” Given the documentary's authority, conveyed to us by its indexing, do these scenes diminish its status as a documentary? Not necessarily, but that discussion can be saved for the chapter on the film in question.

We can still agree with Plantinga that it is the indexing and viewer response to that indexing that properly defines the documentary, even if we can sometimes be tricked by so-called “mock-documentaries.”²¹ These are films that pretend to be documentaries, but have in

¹⁸ Plantinga, C. 1997:9

¹⁹ Ibid 18

²⁰ Ibid 19

²¹ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:124

fact been staged and scripted and this is usually not revealed until the end. A popular version of this is *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) which tried to convince viewers it was actual footage, but it was later revealed the filmmakers had created the entire myth.

Most definitions are not complete, nor completely satisfying, but if we were to ask: Why do we think of *Desperate Crossing* as a documentary and *Plymouth Adventure* as a fiction film? The answer here is that The History Channel presents the former as such, and several cues within the film, as well as on the “making-of” video and DVD box to name a few, compel us to approach it as such. While the same is true of the feature film, only here the cues tell us not accept the story in the same way. We will return to the issue of documentary later, but let us now turn to the different perspectives one can take on the film medium and history.

The study of historical films

In this study, one of the questions I hope to discuss is whether film can tell good history, for countless films are historical, but I wanted to know if there was a way to make judgements about them that went beyond mere fact-checking or studying them as pure cultural artefacts from their production periods. Before we can look at how historical films have been studied, we might want to ask what history *is*. While reading about historical films I noticed most scholars first provide a definition of history so that historical films may be placed within its sphere. I think it is useful to provide a version of this argument so that the reader may enjoy the same logical jumps.

What is history? The question has many answers, but an overview of *all* the arguments is not necessary here. We only need a few key points. If history is, as Rosenstone ironically points out, “thick tomes whose weight and bulk help to underscore the solidity of the lessons they teach,”²² then surely film cannot possibly tell history of any serious sort. The work of historian Hayden White is useful here. Historians do not relate the past back to us as it was, but shape the facts into their desired narrative. Books are not glimpses into the past as it was either. They tell a story, or, to let White tell you himself: “No history, visual or verbal, ‘mirrors’ all or even the greater part of the events or scenes of which it purports to be an account...”²³ So, if neither books nor films can tell us how the past *really* happened, are they

²² Rosenstone, R. 2006:2

²³ White, H. 1988:1194

both then valid ways of telling history in the sense that history is always created and narrated to us? In many ways, yes, they are both valid, but we as viewers must also be very aware and critical of what sort of stories are created and how they are narrated for us.

There are, of course, more problems with film. For example the fact that most of them are products made by groups of people who may not all be concerned with the telling of serious history. Or we could mention the inventions of scenes and characters found in virtually every historical film put there to make the film more exciting or accessible to audiences. And why should they not do so? Films are for entertainment, and even if they wish to inform (or primarily inform as with many documentaries) they must still keep the audience awake and in their seats for the duration. These issues, as well as many others, I will address in more detail in the sections on historical film and theory. For now, we can summarize some conclusions. Films are complex, and we need to remember that if we are to evaluate the historical value of their stories, we must understand something of how the medium works. Nor is their showing of the historical world a window we may look through. However, thanks to the changing perceptions about written history, its relationship to the past has come under scrutiny as well. History is no longer simply the telling of the past as it actually was, but a narrative shaped by people in the present. This fact enables us to study films in a new light. A film is historical if it uses history in some way, whether as a backdrop or plot. Whether a film tells good history is a problem for this study. Let us look at what writers have said about historical films in general.

Films are a relatively new medium and the study of them is necessarily just as new, but it has had time to develop. Before the 1960s the film was viewed as low culture and therefore neglected to a fairly large extent by scholars. It was not until the arrival of television that film came to be seen as art.²⁴ Since then film has been studied from a wide range of perspectives. As Marcia Landy puts it: "From the 1970s onward, the field of film studies has derived intellectual sustenance from, and sought to accommodate various philosophical positions."²⁵ Early on within the field there was a division of approaches to film. The dominant theoretically based approach tended to ignore film's social and historical contexts.²⁶ It is only recently that historians have looked at films as serious objects of study. Since most scholars writing about historical films either write on the feature film or documentary (or

²⁴ Rosenstone, R. 2006:20

²⁵ Landy, M. 2001:12

²⁶ Chopra-Gant, M. 2008:3

separate them in different chapters) I will do so here by first discussing different views on the historical feature film. There are many arguments, however, that will apply to both and I will stress this when they emerge. How has history on film been viewed in the past?

You will merely be present at the making of history.
W.D. Griffith²⁷

The above quote comes from an interview of the filmmaker W. D. Griffith, maker of the infamous film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). He was describing how, within the near future, the act of watching a film would replace the effort of researching all of the written authorities. The film would show you exactly how any historical event happened; it would become a window into the past. Most of us, historians and audiences alike, would probably consider this statement as a naïve way of looking at film. Film's initial potential to record reality has come under scrutiny since its invention. Since that time, it has become clear that its relationship with reality, or in our case the past it tries to conjure up for us, is not as clear as may seem during a screening. Every scene is created for us, filmed from a certain angle and edited to present a story. This is not to say that these same techniques cannot be used to expose us to hidden truths, only that they can just as easily be used to present a fictitious reality.

This issue is even more problematic when discussing films, especially non-fiction films, that include "actuality footage," meaning footage that captures events as they happen, like newsreels or home-movies. Even if a cameraman was lucky enough to be able to film an important event, that person is always choosing the angle and a part of what we see. It is never objective, and it is not necessarily the whole picture. For this study, there can of course be no actuality footage, but the films are still showing a view of the Pilgrims that was consciously shaped and angled in a specific way. In the past film studies tended to view the audience as passive receptors of film, being unable to distinguish what they were seeing from reality. That trend is gone from film studies and today we understand that movie-goers are capable of that distinction, and often debate what was historically accurate in a film or not. I think there can be no doubt that anyone watching the films for this study is aware that what they are seeing is a product of many factors, such as the director, researchers, cameraman, costume designers and many others. The audience does not believe it to be a window into the Pilgrims' lives. The real question lies in how the film handles these historical events.

²⁷ Quoted from G. Pingree in Francaviglia (ed.) 2007:37

Films about the past are entertaining, and have always been popular, drawing great crowds to the cinemas, as evidenced by the recent popularity of the Norwegian film *Max Manus* (2008). Documentaries might not have the same mass-appeal of such a film, but television channels such as The History Channel and Viasat History show us that history on both the small and big screen is as popular as ever before. Some may argue of course that these types of films and television channels show us “popular” history, made for entertainment of the masses and not to be taken seriously by any academic scholar. The History Channel's unofficial nickname, The Hitler Channel (due to their over-favouring of WWII programming) indicates that some see the channel as wholly concerned with ratings²⁸. Like many historical films, *Max Manus* endured the debate about historical (in)accuracies²⁹; a debate that seems to follow for a great majority of films trying to depict past events. These are all legitimate concerns that need to be taken into account when studying this relatively new medium, but the picture (if you will pardon the pun) is never so simple. Let us look at some of the different ways to look at the historical films from slightly more recent scholars.

Many historians have turned sceptical eyes on the historical feature film. The documentary has had the fortune of being spared much of this criticism, but not all, as we shall see. Feature films have been viewed by many, simply put, as pure entertainment. This reluctance to consider films seriously stems, according to Marc Ferro, from the fact that “the language of film appears unintelligible,” and continues with: “How could historians refer to the image or even quote it?”³⁰ Or as David Herlihy puts it: “Footnotes cannot be filmed.”³¹ Already in 1960 did film theorist Siegfried Kracauer dismiss the film’s dealings with history as pure imitation.³² Another scholar, often quoted in works on the historical film, Ian Jarvie points out film’s “poor information load.”³³ The meaning here is that a book holds much more information than a film ever can. He too asks how one can film footnotes and insists that only written works are the proper medium for arguing or debating a subject.³⁴ Hayden White counters this last argument by suggesting that films could, in theory, include such things as footnotes. For myself, this seems like a difficult argument to accept. In reality, while a

²⁸ See for example the amusing website [www.urbandictionary.com]

²⁹ See for example [http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/1.6373051]

³⁰ Quoted in Guynn, W. 2006:9

³¹ Herlihy, D. 1988:1188

³² Quoted in Rosenstone, R. 1988:1175

³³ Jarvie, I. 1978:378

³⁴ Ibid 377

filmmaker might want to include footnotes or other such devices to give the impression of greater accuracy, outside constraints such as budget and audience attention will have to factor in. While some avant-garde films may consciously move away from the normal conventions, in our study we must acknowledge that the feature films and documentary we are studying are without the equivalent to footnotes. Natalie Zemon Davis also suggests ways in which films can improve themselves, but I will return to this scholar shortly in more detail. As for the “poor information load” Rosenstone answers this by asking us to write down every detail from one scene of a movie.³⁵ This would indeed become a lengthy description, and it is clear that film can hold vast amounts of data, but not necessarily the same kind as a written account. Whether this description is just as important as the information contained in a history book is a matter of opinion, and if this can be applied to the three Pilgrims cannot be answered here yet.

Some historians look at film in a different way: as a source of information on the times in which they were made. They can be likened to other documents from the past, for example letters or marriage certificates, that weren't made with the intent of recording the past for posterity.³⁶ These types of analyses, common in the 1970s, were rarely the work of historians. A more recent work of this type was undertaken by Mats Jönsson. He clearly states his thesis: *“films always say more of empirical value about the time in which they are produced than they do about the periods they depict.”*³⁷ This is a perspective that can lead to many insights, and for this study it will be one of the questions examined. This is a limited study, however, and to examine the films as sources for their respective production eras would be a study in itself. We must rather ask: do the films tell us nothing useful about the Pilgrims because contemporary society encroaches constantly? Are there any aspects of the films that are easily identifiable as contemporary values? The contemporary history issue is difficult without deeper knowledge of the times the films were made. Another side to this issue is: do the films tell us something useful about how the past looked at the past? Does the 1952 film tell us *only* about the Pilgrims, 1950s America, or how the 1950s thought about the Pilgrims? Perhaps there is a balance between them we might find and describe.

Another historian, Robert B. Toplin, has written much on the historical film, and writes that films may not be able to do history quite like a written work, but they do have the

³⁵ Rosenstone, R. 1988:1177

³⁶ Guynn, W. 2006:7

³⁷ Jönsson, M. 2004:215

potential to open the debate about subjects from the past.³⁸ Films are always filmed from a point of view and generally ignore other interpretations of the sources. Documentaries too often want to bring audiences over to a particular way of thinking (Michael Moore's documentaries, the most recent being *Capitalism: a love story* (2009), instantly spring to mind). By picking a side, they can "contribute to the controversies that animate historical writing."³⁹ This is a good point. Do the three films in question make us think about the Pilgrims? Well, certainly, I take it as a given that one wonders about the subject matter of a film one has just viewed. Whether or not they open a debate is another matter. Films are often accused of being a contained story without room for other interpretations. Whether or not our films do this will be a point of discussion in this study.

Natalie Zemon Davis is fairly positive towards the historical film in her book *Slaves on Screen* (2000). She links her four case studies to corresponding historiography and social moods. For example she places the films *Amistad* (1997) and *Beloved* (1998) "under the shadow of Holocaust."⁴⁰ This does not mean she only values films as sources for their production periods. She comments that if "we bear in mind the differences between film and professional prose, we can take film seriously as a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision." Films can be a "thought experiment about the past."⁴¹ She voices some reservations despite this, pointing to several flaws to films that make things difficult, for example their remaking of the past to feel more like the present. She concludes that films could do "more to pose questions to their viewers about history-making and history-knowing."⁴² Davis listed specific ways in which films can attempt to do history better. Rosenstone objects to this and argues that she is trying to make a film into a book.⁴³ As already discussed, while I would find it admirable if more filmmakers were to attempt to incorporate some new devices to show the uncertainty of historical sources, such films are not common. For our study, or even the majority of feature films and documentaries, we must again acknowledge that they lack any such devices. While I think it is important to focus more on what the films actually do, and how they do it, sometimes it might be necessary to ask what could have been done better. As Marie Hughes-Warrington points out, there are too

³⁸ Toplin, R. 1988:1213

³⁹ Ibid 1218

⁴⁰ Davis, N. 2000:70

⁴¹ Both quotes: Ibid 15

⁴² Ibid 136

⁴³ Rosenstone, R. 2006:28

many sweeping generalisations about films that are based on anecdotal evidence.⁴⁴ During my research I have found those studies which focus on individual films to be the most instructive because all films are unique.

Rosenstone is a notable historian in the field and has a much more optimistic view of the medium. He has come to the conclusion that “film makers can be and already are historians (some of them), but of necessity *the rules of engagement of their works with the stuff of the past are and must be different from those that govern written history.*”⁴⁵ He compares film’s challenge to written history with the written account’s challenge to oral history, and points out that we need to recognise that there exists more than one type of history.⁴⁶ The written history cannot be literal, as we have seen, and the filmic past cannot be either. Film must work symbolically and metaphorically.⁴⁷ What does this mean for the three films in question here? It means that we aren’t meant to take the people on screen literally. When we read written stories about the Pilgrims we know that this is only an attempt to write what happened, why and how, but that we can never truly know what happened. So it is with film; feature films as well as documentary. As has been mentioned earlier, the passive audience member that is in danger of confusing the image with reality does not exist, and it is no longer valid in film studies.⁴⁸ This does not address the issues of invention and manipulation of facts, but we will get back to those later. To counter Rosenstone's view we can turn to Marie Hughes-Warrington, who takes issue with his division of different approaches to history, and sees this as problematic because separating the two does not mean films will be read as seriously as books. She offers the alternative view that instead of seeing them as different types of history, we need to see them both as simply history.⁴⁹ This is a difficult proposition. It could be argued that since films to a higher degree have economic and entertainment sides to them, we will necessarily view their use of history differently than academic works, and that a hierarchy or grading is necessary to distinguish those that focus on the historical research, and those that use that research to entertain. Although simple fact-checking is not useful to us, I do believe we must have some sort of standard to measure historical films against. Without books and primary sources (which are often written) as part

⁴⁴ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:19

⁴⁵ Rosenstone, R. 2006:8

⁴⁶ Rosenstone, R. 1988:1185

⁴⁷ Rosenstone, R. 2006:31

⁴⁸ Davis, N. 2000:15

⁴⁹ Hughes-Warrington 2007:7

of those standards, we have very little to go on. In the first chapter we will explore this problem further by trying to find a definition of good history we might search for in our films.

I have now given a short overview of several different ways of looking at the historical film, but we have yet to delve more deeply into several key issues. The issue of invention and good history being chief among them, which will be the focus of the method chapter. Whether or not you agree with any of the above scholars and are positive or negative to filmic uses of the past, the issues we have and will go through must be addressed if we are to approach films in a meaningful way. In this last section on historical films, I wish to highlight a set of issues, or problems, Robert Rosenstone lists about *how* feature films use history exactly and how these types of common techniques or similarities are problematic to us as historians. All of our three films do this to some extent, and Rosenstone presents them as typical of mainstream films. By going through them we might better understand why exactly historians have difficulties when it comes to film and history. In the next chapter we will see how films can tell us good history despite these problems.

Rosenstone's Six Points

Rosenstone points to six main problems with films we will now take a look at. 1. The feature film “tells the past as a story.”⁵⁰ Meaning it is a drama first and foremost. The story almost always contains a climax and a fulfilling end for the audiences. 2. The story is about individuals and consequently not about the big movements in history books tend to focus on. This places the film closer to micro-history or popular history. 3. The story is a completed one without the possibility of other interpretations of events. 4. The film “emotionalizes the past.” 5. The film is good at providing the right settings and props for the past. This means that the film gives a false impression of accuracy. 6. “Film shows history as process.”⁵¹ These six points raise many questions in me. Hughes-Warrington addresses some of them in her book and I will present some of her counter-arguments below.

Point (1): the past as a story. History is not structured the way a film is, with a beginning, rising tension, climax and – often with a moral message – satisfying resolution. Hughes-Warrington argues first that Rosenstone’s points about the story aspect of film and about

⁵⁰ Rosenstone, R. 2006:47

⁵¹ Ibid 48

individuals is based on anecdotal evidence, and that we need more research into more films.⁵² This is certainly true, but for myself I must consider the films I intend to study, and they all present history as one story with a build-up, climax and resolution, and with a focus on the individuals. Now, the story of the Pilgrims *is* one of individuals and perhaps seems like a straight-forward story to non-historians, but an academic work on the subject would look deeper into their backgrounds and political and social reasons for leaving. The historian would study contemporary society and the religious movements at the time. The three films I have analysed all include the build-up and climax structure to some degree. So for this study and these films, the two points apply and are important issues. Personally, I have never seen a mainstream feature film or documentary that lacks the story structure, but I agree with Hughes-Warrington that a proper survey is needed, as anecdotal evidence is too prevalent in these studies.

The documentary is not exempt from this. How can we as historians justify and accept this? I have been in contact with the director of *Desperate Crossing*, Lisa Wolfinger and she was kind enough to answer a few questions. I asked which aspects she found difficult when making a film with good history and good storytelling. She explained her role as filmmaker thus:

I approach any story as a filmmaker, in other words I have to tell a good story, that means story editing! My job is to get all the known facts, lay out the timeline and figure out where the drama is. I am distilling history down to a one, or two or three hour format after all. It all has to fit neatly into a TV screen with a beginning, middle and end. Real life is rarely that neat!”⁵³

This I think, is a very good explanation of how a film (both feature films and documentaries) work in order to be watchable movies. This doesn't mean they are of no value as history, if by history we mean anything that engages with the past. And written history is also constantly edited, or as E.H. Carr once wrote: “The main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording?”⁵⁴ Films must evaluate, in a different way admittedly, to decide what is worth filming. What I am

⁵² Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:19

⁵³ Interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, dated 10.03-10 (I have edited the capitalization)

⁵⁴ Carr, E.H. 2001:22

trying to discover here is how much editing of a story such as the journey of the Pilgrims can we as historians and film-viewers accept and still call the film good history?

(2) Both dramatic features and documentaries present stories of individuals in the forefront of the historical process, meaning they focus on the individual because that is what appeals to an audience. One individual or group can stand for the whole. What we must accept here, again, is that films have many other aspects to consider when choosing what to include and focus on. The length of the film will be one of the main things that limit the inclusion of context. The documentary, through its education aspect, would naturally include more information about historical processes.

The same goes for point (3): the lack of other interpretations. To make the film coherent filmmakers would not want to complicate the plot needlessly by including all the historical uncertainties. We must consider the individual films and the historical events behind them. Are there any strongly debated facts and do the films explicitly argue for one interpretation? If so, showing one interpretation might be as legitimate as a history book doing the same, or a book that doesn't include all the debates.

The fourth point, “emotionalizing the past”, meaning that films almost always play on our emotions to get us to care about the protagonists. Hughes-Warrington counters this by asking what is wrong about having emotions in historical inquiries?⁵⁵ All three films include clear appeals to our emotions. Without such emotionalizing some might argue the films would either be boring or the equivalent of an illustrated, dry lecture. But is this a weakness in terms of their historical value? Some emotional distance is surely required when examining sources and forming opinions, but I am not certain all emotion needs to be absent from all history presentations, and indeed they are not. In the books I have read of the Pilgrims, both academic and popular, many include descriptions of scenes that might appeal to emotion. The speculation over what the Pilgrims might have been feeling when they finally spot land is a recurring theme. The problem is perhaps a more *over*-emotionalizing the past, or appealing to modern sensibilities when in fact such ideas did not exist in the depicted past. Bill Nichols, a good authority on the documentary genre, explains how to write about such films, and makes a good point concerning emotion. We all have an emotional response when we see a film and this leads to very different interpretations. What is important is that this is “shaped into a

⁵⁵ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:20

critical analysis that has substantive support for its points.”⁵⁶ Just as we may have personal and emotional reasons for choosing a topic for academic study, we must form our views into arguments based in the evidence.

For the fifth points about recreating the past to create the illusion of historical validity, or the false impression of accuracy, Hughes-Warrington uses the film *Dogville* (2003) to demonstrate that no props are necessarily needed to make a historical film.⁵⁷ The film in question uses a black sound-stage as the only setting, and white chalk lines to designate rooms. This is a very valid point, but it does not mean that other films do not treat the past as Rosenstone describes. Just as Hughes-Warrington states several times, we need more than anecdotal evidence to see how the majority of films treat history. For our purposes, we will be looking at how the three films portray the past, or rather how they get the “look” of the past, as Rosenstone puts it.⁵⁸ Are the actors playing people the audience can identify with while only looking like Pilgrims? Are the props there to distract us from the greater historical liberties taken with events and facts? Or do they properly add to the historical experience?

When it comes to the Pilgrims, the costumes and props may have an above-average significance and interest to us. The traditional Pilgrim costume is now, and has been for quite some time, regarded as a fallacy. We will see in the next chapter that the traditional dress with buckled hats was a much later creation. I do not think any scholar would dispute this, yet the popular image of the Pilgrim persists in contemporary imagery. The best example of this is the Halloween costumes marketed as Pilgrim outfits with the wide collars, dark colours and buckled hats still in place. Do the films reinforce or work against this image? Is there a difference in clothing in the different films, and does this reflect contemporary ideas? In these three films what the costume designers and filmmakers decided is very important to our understanding of how they looked at the Pilgrims. This is linked to the wider issue of history and myths, which will be presented in detail in the next chapter: Method and Myths.

Point six “history as process.”⁵⁹ Written history is most often divided into separate topics. This is obviously useful for analytic purposes. In film, however, all topics are one story: the political, social and economical aspects of the Pilgrims’ actions come together. Hughes-Warrington does not address this point as her list is based on an earlier version. It

⁵⁶ Nichols, B. 2001:170

⁵⁷ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:21

⁵⁸ Rosenstone, R. 2006:48

⁵⁹ Ibid

certainly brings the viewer closer to the individuals and away from the overreaching movements of history such as economics.

Some might think that these points only apply to fiction films. In some ways, Rosenstone believes the documentary has more in common with books than feature films, because it doesn't "point to a new way of thinking about the past".⁶⁰ I believe he was here thinking about the more traditional lecture-like documentary. The six points, do, however, apply to documentaries as well. Rosenstone describes the documentary film thusly: "it tells a linear and moral story, often deals... with large topics through the experience of a small group... spends a good deal of time on the thingness of objects, and aims to stir the emotions..."⁶¹ It would appear that our confidence in the non-fiction film has been misplaced. Just like a feature film, the documentary filmmaker must keep audiences' attention despite not wanting purely to entertain. Just as Wolfinger says, she approaches it first from a filmmaker's standpoint. They must compress history into an easy understandable story and "woe to those aspects of history that can neither be illustrated nor quickly summarized."⁶² Rosenstone seems to prefer drama because there is no false trust of the feature film.⁶³ John Grierson, an early documentary maker, is often quoted when writing about the genre for he called it "a creative treatment of actuality."⁶⁴ The documentary doesn't necessarily bring us a completely factual and balanced view of history, according to many scholars, but what does this mean for us as viewers?

Despite these arguments, most of us do approach documentary differently than a feature film. For example while watching *Capitalism: a love story* (2009, Michael Moore) we can have no doubts that the filmmaker is trying to argue a very specific point of view, but we still assume to some degree that his arguments are based in the factual world. We expect documentary makers to have done research on a level we do not expect that feature films have gone through, though feature films have gotten better at research in the last decades. We expect no pure inventions or conscious distortion of facts. In this way, as Rosenstone puts it, documentaries are closer to books than feature films. "Like the work of written history, the documentary 'constitutes' facts by selecting traces of the past and enfolding them into a

⁶⁰ Rosenstone, R. 2006:70/71

⁶¹ Ibid 17

⁶² Rosenstone, R. 1988:1180

⁶³ Rosenstone, R. 2006:71

⁶⁴ Ibid

narrative.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, Hughes-Warrington explains how we have moved into age where we no longer trust the documentary format. Feature films now often include traditional documentary styles.⁶⁶ Even a science-fiction film like the very recent *District 9* (2009) has taken up this practice in an attempt, perhaps, to convey a heightened sense of realism. Indeed, when I saw the film I wondered if the emotional impact would have been as great without the use of hand-held cameras and the actors’ reactions to the presence of said camera.

Our documentary, *Desperate Crossing*, has many feature film techniques. This is one of the reasons for my including it in this study. It includes scenes that cannot be said to be based entirely on what we know about the events it depicts. The chapter concerning this film will explore how we can judge such scenes and if the authority of the documentary can still be counted on.

Invented scenes might be unexpected to some in a documentary, but inventions are certainly expected to some extent in feature films. This is the biggest problem for historians when it comes to films of all genres. If we are to make useful judgements about films – assuming first that we are trying to accept them into the term history – we must learn to deal with this problem. The discussion of invention and how we can incorporate it into a definition of good history for film is left for the next chapter.

Before we move on to the heavier discussions, however, I wish to provide some information on how, exactly, one can approach the study of films. We have looked briefly on several different issues and aspects a historian must confront when writing about films, but how do we go about studying and writing about them?

Approaching the analysis.

During my research on the films and writing about them there emerged a method I was not aware of until I stepped back and saw the whole picture. Since the next chapter is devoted to the method of judging the films, I thought I would here present some of the scholars that influenced how I went about researching and presenting these films.

Rosenstone states that he engages the subject in an *ad hoc* way.⁶⁷ Many recent scholars had taken issue with those who would simply compare films with written sources, or turn them into books as Rosenstone pointed out, and I certainly took this method to heart. I

⁶⁵ Ibid 70

⁶⁶ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:133

⁶⁷ Ibid 9

did find some of O'Connor's method in his book *Images as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (1990) very useful. He outlines two stages for the study of historical films. During stage one you find evidence for the production, content and reception of the films.⁶⁸ As I am primarily concerned with the films as sources of historical understanding about the Pilgrims, I will not be studying reception theory in great detail, though contemporary reviews will be useful to judge how they met expectations about the Pilgrims. Reception theory is a wide field in itself, however, and will take up too much time for this study. The films will be looked at as sources for their contemporary society to some degree, but this will not be the primary focus.

The second stage consists of "four frameworks" or approaches in which to study film. These consist of: "1. The Moving Image as Representation of History... 2. The Moving Image as Evidence for Social and Cultural History... 3. Actuality Footage as Evidence for Historical Fact... 4. The History of the Moving Image as Industry and Art Form."⁶⁹ Now, O'Connor himself makes clear that all four frameworks cannot be given the same amount of importance for every study, and for the films in question here we might even exclude some. Number 3, for example, is quite impossible for us as there is no actuality footage of the Pilgrims, nor do any of the documentaries contain any footage that was not set up specifically for the film. This framework, then, may be ignored. It is the first framework we are most interested in, and to some extent the second framework. Framework 4 also appears to fall outside the interest of this study. Under framework 1 O'Connor makes the distinction between the fiction film and the documentary, and then asks: "should historians look differently at a historical documentary than they do at a dramatization?"⁷⁰ O'Connor states plainly that neither is "more truthful" than the other for "both are susceptible to mindless travesty and intentional misrepresentation."⁷¹ If this is true, and it is a question I will have to examine more closely, then we should approach both types of film in the same way, which I intend to do in terms of method. The criteria or standard of comparison, however, will necessarily have to be different if we agree that we expect more from a documentary than a feature film. Even if we no longer have the same absolute faith in documentary, the myriad of TV channels devoted specifically to documentary programming can attest to the fact that we enjoy now,

⁶⁸ O'Connor, J. 1990:6

⁶⁹ Ibid 7

⁷⁰ Ibid 28

⁷¹ Ibid

perhaps more than ever, the “true” stories and reality television. When viewing *Desperate Crossing* people will expect more adherence to the facts than when watching *Plymouth Adventure*. What sort of criteria can we use to judge these types of films? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

The two first frameworks from O'Connor, therefore, seem to be most useful for us, though the focus will be on the films as representations of history. The chapters will be based on the individual films in chronological order of their release. The Pilgrim's side of the story, however, is also very complicated. We must separate the popular romantic story and the historical facts. Do the films follow the romantic or the historic more?

Structure of analysis.

The structure has evolved as the analysis went on. There are three main areas, or angles of analysis, that are of interest to us.

Before that there must be some context. I have already argued against the over-emphasising of production history, but the age of the films cannot be ignored. With great stars such as Spencer Tracy, Van Johnson and a younger Anthony Hopkins than we are used to, our feature films can be easily placed in their respective decades. The colouring, technology and acting styles can all be dated relatively easily for those with some knowledge of film history. The chapters will therefore begin with context, which will be shaped by how much information I have been able to acquire about the production and the historical films of the times.

Next I shall examine how the film uses the historical events to tell a dramatic story and how the romantic Pilgrims are represented. Are the films merely a recreation of popular ideas, or do they try to make a genuinely historically accurate film? Is there a marked difference between how the films from the 1950s handles the events compared to the later versions? In the concluding chapter we will be able to compare all three and see how the documentary is both different and similar to the feature films in many respects. Each chapter is shaped by the film it describes and so focus on different aspects of the story. During this close examination there will be an ongoing discussion on if and how the film presents us with *good history* - the main subject of the next chapter.

Closely related to this, and also a subject that will be detailed in the next chapter, is how the film engages with the numerous myths permeating the Pilgrim story. This is very much

related to if and how the films can give us good history. Do the films give us only the popular and easily recognisable romantic Pilgrim story? How does the film engage with the Pilgrim story as it was during the time it was made? Is there a marked difference in how the myths are handled in 1952 compared to later version? Perhaps this may indicate how the romantic story continues to evolve throughout the 20th century. How does the modern documentary handle popular myths? Is there a discussion, a dismissal, or does it simply not mention the misconceptions viewers might have at all?

The next area of analysis to put to the films will be contemporary culture intruding on the historical representations. Does *Plymouth Adventure* tell us more about 1952 than 1620? Contemporary culture will always intrude on films as well as all kinds of works; books, music art, and academic works. While there is hardly room to give an in depth study of the 1950s, the 1970s and first decade of the 21st century, I will nevertheless try to see if there are any obvious contemporary traits that intrude in the story to such a degree. The biggest issue here is the portraying of women, as the role of women has changed so dramatically from 1952 to 2006. Can the same characters in the respective films be easily identified as women from the 50s and 70s for example? Does contemporary society intrude so much as to exclude the film-versions of these events from history? Or do they perhaps give us history in the sense that they can tell us how the past looked back at the past?

By the end of this we will be able answer the question of what sort of history these films present us with, and how the Pilgrim story is represented in three films spanning the 20th century. These chapters could all have been much longer, as films can always be examined another way from a different perspective or by an even closer reading. Film also invites subjective readings. I have tried to provide summaries of the films so that the reader may get some idea of how the story is told, but I would argue that the best way to agree or disagree on my interpretation of these films is to see them. As it stands, that is difficult due to their obscurity (at least the first two), so I hope you will endure the perhaps tedious but necessary descriptions.

Before we can get into the films, however, there are still some questions that need examining. Method and Myths is what the next chapter will be about. Here we will explore the problem with history and film more deeply, as well as examine the romantic Pilgrims, and how popular culture has recreated and reshaped the story into the popular images that persists even

today. A big part of this study is all about how the films confirm or confront these myths. In trying to say something concrete about these three films, I have found it necessary to find a point of reference, or standard, to compare them to, otherwise it is all a matter of opinion and anecdotal evidence. To find this, I have attempted to define what “good history” might mean for films, as I believe their use of history is different from written history and as viewers we approach it differently. Therefore we must look at the problematic areas of films, namely the invention of facts, and how to deal with them. Rosenstone here is very helpful. How we judge inventions in films is very much linked to how I define good history for this study. This is what the next chapter will be about. After establishing this definition, I will finally move on to applying all these discussions on the films themselves in chronological order, and perhaps we will be able to see a development of the Pilgrim story on the screen.

CHAPTER 2: METHOD AND MYTHS

- A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand

Christian Metz⁷²

The above quote certainly neatly sums up my feelings about film in general, but that does not mean I will not attempt an explanation regardless. Perhaps we can also turn the quote on its side and say: a film is easy to explain (technically, if you have the time), but difficult to understand (its underlying meaning and impact). In any case, if we wish to both understand and explain, we must have the tools to do so. In this chapter I am going to elaborate on some issues touched on in the introduction as well as outlining my method in detail. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to the study of the Pilgrims. More specifically, the many myths and common misconceptions that have evolved from the original historical events.

In the introduction we saw that while film cannot be a window into the past, that it can and already does use history, and that in recent decades scholars have come to accept that we cannot ignore such films even if their language is different from academic works. Individual films may use history in different ways, and this study is all about making judgements about three specific films all depicting the same set of events: the Pilgrims crossing to America in 1620. We have already briefly looked at several issues with films that may cause some historians to reject films from a strict definition of history. Rosenstone's six points illustrates how mainstream films often depict history. These issues are all present in our films, and we must learn to accept them as part of the mainstream filmic language and try to find a way to still make judgements about such films.

What sort of criteria then, or definition, should we put to history when we see it on film? Academic history has its own methods and standards, and this is not what is meant when we say a film is doing good history. Historical understanding is perhaps a better term. Written history is more than just academic history, and filmic history varies greatly as well. There does not seem to be a clear consensus on how historians should look at or judge historical films. Much has already been written on the subject. As we saw in the introduction, scholars today seem ready to accept film into some definition of history. In this chapter we will examine more concrete definitions and criteria that may be used to make judgements about the historical value of individual films. We will try to come to a definition of *good*

⁷²Quoted from Monaco, J. 2009:176

history, or good filmic history, that we can put up against our three films.

The first part of this chapter deals with the film medium and issues related to analysing it. How does one read a film? And more important for us: how does one read a historical film? What sort of criteria should we have? Should we compare it to traditional, written history, and if so, how? What about the issue of factual inaccuracies? If we accept some inventions, can a film ignore specific facts and still give us a film in the *spirit* of the Pilgrims? Are they showing us modern sensibilities and values, or can films truly show us the mindset of those in the past? This relates to the second part of the chapter: film and myths. Do films merely perpetuate common myths about the Pilgrims, or do they confront them and engage in the historical debate?

This brings us to the people on the screen; the Pilgrims. They themselves never called themselves that. The popular image of them in buckled hats and black clothes is not historically accurate, yet they are still the typical Pilgrim costume found everywhere from Thanksgiving plays to costume shops. Where do these images come from? What can we know with some certainty happened back in 1620, and what facts are lost to us forever? We have already been familiarised with the main accepted events as described in the primary sources. In this chapter we will instead look at the history of the myths themselves, and attempt to trace the development of the Pilgrims' history.

If we take the argument further, we may ask if the films give us only a contemporary version of events in costumes made to look authentic. Can these films tell us more about contemporary society than the Pilgrims, or is there a balance to be found, and can we examine it?

How to read a (historical) film?

When analysing a film we can do so from a multitude of different points of departure. Film studies is a vast field with many schools and different perspectives. In our case, we are looking at the content of the films, what we see on screen, and the historical worlds they create. Economics, politics, audience reception theory, aesthetics, etc, are angles not of special interest here – they can be studied onto themselves. That, I think, is one of the most fascinating and at the same time frustrating things about film: there is always more to say on the subject. Any single scene might be analysed from several different angles. When conducting a relatively short study such as this, one must be very strict with what one chooses

to focus on.

When we watch films we perceive them through a combination of instinct and habit. We recognise filmic cues. When it comes to representing history in books and on films, both of them involve the creator(s) choosing and editing the information into a meaningful whole. There are differences, as they are very different mediums, but this creating of meaning is fundamentally the same. Our question here will be, can history on film be judged according to some standard or criteria, or will we find that our three films cannot be judged to be anything other than entertainment?

Although, one can never forget all the different aspects that shape a film's contents, we cannot examine them all in detail. Perhaps foremost, at least for the mainstream feature film, films are commodities made to make money, and this shapes our understanding and explanations of decisions we might see in a film. Production history, context, and audience reception are all very interesting areas within film studies. Many will agree that the study of context is essential to film, and of course it can never be fully ignored that one film was released in 1952, one in 1979 and one in 2006. We must take this into account when we analyse how certain historical events are presented differently in the three films. As explained in the introduction, production notes are not of special interest here. We are not so much interested in what a 1952 version of the Pilgrim story can tell us about the 1950s, but if and how a film made in this context tells us about the 1620s.

Old reviews have been useful when putting the films in context. How the reviewers interpreted the films is interesting to us because we might get a glimpse of how the contemporary audience expected the Pilgrim story to be portrayed. The films might tell good history in terms of how the historical Pilgrims were seen in 1950s or 1970s. We must be aware that the accepted version of events might have changed, just as older history books may have been discredited later. They were not necessarily bad history books when they were published, and they, like the films, can tell us valuable things about how the past viewed the past. My search for information on the 1952 film, for example, produced some articles and even an interview with the producer. For the 1979 film, on the other hand, not much exists outside the film, and we are left to focus solely on what we see on screen. In contrast to these relatively old films, *Desperate Crossing's* director Lisa Wolfinger provided me with lots of interesting information that has helped me to understand how the film was made.

Sometimes the reviews let us see something of the filmmakers' intentions, but we must

supplement this with what we see on screen and the sources the films are based on. Stated intentions may not be accurate. The focus of this study is the film that the audience gets to see, but also why and how the Pilgrim story has evolved across the 20th century. Are the films a continuation of the popular story, or an attempt at a real historical representation of the Pilgrims? Before we can answer that question we must ask how does one interpret or read what we see on screen?

Since I am not a film student, and not writing for a film studies course, I have tried to keep any technical jargon to a minimum. Some basic information on understanding film is necessary, however. In James Monaco's greatly detailed book *How to Read a Film* (2009, fourth edition), he lays out how some might compare film to language. A comparison that those who deal primarily with the written word might enjoy. To understand this comparison we must first be aware of a few basic terms used to describe films. A *shot* in a film is the continuous filming of an object, the length of which can be anything from one frame (1/24 of a second) to however long the filmmaker wants (or however long the camera was capable of shooting, though nowadays technology can overcome this problem). Some have equated a shot in a film to a word in a book. The *scene*, several shots filmed in one location, is like the sentence, and the *sequence*, a series of scenes that together make up one part of the film with one meaning/message, could be the paragraph. These filmic terms are important to know when reading and writing about film - that is why I list them here - but equating them with words and sentences, as Monaco shows, is a little too simplistic. A film is a "continuum of meaning."⁷³ Every scene must be analysed in relation to this continuum, which it must be said is similar to how one reads a book so the comparison does make some sense. For myself the difference that first springs to mind is how the senses are all collaborating on creating the meaning: music, dialogue, sound, the actors, photography, etc. Things move much faster than when reading. A single shot lasting for only a few seconds can convey the emotion, reference or action that it can take several sentences to describe. Every film also has its own tone and style. Some meanings might be hard to grasp for some, and other arguments might be very explicit.

A film, a feature film in this case, often invites subjective readings, much like a novel. This aspects sets it far apart from academic works. A documentary is generally expected to be more related to a lecture or book, as its arguments are usually made more explicit. But that is

⁷³Monaco, J. 2009:178

generalising to a large extent, and in the chapter concerning *Desperate Crossing*, we will see that documentaries are fully capable of inviting speculations subtly, and can have the emotional impact of a feature film. These aspects are what make a film so easy and complicated at the same time. Modern audiences in a cinema can understand a film and its codes without much conscious effort, but analysing it is a different matter, as the opening quote of this chapter so poetically points out.

What are the potentials of films? Another way of putting it might be: why do they captivate us so? Reading a film with the intent of further analysis might require something more than a single viewing. One can read a book without knowing much about the technology behind printing books or the publishing industry. To fully appreciate and understand how *Desperate Crossing* works, however, you need some understanding of how it came to be and the conventions within the medium. One of the great things about film is in the technology itself, a relatively new invention that is constantly being improved. A modern documentary such as *Desperate Crossing* makes great use of modern technology to create the period. This is not a new phenomenon: *Plymouth Adventure* received the 1952 Oscar for special effects. Historical films, in general, are very adept at making use of the newest technology to take us back to the past in ever more realistic ways. One of Rosenstone's six points is that highly accurate props and scenery might fool audiences into thinking the film has a highly historically accurate plot. Some of us might resist this point and say: we are not so easily fooled. It is impossible to know how many of us might consider a film with better props more accurate. One scholar argued that we are now in a post-documentary age where we no longer trust the image, and with good reason.⁷⁴ Perhaps initial awe at historically accurate costumes and cityscapes has turned to scepticism. As Winkler, author of the book on the film *Gladiator* (2000) argues, audiences enjoy films for their story, and it is not props that make a film memorable.⁷⁵ That is why some films are timeless despite new technology making them look dated. "Most audiences would have had the same reaction to or memories of these films if their sets and decor had been utterly inauthentic."⁷⁶ This is anecdotal evidence, but do we really believe that most people are fooled by production value alone? It might be a factor, certainly, but if it is so, it would require a thorough audience-focused study to examine it and is therefore not something we can do here. For our films we must consider the costumes and

⁷⁴ Hughes-Warrington, M. 2007:133

⁷⁵Winkler, M. 2004:17

⁷⁶Winkler, M. 2004:17

props in relation to the iconic yet factually inaccurate Pilgrim costumes, and it must be a small factor in determining the films' historic value to modern audiences.

In a documentary about the long gone past new technology can bring more realism, for better or worse depending on your point of view of the above debate. We cannot feasibly go out into the Atlantic and wait for a storm, so the computers allow the viewers to see the storm as it might have been. In a historical film set in London, for example, the whole skyline can be recreated to show audiences how the city looked at any point of time the script calls for. We should certainly always be sceptical of visual evidence in this day and age, but the post-documentary and digital era clearly brings new opportunities for the past.

Another great thing about films, closely linked with their ability to recreate the past ever more perfectly, is their ability to show us things. This difference from books is my personal reason for why I resist any direct comparisons to books. Writing about novels and films - but we can apply it to our situation, I think – Monaco writes: “the great thing about literature is that you can imagine; the great thing about film is that you can't”,⁷⁷ meaning that films can show us, without us having to imagine, exactly how the first sighting of Cape Cod on a cold day in 1620 *might* have looked like, while a book can only describe how it *might* have looked like. The difference lies in film's concreteness versus a book's dependence on the reader's imagination. Neither can give us the actual image, but film's concreteness in its image can be a positive as much as a negative. The negative is clearly that the audience cannot know what the filmmakers are showing us has any basis in the sources. How far can a filmmaker go with his imagination? How far have the three Pilgrim films gone?

A historian can afford to speculate and not give a concrete answer, a filmmaker cannot.⁷⁸ A film can show the audience what it might have been like aboard the *Mayflower* in a way a book can not, though I have read many moving descriptions of the conditions onboard in several history books. A film can show us what might have been said, since we have no record of all their conversations. This seems to be a thin line to walk. If a filmmaker has a genuine desire to make a historically accurate film, it must be difficult to find a way to fill in the many holes in the sources, and make an entertaining film, all the while keeping to your idea of good history telling.

When we watch historical films, however, we are most often confronted with numerous

⁷⁷Monaco, J. 2009:177

⁷⁸Winkler, M.2004:22

facts that we wish to look up and check. As historians we may want to point them out to other audience members. We might desire some sort of standard to judge a film against. We might resist a direct comparison with books as books can not be translated to films, but it is from books and written sources that the historical films often take their stories from. Rosenstone uses the term “discourse of history.”⁷⁹ What he means is not a comparison with just one history book, but the accepted facts in numerous books, and the continuous debate over these facts. The discourse about the Pilgrims has gone on for some time (alongside which the popular misconceptions have flourished in art and stories). When we see a factual inaccuracy in a film, we must not simply look it up in a book, but make an effort to understand why the filmmakers made the choices they did based on the information they had on hand. Rosenstone uses the term discourse of history to handle the issue of invention, and we will now take a closer look at this. If we can find a way to deal with invention in films as historians, we may find a definition of history that can be applied to our films.

*“But is it accurate?”*⁸⁰

The clearest problem people, or at least scholars, have with film is invention. Invention is not the same as factual inaccuracies. If a film alters or misrepresents events, or perhaps just gets a single fact wrong, like a date, those are inaccuracies, and are more easily overlooked. It does not really matter to the audience that the different films say John Alden is a carpenter or cooper. Invention is the adding of facts, events, characters etc, that do not come directly from the sources. When Gilbert Winslow narrated what he writes in his diary in *Plymouth Adventure* (1952), that is invention. How do we judge that? Can we say it is in the spirit of the Pilgrim story and therefore forgiven? What about invention in a documentary? Surely inventions have no place there at all? Is there a way for historians to accept invention?

How can we handle invention on films when they are technically everywhere, in every scene? Films invent not only scenes, characters, and dialogue, but the gestures and tone of every character, as well guesswork with clothing and how places looked. Well, history books also do a lot of informed guesswork; speculations on how things were, what we might conclude from a set of facts, but they do not invent in the strictest sense of the word.

Rosenstone has this to say about invention: “This practice may be enough to remove from the

⁷⁹ Rosenstone, R. 1995:21

⁸⁰ From the *BBC History Magazine* in several issues. For an online example see: *Titanic: Three Films*, History Extra, date unknown, [<http://www.historyextra.com/feature/titanic-disaster-three-films>] (downloaded 28.02.11)

dramatic film the word ‘history,’ but certainly not the ideas of historical ‘thinking’ or ‘understanding’.”⁸¹ He argues that we can still focus on the metaphoric reading of films, on the argument side of the story, and that this is “precisely the point at which film and written history come the closest to each other.”⁸² What about documentaries? They are not suppose to invent, are they? Despite the fact that they are a “creative treatment of actuality” we do expect them to refer to the factual world, to base their arguments in fact. Not all documentaries are so strict in their presentations, however, and the documentary *Desperate Crossing*, does invent scenes. Does this immediately detract from its value as a source of historical understanding? Do they justify it in some way? This issue will be a major point to examine during my study. How to compare and contrast the three films and their methods for presenting the Pilgrims proved to be a challenge as well. How do we as historians handle the issue of invention?

While it did not influence my method notably, I was nevertheless delighted to discover that the *BBC History Magazine* has several times included a feature about three films on a single topic. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, it does not appear they have ever chosen the Pilgrims as a topic. Each film, be it one from a group about the British Empire, Titanic or Queen Victoria, are summarised and commented upon before asking the important question: “But is it accurate?” After pointing out the major flaws (or praising its verisimilitude) each film is given a rating on accuracy out of ten. The latest film on Jesse James earned an amazing nine out ten. Although, one can't help but wonder what the film needed in order to get that last point, and if ten out of ten means it is a perfect recreation of the historic events (an accomplishment which is, as we all know, impossible). While this method may seem simplistic, it does serve a purpose: informing people who were asking themselves that very question after they had watched any or all of these films. It may also encourage people to find out the accuracy rating of other films they like on their own. If more people asked “But is it accurate?” after viewing historical films, history teachers everywhere would no doubt be grateful. Films can lead to deeper examination and discussion of historical events, and that is exactly what has happened here, even though far from all historical film fans read history magazines. This type of comparison is quick, but effective in some ways.

The goal of this study is to delve deeper into these films and their relationship with history, but fact-checking against the accepted versions of events has its place. Films are a

⁸¹ Rosenstone, R. 2006:162

⁸² Ibid 163

separate medium with their own rules and conventions, and we must accept these if we are to study them. However, by virtue of their subject matter, they engage in the debate around the historic events in question, and must be set up against the facts at some point. I will not be giving the films a score out of ten, nor will factual (in)accuracy be my main criteria for “good” history, but I believe it to be a necessary and useful part of the evaluation process nonetheless. The medium's conventions necessitate many changes and alterations that a written history work would not get away with, but that does not automatically make the film lose points.

We are lucky in that the story of the Pilgrims has been written down by people who actually lived through the experience. Many facts can also be discovered through other sources, on both sides of the Atlantic, yet large gaps still remain. A film about the Pilgrims, or any historical subject matter, must invent to fill the gaps, or alter and/or compress events to fit the story into a single two-three hour film. It simply cannot include everything, nor can it leave gaping plot holes because the sources do not have the answers. It may also invent, alter and compress due to other considerations, not least drama and pacing, or for economic reasons. Another type of invention is when the narrator of *Desperate Crossing* tells us: “This is William Bradford.” This is, in fact, a lie, for it is just an actor, but it is a lie we all accept and it does not alter history, even if the actor, Sam Redford, does not look exactly like the historical figure (something we will never know in any case, as there are no portraits of him). Invention, therefore, is part of retelling the past. So how can we distinguish between the type of invention we all accept, like the actors, props and scenery not being completely authentic (we do not even know for certain what the *Mayflower* looked like), and the types of inventions that alter history to such an extent it cannot be ignored?

Rosenstone distinguishes between *false invention* and *true invention*. When a film is guilty of false invention it “ignores the discourse of history”⁸³ while true invention engages with said discourse; it does not alter the big picture. His exact definition of discourse of history is “the existing body of historical texts;” and he argues that a historical film cannot exist in a vacuum, to be judged separately from what we know of the past. “Like any work of history, it must situate itself within a body of other works, the ongoing (multimedia) debate over the importance of events and the meaning of the past.”⁸⁴ We must at the same time also

⁸³Rosenstone, R. 1995:8

⁸⁴Ibid

remember that inventions in film are different from inventions in history books. Getting every detail correct is not only impossible, but may not be all that important. A film is not up for peer-review. Director of historic films Anthony Mann put it thus: “The actual facts, only very few people know. The most important thing is that you get the feeling of history.”⁸⁵

An example of false invention, to pick a film relevant to our study from my own viewing experience, would be the Disney film *Squanto* (1994), which is a live-action adventure film clearly aimed at children. You may recognise the name as the Native American the Pilgrims were introduced to in the new world. According to the history books he stayed with them, helped them and became a great friend and ally to William Bradford. He already spoke English because he had been kidnapped from his home (where the Pilgrims settled; the area called Patuxet) and eventually ended up in London. His kidnapping and subsequent meeting with the Pilgrims are about the only things the historical record and the Disney adaptation have in common. While he did receive help from monks during his time in Europe, in the film he spends virtually all his time with them, learning from them and teaching them his strange but innocent ways in return. The film ends back home in America with him stepping between the Pilgrims and Native Americans, both poised to attack at any moment. Squanto has learned to love his fellow man despite past wrongdoings. William Bradford makes a brief appearance as a weak and peaceful man who is pushed aside by the war-mongering Miles Standish. This film, I would argue, is bad history simply because it is almost pure invention, yet still they attempt to link it to actual historical events and people. The type of invention in this film is false because it ignores virtually all the facts and thus places itself far afield from the historical record. There is no engagement with the discourse of history.

This is perhaps an extreme, or “easy”, example, in that there is no question that the filmmakers ignore the historical record and the discourse of history. The other films about these characters may not be so easy to judge, which is why *Squanto* is not included in this study. To distinguish films that make “good” or “bad” history, we must do more than simply count movie-mistakes, and that is what I hope to do here. Most likely we will find examples of false and true invention in all three films.

Before I conclude with what we now mean by good history on film, we will take a look at another aspect that is problematic for our three films: the romantic Pilgrim story.

⁸⁵Quoted in Winkler, M. 2005:23

The Romantic Pilgrims

The Pilgrim story is a very popular one in American history, even though the colony did not grow to flourish like its later neighbour, Boston. Every year Americans celebrate their ancestors' crossing and feast with the Native Americans, now known as the First Thanksgiving. They put on Thanksgiving plays at schools. There are cartoon Thanksgiving specials on television, and dozens, if not hundreds, of websites that give information on proper Thanksgiving traditions. Yet if you go through some of these websites many are likely to tell you the *truth* behind popular traditions and ideas about the Pilgrims. Lists of debunked Thanksgiving, Pilgrim or Mayflower myths are numerous. I would like to see a study about what Americans believe about the Pilgrims today. In fact I did come across one last Thanksgiving (November 2010) in an article entitled “Americans hang on to Thanksgiving Myths,”⁸⁶ about a dissertation by LuAnne Roth which claims schools still teach the myth of the First Thanksgiving. I was unable to locate the actual dissertation, however. I have gone through many sites describing the history of Thanksgiving, and many mention the fact that popular ideas are wrong. The fact of the matter is that neither of the primary sources describe the first Thanksgiving as it has become known among modern Americans. They did feast with the Native Americans, but it was not, as we shall see later on, as the modern holiday is celebrated today. I cannot state with any firmness that the many top ten lists of thanksgiving myths are widely believed today, but their popularity over the centuries can not be doubted, and they are of great interest to our films. Film is a popular medium after all, and one of the main questions for this study is: how has a popular media such as film handled these popular myths?

How did these myths come to dominate the story of the Pilgrims? How did the Pilgrims story become romanticised and what are the specific falsehoods people have believed over the years? This will not be an exhaustive list, since I have chosen to present those myths that are of interest to the three films.

One of the main reasons there exists so many different ideas about the Pilgrims that can today easily be shown have no basis in the sources is because the main source, William Bradford's book, went missing for quite some time. It was never printed until it resurfaced in

⁸⁶Silvey (2010) “Americans hang on to Thanksgiving Myths”, *Columbia Daily Tribune*, Nov 24 2010, [<http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/2010/nov/24/americans-hang-on-to-thanksgiving-myths/>] (downloaded on: 15.12.10)

England in 1856. Before that only a handful of scholars had managed to get a look, among them Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's nephew, who wrote his own history, *New England Memorial* (1669) using large portions of Bradford's work. "It was from these deliberately selective and didactic interpretations that the Pilgrim myth evolved."⁸⁷

Another reason that can explain some of people's misconceptions is that the importance of Pilgrim story itself, and the significance of Plymouth to the rest of America, did not become a fact until long after America became an independent country. Every country has its own origin myths, and today the Pilgrims are very much a part of that, but this was not always the case. The Pilgrims were not even associated with Thanksgiving until the late nineteenth century.⁸⁸ By the time the Pilgrims story came to symbolise the origin of America, the story had already undergone changes in its regional form.

A third reason for some confusion about who the Pilgrims were and what, exactly, they did, is their close neighbours the puritans. Many sources agree that the puritans were stricter and some say more prudish than their separatist countrymen. It does not help that many times characters from the different stories are referred to with the wrong prefix: *Pilgrim* John Winthrop (the first governor of the puritan colony) or *Puritan* Miles Standish, for example in *The Courtship of Miles Standish*.

Now we know a little about why the Pilgrim story can be divided between romantic and historic versions, we will now look at more specific questions about the most popular misconceptions and myths. Once we know more about them we will be able to see how the films either adhere to popular notions or try in some way to counteract these common ideas.

The first major myth is the *romantic* Pilgrims themselves, or courting Pilgrims: Miles Standish, Priscilla Mullins and John Alden. The three are involved in a love-triangle in a poem by the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, called *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. Written in 1858, it was very popular in the 19th century and helped shape the common view of the Pilgrims.⁸⁹ From the Pilgrim Hall Museum website: "Generations of schoolchildren grew up with Longfellow's poetry.[...] Longfellow used his imagination to

⁸⁷Abrams, A. 1999:23, see footnote 34 for details.

⁸⁸Abrams, A. 1999:11

⁸⁹ Unknown author (year unknown), "Longfellow- His Influence and Lasting Appeal", *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: a Maine Historical Society Website*, date unknown, [http://www.hwlongfellow.org/works_influence.shtml] (downloaded on 6.09.10)

flesh out the characters in his love triangle.”⁹⁰ The poem's plot cannot be verified, but its popularity shaped people's image of the Pilgrims when it came to romantic love. Today the poem is not as popular as it once was, and it is not even addressed in the latest documentary, but the two older films both invoke this old tale and therefore it is significant to this study.

The poem actually takes place well after the Pilgrims have landed in the New World. Miles Standish lost his wife, Rose, shortly after their arrival, and decides to court Priscilla. Standish, unfortunately, is a man of action, not words. Luckily for him, he lives with a bachelor named John Alden, who is very good with words. Standish entreats his friend to do the courting for him, and Alden, though sceptical at first, agrees. Unfortunately, as some may have guessed, Priscilla is not interested in Standish, but Alden. She utters the most famous quote from the poem when Alden is speaking about what a good man Standish is: “Why don't you speak for yourself, John?”⁹¹ Though at first very angry, Standish eventually forgives Alden and all is well.

We know that Alden and Priscilla married and that Rose did die shortly after arrival. Other than that, Longfellow's imagination must get all the credit. Although I did find some who claimed the tale was passed down within the families and kept alive through an oral tradition, but I have found no reliable sources.⁹² The image of romantic love among the Pilgrims sprang from this poem, and the two feature films invoke the spirit of Longfellow's work. How they do this and why it is interesting, will have to wait until their respective chapters. For now it is enough to mention that the poem was certainly popular enough for reviewers to comment on its inclusion (and alteration) in the film *Plymouth Adventure* (1952).

The idea that Pilgrims do in fact indulge in romantic love seems to go against the other common idea that the Pilgrims were stiff and a little prudish. This stems, according to many commentators, from their conflation with the puritans.⁹³ The top three results on a “Pilgrim myths” search on google (out of 685,000 results) gives us the correcting of such myths as “The Pilgrims were teetotallers” or “The Pilgrims Hated Sex” and of course “Pilgrim, Puritan

⁹⁰Leach, F. (2005) “Love and Legend: the Courtship of Miles Standish”, *Pilgrim Hall Museum*, May 18 2005, [<http://www.pilgrimhall.org/love&leg.htm>] (downloaded on 6.09.10)

⁹¹Longfellow 1858:42, (located with Google books [http://books.google.com/booksid=neIIAAAAQAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s] (downloaded on 19.01.11)

⁹² See the Pilgrim Hall Museum Website [www.pilgrimhall.org/love&leg.htm] (downloaded 14.04.11)

⁹³ For example: Maxwell, R.H (2003) *Pilgrim and Puritan: A Delicate Distinction*, Pilgrim Society Note, Series Two, March 2003. Found at [www.pilgrimhall.org/psnotewpilgrimpuritan.htm] (downloaded on 14.04.11)

– Same Thing.”⁹⁴ I have studied many of these lists and most of them have merely reposted the same version on different sites. Most of them are more focused on the fact that the first Thanksgiving was not about family, football and a big turkey dinner. If they do not include a variation of the fun-less, prudish Pilgrims confused with puritans, the lists or articles almost certainly include a comment about the fact that the Pilgrims did not wear only black clothes and buckled hats.

The Pilgrim man and woman, in black clothes with white collars or aprons, and the buckles on hats and maybe even shoes, is a very common image. Simply do an image search for “pilgrim” and the buckled hat will take centre stage. They appear ubiquitous, despite the many debunking lists. Where did this image come from when so many historians, teachers and bloggers make it clear it has no basis in history?

The popular image of the Pilgrim comes to us from paintings. The Pilgrims depictions changed according to who was doing the depicting. “Not until the mid-nineteenth century did the familiar stiff, drab Pilgrim ‘uniform’ come into being.”⁹⁵ The buckled hats did not come into actual use much later than the landing at Plymouth, and artists started depicting the Pilgrims with them even later. In the next chapters we will be asking how the filmmakers decided to portray the Pilgrims. Are there buckled hats everywhere, or do they wear historically correct garments? Lisa Wolfingers, from the documentary, commented that she prided herself on researching every aspect of the times, including dress. Can we find a similar respect for research and verisimilitude in the older feature films? As a film-viewers, I must admit I expected the older films to be more likely to fudge on the details. In my examination of the films, I was surprised.

Before we move on there is one other common misconception I wish to address here. It concerns a specific event that will be taken up in two of the three films. It concerns the wife of William Bradford and her untimely death.

Dorothy Bradford died after the *Mayflower* had anchored off Provincetown Harbour. Bradford was out exploring at the time, but he does not mention the death in his history. He

⁹⁴The first quote from a blog called “Jason Rohrblogger's Top Ten” [<http://toptenlog.blogspot.com/2009/08/top-ten-pilgrim-myths.html>] the other two by Rick Shenkman (2001) “Top Ten Myths About Thanksgiving” on the George Mason University's History News Network [<http://hnn.us/articles/406.html>] (both downloaded on 10.01.11)

⁹⁵ Abrams, A.U. 1999:39

notes it only in the appendix chronicling the “decreasings & increasings” of the colony that: “William Bradford his wife dyed soone after their arivall; and he married againe; and hath 4. children, 3. wherof are married.”⁹⁶ According to accepted wisdom she drowned, most likely slipping overboard and sinking quite rapidly due to her heavy clothes. The books I have read on the subject all describe her death by drowning and comment on Bradford's lack of comment on his wife's death. While some do not question the drowning at all,⁹⁷ others take the opportunity (as the documentary *Desperate Crossing* does) to suggest the lack of comment from Bradford meant shame involved, and therefore a possible suicide. One author lists things she might have been depressed about to show how likely a suicide could be.⁹⁸ It makes for a convincing argument.

Speculation about Dorothy's possible suicide is the sort of thing that fascinates us. The lack of knowable facts makes a good basis for myths. Why did Bradford not write more about her? As human being we can not help but wonder if he was so heart-broken he could not find the words, or if perhaps he was cold and unforgiving of her sin. It is no wonder this story has found itself part of the Pilgrim story. Unfortunately, as historians we must conclude there is little evidence to grasp at. How do the films grasp at it? Do they all take this (possibly) dramatic plot twist and use it to their full advantage, or do they, like historians, allow the audience to speculate but give no firm answers?

We might mention briefly one other event which all three films deal with in some fashion, and that people who are familiar with the Pilgrim story might want to examine: The legend of Plymouth Rock, where the Pilgrims were to have stepped ashore first. There can be little doubt it never happened. Again, I wish I possessed a survey over Americans' ideas about the Pilgrims. How many today believe this story? Very few, most likely, as the Rock itself has lost some of the prominence it once had, as explained in the very detailed book *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (1998) by John Seeley. The first mention of the rock occurs in 1769, over a century after the alleged landing, and more interestingly, the Rock itself did not come into its fame until even later in 1820 “when it emerged from a local to a national eminence.”⁹⁹ While no longer as important a symbol as it once was, it remains a

⁹⁶ Hildebrandt 2001:609, electronic version of Bradford's original manuscript found at [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NEReligiousHistory/Bradford-Plimoth/Bradford-PlymouthPlantation.pdf] (downloaded 13.01.11)

⁹⁷Hilton, C. 2005:126

⁹⁸For example Philbrick, N. 2006:76

⁹⁹ Seeley, J. 1998:1

thoroughly American icon. Yet, as we shall see, all three films, even the 1952 film to some extent, dismiss its place in actual history.

Now we have some idea of how and why the Pilgrim story is such a complicated one. It is a story that is celebrated every year, and has evolved from its historical beginnings into a romantic origins tale. We cannot know how many American school-children learn the *true* story today, but what we can examine here is how the romantic and historic tales interact in the film medium across the 20th century. There are yet other interesting legends that have since faded away in the modern version of the romantic Pilgrims. These are mostly to be found in *Plymouth Adventure* (1952) and I will therefore address their history and historicity in the next chapter.

The films gives us unique insight into how the Pilgrim myths persist across the 20th century, but what do they mean for the films being judged to give us good history? This is a very difficult issue, and I believe it is necessary to judge it on a film-to-film basis and the status of the myth at the time of production. Some myths were more accepted in 1952 than today; in fact some myths are even completely forgotten today. We must also consider that we might applaud a film for breaking through old myths and trying to give a more historically satisfying version of the story, but at the same time be more forgiving if the story gives us the popular myths often mistaken for facts instead of pure invention. Myths and history are things that often get mixed up in an audience's mind, and so we must tread carefully when judging them in our films, especially since this is a story so deeply entwined with its own myths.

Conclusions on method and myths

For us to make judgements about what is a film depicting good history and a film depicting bad history, we must have some sort of criteria by which to judge them. It cannot be a simple set of criteria, like the counting of facts or inaccuracies. Every film is unique and approaches history from a different perspective. Every film that depicts historical events or historical people are, by definition, historical films, but many people can tell a good one from bad one. How? For this study, I have relied mostly on Rosenstone's handling of invention.

Films must alter historical events to fit them into a nice filmable story. Some things simply do not translate from one medium to another and we must respect that, but also make judgements about it. When judging alterations and compression of time one must look at the individual film. How long is it? Does it look like it has a high production value? These things

effect what can be put on film, and what must be cut to preserve a coherent story.

Invention, as Rosenstone points out, is the big challenge with film. Historians cannot abide invention in their academic work, and this tends to seep over into their film-judging. How can we judge what is allowed and what is not? Rosenstone uses the terms true and false invention – invention can be tolerated if it is in the spirit of the historical time and place, if it “engages with the discourse of history.” When judging inventions, this separation will be very useful in judging events that deviated markedly from the accepted historical facts.

We must also distinguish between the type of story told and the invention in question. If all the events and people in the film are presented as real historical people, then false invention is not so easily justified. If the story itself is an invention, we must then ask if the story is in tune with the historical era depicted. For our case, the events are historical and the people well-known to many. It is then we come to the question of myths, or popular ideas.

When discussing well-known people from the past, many have ideas about them that when examined have no concrete base in the historical sources. Such is the case with the Pilgrims. Their image has been distorted, their lives have been spun into epic poems, and their journey has even been complicated by conspiracy theories. We have many films that are about myths more than history. The Disney film *Pocahontas* (1995) for example, is very much mythic, but that is why we forgive it for having talking trees and very intelligent animals.

How can we judge the recreation of the Pilgrim myths on screen? These types of images of the Pilgrims have already been recreated countless times in paintings, poems and plays. Myths such as these are part of many peoples’ historical consciousness. They are often accepted facts that remain unquestioned. If one wishes to make a good history film, therefore, a film cannot simply recreate such myths to the audiences' expectations. When judging old films, as in our case, we must look at the historical discourse going on at the time and the status of the myths then. Old history books can be proven wrong, but we should not say an old film is a bad historical film because of research performed after their release. A film may very well be much more engaged in the historical discourse than some might assume because certain ideas have been discredited later. In such a case, the film might not only provide information about the historical events and the contemporary society, but also how the contemporary society looked at the Pilgrims and their history.

Some scholars¹⁰⁰ would argue that contemporary society always intrudes on the films so that they cannot tell us about the past. I do not think this is always the case, although contemporary culture will *always* intrude in some way, as it does in every sort of work be it books or other mediums. Old films may seem to modern audiences to handle historical events in an inaccurate or even dismissive fashion, but we must look more closely and see how the accepted wisdom of the events in question have changed. Old historical films may very well tell us just as much about how the past viewed the past as the contemporary culture that created them. When viewing old films we cannot therefore simply compare with modern academic works on the subject. We must delve deeper into the evolving research about that specific topic.

In summary, to judge good filmic history, a sort of “is it likely?” mentality is needed. We simply cannot have the same mindset when judging films as we do judging written works of history; that will not get us very far. The question must be posed to each individual film and studied in its own context, but at the same time we can not let ourselves become apologists for films. Where the line is crossed varies with each story, with almost countless unique circumstances for the historical events and the production situation of the film.

An added element to all this is the romantic version of the story. The Pilgrim story is very well-known in America. It has been retold countless times in art and other mediums. Many falsehoods have become completely ingrained in the story, and even today people are trying to correct them. How does this affect our judgments of these films? A film should not simply pander to what people expect. If it simply recreates the romantic version, it is no more than a dramatization of a story, with no engagement with the discourse of history. It will be interesting to see how a popular medium handles such myths. At the same time, if the myths themselves are faithfully depicted, and the film presents no further ambition than this depiction of a popular story, then we can not judge the filmmakers to be inventors. They may at worst be judged poor researchers or pure entertainers.

¹⁰⁰ A good example is Mats Jönsson 2004, who argues films always tell us more about contemporary society than the depicted past.

CHAPTER 3: *PLYMOUTH ADVENTURE* (1952).

“The Most Exciting Sea Adventure Ever Filmed.”¹⁰¹



In colourful gothic writing, scrolling slowly upwards so that all may have time to read, while a busy harbour can be seen the in background, these words appear:

The history of mankind is the record of those who dared to adventure into the unknown realms: into the depths beyond the microscope, into the mysteries behind the stars, into the hidden areas of the mind, into the wilderness of new continents.

This picture is dedicated to the immortal men and women who dared to undertake the Plymouth Adventure and so brought to a continent the seed that grew into the United States of America.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹From original trailer, found at [<http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/index.jsp?cid=11064>] (downloaded:30/08-10)

¹⁰²Time stamp: 0:01:47

This is the beginning of the 1952 film *Plymouth Adventure*, based upon the book of the same name by Ernest Grébler, published one year earlier. In beautiful Technicolor we see the harbour of Southampton in August 1620. Famous stars fill the screen, (at least famous in their day) including Spencer Tracy, Van Johnson and Gene Tierney, playing Captain Jones, John Alden and Dorothy Bradford respectively. It was directed by Clarence Brown, produced by Dory Schary and written by Helen Deutsch for the well-known Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studio.¹⁰³ The film chronicles the events from Southampton, across the ocean and ends with the *Mayflower* leaving the Pilgrims in the New World. Its version of the Pilgrim story is filled with drama and cinematic magic. It even won an Academy Award for special effects. It may be far from a milestone in film history, but while watching it you certainly get the feeling that the producers spared no expense and took great care in creating the world around the Pilgrims.

What kind of Pilgrim story did the filmmakers create? A more detailed summary is necessary before we proceed with any analysis. Following that I will place the film in its filmic context with some information regarding historical films in the 1950s, as well as the film's economic and political context. A close reading of the film will be next. First we will examine how the film creates its world. Following that is an examination of how the filmmakers explored common schoolbook myths in the film, and how they engaged with the historical discourse and not just the romantic Pilgrims. Within this several points of invention will be analysed to see if they are justifiable or inexcusable. Finally, a short discussion of possible contemporary values present in the film will be presented. Through all this, the question of whether films can do good history will be considered. What does *Plymouth Adventure* teach us about the historical Pilgrims? Or does it merely retell the romantic story?

Summary of the film

We begin as stated on the harbour at Southampton. Here we quickly learn that the Pilgrims are leaving because they “pray standing up,”¹⁰⁴ but while they are free to leave and good riddance to them, their leader William Brewster is wanted. Gilbert Winslow, who will narrate while writing in his diary for most of the film, is not part of the religious group. This we learn while he speaks with John Alden, a nearby carpenter, about people coming down from

¹⁰³See the Internet Movie Database for a full cast-list and more information:
[<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045039/>]

¹⁰⁴Time stamp: 0:03:18

London seeking adventure. He casually mentions that they are in need of a carpenter, and John's eyes twinkle.

As the passengers board the ship, the master of the *Mayflower*, Christopher Jones, gets his first glimpse of Dorothy Bradford and the viewer understands immediately that he is interested in her. He goes to meet Thomas Weston in a nearby tavern. Mr. Weston pays Jones to land the Pilgrims in New England instead of the planned Virginia in exchange for a bag full of money. Jones agrees, stating that he does not care if the passengers land in hell. We later learn that Weston means to buy up the New England Company in secret, thereby owning the land the Pilgrims will settle on while his former company, The Virginia Company, has paid for the entire voyage only to end up with no settlers on their land.

John Alden comes aboard, has his first scuffle with a crew member, and discovers William Brewster hiding down below. He also sees Priscilla Mullins for the first time and is instantly infatuated. On deck the Pilgrims are arguing over the new terms Thomas Weston wants them to sign. He rips up the agreement, and whispers to Captain Jones as he leaves: "Now, Captain Jones, you may sail."¹⁰⁵ By saying they are free of each other he hopes the Pilgrims will be more ready to settle in New England.

On the night before they are to sail a drunken Christopher Jones comes aboard after one last night out. He discovers Dorothy Bradford on deck and clumsily tries to seduce her. Luckily she is rescued by her husband. This is their first private interaction, and the next morning dark looks are exchanged between the men while Dorothy dutifully lowers her gaze. Jones is cynical and downright cruel towards the passengers.

The *Speedwell* leaks and is forced to turn back, and this leads to even further antagonising between the Captain and the passengers. Finally, the *Mayflower* sails out on her own. The crew members continue to harass the women. John Alden melts Priscilla's heart while Captain Jones hardens his; "There are no honest men!" he declares.¹⁰⁶ When the storm hits William Bradford goes out looking for a missing boy and is tossed overboard. Captain Jones aids in his rescue - this is a turning point for Dorothy's view of him. Inside the ship, the main beam cracks and John Alden comes to the rescue by suggesting using a printing press to force the beam together.

Scurvy and sickness now plague the passengers and William Button, a boy who

¹⁰⁵Time stamp: 0:21:15

¹⁰⁶Time stamp: 0:42:20

planned to be a king in New England, dies and is buried at sea moments before land is sighted. As the Pilgrims go ashore to explore, the women are worried Captain Jones is planning to leave before they have a chance to build shelters. Dorothy goes to beg him to stay and he in turn begs her to come back with him. "This is wrong," Dorothy pleads. "You'll never belong to him again," Jones declares. "That I know, and so I'm lost somewhere between you."¹⁰⁷ She says she will think about it, and goes out to sit and stare at the sea. The next scene is of Bradford returning; he has found the New Plymouth of which John Smith spoke. He is informed that Dorothy has died, and it is assumed she fell overboard while no one was about.

We are not witness to the winter, but are read a tally of the dead while viewing the now prosperous colony still under construction. Friendly Indians work in the background and people are gathering to say thanks to Captain Jones. He has stayed with them despite the difficulties with his mutiny-minded crew. He says he will transport back any who wish to return if they appear at Plymouth Rock at dawn. He draws Bradford aside and tells him, "she never betrayed you."¹⁰⁸ They share a silent moment of grief.

Only William Brewster comes to say goodbye at dawn and Jones is clearly impressed that no one wishes to go home. He has finally come to respect and care for the Pilgrims. "I can see the sails, two, then five, then fleets of them, coming to join you. I'll be among them."¹⁰⁹

The End.

Historical films of the 1950s

Plymouth Adventure was released during a decade that produced a lot of films set in the past. In fact over 40 percent of Hollywood films made during the fifties dealt with history in some form. That's about 1200 historical films during the ten-year period.¹¹⁰ The production had almost doubled compared to the 1940s.¹¹¹ "It was a level of historical interest unprecedented in the industry."¹¹² The reason for this is complex and has many factors. Historical films have always been popular and made money, but why did this increase to such an extent during the

¹⁰⁷Time stamp: 1:32:05

¹⁰⁸ Time stamp: 1:41:42

¹⁰⁹Time stamp: 1:42:52

¹¹⁰Eldridge, D. 2006:1

¹¹¹Cameron, K. 1997:98

¹¹²Eldridge, D. 2006:2

50s? Some might point to a postwar culture with the anxiety of the McCarthy era, along the threat of the cold war looming, coming together to create a powerful nostalgia and a need for escapism.¹¹³ Whatever the reason for their production, the films of the 1950s were a varied group of films. According to one scholar the 1950s was a time when historical films had lost some of the greatness of the 1940s; that they were excessive in their neoromanticism and “peripheral to the national experience, and they seem to know it.”¹¹⁴ What he means here I think is that the decade's political climate, with the red scare, made it difficult to deal with the national experience directly, and also produced shallow melodramas that were poorly made compared to past decades. *Plymouth Adventure* itself has been dismissed by another as a “superficial effort”.¹¹⁵ It is true that *Plymouth Adventure* tells us a great deal about the time it was made, as we will see later, and how the filmmakers saw the Pilgrims, but the film also engages with history. The newspapers of the time reported on its new take on the famous story. In his book about the historical films of the 1950s David Eldridge shows how varied the films of the decade were, and that they engaged with the past in a multitude of different ways. It is up to us to look at the individual film to see how its historical world is created.

Many of the historical films from Hollywood in the 1950s and 60s are still remembered as great films, but not for their historical accuracy. Our mental image of Rome, for example, has without a doubt been influenced by the classic films of this period, but it is not a historically correct image. In analysing the modern *Gladiator* (2000) its cinematic predecessors are easily spotted, and some might argue its version of Rome has more in common with Old Hollywood than the ancient city.¹¹⁶ The fact that it has numerous historical inaccuracies, however, does not discourage the scholars. Despite inaccuracies, the film can reach back to both ancient Rome and old Hollywood at the same time. The old historical films, such as the ones *Gladiator* pays homage to, are not as often given this type of analysis, despite the changing view on historical films.¹¹⁷ There are a few books on the subject, one already mentioned, that I have found very useful, and they attempt to answer how old films dealt with history in a more nuanced way than simple escapism. Upon first viewing *Plymouth Adventure* one might be dismissive of the starch collars that seem to shine with their

¹¹³Hofstadter, quoted in Eldridge, D. 2006:32

¹¹⁴Cameron, K. 1997:122

¹¹⁵Pitts, 1984:234

¹¹⁶Winkler (ed.) 2005:27

¹¹⁷Eldridge 2006:3

whiteness even at the end of a nine week voyage, but “no matter how idiotic the end result might have been, even these films were the product of the industry's historical consciousness.”¹¹⁸ *Plymouth Adventure* has much more to say on the Pilgrims, despite perhaps not being a great film, or an academic history lesson.

The majority of Hollywood films made during the decade were westerns, but historical films in general were seen by the studios to be a safer bet than films set in contemporary society. Historical films were very popular. According to MGM records, the studio that made *Plymouth Adventure*, they raked in a total of \$430 million for the 105 historical films they released during the 1950s. Averaged, that means a film set in the past made \$4 million, while a contemporary set film released at the time could expect to earn no more than \$2 million.¹¹⁹ The numbers speak for themselves; historical films drew the big crowds. It was a good thing too because historical films cost more money to make. Costumes, sets, research: everything was more expensive. In 1952 “seven of the eight costliest productions were also historical,” *Plymouth Adventure* being among them.¹²⁰ It was a “prestige production”¹²¹, made in glorious Technicolor, clearly meant to wow the audience. It was even advertised as “The Great Technicolor drama of the sea!” Big investments meant big risks, though, and sometimes the gamble did not pay off. *Plymouth Adventure* failed at the box-office and lost \$1.9 million.¹²² It was one of the top ten most disastrous films of the decade from MGM, one of six historical films on the list. Despite the risk, and the disastrous losses, the studios still made more money from historical films. “Half of MGM's history films made a profit, making them a safer bet than non-history films, of which just 35 percent were profitable.”¹²³ Clearly, the studios had good reason to put money in these types of film projects. While films set in early American history were in fact very rare compared to others historical periods, we can see how a film like *Plymouth Adventure* managed to get the backing it needed to get made. Its unlucky reception could not have been foreseen. Film studies are not limited to popular films, however, and the reason for *Plymouth Adventure's* big loss is interesting in regards to its content. It might have failed at the box-office due to the political climate of the time and how the filmmakers chose to represent the people regarded as the first Americans.

¹¹⁸Ibid 2

¹¹⁹Ibid 36

¹²⁰Ibid 40

¹²¹Ibid 20

¹²²Ibid 49

¹²³Ibid 41

McCarthyism always springs to mind whenever we think of America in the 1950s. The Red Scare came to Hollywood and the Hollywood Ten, as they came to be known, were blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951. The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals wanted to make sure the screen version of history was free of marxism.¹²⁴ This created a stifling climate for filmmakers, according to the blacklisted screenwriter Walter Bernstein.¹²⁵ Perhaps this is the reason why many of the films can be seen as less than celebratory compared to previous decades, and the reason they were not engaging in the same way with the national consciousness.¹²⁶ History, however, could be used as a way to comment on contemporary society without attracting scrutinising eyes. Instead of purely escapist films much scholarship has found that these films use “historical settings to achieve their political statements.”¹²⁷ How does *Plymouth Adventure* fit into all this?

The modern viewer might be hard pressed to find anything remotely marxist about a film depicting the most American of people, according to popular sentiment. The Mayflower Compact is signed in one of the more moving scenes in the film. “Anarchy means disaster,” Bradford declares in his stirring speech to convince the passengers to sign. The narrator, Gilbert Winslow, describes what they have done: “They have laid hold of great principles hitherto unrevealed to the nations of the earth. They are about to establish just and equal laws, adopted and administered by the people. A government based upon the will of the people.” This clearly is meant to reference a much later, more famous document. How could a film containing such words be viewed as marxist? The problem of marxism lay in the depiction of the Pilgrims as a less than coherent group of separatists seeking religious freedom. The filmmakers wanted to portray the Pilgrims as real people. In essence, they were attempting to make them more historically correct, and they defended their version of the story with their meticulous research.¹²⁸ The advertisement for the film proclaimed things like: “...certain secrets concerning the fateful voyage of the Mayflower were locked in archives for many years. Now MGM presents the unknown drama...”¹²⁹ *Time* magazine reported on their plans and the producer was accused of “‘debunking’ the national heritage,” mostly because the film

¹²⁴Eldridge, D. 2006:78, 97

¹²⁵Ibid

¹²⁶Cameron, K. 1997:122

¹²⁷Eldridge, D. 2006:79

¹²⁸Eldridge, D. 2006:98

¹²⁹Advertisement found in *The Spokesman Review* Dec 1, 1952, p. 36. (found with Google News Archive)

had included passengers who were seeking their fortune instead of religious freedom.¹³⁰ Several newspapers ran the story containing the same talking points from *Plymouth Adventure's* producer, Schary. In the interview, reprinted several times in different newspapers, he gives seven notions about the Pilgrims that he views as common myths, and explains why these will not be present in the film. This list will be useful when discussing common myths later. Headlines declared how the film would upset or “Puncture Notions About Pilgrims Fathers.”¹³¹ Although it seems that most critics who actually saw the film did not bring much attention to these original points, and their view on the films historical accuracy seems to be pushed aside in favour of its entertainment value, which was mixed. We will discuss reviews in more detail later.

There were those who opposed the film completely. The Governor of the Connecticut Mayflower Society put it thusly: “The joint opinion appears to be extremely unfavourable, not only in Connecticut, but in the other State Societies. We can, it seems, do without Hollywood!”¹³² Clearly, the past could not always be a “safe refuge” from the Red Scare.¹³³ The Society threatened to boycott the film, and their negative view on it might have contributed to the flop at the box-office, though we can not know this. This debate, however, does plainly illustrate that *Plymouth Adventure* was more than simply a reflection of 1950s American onto an imagined past; at least it was not a reflection everyone agreed with. It gives us more than a confirmation of myths. The filmmakers were trying to recreate the *historical* Pilgrims, not simply retell the established romance. How exactly does the film itself engage with the discourse of history by challenging common myths or the romantic story of the Pilgrims? Just how accurate this filmic attempt at recreation is, and how it relates to the romantic Pilgrim story, will be discussed later. At the same time it is clearly a “sea adventure” meant to entertaining and dramatic in the traditional Hollywood style. Can the two sides be reconciled or does the Hollywood-thinking always erase the historical validity of films?

Creating History in Mainstream Hollywood

How does a film, *Plymouth Adventure* in this case, create its world and does such filmic

¹³⁰Eldridge, D. 2006:97

¹³¹Thomas (1952) “New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers” *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

¹³²Shaw (1952) Mayflower Members Dislike 'Plymouth Adventure' *The Hartford Courant*, Dec 23, 1952. p.14 (located with Google News Archive)

¹³³Eldridge, D. 2006:98

methods destroy the historicity of the film? Being a Hollywood creation, a mainstream feature, it follows a set of conventions. Rosenstone labels these traditions Hollywood. He illustrates them by using the film *Glory* (1989).¹³⁴ All the films in this study follow these six conventions to some degree. *Plymouth Adventure* is very much a Hollywood creation.

It is very much a story, moral and closed, and with a focus on individuals. While it hints at a wider context with Master Jones' last line ("I can see the sails, two, then five, then fleets of them coming here to join you."¹³⁵) the film is very much a closed story with a beginning, climax and moral resolution. Its focus is not so much on the importance of the Plymouth colony to the rest of history (though this has its place too, as the line above illustrates), but on the moral development of a man who stands for everything the Pilgrims do not, and who eventually is, in a way, converted. The closed, moral story oversimplifies things considerably, but its moral message is very much in tune with the romantic Pilgrim story and the meaning that has been passed down: triumph over adversity, the search for freedom above all, and sacrificing physical comforts to gain spiritual peace.

A film, as we know, has a different function than a book. The large movements in history are not going to add much to the entertainment factor, and may complicate the story needlessly. The short introduction of the Pilgrims and their problems is really all we need. The (American) audience are well aware that the Pilgrims fled England due to religion. It is a simplification and the film has very little historic information beyond the individuals. Should a film need to include a wide enough context to please all historians? No, that is impossible. A film might still be called history despite its narrower focus.

Plymouth Adventure's simplification may be too much for many historians to accept. The very first scene gives us an explanation to who the Pilgrims are and why they are leaving: "They want to pray that way instead of this way (he points his praying hands downwards and then upwards) and they don't kneel, they pray standing up. They calls it religious freedom, and for that they're sailing away into the black sea of darkness."¹³⁶ This comment has the double function of explaining why the Pilgrims are leaving, and how other Englishmen might have been dismissive of their views. Although an American audience will have no difficulty in recognising the right cues to identify the Pilgrims and their plight, the film gives us no more than the context we are already familiar with. How it handles specific events is more

¹³⁴Rosentone 2006:47

¹³⁵ Time Stamp: 1:42:52

¹³⁶Time stamp: 0:03:20

therefore more interesting.

Rosenstone argues that most films give us a “unitary, closed, and completed past.”¹³⁷ Does the film ever hint at historical alternatives? Not really, but one issue always seems to stand out when dealing with this particular narrative: the question of Dorothy Bradford's untimely demise. Dorothy's death is never shown in the film, but it is heavily suggested that she drowned herself due to guilt. Brewster gives us an alternative interpretation by stating she would never commit such a mortal sin and that they can only assume she fell overboard. This might seem like a small concession, and it is. The filmmakers did change this from the book, *The Plymouth Adventure*, which gives us the whole scene: Dorothy slips and falls, thinking how silly it is that she should drown when nobody will ever know what happened to her.¹³⁸ *Plymouth Adventure*, the film, concedes, in this one instant at least, that we do not know what happened. For the rest, it has chosen one interpretation of events and, as a history book might, argues for this view through the story. As we will see later, there are many points where the film challenges the accepted myths about the Pilgrims, something the filmmakers were specifically trying to do. It may offer no alternatives within the film, but on its own it is one alternative, one possible version of events, shaped by Hollywood, but engaging with history nonetheless.

Almost all films have an emotional impact, as Rosenstone's fourth point makes clear. Books are more likely to ask and speculate over the question: would they have felt joy at their safe arrival or despair at the empty wilderness, or both? Popular history books might invite us to imagine their emotions, but film makes us live through the journey with the characters in a unique way. We can see the emotions on Captain Jones' face as he slowly changes his opinion of the passengers. We are affected by the music in the background. A film can show us how human emotions might transcend time and place. The Pilgrims did all surely feel joy, despair, hope and anger at some point. We can never know exactly when or why, but the film can show us a human reaction. William Button's burial at sea did not actually happen moments before they spotted land, but the Pilgrims are so overcome with emotion at finally seeing land again that they all but forget their grief from a moment ago. This illustrates their humanity, which as we will see later was a major goal of the filmmakers. Humanizing the characters in this way is what I would deem true invention: we cannot know how they all felt, but we can

¹³⁷Rosentone 2006:47

¹³⁸Gébler, E. 1951:286

imagine because we are all human. This is where film has the advantage over books in terms of the human experience, not historical accuracy. Of course, if personalities are presented in a unhistorical way that could be false invention, which we will examine when we look more closely at the characters.

The fifth point is all about history giving us the “look” of the past. What Rosenstone means here is that some films may try so hard to look right so that the audience might easier accept other historical inaccuracies. The costume and prop departments on *Plymouth Adventure* certainly had enough money to spend, not to mention the effects department. Eldridge has a very interesting chapter on the research that went into movies in the 1950s.

“Studio publicity in the 1950s frequently implied that props, costumes and locations imbued a film with *automatic* historicity, in terms which often reduced history to a mere patina of authenticity, present only in the period details. The industry's common conception of historical authenticity rarely matched a professional historian's sense of the term.”¹³⁹

Eldridge shows how the 1950s was dominated by a hunger for facts. The view of traditional history had also been shaken, and filmmakers were more aware that the historians themselves tell stories in a way by picking out facts. Hollywood frequently preferred “authenticity in the visual details while privileging imagination in the narrative drama.”¹⁴⁰ Researches compiled a lot of material, great “bibles”, that the filmmakers could pick and chose from.

While we may be critical of this view on props and authenticity, getting the right look is the convention for a reason, but films themselves are not popular solely because of how they look. *Plymouth Adventure* is a good example of that I think. It won an academy award for special effects for the storm at sea that most critics loved. Its props and costumes are vivid and in Technicolor, a technology that was still somewhat reserved for prestige films. Producer Schary stated in his interview that he wanted to show that “Their outfits could be colorful.”¹⁴¹ I have no evidence to suggest that the lack of traditional black Pilgrim costumes had anything to do with its lack of success, in fact I doubt it, but it is interesting to note that they actually attempted to bring something more than the romantic look to the screen. We

¹³⁹Eldridge, D. 2006:128

¹⁴⁰Eldridge, D. 2006:130

¹⁴¹Thomas (1952) “New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers” *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

may criticize research departments in the 1950s for not being more critical and not working with historians more. Still, they did manage to “provide a sense of how common objects appeared when they were part of people's lives and in daily use”,¹⁴² as Rosentone's point states. How exactly the producer and filmmakers confronted the common myths will be examined in detail in the next part.

We have now gone through some of the Hollywood norms briefly and seen a little of how the film's historical world is shaped by mainstream Hollywood. A film is a collaborative economic endeavour, but the individual filmmakers also have great influence on the final product. They in turn are affected by the contemporary style of Hollywood, but they, and the industry as a whole, do have a historical consciousness, and this is evident in the film. As we will see next, the filmmakers were very conscious about several myths common to the Pilgrims, and they genuinely desired to make a film that came closer to the historical individuals than previous representations.

*Plymouth Adventure and the “schoolbook notions”*¹⁴³

Producer Dory Schary, “the headman at MGM”¹⁴⁴, was interviewed before the film's premiere. It was reprinted in several newspapers. Interestingly, the producer gave seven facts about the Pilgrims that he argued were common myths, and that his film sought to correct them. We might describe the interview as a very early version of the numerous debunking lists on the internet today. These seven points have a lot in common with today's online lists in that some myths are similar. A sign, perhaps, that some of the myths are very persistent? Other points or facts he lists, however, I have not found anywhere in modern debunking lists. The myths do not stop evolving, it seems.

This interview is a look into what the filmmakers intended. Before I saw this interview, I was convinced the film was very unhistorical, but these seven points made it clear how much the myths themselves seem to have changed, and how some have fallen out of popular culture completely. By studying the origin of these myths I was better able to understand the film's relationship with myths and history. *Plymouth Adventure* is not the most accurate retelling of the historical Pilgrim story, but it does have a fascinating relationship

¹⁴²Rosenstone, R. 2006:47

¹⁴³Thomas (1952) “New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers” *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

with history nonetheless, and I much more complicated one than what a modern viewer may first assume.

I would therefore like to go through these seven schoolbook notions, and see what sort of common myths they are and whether or not the film actually counters or supports the popular view of the Pilgrims, as Schary represents them. Does the film deal primarily in true or false invention? How do the filmmakers balance their clear desire to make a historically accurate film with their desire to create an adventure of the sea?

The first myth Schary relays is about the popular poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. As already discussed, it was very popular in the 19th century and helped shape the common view of the Pilgrims.¹⁴⁵ The triangle in question is between Priscilla Mullins, the only single woman of age on board, John Alden (who is a carpenter in *Plymouth Adventure*), and Miles Standish, the captain hired to deal with military affairs. Miles Standish appears only briefly in the film, however, and is a comical figure if anything. He tries to teach the Pilgrims to shoot, but the gun goes off in his face, covering it with soot. He does not interact with Priscilla at all.

Throughout my research the only bit of evidence to support the story in the poem is that John Alden did marry Priscilla. One historian, in a book about Miles Standish published in 1905, called it a simple “little fairy-story”.¹⁴⁶ Clearly historians were well aware of Longfellow's imaginative account, but the poem most likely had some influence on the public's view on romantic love among the Pilgrims. Such notions may no longer be so widely believed, but they clearly were during the 19th century. Most likely it was still remembered in the 1950s considering the producer makes clear to point out: “The John Alden- Priscilla Mullins- Miles Standish love triangle was strictly a figment of Longfellow's imagination. Miles Standish was a married man and much older than Priscilla.”¹⁴⁷ Rose Standish, his wife, came with her husband onboard the *Mayflower*, but she apparently perished in January of 1621. Several reviewers in 1952 mentioned the absence of this famous love-triangle, so it can be reasonably assumed they expected this plot-line to be included in a film about the Pilgrims,

¹⁴⁵ Author unknown (year unknown) “Longfellow - His Influence and Lasting Appeal.” *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow website: a Maine Historical Society Website*, [http://www.hwlongfellow.org/works_influence.shtml] (downloaded on 6.09.10)

¹⁴⁶ Jenks 1905:239

¹⁴⁷ Thomas (1952) “New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers” *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

though none seem terribly upset that it was not.¹⁴⁸

The book *The Plymouth Adventure* (1951) is what we would call a historical novel. The book sticks close to the big events of the Pilgrim story, but the details are very much taken both from imagination and common myths. The triangle is somewhat altered from the poem as well, being between Priscilla Mullins, John Alden and Master Jones. The author provides a “forewarning” in lieu of the traditional introduction: “herein imagination has tried to walk with fact without pushing fact out of the way for its convenience.”¹⁴⁹ What is meant is that the book follows the events of the voyage while interpreting the actions of the people on board and writing their personalities from intuitive guesswork. He calls it a “documentary chronicle rather than a historical novel.”¹⁵⁰ While I would hesitate to use such a word, his stated mission seems to be a favourable way of looking at historical films, and our film in particular. In the film the love triangle has been altered even further, but since the original was no more historically accurate than this one, we can not help but wonder why it was done. Priscilla Mullins is substituted with Dorothy Bradford and John Alden with her husband William Bradford. That makes the new triangle: William Bradford, Dorothy Bradford, and Christopher Jones. None of the original members from the poem remain. Meanwhile the John Alden and Priscilla Mullin's story is put in the background, where they fall in love without interference from Miles Standish, who is made into a comedic character who is barely present in the film at all.

If Schary took pains to make it clear the poem was pure imagination, how does it serve history and the film to create another fiction? From an historian's point of view it does makes the film seem even less engaged with the discourse of history, or in this case the discourse of myths. If they had chosen to disregard the myth completely one could argue they are making the statement that the poem is unhistorical, and that the film is trying to stop it from being perpetuated. Since they did not simply remove the triangle, however, one could argue that by putting in another in its place it seems almost more of an act of pure Hollywood thinking, with just as little regard for the historical Pilgrims as for the romantic. We must, however, also try to see the film as a filmmaker and historian at the same time. The answer that spring to mind is that by not showing the love-triangle the audience expects, they at least *know* for

¹⁴⁸A compilation of several reviews with comments available at [http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reels/films/list/1_23_5] (downloaded 13.09.10)

¹⁴⁹Gébler, E. 1951:vi

¹⁵⁰Ibid

certain that the romantic plot-line they are presented with is fictional.

The film is also an attempt to humanize the Pilgrims rather than remake the romantic image. A Hollywood version of events, whether it is debunking the Pilgrim myths or not, needs a dramatic focus; a set of main characters that are battling more than the rough seas. I do not have access to any notes or letters that might illuminate this single decision, but I can certainly argue for it as a movie-watcher myself. Bradford is the natural main character of the story; he wrote most of what the film is based on, and he became the most important person in the new colony. The story of his wife, Dorothy, was already steeped in mystery. Bradford barely mentioned her death in his history. The conspiracy theory about how Master Jones betrayed them by landing them in New England on purpose is another story, which we will look at in more detail later, making him an unsavoury character. Yet we know he stayed some time in the New World so that the Pilgrims could have shelter until their houses were built. A filmmaker would take that opportunity to ask, why the change of heart? The script-writer Elizabeth Deutsch must have seen the potential here quite easily. Whether or not the love-triangle and film as a whole were well executed is another matter. Is the new love-triangle itself a false invention? I would argue instinctively yes, because they take so many liberties with historical characters. We have no basis to believe Dorothy was involved with Jones. One can, however, argue that the switch could impress upon audiences the inaccuracy of the original poem, and that might be seen as engaging with some historic discourse. Instead of including a story some might mistake for fact, the film presents an overtly fictitious love-story. It certainly serves to give a new twist to an old story.

As historians we might find it difficult to forgive such wild speculations, but we can see some elements in the myths and ideas about the Pilgrims were already in place: Dorothy's mysterious death and conspiracy theories surrounding Master Jones. This is speculation with both history and myth in the service of story-telling. The film has taken the traditional poem and made it darker and more relevant to the main story of the Pilgrims, and perhaps more interesting to the audience. I would not say this is good history, but it is pretty good, and very interesting, story-telling. The descendants of several *Mayflower* passengers, however, were probably not so lenient in their judgement, as we have already noted, and perhaps Marxist suspicions were not the only reason they disliked it.

The second “schoolbook notion” that Schary says will be changed is the fact that the Pilgrims

did not land on the famous Plymouth Rock. The landing on Plymouth Rock has come to be one of the most easily recognisable scenes in early American history, depicted time and time again in drawing and paintings. There is a sandstone fresco in the Capitol building's rotunda depicting a Pilgrim stepping off a boat, one foot on a rock, being greeted by a submissive Native American.¹⁵¹ This is a scene that cannot be mistaken, and yet it almost without a doubt never happened in the way it was traditionally depicted. There is simply no mention of it in the original sources, and most likely the Pilgrims would have pulled their boat up on a beach and not tried to step off onto a rock that might knock it about.

In the film the Pilgrims come ashore on a quite rock-free beach. The scene does not even include the sea-weary travellers falling to their knees as Bradford describes.¹⁵² Only the narrator seems aware of the history-making moment: "Here at last is the beginning. This lonely boat being beached on a cold and empty shore. [...] this day must be remembered..." The Pilgrims carry their heavy muskets and look warily about them, "setting forth into they know not what."¹⁵³ Plymouth Rock does not go unmentioned, however. Lose your focus for one moment and you might miss it, but Master Jones does make a reference to it at the very end of the film. Having just received thanks from the gathered Pilgrims he rises and makes an offer to those who want to go back home to England: "if any who wish to go will appear at dawn at Plymouth Rock, you will be taken aboard."¹⁵⁴ The next morning we see the Captain waiting by a rather large rock, higher up on the shore than is possible to step on land from a boat. It is also much larger than the rock tourist can view today, but the real rock also lies almost the same length up from the shoreline. Why include this here and not in the scene the audience would expect to see it?

By making this reference, and having Jones sit by such a rock, the film subtly connects the Rock of today with the past without having to perpetuate the common myth of Plymouth Rock as the original landing site. Through the setting of Jones' departure the viewer can see how the Rock came to be important to the Pilgrims without having them land on it. In this way the film makes a point to debunk the myth while at the same time suggesting a reason for the myth's existence at all: the place of the Rock became the natural point of arrival and departure after the Pilgrims had founded their settlement and later generations confused this

¹⁵¹Can be viewed here: [<http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/rotunda/reliefs/landing.cfm>]

¹⁵²Charles Deane, ed. 1856:78 (read with Google books)

¹⁵³Time stamp: 1:29:12

¹⁵⁴Time stamp: 1:41:10

with the original landing. While it is unlikely that the physical, rather small, Plymouth Rock was ever a landing place, it did lie by the harbour. The film is giving us a possible explanation, it is presenting an argument, a subtle one, maybe even clever. To me it illustrates that films are capable of making arguments about history.

Conspiracy theories and antagonists

The third point Schary mentions I will give to you in full: “3. The Mayflower wasn't blown off its course, which was supposed to be Virginia. A land speculator bribed the captain to deliver the settlers to New England. (This is supposed to be the first real estate swindle in American history.)” We cannot be not sure where Schary took this information from, as he does not say so directly, but we can guess from the books he mentions: "In recent years, there has been a lot of new material turned up about the Pilgrims. Books like 'Saints and Sinners' and 'The Plymouth Adventure' have thrown a new light on the founding fathers.”¹⁵⁵ *Saints and Strangers* (1945) is the book I think Schary is referring to. It is a more academic history book than *The Plymouth Adventure*. According to the book, the leaders of the Pilgrims knew of the plan to settle in New England, but kept up the pretence in order to avoid delaying any further while waiting for a patent to settle in New England instead of Virginia. This delay in the patent was caused by the fact that the Council of New England had not yet been recognised by the King, and could not get a patent before this happened.¹⁵⁶ Thomas Weston is not the villain he is in the film (and in *The Plymouth Adventure* book). On screen Thomas Weston is the instigator of the plot to trick them into settling in New England for his own personal gain. Weston knows the Pilgrims will settle in New England and not Virginia, so he plans to buy up the New England Company, on the verge of bankruptcy, before the company knows of the colony founded on their land.

The film has Thomas Weston as an employee of The Virginia Company, which in fact he was not; he was an ironmonger from London, having had various dealings and adventures as a merchant. According to most sources on him he was a slick salesman at best and a crook at worst, but his origins have only recently been established.¹⁵⁷ He seems to have had no compassion for the Pilgrims at all, but he did not buy up the New England Company. There

¹⁵⁵Thomas (1952) “New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers” *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

¹⁵⁶Willison 1945:466, note 2 for chapter ix.

¹⁵⁷Bunker 2010: 252

was not even a company called the New England Company involved, let alone a competing company like the film suggests. The facts are these: The Virginia Company, or Plymouth Company as one branch of it was also called, was in reality the Company close to bankruptcy. They issued a patent to the Pilgrims, but did not finance the venture. That was what the Pilgrims needed Thomas Weston and his merchant adventurers for. The Plymouth Company was relaunched after the failed Popham Colony and was given a new name, The Council for New England, which came into being only days before the Pilgrims saw America.¹⁵⁸ When the news of the Pilgrims' landing came back to London the merchant adventurers quickly got a new patent from the Council so the legal matters were in perfect order. Thomas Weston made no profit in the change of name or patent, as it was the joint-stock company, the merchant adventurers, including him, who financed it all. What does all this mean? It means for one that we have established that Thomas Weston is unlikely to have bribed Master Jones as he does in the film, since he did not in fact buy up any company afterwards. He would most likely have preferred for them to settle in New England because of the fishing opportunities, but that does not equate to him bribing anyone.¹⁵⁹ What about Master Jones' role in where the Pilgrim were settled? Let us look at the sources Schary mentions.

Both *Saints and Strangers* and *The Plymouth Adventure* make light of the fact that Master Jones turned back after reaching the shoals now called Pollack Rip, the former implying that an experienced sailor such as Jones could have gotten them to Virginia if he wished. By this they mean to suggest he was landing them in New England on purpose, disregarding their patent. There is no evidence that Master Jones was conspiring against the Pilgrims or that his attempt at going south was just for show.¹⁶⁰ Pollack Rip is a very dangerous area, as Bradford describes, and a good percentage of the shipwrecks on the east coast of America happen in this area.¹⁶¹ It is therefore not so farfetched that after an error in navigation, or having simply headed straight for land after the storm, Master Jones attempted to sail south but realised the risk was too great. The idea that Thomas Weston paid Master Jones anything to settle the Pilgrims in New England cannot be proved, nor does it seem

¹⁵⁸Bunker 2010:50

¹⁵⁹Hildebrandt, T. 2002:127 (electronic version of Bradford's original manuscript)

¹⁶⁰Some suggest (see Pilbrick 2006:20) that it was the Dutch that were conspiring against the Pilgrims, and that they had the captain of the *Speedwell* as their accomplice. While this version is much more believable – that a captain would know full well he needed only to reduce sail to stop the ship from leaking – it is only speculation. The Dutch were eager to recruit the Pilgrims before Thomas Weston entered the scene, and so perhaps they were not so eager for them to settle on the place they had planned.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Nathaniel Philbrick in *Desperate Crossing*. Time stamp: 1:06:49

likely. There simply is no evidence that either man tried to swindle the Pilgrims, or that the Pilgrims felt they were being cheated when Jones turned back towards Cap Cod. Bradford makes no mention of such feelings. No doubt everyone was glad to be off the ship at all. One author asks an intriguing question: “were the passengers, in retrospect, justifying their decision to land where they did rather than the Hudson? They had no patent north of the 41st parallel, which by coincidence began just south of the Shoals. Blaming Jones would be a good cover.”¹⁶² Having come so far, any human being might easily imagine the desire to find land and settle as quickly as possible before the winter set in. The fact remains that these questions cannot be answered, and Bradford himself is too vague for us to do anything but speculate.

In the film Master Jones does not even attempt to go past Pollack Rip. The Pilgrims are more than a little surprised when one of the passengers, who has been to America before, tells them it is Cape Cod they are seeing and not Virginia. When they confront the Captain about it, who has locked up the Pilgrims' muskets as a precaution, he tells them the land is as good as in Virginia. “Are you suggesting that we settle here?” Carver asks. “No, I'm not suggesting anything, I'm telling you that this is where you're going to settle,” is the stern answer.¹⁶³ Luckily for him, or so the Pilgrims insist, they have already decided to settle in New England before they confronted him. So in this sense everything worked out: Jones could keep his bribe and promise to Weston, and the Pilgrim could settle were they had already chosen in secret. Does Master Jones deserve to be portrayed as engaging in the “first real estate swindle in America”?

If we examine the character of Master Jones we may find the answer. The journey of the Pilgrims to America onboard the *Mayflower* is mirrored in Master Jones' own journey of discovery. Through the kind actions of the Pilgrims, and Dorothy's in particular, the once stern and cynical man learns to respect and even care for the freedom-seeking settlers. At first he eagerly takes the money from Weston, and in the scene above he cannot wait to get them off his ship, but already at this point he is changing. Dorothy's death is the last blow needed to change his mind and he battles a mutinous crew so he can remain and provide shelter. Portraying Christopher Jones in this manner may seem harsh and historically inaccurate. It is a portrayal that will be somewhat repeated in the 1979 remake, *Mayflower: the Pilgrims' adventure*. It is difficult to justify such a characterisation when we are dealing with a real

¹⁶²Hilton 2005:104-105

¹⁶³Time stamp: 1:20:50

person. From a filmic perspective the character supplies the story with a villain that is onboard the ship, a point of conflict, and also with a person who might evolve during the film; the Pilgrims themselves are unshakable in their convictions and therefore poor choices for character development. Spencer Tracy manages to play Jones in a way that makes us sympathise, even respect, this rough sailor. His time on the sea has made honest men strangers to him, but through the love of a pious woman he sees the potential for greatness in man. The film could have chosen to focus on the Pilgrims themselves, but instead they chose to focus on a man outside the group so as to show how the spirit of the Pilgrims can change a man.

More than one book made the claim that Christopher Jones cheated them out of the Hudson river settlement, so the film's portrayal has basis in more than just a writer's imagination. As far as I can determine, the original theory comes from Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's stepson. It is only a small paragraph in his book *The New-England's Memorial*, first published in 1669. According to him the Dutch hired the "fraudulent" Jones to make delays. He cites no sources, but writes "Of this plot betwixt the Dutch and Mr. Jones, I have had late and certain intelligence."¹⁶⁴ While he no doubt had access to letters, people and other sources that are long gone, we cannot know how certain they really were. Neither Bradford's history nor *Mourt's Relation* include any mention of foul play, but it is most likely Morton's book that is behind the equally fraudulent Captain Jones in *The Plymouth Adventure*. Placed in this light it is a more understandable choice we see in the film, having actually been based in several sources.

Saints and Strangers makes the case that the Pilgrims knew the advantages of settling in New England, with better fishing opportunities and no established Church since it is far enough from the settlement in Virginia. The Pilgrims were in on it all along and never had any intention of settling closer to Jamestown. We have a version of this theory in the film when the Pilgrims decide to settle in New England of their own accord. They give the same reasons as the book; that they will be farther away from the Church. "Here we will have even more freedom."¹⁶⁵ If any person has been treated needlessly unfairly it might be Thomas Weston, who despite his documented shady dealings never even had the opportunity to cheat them in the manner attempted in the film, but from a filmic point of view having him as a

¹⁶⁴Morton 1669, Applewood books edition 2009:25.

¹⁶⁵Time stamp: 1:22:20

villain makes sense. Thomas Weston is a simpler villain than intangible Dutch conspirators, and so his already shady reputation served the story quite perfectly. Fortunately for him, he makes only a brief appearance in the film.

What first seemed like purely false invention to a modern viewer was in fact based on available books and theories at the time. It was in fact an attempt to bring to light a more historically accurate story that not everyone has heard. The film chose this interpretation of history, just as several writers had argued for it before, and altered some points to better suit the medium. Alteration is easier to forgive than pure invention. We can say that by today's historical discourse on the Pilgrims, and even the popular myths that are still common, the film can seem simplistic. However, the film was engaging with the discourse of history at the time, and was not *purely* inventing the personality of Master Jones for the sake of plot. It also tells us something of how certain theories about the romantic Pilgrim story has evolved. We can observe this today, since many history books today take time to point out Jones' friendly disposition to the Pilgrims in contrast to past perceptions.

The Pilgrims: fun and colourful?

The next point is one that can often be seen in modern lists of myths about the Pilgrims: "4. The Pilgrims weren't stiff-necked stolid people. They were warm human beings capable of having fun." The stern and almost fanatical Pilgrim, which is a common image even today, is an image that comes from a confusion with their neighbouring Puritans. The terms Pilgrims and Puritans have often been used interchangeably. Longfellow described Miles Standish as a "Puritan Captain" and Priscilla as a "Puritan maid".¹⁶⁶ They are the stricter neighbours, especially when it comes to anything they viewed as deviant behaviour.¹⁶⁷ The image of the Pilgrims big white collars, black clothes and buckle hats comes from the numerous paintings and engravings over the years.¹⁶⁸ This image combined with the Puritan confusion to create a stiff-collared, very pious image of the Pilgrims. *Plymouth Adventure* wants to change "the impression school children get from books and old painting that the Pilgrims were stiff,

¹⁶⁶Longfellow 1858:7 found on Google books

[http://books.google.com/books?id=neIIAAAAQAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s] (downloaded on 19.01.11)

¹⁶⁷See for example my bachelor thesis: "Puritan and Criminal Justice in Colonial Massachusetts, 1629-1684," unpublished.

¹⁶⁸See John Seelye's excellent book: *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock*

uninteresting people."¹⁶⁹ From the view of an historian, this seems to be a commendable project. What were the Pilgrims really like?

When reading Bradford's own words one does get the sense that these people were far from stiff. They knew they were going out on a dangerous journey and were prepared to go the distance. They had already endured hardships, including imprisonment and fleeing into exile. Does the film manage to give us a more realistic image of the Pilgrims? Film critics seem to be divided on the subject. Most reviewers of the film seem to think more highly of the entertainment value than the historical accuracy.¹⁷⁰ One characterises the Pilgrims as "a fine, stalwart lot of earnest people with quite as much light in their eyes as there is starch in their snow-white collars after fifty-odd days at sea"¹⁷¹ Others are not quite so lenient in their judgements. In *America on Film* the Pilgrims are explained as being "played by English actors [...] apparently to show that they are not graceless and rude" unlike the Captain. The script is "as wooden as Tierney's face."¹⁷² After viewing the film several times it is still difficult to judge. Watching movies is a very subjective activity. The only Pilgrim to get much time on screen is Dorothy, and the term "wooden" might well apply, though I would judge her face to be more in tune with a religious women trying to hide all emotions. Gilbert Winslow, the narrator, and John Alden, are the two characters besides the love-triangle who get much screen-time. They are not Pilgrims, but strangers, and so they appear in contrast to Bradford and what little we see of Brewster. The scenes with the male Pilgrims are mostly filled with good words about religion or grand speeches. Throughout the film we get the sense that these people are humanized, but still remain slightly aloft from the rest of us due to their religious convictions and heroic accomplishments.

For example: in the scene where Miles Standish tries to teach the settlers the use of firearms the men start laughing at their own fumbling attempts. This serves both to counter and reinforce certain ideas. It plainly shows us that the Pilgrims are not so stiff-necked that they can laugh at themselves and their pathetic skills with firearms. On the other hand it tells us they are a naïve and peaceful people who do not really seem to grasp the seriousness of the situation, as Miles Standish points out, frustrated. Another scene does something similar: a

¹⁶⁹Thomas (1952) "New MGM Movie Will Puncture Notions About Pilgrim Fathers" *The Free Lance-Star*, March 26, 1952. p.36 (located with Google News Archive)

¹⁷⁰See list of review excerpts at [http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reels/films/list/1_23_5] (downloaded: 8.09.10)

¹⁷¹Crowther 1952:20 found at [http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reels/films/list/1_23_5] (downloaded: 8.09.10)

¹⁷²Cameron, K. 1997:101

small group is sitting on deck and are romanticising about what the New World will be like, with palm trees and warm weather. Master Jones comes by and quickly disabuses them of such notions, informing them of the harsh realities. The historical Pilgrims knew much of the New World, not all of it true, but they were not crossing the ocean with no clue as to what to expect.¹⁷³ The scene does help to humanise them even in their naiveté; they too had hopes and dreams that were dashed, yet they ploughed on despite all adversities. Compared with the idea that the Pilgrims were so pious as to be fun-hating and practically repressed (a description that some might still apply to the puritans instead) the films makes a strong argument for the human and very much alive Pilgrims.

The vivid technicolor photography no doubt helped the audience to interpret the Pilgrims as flesh and blood people, but the script and acting gives us little to work with. One scene stands out: Bradford is about to go ashore and has a private word with Dorothy, telling her that anything that might have happened onboard the ship will be forgiven. “You have filled my life with sweetness,” he tells her.¹⁷⁴ We can suddenly see beyond his narrow-minded focus on the mission and see his role as a husband, though his affection for her is a controlled and subdued kind of love. The film certainly brings the Pilgrims to life in a way past paintings and books never could, in full colour. When we see the film as a whole, the Pilgrims are portrayed as a group of people searching for freedom, resilient to the Captain’s cynicism and crew’s awful treatment of them, forgiving and peaceful, but also human in their faults. This is perhaps not a completely accurate portrayal. We know they were naïve in some respects, but not blind to the dangers that lay ahead.

The scenes I have mentioned above I would judge to be acts of neither strictly false nor completely true invention. While the Pilgrims were prepared to learn military tactics, they were farmers originally and would no doubt have at least some initial trouble, but depicting them as though they are more interested in laughing than learning is not logical. When we view this film from a modern standpoint after having learned about the historical Pilgrims, we might only see these naïve Pilgrims. However, when we bear in mind that many people still think of them as stiff and repressed (even perhaps today) then we see that the film did try to humanize the Pilgrim to a large extent.

The last point has already been mentioned in conjunction with the stiff and pious

¹⁷³ According to the expert interviewed in *Desperate Crossing*, David J. Silverman, Assoc. Prof. Of History at George Washington Uni. Time stamp on *Desperate Crossing*: 0:25:15

¹⁷⁴ Time stamp: 1:28:10

Pilgrims, but it merits some further explanation. Schary makes it clear that the popular image of the Pilgrims' dress is wrong. "5. They didn't dress primly, with square, buster brown hair-cuts. Their outfits could be colorful, and their hair styles were similar to those of today, including the crew-cut." While he does not mention the buckled, the outfit was certainly recognisable in the 1950s as well as today. The image of the Pilgrim in a wide buckled hat in black clothes is still very much part of the Pilgrims story. This myth is slowly, hopefully, being worn away, with many Pilgrim and Thanksgiving websites pointing out the false image in an effort to correct it.

In the film the Pilgrims wear as much colour as the strangers and other people we see about Southampton. One can speculate that the women's vividly colourful dresses are more for the sake of Technicolor brilliance than pure historical accuracy. There are a few wide collars, but they are all in keeping with the times. The film certainly does not recreate the stereotype when it comes to clothing, though we saw one critic point out they could have used a little more dirt by the end of the journey. The filmmakers were clearly aware of the traditional image and wanted to show the true historically accurate image. They could have easily recreated the more recognisable image of the Pilgrims, but chose instead to confront this popular misconception. The filmmakers were trying to make a film that was more than a yet another easily recognisable representation of the romantic Pilgrims. Of course, we cannot know *exactly* what the people onboard the *Mayflower* wore, but this would be a clear case of the type of invention we all expect and accept when we view films.

Natives Americans

The sixth point is a topic on which there has been much controversy throughout American history; the treatment of the Native Americans. There have also been studies on how the natives have been treated in films. Schary corrects what he believes to be a schoolbook notion by stating: "6. The Indians were not exactly friendly toward the settlers, but they did them no real harm." This plain statement seems at first glance fairly accurate. The Wampanoags did not appear to have any plans to harm the Pilgrims for no reason, and entered an alliance with them quickly. The Native Americans on Nauset had good reason to be upset with the Pilgrims after they had stolen corn and dug up a grave, but they too were satisfied after receiving compensation. Apart from the First Encounter, more a testing of strength than any full-scale attack, the local Native Americans were willing to trade and make peace, at least during the

early years of the settlement. Many accounts of the Plymouth Colony do not include the problems that would eventually arise, leading to King Philip's War. It was a conflict lasting about a year, in 1675 between Native Americans and the colonists.¹⁷⁵ Those events are not part of the film as they are many years off. While we may criticize writers and filmmakers both for neglecting this part of the story, every account of events, in book or film, must chose an ending.

The most prominent image of the Native American in the Pilgrim story is no doubt what is now called the First Thanksgiving. The film does not include any Thanksgiving or harvest feast and in fact there are very few Native Americans at all. Upon seeing the thriving colony we spot a few of them working in the background, and one standing by the door to the common house where the Pilgrims are gathering – though he never enters himself and why he appears to stand guard there is unexplained. The narrator tells us how lucky they are to have settled here where the Indians are friendly, gentle and often hungry like them, whereas in Virginia they are murderous and likely to kill you on sight.

The focus of the film is on the journey, and including the Thanksgiving or any of the big events after arrival would have made the film too long. Still, the image of the Native Americans working diligently in the background and standing guard at the door seems strange and does not dispel any schoolbook myths about friendly Native Americans coming with food and sharing the first traditional Thanksgiving. They certainly helped the Pilgrims, particularly Squanto, who helped them plant corn, but did not work for them in such a manner.¹⁷⁶ While it is only for a few moments, seconds even, and perhaps easily dismissed when viewing the film as a whole, I feel the depiction of the Native Americans was done too easily. It was done to save time certainly, but they could just have easily simply not included any. The narrator's comments oversimplify and partly misrepresents things. The Jamestown colony traded with the locals as well, and the Plymouth Colony did not live in perpetual peace with the Natives. This portrayal of the Native Americans might well have to do with the climate of the 1950s.

The Pilgrim Group

Lastly, Schary speaks about the issue which would later prove a problem to the film: "7. Only half of the Pilgrims were religious dissenters. The others were tradespeople and craftsmen."

¹⁷⁵ Author unknown, (2005) *King Philip's War: the conflict*, Pilgrim Hall Museum website, [<http://www.pilgrimhall.org/philipwar.htm>] (downloaded 11.04.11)

¹⁷⁶ Hildebrandt, T. 2002:188 (electronic version of Bradford's manuscript)

Showing the passengers as a diverse group of people is something the film does rather well. Right from the start we are introduced to Gilbert Winslow and John Alden, two different types of men, but neither a religious dissenter. When John Alden discovers William Brewster hiding in the bowels of the ship and finds him reading a subversive book, he declares himself a God fearing member of the Church of England. He asks why Brewster does not think he might be tempted to turn him in, and Brewster replies that they are “on the same pilgrimage [...] to a specious land where a man can set up a trade without pulling down two of his neighbours [...] such a man cannot be tempted by five crowns to betray a fellow pilgrim.”¹⁷⁷ This allows us see how the Pilgrims and strangers might have come from different backgrounds, but once onboard the ship, they were all in it together. This might not be entirely historically accurate, at least not at the start of the journey. While the film makes plain the fact that only half of them were nonconformists, it does not convey much of the conflict between them. Bradford gives them the name “strangers” and their leader, elected by the merchant adventurers, Christopher Martin, is not well liked. Martin is barely present at all in the film, and in fact I missed him being mentioned during the first viewing. John Alden and Gilbert Winslow seem to be the only true strangers of note onboard. Alden mentions he feels is neither part of the crew or the passengers.

Much could have been made out of the conflict between separatist and strangers, as indeed it will be in the remake, *Mayflower: the pilgrims' adventure*. In this film, however, such conflicts are reserved between the crew and the passengers, which in turn is made quite explicit. John Alden comes to blows twice with crew members. The sailors laugh and jeer at the women, and threaten mutiny when Master Jones refuses to leave. None of the sailors are stricken with the “grievous decease” Bradford mentions and buried at sea, a plot-point that might have made the conflicts between them even greater, as happens in the remake. The film is good at showing the audience that the Pilgrims were not a united group going out together, but actually included people who had no thought about religious freedom at all. Unfortunately, it fails somewhat by missing the opportunity to take this even further by exploring the other conflict Bradford hints at. Considering the critique that came from suggesting a less than uniform group, it is perhaps not so surprising that the filmmakers went as far as they deemed necessary and omitted Bradford's comments on the strangers. With the focus on the love interests and the storm at sea, little time could have been devoted to the

¹⁷⁷Time stamp: 0:19:03

character of Christopher Martin, who gets much more screen time in the next film when the Captain has no love interest.

Now we have explored all the “schoolbook notions” producer Dory Schary stipulated would not be included in the film. Whether or not all points were actually dealt with to a historian's satisfaction can be debated endlessly, but the thing I have argued for here is that the film is engaged with both history and myth, for better or worse depending on your viewing experience. It does not ignore the historical discourse surrounding the Pilgrims, but in fact embraces it and tries to sort history from myth. Several of the points above deal with problems of invention, and some are in the false category, while others can be more easily justifiable. Some are mixtures of both, and this makes things very difficult when judging the historical value of a film like this. One certain conclusion from this part of the chapter is that the film gives a unique view on how the filmmakers, and the contemporary discourse of history, viewed the Pilgrims. In this the film is of great historical value to us.

The last area we will look briefly at is contemporary society. It is difficult to form any firm conclusions on this as a much more thorough study of contemporary society and films of the time would be needed. We can still find aspects of the film where the intrusions of contemporary society are more obvious to a modern viewer. What points, then, can we look at and say with certainty that the film tells us more about the 1950s than the Pilgrims? Do these intrusions overshadow any other historical value the film has?

The 1950s in the 1620s.

The main focus of this analysis is not the contemporary society mirrored in the film. Yet we cannot ignore the question: does the film tell us more about contemporary society than the past? I will argue that this is not always the case. Instead the film tells us how the past view the past, which is an important distinction. As we have already seen, the film engages with the discourse of history on a much deeper level than a single viewing might reveal. Still, the film is a product of the Hollywood of the 1950s, and we must look at it from that perspective. One major issue seems especially to reflect the society in which it was made. There is also the smaller issue of Native Americans, which we will touch briefly on from the contemporary perspective.

The major issue is gender. The portrayal of women in the film and specifically the

character of Dorothy Bradford. The recent documentary *Desperate Crossing* has an expert who gives information on the role of women in the Pilgrim society: they obeyed their father and husband, who was head of the household, but that does not mean they were completely silent. We will get into more details on this in the chapter about the documentary. Dorothy makes the decision to leave their son behind in Leiden, and William must accept that decision without much argument. The women of that time may be silent in the sources we have from them, but they were obviously not silent in real life. They had responsibilities and made decisions.¹⁷⁸

Priscilla Mullins is the only woman onboard apart from Dorothy who interacts with the men, or indeed has any notable screen-time. She rebuffs both the sailor and John Alden when they fight over who should be the one to help her. Ultimately, she falls for Alden's charms quite quickly, and perhaps even inexplicably. He tells her the difference between him and the sailor is that she likes him. Why this should be is never really explored. The reason for her being somewhat more alive-looking and animated than the rest of them can be traced back to Longfellow's poem. Priscilla Mullins was already known as the more forward one thanks to Longfellow, where she utters the famous quote "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"¹⁷⁹ The film takes up this tradition to some extent, though she never utters the line, but her limited screen-time prevents any truly strong character from emerging. Historically, we cannot know how Priscilla Mullins was. The film version of Priscilla, however, is more accurate than the woman who does get all the screen-time: Dorothy Bradford. This character is what our view of women in this society must be based on. Her inner conflict and the way she (presumably) solves it shapes our view of women in the Pilgrim society simply because she is the main character.

Dorothy has a very stiff expression throughout most of the film, which I argued earlier was part of her character. This character is quiet, religious and completely subservient to her husband, who does not hesitate to interrupt her, failing to listen to what she has to say. She is also attracted to a man old enough to be her father. Writing about how this problem can be seen in many films of the decade, Kenneth M. Cameron, thinks it might "tell us something about the aging of Hollywood and its ideas."¹⁸⁰ The wide age-gap seen in such films

¹⁷⁸Time stamp on *Desperate Crossing* : 0:34:00

¹⁷⁹Longfellow 1858:42, (found on Google books

[http://books.google.com/books?id=neIIAAAQAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s] (downloaded on 19.01.11)

¹⁸⁰Cameron, K. 1997:104

“suggests both that women were seen as children and that male stars were getting old...”¹⁸¹

This sweeping generalisation cannot apply to all films of the decade; there were many strong roles for women during the period.¹⁸² There were still many films who employ the child-woman, old man dichotomy.¹⁸³ Dorothy comes off as the pious, loving wife who almost succumbs to temptation and punishes herself for it. We may not see her suicide on the screen, but no one viewing the film can deny it is heavily suggested, despite being technically left open. Dorothy Bradford's true death is something we will never know how happened, and we can rule out neither accident nor suicide.¹⁸⁴ We can rule out suicide over amorous feelings, however, as there is absolutely no reason to think she interacted with Jones in this way. If the audience interprets the scene as a suicide, they must see it as her way of solving her inner conflict by punishing herself to eternal damnation. She could not remain with her husband because her feelings for the Captain were sinful, nor could she leave her husband and live in sin with the Captain. The only solution would be suicide.

A 1950s audience would most likely contain people with all sorts of opinions on this solution. One cannot help but wonder, however, if this was the only ending the filmmakers thought the majority of the audience would accept? The way the film suggests Dorothy solves her inner conflict seems more a necessity of the story-telling and conventions, than any historical considerations. Dorothy has sinned, maybe not physically, but emotionally (and that is just as bad, if not worse) and so she must die in order to redeem herself or else the audience will not like her. There is no other possible outcome for such a woman. Dorothy's character is a result of the 1950s view on women, and the ageing Hollywood elite that included Spencer Tracy (Master Jones). Most historical personalities in such films are inventions, and they have to be since we usually do not know much about them, but to be good history such inventions must be deemed true. Dorothy's actions and emotions are more a result of non-historical issues. As such, her death needs an explanation, and they chose a guilt-ridden suicide. What other ending could there really be for her? To put this in perspective, consider this: would a modern film be able to depict her running off without remorse?

¹⁸¹Cameron, K. 1997:122

¹⁸²Rose (year unknown), “Women in Film” *GreenCine website*, date unknown
[<http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/womeninfilm2.jsp>] (downloaded 14.09.10)

¹⁸³See Cameron, K. 1997:104

¹⁸⁴As one scholar interviewed in *Desperate Crossing* points out: if one is depressed enough, even the most ardent religious conviction will not prevent you from trying to escape that pain. Dorothy would have been well aware that suicide was a deadly sin, but suicidal people are not known for being rational enough to consider the consequences of their actions. Time stamp on *Desperate Crossing*: 1:32:09

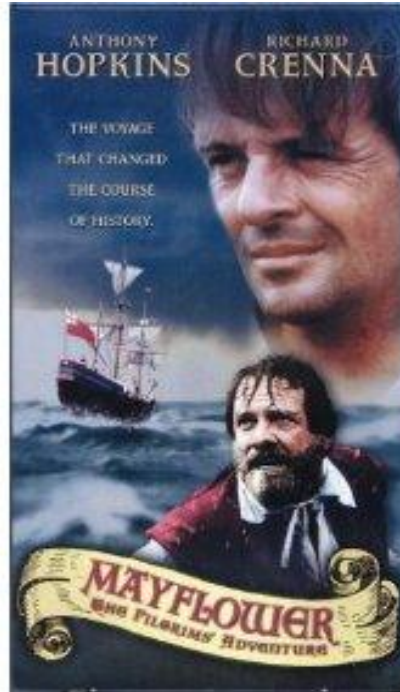
When it comes to women's roles as submissive and shamed to the point of (possible) suicide the film is most likely more influenced by Hollywood conventions and contemporary society. The same is most likely also true of their depiction of the Native Americans. The Native Americans make a very brief appearance as no more than servants in the background. While it would be interesting to study this aspect further, the arguments made in this chapter are, hopefully, enough to show how the film is too complex to put under any one conclusion. It is influenced by contemporary society, as all things are, and for a modern viewer this would detract from its value as good history about the Pilgrims. The film also, however, tried to tell a historically accurate story. It goes against many common misconceptions about the Pilgrims that may still be popular today. This alone means it contains good history, and has value as a source on the past's look on the past.

Conclusions: what can we say about Plymouth Adventure as good history?

This chapter shows how a film that seems to modern viewers to have little regard for history, in fact engages with the discourse of history. It makes use of both true and false invention. Can the false inventions be forgiven? Perhaps not if we wish to use the film as an historical tool, like for example a school class learning about the Pilgrims. The film is entertainment first, and a Hollywood artefact, not a history lesson on the first Americans. It tells us about how the people who made it and the society who viewed it looked at the past. By engaging in the discourse of history, it is also a source on the Pilgrims to some extent that cannot be ignored. It tells us about the hardships endured onboard, that the group travelling was not homogenous, their reasons for leaving, their harsh winter upon arrival and their cooperation with the Native Americans. When we look closely, it also tells us a lot about how the Romantic Pilgrim story has evolved. How the conspiracy theories surrounding Master Jones was not a completely false invention, even if audiences today would not recognise it as part of the story. The film is certainly far from written history, in that so many details are lost and invented things added, but if we see it for what it is, it can be historical in several ways at the same time.

CHAPTER 3: *MAYFLOWER: THE PILGRIMS' ADVENTURE* (1979)

“The voyage that changed the course of history.”¹⁸⁵



In 1979, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) aired a Thanksgiving special; a TV movie about the famous *Mayflower* voyage called *Mayflower: the Pilgrims' Adventure*. I will refer to it from now on as *Pilgrims' Adventure* so as not to confuse the title with the ship itself. In many ways it resembles the 1952 film, but it differs in several key areas. On the one hand, it also gives us a more traditional romantic Pilgrim story than its predecessor. On the other hand, one might argue it is a better historical film. This chapter sets out to explore these two aspects of the film by asking: *How has the filmic representation of the Pilgrim story changed from 1952 to 1979?* Like the previous film we will focus on three aspects. How does it engage with the romantic Pilgrims story? Does the film include good history according to the definition we have stipulated? And lastly; are there aspects of the film that are clearly an intrusion of contemporary society? Because this film is so similar to the 1952 version, this chapter will focus on that comparison. In much the same vein as the previous chapter, I will first provide the reader with a detailed summary of the experience before moving on to some

¹⁸⁵See movie poster below.

context information.

Summary of the film:

The opening scene begins in an attic in “England, 1620” as the text on the screen tells us. Inside a congregation sings, led by William Brewster, the elder of their church, and a minor role in the 1952 version. Brewster informs the congregation that they have found a ship to go with the *Speedwell* to America, and have hired a military man to handle their defences. They are interrupted by the arrival of guards and must flee through a window. William Brewster tries to make Robert Cushman promise they will sail without him, since he is the one they hunt, but Cushman refuses to. Historically, Cushman was a member of the congregation who travelled to England early and prepared for the voyage. He does not have much of a role in either feature film.

Next we are introduced to the *Mayflower*, her captain and her morally questionable crew. None of them are keen to take pilgrims across the sea. “Doesn't it make you want to vomit?”¹⁸⁶ the Captain comments. The immediate comparison to the previous Captain Jones is that this one, played by Anthony Hopkins, seems much more polished, with fancier clothes and a more intellectual demeanour, though his attitude towards the Pilgrims seems very similar.

As the cargo is loaded we meet Miles Standish, his ill wife Rose, and John Alden. We might remember that Miles Standish was a rather comical figure in 1952, and Alden was a smart carpenter who won the heart of Priscilla. Here, it is both men who are immediately taken by Priscilla Mullins, a young well-articulated woman who speaks her mind. Christopher Martin shows himself to be a pompous man, with a wife to match, and a much more substantial role than in 1952. Historically, he represented who Bradford calls the strangers on board the *Mayflower*, and made things difficult during preparations because he failed to coordinate his efforts with the others, Cushman among them.

The guards show up and search the ship for Brewster, who is hiding under the floorboards below deck. Cushman must lead the Pilgrims in prayer before they set sail. Once underway the passengers are immediately seasick. The plot moves forward by a series of interactions in pairs. Alden nervously attempts wooing Priscilla. Priscilla and Mary Brewster speak of what it means to be a woman. Rose Standish wants her husband to ask Priscilla to be

¹⁸⁶Time stamp: 0:08:50

her nurse. Brewster finally reveals himself to Captain Jones, who is not at all happy with the stowaway. He makes it clear he does not care about the Pilgrims at all.

Miles makes his attempt to train the passengers in musket shooting, as he did in 1952, and it doesn't go so well here either, but he is not the comical figure from the previous film. He flirts with Priscilla, which John does not like, and asks her to be his wife's nurse. Down below there is a scuffle between John and Christopher Martin, who wants more than his fair share of the water. The next problem is the leaking *Speedwell*, but instead of both ships turning back the passengers are transferred on the water and the *Mayflower* carries on alone. Cushman leaves on the *Speedwell*, with a very tense goodbye to the Captain.

There is more tension between the crew and passengers, especially due to their swearing which the Captain refuses to censure. John and Miles' relationship is even more strained when the latter continues to make a spectacle of himself for the ladies. The food supply is now full of bugs and is running low. The most offensive of the sailors dies suddenly from an unknown cause and is buried with little ceremony. Rose is dying as well, slowly. Knowing this, she suggests to Priscilla that her husband has much to recommend him and that she should consider taking him as her husband after Rose's death. Priscilla is shocked, but does not directly tell her no, which angers John, who accuses her of leading him on.

With the storm comes the breaking of the beam. The ship is rescued by the Pilgrims' use of a jackscrew, brought to lift houses in the new world, as opposed to the printing press in 1952. After their joyful exclamations Captain Jones informs them they should report any who offend or swear at them and he will have them punished and shot. Finally, the sea calms.

Priscilla tells Miles what his wife said to her, and he must face the fact that she is dying. He cries on John's shoulder and their relationship is repaired. The sailors' view of the Pilgrims have changed as well, even to the point of gifting a child with a nice toy ship. Finally, land is spotted. Priscilla and John have a heart to heart on the deck and seal their fates. Captain Jones says goodbye to Brewster, warning him of the terrible savages and the great loss of life at Jamestown. Despite insults, it is clear the Captain will actually miss the man. As the men row unceremoniously to shore, with Miles jumping off first and into the thick forest, words scroll upwards on the screen:

Of the 103 men, women and children who sailed for 66 days aboard the Mayflower, 51 died during the first winter in the New World.

John Alden and Priscilla Mullins married, and had eleven children.

Captain Myles Standish was instrumental in establishing friendly relations with the native indians.

Rose Standish died shortly after arrival.

William Brewster continued to provide inspired spiritual leadership to the people of Plymouth colony.

Captain Christopher Jones stayed on in the New World for six months before sailing back to England and retiring.

The Plymouth colony flourished... perhaps no other group would ever so completely epitomize the courage, hopes and dreams of what would become *AMERICA*.¹⁸⁷

End credits.

TV Movies and the 1970s

“Few artifacts of popular culture invite more condescension than the made-for-television movie.”¹⁸⁸ Far from all TV movies are quite so terrible, in my own personal experience, but I have seen a fair share that could easily contribute to the above assessment. TV movies generally have a smaller budget than theatre releases, and therefore lack the same big-picture feel. They did, and still do, have the occasional big star, as in our own film. Why did the TV networks start making movies? The logical answer is to steal audiences away from the cinemas. The term first entered common usage in the 1960s, and networks started airing old movies from the theatres even earlier. “Televisions' hunger for old movies, and its ability to devour them much more rapidly than they were created, led to the birth of a new genre, the made-for-television movies.”¹⁸⁹

The 1970s was for Hollywood the era of the true blockbuster. This was the decade of amazing special effects and young new filmmakers showing what they could do. Films from this decade stand out as cinematic classics, for example *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977). The number of films being made were in decline as studios focused on fewer big-budget films

¹⁸⁷Time stamp: 2:12:35

¹⁸⁸ O'Connor, J.J. (1991) “Review/ Television; A TV Movie With a Familiar Ring” *The New York Times*, Jan 1, 1991 [found at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE7DB133BF932A35752C0A967958260>] (downloaded on 25.02.11)

¹⁸⁹ Segrave 1999:2

with wider releases.¹⁹⁰ The decline in the total number of films made by Hollywood began following the changes in the studio system, which we will not go into detail here. “Total production of historical films in the 1970s was about the same as that of the 1960s, with fewer films of the oldest type – traditional history and western...”¹⁹¹ The decline in *total* film production went from about 500 films a year during the early 1940s, to around 153 average in the 1960s.¹⁹² I do not have the number for TV-movies in particular. It might be safe to assume some degree of mirroring when it comes to interest in specific topics, but I have not been able to find hard numbers. According to Cameron's history of historical Hollywood films, the type of history in Hollywood productions came to be more revisionist history than the neoromantic melodrama of the 1950s: “history was no longer a moral paradigm about justice and the rightness of America” according to one survey of American film.¹⁹³ Whether this applies to our films we will have to examine and see. Made-for-TV movies have over the years created their own aesthetic, a melding of film and television styles, as any viewer could tell you. *The Pilgrims' Adventure* is a full-length film and its tone and production values make it far from a blockbuster, but certainly comparable to other feature films. It should also be remembered that the film was made with Thanksgiving in mind, airing on the night. It is easy to speculate that a film made with the intention of celebrating a holiday is less inclined to be controversial when trying to appeal to the majority of Americans.

Mayflower: The Pilgrims' Adventure was made by Szygzy Productions, who according to imdb (the Internet Movie Database) only made two other films, both in 1980, only one of which was very successful. Our film aired as a Thanksgiving special on November 21st 1979. It was directed by George Schaefer, produced by Linda Yellen and written by James Lee Barrett. The film stars a young Anthony Hopkins, whose fame had yet to rise to today's peak, as Capt. Christopher Jones. Richard Crenna plays William Brewster. Another award-winning and relatively well-known actress, Jenny Agutter, plays Priscilla Mullins. Clearly, this film was not lacking in talent, yet it appears to have failed to impress, and is now largely forgotten, as with our previous film. The question we should concern ourselves with is what sort of film did all this talent create? Due to its lack of popularity and big release, however, there is much

¹⁹⁰Dirk, T. (year unknown) “The Last Golden Age of American Cinema (the American "New Wave") and the Advent of the Blockbuster Film” *Film History of the 1970s*, date unknown [found at: <http://www.filmsite.org/70sintro.html>] (downloaded on 25.02.11)

¹⁹¹ Cameron, K. 1997:164

¹⁹²Cameron, K. 1997:143

¹⁹³ Cameron, K. 1997:164

less information on the film than its 1952 predecessor. Reviews are difficult to find, but I have located a few that may be of some interest, though our main focus as always is on what the audience is presented with on screen. Let us take a very brief look at the newspapers from the fall of 1979, to find out what they had to say.

Reviews are not easily accessible to someone not being in the the US, but a couple can still be found online. One critic called it a “two-hour trifle” and asserts that “(a)ll in all, it's a sad way to treat our ancestors.” According to the writer’s conclusion, the only things worthwhile in this “vastly unnotable blast of Hollywood history” were the performances of Hopkins, Crenna and the starring women Agutter and Devere (who plays Rose Standish).¹⁹⁴ Another review is more positive, beginning with: “If you tend to forget the meaning of Thanksgiving, tune in to CBS the night before and watch...” There is much praise given to the screenplay, which “at times reads like a thriller. At other times it is a rousing adventure story, and still other times a romance. It is, above all, an inspiring story of hardship, survival and determination”.¹⁹⁵ Films more often than not produce these kinds of diverging experiences. That the reviewers express such distinctly opposite opinions on the historical meaning of the film is interesting. How does the film treat the Pilgrims? Does it give us an adventure/thriller/romance about the meaning of Thanksgiving? Or is it indeed a sad way to treat such well-known historical figures? Or, as a third option, does the film perhaps have more to say on the historical Pilgrims than the thrilling and romantic story of Thanksgiving most people are familiar with?

Myths, ideas and history aboard Mayflower: The Pilgrims' Adventure.

The first section of our analysis looks at common myths or ideas about the Pilgrims. The previous film's producer was very explicit in his desire to confront some of these myths, and *Plymouth Adventure* does so with varying degrees of success. We have no such interview from anyone involved in this film, but that does not mean we cannot see for ourselves how the romantic story is represented. How does the more modern version use the common school notions? The first popular story we will look at is the famous poem by Longfellow, utilized much like the 1952 version to inject some romantic love into the story.

¹⁹⁴ Brown, J. (1979) “Mayflower' Vies with Bee Gees” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 21, 1979. [Located with Google News Archive] (downloaded on 04.10.10)

¹⁹⁵ Bruck, J. (1979) “Mayflower Story Told” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, Nov 16, 1979. [Located with Google News Archive] (downloaded on 04.10.10)

The Pilgrim myths, or legends, have been constantly reworked since the events themselves took place. The people and their actions have been retold in different ways, with different methods and mediums. These myths have been prevalent in popular culture for so long that they often went unquestioned. Today it is likely much easier for a non-academic to get at the historical facts, with easier access to both books (thanks to Google books anyone can read Bradford's words), and those popular debunking lists on the internet. In 1979 of course this was still not the case. The very image of the Pilgrims with their buckled hats came about through the reworking of their dress in paintings to suit whatever style currently in fashion. While the stories might seem unchangeable to us, such myths were created over a long period and were not in fact constant.

Throughout this chapter there will be comparisons made with the earlier film. There is no one scene, however, that is exactly the same, despite them telling the same story, and a scene-by-scene comparison would be meaningless. Instead, we will look at a few key differences in the way the Pilgrims story is presented, both in detail and in terms of the whole picture. We will also bear in mind the question of true or false invention in relation to our definition of good history. Which aspects of the film can be justified from a historian's point of view, and which, must we conclude, were made only in the service of drama? Does the film engage or ignore the historical discourse? Let us first look at how the film uses one of the most famous Pilgrims myths of all: the love-triangle of Miles, Priscilla and John.

One reviewer commented about the film: "It also deals with the courtship of Miles Standish - although not exactly the way Henry Wadsworth Longfellow described that event."¹⁹⁶ Apart from the fact that this is a fairly accurate description of how the poem is used in the film, I also find it interesting that the reviewer does not question the historical accuracy of Longfellow's description. *Plymouth Adventure* also used the idea of a love-triangle and blended it with other aspects of the historical record and popular myths to make a dramatic film. Priscilla and John still fall in love, but their courtship is not the main focus of the story, and Miles was never even involved. Instead the film took the triangle to other characters, namely William and Dorothy Bradford and Captain Jones.

In *The Pilgrims' Adventure*, however, the focus of the film is not the love-triangle, but the ideological conflict between Captain Jones and William Brewster. Although, so much

¹⁹⁶ Bruck, J. (1979) "Mayflower Story Told" *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, Nov 16, 1979. [Located with Google News Archive] (downloaded on 04.10.10)

screen-time is given to the other characters that the viewers' attention can easily shift. The subplots are important, and Longfellow's original love-triangle is here intact. To put it succinctly: Longfellow is invoked, but not exactly retold. The poem takes place after arrival and John does not fall in love with Priscilla until he starts courting her on behalf of Miles. In the film's version of events John and Miles both clearly admire Priscilla, but Miles, for all his flirtations, still loves his wife, who is not yet dead. John, instead of the man-of-words we find in the poem (and to some extent in *Plymouth Adventure*, where he can read despite being a carpenter) is the ship's cooper and speaks very slowly and plainly. His innocence seems to be his main charm for Priscilla. The young maiden is the only one that truly resembles her poetic counterpart. In the last scene she even utters words Longfellow might have written for her: "I wish that you would speak for yourself, John Alden"¹⁹⁷

The romance we see is clearly meant to be recognizable to the audience, but there are clear alterations. We also have the added scene with Priscilla and Rose. Rose forgives her husband's adulterous ways because she knows his heart better than he does himself, and even attempts to take control over her own death by deciding his next wife for him. She is a strong woman among several we will look at more closely when we discuss women in the film. We know the poem to be an invention, and very much a part of the romantic Pilgrim story. Why were these changes made in the film?

Did the film perhaps attempt to make the famous poem more realistic and acceptable to a 1979 audience? To a modern audience the idea of a man whose wife dies a year ago asking another man to court a young maiden may appear foreign. In the film we find two men, one worldly and one fairly naive, both openly vying for her attention. One is married, but we learn he is not really a bad man despite this. It is just his nature. The conversations between Rose and Priscilla seem very modern: a frank discussion about death and marriage. While her silent acceptance of his adulterous ways may not match a modern woman's, the fact that she is not blind to it paints her as a much stronger woman. Miles' repentance and declaration of love also seem very modern: he corrects his ways and they fix their marriage. It appears the voyage and her imminent death is therapeutic for them.

What if we compare it to the 1952 version? Is it then a more historically acceptable way of handling the poem? One argument made for the 1952 version was that they had removed the original love-triangle because, as the producer said in the interview we analyzed,

¹⁹⁷Time stamp: 2:09:12

it was not historically accurate. By showing the audience a new romantic story between the Captain and the doomed Dorothy, they would not perpetuate the myth of Longfellow's love-story. In the 1979 version we are much closer to a film-version of the poem. It is difficult to judge how this impacts the audiences' view of romantic love in the historical Pilgrims' society. The earliest short films, you might remember, were complete film-versions of the poem. Since the love-story is not the main focus, however, I would argue its placement in the background gives it a pageant feel; a nod back to Longfellow's poem, and it is therefore not a true film-version of the poem.

Instead of removing the triangle completely and replacing it with another, like *Plymouth Adventure*, it has been altered, perhaps to make it more pleasing to modern audiences. It is not historically accurate, since there is nothing to suggest that John and Miles ever butted heads over Priscilla, but such alterations cannot really be deemed false or true. One can argue that since the poem itself is not historically accurate, a filmmaker can justify any alterations. I would argue, however, that the inclusion of this modern triangle is neither good or bad filmic history. It is not strictly false invention, since we know John and Priscilla did marry and Rose did pass away after arrival. Neither is it true invention, however, since the type of relationships viewed are not very much in tune with what we know of courtship in the 17th century. In the end we must conclude it is contemporary drama above all else.

One thing noticeable to someone familiar with the historical and romantic Pilgrims, is how the film tends to simply remove things. One of *The Pilgrims' Adventure*'s main strengths and faults, at the same time, is the fact that it removes aspects of the Pilgrim story, both the romantic and historical versions. As we shall see, by simply removing events and characters from the story, it avoids some of the pitfalls the 1952 version did not, but it also means the film is clearly lacking several key characters, events and perhaps even drama. One example would be some details that were removed from the journey itself. The 1952 film's producer stated quite clearly that he believed the land-speculation and conspiracy theory involving Captain Jones was fact. We now know there is very little evidence to support this, but the books the producer based the 1952 film on did include the conspiracy theory. In *The Pilgrims' Adventure*, the character of Christopher Jones becomes much more realistic because the whole plot-line of conspiracy, land-speculation and where the Pilgrims were suppose to land is simply not included.

In *Plymouth Adventure* Christopher Jones has no qualms about taking money from Thomas Weston and dumping the Pilgrims in New England without even making an attempt to go south. The 1979 version of Jones does not try to sail to Virginia either, but the fact that he is suppose to attempt it goes completely unmentioned in the film. Most likely, as is often the case when making a film, there were time-constraints, and the attempt south takes too long to show on screen. It does not add anything interesting or vital to the plot or character developments. Basically, from a filmmakers standpoint, it might be considered a waste of time. The 1979 version simply removes the issue entirely. Do we *need* to know that the Pilgrims were really heading for Virginia? As a historian I would say that it is good filmic history to not include conspiracy theories that are no longer part of the historical discourse. Without any information on where the Pilgrims originally wanted to settle, however, the viewers might get the misconception that the Pilgrims always planned on becoming New Englanders. As a film-viewer, I understand that it does not add much to the story and it was most likely a simple time-saving device. In 1952 Jones insisted they settle in New England because Weston paid him to. You do not need to show them attempting going south because we have an on-screen reason not to. This both saved time and added the drama of the conspiracy theory, which the producer believed to be historically accurate. By comparison, the 1979 Captain Jones comes off as a more realistic version because the historical discourse of today does not include the conspiracy theory. He is not very friendly towards the Pilgrims as he is sceptical towards the religion. He stands for the majority of Englanders who were members of the official Church of England. This is more of a true invention than historical fact.

The point of all this is to illustrate the change in the historical discourse about the Pilgrims from 1952 to 1979, and how the films are not completely removed from it, but engage with it in different ways. Both are of historical interest. I have found very few references to conspiracy theories in today's online discussions on Pilgrim myths. Modern audiences might simply have not heard about the story because it is no longer a well-known part of the romantic Pilgrim narrative. *The Pilgrims' Adventure* film ages better because is not so far removed from today's discourse. If one were to show one of the films in a grade-school class, the 1979 version is more straight-forward and does not include outdated theories. For historians, however, both films are of interest because we can see how the historical discourse has changed.

Another aspect of the story that was removed completely, also most likely due to time-constraints, were several key characters. Neither the Bradfords nor the Winslow brothers are present in the 1979 film. Gilbert Winslow, the *Plymouth Adventure* narrator, is from a historian and filmmaker's perspective hardly missed. Sources on him are limited, and he is no different than all the other passengers who are not mentioned by name. William Bradford and Edward Winslow, on the other hand, were the main authors of the story in the first place. Bradford also became the leader of the colony. His wife's mysterious death is a well-known part of the traditional story, both historical and romantic. In the film Edward Winslow has some of his role usurped by Miles Standish in the end credits. While Standish no doubt did his part, it is Winslow who is remembered for his diplomatic skills and contact with the Native Americans. With both Bradford and Winslow's importance so obvious, how can they both be completely absent?

Most likely this is the result of how the film was focused and the resulting time-constraints. The focus is on Brewster, the religious leader of the group on board, and the one wanted by the government. His associate, Mr. Cushman, stays behind on the *Speedwell*, leaving the focus of the Captain's dislike entirely on Brewster. With the romantic subplots getting their share of attention, adding another two characters (or three since Dorothy's death could not go unmentioned with Bradford in the picture) would complicate the easy antagonism between the world-weary Captain and idealistic Pilgrim. The film simplifies the story by removal. We must ask, then: how much is removable in the film before it is disregarding history? Is this another type of false invention or a lack of engagement with the historical discourse? If the story becomes unrecognizable then it is no longer the story of the Pilgrims, and questions of its good history are irrelevant. What we must judge here is where the line is crossed.

With so many individuals present in the sources, most film-viewers would probably agree that it is impossible to do them all justice in a 100 minute film. Nor is this required for a film to be considered good history. On the other hand, the exclusion of Bradford and Winslow does present us with a dilemma: Can it be regarded as good history when central characters are absent? A written biography may focus on Edward Winslow rather than Bradford, but the latter would at least be mentioned in some detail. A simple mentioning is more difficult to do in film, however. To avoid complete confusion, removal may still be better. The audience

expects more from a character when the film takes the time to introduce them; such is the nature of the medium and the audiences' expectations. More than simple removal, the film also emphasizes Brewster's role more in Bradford's absence. Brewster was the elder and his importance is obvious, but placing the whole of the colony's survival on Brewster is overemphasizing. It is not false invention to focus more on one individual than another, but to remove the main sources of information, both Bradford and Winslow, without whom we would know very little about the details of the voyage, seems like an odd choice from both a film-viewer and historian's perspective.

Dorothy's death was probably excluded on similar grounds as the others. Yet, her character is less important for understanding the major events in the pilgrim story. Besides, the historical facts are unknowable in Dorothy's case, so the removal may also have been a way to avoid the question entirely. We simply can not know the filmmakers' reasoning. Compared with *Plymouth Adventure*, the 1979 version chose to depict the more documented sailor's death. This death is almost exactly as Bradford describes it. The sailors are depicted as swearing and rough with the Pilgrims, and the film implies the sailor's sudden death is interpreted as God's justice, as Bradford notes in his book.

The last few common notions about the Pilgrims will be briefly commented upon here. One common idea that we have discussed before is the simple black clothing and the Pilgrim mindset that goes with it. The Pilgrims wore black, they expressed piousness, not joyfulness, and they were perhaps even a little repressed in terms of their sexuality. *Plymouth Adventure* was made with the fairly new Technicolor technology and the costumes showcased this. The producer also mentioned that an effort was made to depict the Pilgrims as people who were also able to enjoy themselves. In *The Pilgrims' Adventure* a few of the Pilgrims wear buckles and nearly everyone wears black or dark colours. It is impossible to know why no more effort was done on the costumes. We can speculate, however. It might simply have been budget concerns. We also noted earlier that the film was made with Thanksgiving in mind. Are the costumes then confirming the romantic image of the Pilgrims so that they will be more recognisable to an audience with a set of expectations on the well-known story that celebrates the holiday? Could the costumes be a deliberate choice to be instantly recognisable? We know that the props do not make the film, but it is quite noticeable that the costumes are very traditional, much more so than the 1952 predecessor.

As for the Pilgrim mindset, we must base most of our judgements on Brewster as he is the only Pilgrim to get a lot of speaking lines. He is usually in conflict with Captain Jones. Compared to the previous film, the Pilgrims here are portrayed much more humanized and not quite so stalwart in their faith. When the storm hits the Pilgrims demand that the ship turn back, and the Captain asks if their faith is perhaps not as strong. Brewster, antagonised by this, finds his courage to tell the Captain to “Sail on.”¹⁹⁸ This might be interpreted as a humanizing technique: the Pilgrims are shown as having religious doubt, as many people have experienced in times of great crisis. What makes them unique is their ability to stand against that doubt and encourage the others to continue, illustrated by Brewster's comment to pushsail on.

Another interesting depiction of the Pilgrim mindset that lends credence to the humanizing interpretation is the inclusion of Mr. Carver's concern about the married couples aboard the *Mayflower*. He asks Captain Jones what they should do for privacy, as some of the couples are newly married. The Captain of course answers that there is no privacy. Based on the estimates of the size of the ship, this seems very likely. While the concept of privacy as expressed here may not be historically accurate, the argument this scenes makes is about the attitude towards sexuality. The fact that the Pilgrims are depicted as people who are well aware of young people's sexuality is historically accurate. They were not, as the myth goes, repressed.¹⁹⁹ Like the 1952 version, this film is arguing for a more realistic depiction of the Pilgrim mindset. With the inclusion of this sexuality comment they go even further than the 1952 version, which focused on the Pilgrims being able to have fun and wear colours. Neither film perpetuates the romantic idea of the Pilgrims as anywhere near prudish religious zealots.

One cannot ignore the famous Plymouth Rock when discussing a film about the *Mayflower*. This common myth was not present in the 1952 version except for a very brief mention and appearance. The landing is shown on an empty beach, though the significance of the moment is not lost on the narrator. In *The Pilgrims' Adventure* the landing is not even shown on screen properly. The last scene is between Brewster and Jones, now finally reluctant friends. The small boat sails towards the shore and we can spot their embarkation in the distance while a summary of future events are shown on screen. Plymouth Rock it seems, despite it being an icon of America for many years, and still a fairly busy tourist attraction,

¹⁹⁸Time stamp: 1:44:30

¹⁹⁹Argued by Francis J. Bremer, prof of history at Millersville U of PA in *Desperate Crossing*, time stamp: 0:17:00

has no real place in the film-versions of the Pilgrim landing. Neither of the films invoke any of the iconic paintings or engravings found either at Pilgrim Hall or in the Capitol Building in Washington itself. In this, both films are more concerned with historical accuracy than depicting a momentous and dramatic scene. Judging by the engraving at the Capitol Building it could have been quite the scene.²⁰⁰ In this, both films engage in a fairly unchanged historical discourse: even in 1952 historians were certain that Plymouth Rock did not exist as a point of embarkation for the Pilgrims.

Another Pilgrim idea that is included in both films is the representation of Pilgrims as the roots of America. While we get none of the iconic imagery of the landing, we do get inspiring last lines. Captain Jones in 1952 spoke of the many ships that would come after them. The film itself is dedicated to the men and women who would become America. *The Pilgrims' Adventure* as well perpetuates this idea, especially in the last words to appear onscreen before the credits: “The Plymouth colony flourished... perhaps no other group would ever so completely epitomize the courage, hopes and dreams of what would become AMERICA”²⁰¹ We know, as did the filmmakers of both films, that the Plymouth Colony did not flourish, at least not compared to neighbouring Boston or the many other future great cities that were established before the founding of America. Plymouth today is not a great hub of activity, and not the centre of any state. The Pilgrims certainly became a symbol for America, but only centuries later when their imagery was used by people outside of Massachusetts. To say that one colony, a colony that did not even become a big city, is the root of all that is America, is an exaggeration to put it mildly. It is drama, and good filmmaking, and certainly in keeping with the romantic story of the Pilgrims. This **perserving** idea does not appear to have been diminished or altered since the last time the Pilgrims were on screen. Despite all attempts are humanizing the Pilgrims, and depicting the group as a varied one with non-religious people included as well, the idealistic image of the roots of America remains. In the next chapter it will be interesting to see if this still persists today.

We have now looked at how the film deals with the romantic story of the Pilgrims in comparison with the 1952 attempt. The film does not include many purely false inventions, but rather deals mostly in alterations and removals. The invention of the relationship between Jones and Brewster is interesting and is used as a way to illustrate the Pilgrims' uniqueness

²⁰⁰ See for example the Architect of the Capitol website at [www.aoc.gov/cc/capitol/rotunda.cfm] (downloaded 14.04.11)

²⁰¹Time stamp: 2:12:35

and humanness at the same time. I would judge this to be a true invention as it serves the story and history at the same time. This conclusion does not mean the film is giving us straight-forward good history. It engages with the romantic Pilgrims as well: with the clothing and love-triangle among others. Before we can reach any conclusions there are a few more areas we must look at. Can a viewer still experience the voyage of the *Mayflower* with the alterations, inventions and removals? We have already noted that the romance seems a little modern, but does contemporary society intrude upon the film in other areas? What sort of history is presented in the film when so much is missing? Can it be judged good history?

Contemporary Society

In the previous chapter we discussed the roles of gender in the film. In the 1952 film we concluded that Dorothy Bradford's passiveness was a 1950s intrusion, and even a possible symptom of having too many ageing Hollywood leading men. In the 1979 version, however, the women play important roles and appear strong. They talk to each other on what it means to be a woman. Mary Brewster lies to protect her husband from being found and dragged to prison, standing up to the man searching the ship. Rose Standish, as already mentioned, is subservient in her acceptance of her husband's infidelities, but her attempt to control who his next wife will be is not. Like the romance between Priscilla and John, these Pilgrims cannot be separated from the year they were filmed. The women are, especially compared to the 1952 version, fairly modern. They speak for themselves and discuss what it means to be a woman. Priscilla is much more frank than John Alden. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are not historically satisfying as well. Pilgrim women, as we established in the previous chapter, were not completely passive in the marriage. This might again be a result of the films engaging with different historical discourses. The historical discourse on gender was fairly different in 1979 than in 1952. The films no doubt reflect this. To modern audiences the 1979 is more satisfying in this regard. Only time will tell if future historians agree with us.

The role of Native Americans in films is a topic that has been explored extensively. While the Native Americans do not actually appear in this film, they are mentioned, and a comparison with the previous film gives us a glimpse of how films are affected by society and historical discourse. According to one survey of historical films, the films of the 1970s gave

us revisionist history when it came to Native Americans.²⁰² Compared to the 1952 Native Americans, who stand in the background working happily or guard doors for no apparent reason, is there any mention of a more revisionist version in 1979? Miles Standish comments that the Indians have every right to be angry at them for coming to take their land. This could be interpreted as a more humanized view of the Native American. Standish shows with his comment that we should be able to empathised with the natives, and presume that they can be just as angry as any European whose land is taken from him. In conclusion, these Native Americans are not the kind and passive ones from 1952, neither are they passive victims. I would argue that this small comment hints ever so slightly at a more revisionist view of Native Americans in general in contemporary society.

When it comes to film, the most obvious impact of contemporary society is in the style and technology itself. Most viewers, even those who are not great film-fans, can date movies simply by looking at them. Everything from music-style, colour, photography and even credit fonts give away a film's age. How does all this intrude upon the story? In *how* the story is told, how we are presented with the characters, how they speak and the tone of the film. Cameron says about the historical films of the 1970s that “All reverence for the past is gone.”²⁰³ This can be seen in how the camera engages the audience with the film. *The Pilgrims' Adventure* use of camera brings us much more into the action, though reverence is still there I would argue. The action is more close-up and realistic than the 1952 version. The shots focusing on the faces do not linger as much as in 1952. To modern viewers such constant focus on the dramatic face may become a parody of itself. We must also consider if its reverence for the Pilgrims comes from the fact that it was made to celebrate Thanksgiving. *The Pilgrims' Adventure* is a sort of gritty reboot, to use a currently very popular phrase. It manages to take the 1952 film's mission of humanizing the Pilgrims even further, but it is still the story of the “voyage that changed the course of history” as the tagline tells us, hence much of the reverence remains.

Concluding remarks.

The purpose of his chapter has been to demonstrate how much of the Pilgrim story has remained intact from 1952 to 1979, and also how a few key differences in the historical

²⁰²Cameron, K. 1997:170

²⁰³Cameron, K. 1997:184

discourse makes the 1979 version less problematic as a classroom film.

Mayflower: The Pilgrims' Adventure is not the same technicolor adventure of the sea as its predecessor. It gives us a smaller story, with the romance sharing the spot-light with an interesting relationship between a rough yet philosophical captain and a pious yet pragmatic Pilgrim. The 1952 Pilgrims appeared stoic and pious, yet they still knew how to enjoy themselves. These Pilgrims are much the same, but they take it a step further: they doubt. The 1979 version is a stepping stone to the 2006 documentary, where we will see the Pilgrims in their fully humanized and realistic version.

In spite of its more realistic elements, the 1979 version also has a lot of romantic Pilgrim aspects. The costumes are fairly visible: simple and black. This may have pandered to audiences' expectations. The Pilgrim costume is still very much a part of the Thanksgiving tradition, and showing anything else on Thanksgiving itself may have been seen as unnecessary or complicated. Another problematic aspect we discussed was the absence of the characters in the main sources. William Bradford and Edward Winslow are nowhere to be seen. The film's tendency to remove aspects of the story (the Virginia destination and Dorothy's death among them) may be deemed less engaging with historical discourse, but it does not directly detract anything major from the story. We are still shown a version of the crossing that is fairly in tune with the historical discourse.

The onscreen evolution of Longfellow's poem is interesting. Already in 1952 the filmmakers were aware that historians dismissed the validity of this epos. Yet, years later a film still shows the audience a more faithful rendition of it. Again, this may be due to the film's relationship with Thanksgiving. Was the film simply meeting audiences' expectations? Does this mean the Longfellow poem is still a popular part of the romantic Pilgrim story? It will be worth noticing how the status of the poem is viewed in the next chapter and film.

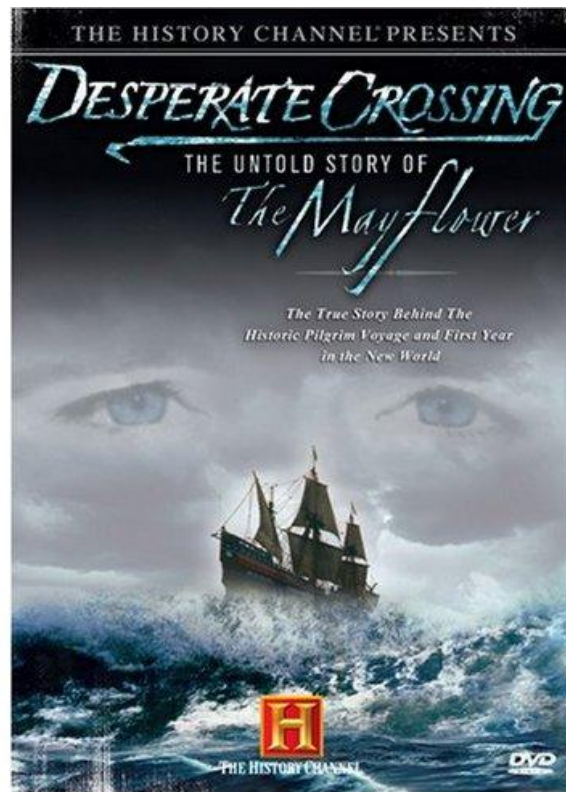
With such a complicated relationship with history and myth, how can we judge this film to be good or bad history? It does get most of the main facts straight and represents the struggles of the voyage well, but it also includes a lot of small inventions, though none very false. I would argue that the 1952 version does just as much, if not more, to engage with the discourse of history at the time. While the 1979 film's depiction of the relationship between Brewster and Jones is interesting, the film suffers too much from a feeling of being a reenactment of a modernised version of a Thanksgiving play. It does not take any risks with audience expectation. We could look at it this way from a modern perspective of both

historian and film-viewer: should a teacher wish to show a film to a classroom getting their first lesson on the early Americans, then the 1979 version is preferable. The characters are more believable, for example we have no comedic relief in *Miles Standish*, and most importantly we have no entirely fictitious relationship that leads to the possible suicide of Dorothy Bradford. At the same time, it is the 1952 film that feels more interesting in terms of engaging the contemporary historical discourse.

This chapter, like the film, is a stepping stone to the next film. I have attempted to show how many of the topics and moods from the first film carry over to the 1979 version: the humanizing of the Pilgrims while maintaining the reverence for the first Americans, and the rocky relationship to the Captain. This perhaps more than anything illustrates that there has not been much change in the historical discourse or the romantic ideas of the Pilgrims between 1952 and 1979 apart from the couple of aspects we mentioned (the conspiracy theory and gender-roles). Will we then find a massive difference in the 2006 documentary? Is this a result of the change in historical discourse between 1979 and 2006, or is it a result of the genre of documentary? We will examine this in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 - *DESPERATE CROSSING: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE
MAYFLOWER* (2006)

“AN ACTION ADVENTURE EPIC”²⁰⁴



“All great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties
and must be overcome with answerable courages.”

- William Bradford, Governor of Plimoth Plantation

As these words on a black screen fade away, the viewer is soon in the midst of a great storm far out at sea. We are informed that we are in “1620, October” and the ship being tossed about is the *Mayflower*. Inside the famous ship we get a glimpse of the cramped conditions: water is sloshing in, people are frightened and seasick, some vomiting, and the ship’s main beam has cracked. There is arguing about turning back, but some, yelling over the creaking of the

²⁰⁴From interview with Lisa Wolfinger,
[http://americanhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/mayflower_s_desperate_crossing](downloaded 16.03-10)

timbers, declare they have already risked too much to give up now.

This is the opening scene of *Desperate Crossing: the untold story of the Mayflower* (2006), a film made by the History Channel. It is a documentary, though for the first few seconds the viewer might not realise this fact thanks to its very good special effects and feature-film-like opening scene. It chronicles the events of the Pilgrim story in much more detail than the previous two films due to it being much longer.²⁰⁵ It is a documentary, and it is certainly presented as such, but it is also “a marriage of feature-film quality historical reenactments with the latest scholarship and analysis of original source material.”²⁰⁶ It is a blending of techniques usually found in feature-films with the authority of a documentary. After putting this film in context, and providing a synopsis of the film, this dual quality is the first part of my analysis in this chapter. How exactly does the film blend feature film techniques with documentary authority, and can this blend engage both history and the audience in an entertaining and educating way? I will argue that it can, and that, in regards to issues of invention, it deals primarily in what Rosenstone refers to as “true invention.” By showing how the film uses feature film techniques, this chapter will also illustrate how even documentaries cannot escape the problems that apply to feature films. They too invent. Our question will be: how true are those inventions, and how does the film use them to engage with the discourse of history? *Desperate Crossing* is not without issues of debate, and we will discuss them, but I hope to show how this film comes closest of the three to our definition of good history.

The second area of interest is the romantic Pilgrims and their place in this film, if there is a place for them. Does the film acknowledge popular myths and address them directly? Or are such popular ideas simply pushed aside? How are the Pilgrims presented, especially compared to the previous films? Can we say definitively that this is the film historians should prefer? That may indeed be most historians' answer, but I, as this project has attempted to show, wish to illustrate how all these films have something to say about the Pilgrims, each in

²⁰⁵ According to dvd listings and descriptions of the film, it should be three hours long. The dvd I have in my possession, however, has an approximate running time of 137 min plus extras such as a making of video, outtakes and behind the scenes. This may suggest that the dvd-version is not the same as the broadcast one, but as far as I can tell there is only one version on dvd, and it is the version sent to me by the director, Lisa Wolfinger. We must therefore conclude that this is the version audiences will be met with. I have been sure to check to see if The History Channel broadcast the documentary again during this project; they did not.

²⁰⁶ From DVD description on the History Shop (the official History Channel online store): [<http://shop.history.com/detail.php?p=69858&v=history&ecid=PRF-2100994&pa=PRF-2100994>] (downloaded 15.11.10)

their own way. What does *Desperate Crossing* tell us about them?

Also included in this section of the chapter is the issue of contemporary society in the film. Given that the documentary is so new, I find it more difficult to say anything concrete about contemporary values or sensibilities that may have coloured the picture of the Pilgrims. This is primarily because I simply do not have the time to research the area thoroughly enough. We may be able to say something about how the Pilgrim story is presented compared to previous representations. As was suggested in the previous chapter, during the 1970s revisionism came to historical films about Native Americans. Modern historiography appears to be much more concerned with writing history from all points of view, and giving voice to those groups who have until now been silent. *Desperate Crossing* certainly tries to give voice to historical actors who were previously ignored. The film gives voice to both Native Americans and women. When you look at what is written about early America today, one can see a tendency to show the real stories about America, to get all the facts, no matter how unpleasant. Gritty details are no longer swept under the carpet. *Desperate Crossing* shared this desire, and shows the Pilgrims with all the warts intact, but to what extent? Can we still see an idealized origin story for America? If we compare all three films' message about the Pilgrim story, can we see a common theme from 1952 all the way to 2006?

Before we get into all this, however, we need some context to put the film into, and how this documentary was received.

Context and reception

The documentary originally aired in November 2006 on the History Channel. It was directed by Lisa Wolfinger, who has produced, written and directed several other documentaries on historical subjects. *Desperate Crossing* was nominated for two Emmy Awards and has received critical acclaim. It follows the story of the Pilgrims in great detail from their beginnings in Scrooby, England, all the way through their first year in the New World. *Desperate Crossing* was created with a budget of only 1.5 million dollars for three hours.²⁰⁷ The screenplay was written by Rocky Collins, and a lot of the dialogue is taken directly from the primary sources: *Of Plimoth Plantation* and *Mourt's Relation*, most of which is narrated by the actors who play the authors, William Bradford or Edward Winslow.

Reviews provide an interesting glimpse into what people expected from the film. The

²⁰⁷ Personal interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, dated 10.03-10

documentary has, as far as I can determine, received generally positive reviews all around. Several commentators point out how the film will enlighten people about the details of the famous story most people only remember superficially from their school days. One reviewer even remarks that: “For most viewers, the events contained in *Desperate Crossing* will come as a surprise...”²⁰⁸ For the New York Times' reviewer the documentary “awakened new curiosity about competing myths of origins: both the first story (about the noble search for religious freedom) and the second (about the cruel seizure of someone else’s land)”²⁰⁹ While not a complete “debunking” of popular myths, such comments might suggest that ideas about the Pilgrims are persistent. One need look no further than the dozens of articles on the internet concerning Thanksgiving, all aiming to provide the truth behind popular myths; everything from Plymouth Rock to their clothing is usually addressed. One might now think back to the 1952 film and the expectations surrounding its correction of popular myths. As the chapter on *Plymouth Adventure* revealed, the film did very much attempt to counter the romantic story of the Pilgrims. *Desperate Crossing* shares this goal, albeit in a different way. We need look no further than its subtitle: *The Untold Story of the Mayflower*.²¹⁰ This title was a marketing decision, but it does play into audiences' expectations about what is to be revealed about such a well-known story. We will discuss this in more detail later.

Desperate Crossing was praised for its portrayal of the Native American side of the story, the Wampanoag nation. Though we have no written record from this group of people apart from what the Pilgrims wrote of them, the filmmakers worked with today's Wampanoags to get an accurate as possible rendering of their culture.²¹¹ The Wampanoag webpage includes a generally favourable review of the documentary. The film's only shortcoming, according to one reviewer, is the romanticising of Thanksgiving and failure to mention the devastating wars that are to come.²¹² These aspects will also be discussed further under the relevant heading.

²⁰⁸ Brady (2007) “Desperate Crossing: the Untold Story of the Mayflower” found at [<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/desperate-crossing-the-untold-story-of-the-mayflower/>] (downloaded: 17.11.10)

²⁰⁹Heffernan (2006) “They Came, They Saw, They Assembled,They Ate A Substantial Meal” in *The New York Times*, Nov 17, 2007 [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/arts/television/17mayf.html?_r=1&ref=virginiaheffernan] (downloaded: 17.11.10)

²¹⁰ The full title was chosen by History Channel marketing, according to Wolfinger in her email to me.

²¹¹ Personal interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, dated 10.03-10

²¹²Gordon-Smith (date unknown) “Reveals Factual History of the Wampanoag...” at [<http://www.chappaquiddick-wampanoag.org/linksrecommendations.html>] (downloaded 16.03.10)

Lisa Wolfinger was kind enough to answer several questions over email, and has also sent me numerous documents detailing the work that went into the research for the film, including the final script and shooting schedules. Some of this will be used in the discussions below. With regards to research the most interesting document is a list of every single event that takes place in *Of Plimoth Plantation* by William Bradford and *Mourt's Relation* by Bradford and Edward Winslow, along with notes on where they differ. This illustrates perfectly how much the film relies on the primary sources, but that does not mean the film slavishly follows that list, as we shall see later on in our discussion. To further put this documentary into context will mean to examine what kind of documentary it is, as well as some brief information about documentaries in general. Since this will tie in to the dual nature of this film, I present it as a separate heading. Before we do that, however, let us take a look at the events in the film.

Desperate Crossing: the story

The rather long summary that is to follow fails to impress upon the reader the editing technique. For every scene with the Pilgrims there is either a narrator, a voice-over of Bradford or Winslow, or an interviewed expert who is explaining or theorizing. New experts are shown as new topics are explored. We work our way through these historians, authors and experts just as the Pilgrims work their way from England to America. When the credits roll the viewer is feeling, if nothing else, greatly informed about the life and times of the Pilgrims. The film also uses 17th century drawings and portraits, as well as animated maps showing the route, and pans over them to create a 3D look that is very interesting. The story follows the primary events very closely.

As stated above, we begin in the middle of the Atlantic. This is only to thrust us into the action, however, as the narrator quickly brings us back many years to Scrooby, England. We hear not only the unidentified narrator, but William Bradford's voice-over as he reads from his book, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, and later we will hear the voice-over of Edward Winslow, presumably reading from *Mourt's Relations*, of which he was a co-writer. The group of English Separatists is meeting in secret to worship. Several historians are interviewed for the documentary on screen, each giving insight into one aspect of the story, including the persecution of separatists in James I's England. We follow the Pilgrims as they try to make their first failed attempt to cross over to Holland. We are told they are reunited in

Amsterdam months later, a very busy and strange place for the separatists. The main characters are slowly being introduced, with scenes that give us insight into their personalities: William Brewster, the elder and printer of seditious books. William Bradford, future governor, who meets his love-interest, Dorothy, in Amsterdam. Edward Winslow, who helps Brewster at the printing press, but is at odds with Bradford and shows open hostility.

They move to Leiden, but soon even this becomes intolerable, for their children are becoming Dutch, meaning the parents fear that the children might lose their English identity. America is suggested and a heated debate ensues between the leading men, but they resolve to go. The group is soon introduced to the slick salesman, Thomas Weston, who promises to fund their adventure. Meanwhile the books printed by Brewster are making King James I angry and the elder must go into hiding at a crucial moment. The film shows us the numerous difficulties the Pilgrims face as they try and organise their journey, as well as the arrival of the Strangers - non-separatist passengers - and the conflicts between them. The second ship, the *Speedwell*, leaks and causes them to turn back, twice, but eventually the Pilgrims are crossing the Atlantic on the *Mayflower*. We are now where the film opened, and they must repair the damage caused by the storm, which they manage thanks to the Pilgrims' quick thinking.

Finally, we see the New World, Cape Cod. They attempt to reach the Hudson, their agree-upon destination, but dangerous shoals force them to turn back north. They quarrel over the legalities because the patent does not include New England as a settlement place. We see the signing of the Mayflower Compact, an agreement to follow the elected governor. The settlers can now begin to explore the wilderness around them. They find empty native settlements and buried corn, which they take. Eventually they decide on Plimoth as the location for their settlement. When they return, Bradford is informed that his wife has died. Having left her son in Holland, she has been getting steadily more depressed, and it is implied she might have killed herself.

They now begin building their settlement, but sickness makes things almost impossible very quickly. Barely 50 remain after the winter is over, of the 102 settlers who came. Come March, the Indians finally make peaceful contact and an alliance is formed. We meet Squanto, an English-speaking native. He will have a strong partnership with Bradford, who is soon after voted Governor after John Carver's death. By summer/autumn the settlement is flourishing and we are witness to the harvest feast - which will become the thanksgiving story in American myth - and how the Pilgrims and Indians feasted and played

for three days.

The main characters are panned over, and the narrator explains what happened to them. Edward Winslow continues as an ambassador to the Indians and later abroad. Bradford is the last remaining of his friends and allies, and he kept the peace with the Indians for his life-time. Squanto will die before his ambitions are reached. The film is concluded with a pragmatic message: some things went right, some wrong, but working together with the Indians is the true importance of the Pilgrim story.

Desperate Crossing: the documentary

Before we move on to a detailed analysis of the techniques used to tell us this story, however, it may be useful to step back and look at the documentary form and ask where this particular documentary can be placed within its genre. In recent decades filmmakers have been increasingly utilizing techniques that are traditionally seen in feature films or television dramas. We can see this going in the opposite direction as well, with documentary forms being used in feature films. One fairly successful sci-fi blockbuster, *District 9* (2009), is made mostly in a documentary way with interviews and what appears to be actuality footage (hand-held camera/mobile phone videos and news footage). We also have a genre called mock-documentaries where the viewer may or may not be fooled into believing it is an actual documentary. There is also the relatively new form of reality television, which is a type of observational documentary. The landscape, it seems, has become more and more complicated.

Rosenstone writes that documentary is in some ways *not* like the feature film, but in fact is so closely related to written history that “far less than the feature film, it hardly seems to point towards a new way of thinking about the past.” We might also think traditional documentaries are more like lectures, with a series of experts on screen and some illustrations thrown in. At the same time Rosenstone argues that the documentary also shares some aspects with feature films. His six points can be applied to documentaries. A documentary is always constructed, and never neutral; it can have a story/plot or a dramatized scene.²¹³ Typically, these reenactments have been presented as such and are fairly basic. With the constant improvements in technology, it is perhaps not so surprising that documentaries can include more and more elaborate reenactments, thereby moving ever closer to feature film techniques. *Desperate Crossing* certainly makes good use of this. First let us examine what makes it a

²¹³ Rosenstone, R. 2006:71

documentary.

Documentary is far from a clear-cut format. Numerous scholars and filmmakers have tried to define the form on a variety of criteria, including content, voices, styles or modes. I will not be wrestling further with the debate on definitions than I addressed in the Introduction, since we can all agree, I hope, that *Desperate Crossing* is in fact a documentary. It is promoted as such from the production company, it presents the viewer with queues that it should be seen as such, and as an audience we expect it to have documentary authority. For people not familiar with the Pilgrims, they expect this documentary to be accurate in so far as this is possible. Some might expect a little artistic freedom and editing of material, but in general the facts should be verifiable to some degree.

The audience sees a documentary. However, like feature films, televisions shows, short-films, cartoons, etc, have genres or sub-genres, so too does documentary. Bill Nichols' use of six modes of documentary seems to be the most frequently used and commented upon division. These six modes are, chronologically from their introduction, *poetic, expository, interactive, observational, reflexive and performative*.²¹⁴ Of these modes, poetic, reflexive and performative are the rare forms of documentary.²¹⁵ Their names are fairly descriptive, but there are also many hybrid variants and these are, like documentary itself, not always simple. Poetic means that the technique used is more experimental, abandoning the traditional editing and continuity techniques. Reflexive means that the documentary is as much focused on *how* things are represented than what is represented. Interactive, or participatory means that the documentary-maker steps into what is being observed and becomes a participant. We will leave off commenting further on these types of documentaries. It is the expository, interactive and observational modes that may be of some interest to us.

The expository mode addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument or recounts history.²¹⁶ This mode was common in the 1950s and 60s, and originally used only actuality footage and was therefore limited to present-day subject matters.²¹⁷ A distinctive feature is the Voice-of-God commentary. A narrator leads us through the images, explaining what we see and how we should see it. This narrator is never seen, appearing thus omniscient or God-like. Such is the case with *Desperate Crossing*, where

²¹⁴ Nichols, B. 2001:99-100

²¹⁵ Rosenstone, R. 2006:73

²¹⁶ Nichols, B. 2001:105

²¹⁷ Rosentone, R. 2006:72

the narrator speaks up almost immediately after the opening sequence. Another element in the documentary is the use of panning over pictures. This technique was added to the traditional expository documentaries as a way of dealing with older historical subjects. The technique involved panning over still-photos to make them come alive, thereby making it possible to create a film with few, if any, moving-images.²¹⁸ *Desperate Crossing* uses a similar technique that gives the pictures an even more 3D look.

The “talking heads” or experts, in this case mostly historians or lay historians, appears to be traditionally linked to the interactive mode, where a filmmaker is engaging with the interviewee either off or on screen. *Desperate Crossing* has an extensive list of interviews spread throughout the film, though sometimes they function almost as narrators when the voice of the experts carries over into other shots or scenes, as voice-overs. Most of the time they begin with an on-screen interview and then later their now recognisable voice is carried over into reenactments. The film is clearly a documentary, with authoritative experts on screen every few minutes, but in between these commentators, the animated maps and old paintings, we find almost a whole feature film.

Even with commentary or narration in the background the reenactments are far more feature-film like than you see in the average historical documentaries. The quality of the reenactments is key here. It is the actors, many from the Shakespeare Company, who drive the narrative forward, not the talking heads or Voice-of-God. Although we are introduced to the characters by the Voice-of-God, and a lot of information about the life and times of the Pilgrims is conveyed through the narrator and talking heads, the documentary is made up in great part by dramatized scenes. In fact, you could theoretically remove every commentary, talking head and picture pan, and be left with a fairly coherent, if not exactly well-edited film. Or as the New York Times reviewer put it: “In fact, with all this Spielberg stuff, “Desperate Crossing” would simply look like a television movie... if not for the occasional appearance of a talking head...”²¹⁹ The opening scene itself is a clear indicator of how this film will progress: the audience is immediately tossed into the violent storm along with the passengers. Only after we experience some of the terror for ourselves does the narrator speak up.

²¹⁸ Rosenstone, R. 2006:72

²¹⁹ Heffernan (2006) “They Came, They Saw, They Ate A Substantial Meal” in *The New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/arts/television/17mayf.html?_r=1&ref=virginiaheffernan] (downloaded: 17.11.10)

One scene that stands out in my mind is a scene between Edward Winslow and William Bradford. They are learning fighting techniques from Miles Standish, and we hear from an expert that the Pilgrims hired Standish to handle the military aspects of the enterprise, and to teach them to handle themselves. The Pilgrims were not pacifists. We then focus on Winslow and Bradford facing off with swords. There is a definite tension between them, soon open hostility, and the training quickly deteriorates into a real fight. Winslow wins by disarming Bradford. We move on, and there is no commentary on this animosity between two of the main characters at all. The viewer is left to interpret why this is by relying on previous scenes and information we have learned so far. There are also several scenes with Dorothy, Bradford's wife, where it is clear she is getting slowly more depressed. While we hear commentary on the status of women and their roles, as well as speculation on her suicide when that time comes, this character development is not commented directly on. We are left to get to know the character and interpret her mental change over the course of the film on our own. Putting aside for now discussions on the historical accuracy of such scenes, I merely wished to show how, despite narrators and experts, a lot of the character information comes from the viewer interpreting scenes like this as we would in a fiction film or an observational documentary.

Another aspect that can perhaps be interpreted as a feature film technique is the narration of the characters themselves. The Voice-of-God is not the only narrator, as both William Bradford and Edward Winslow's voice-overs are heard. At the very beginning, we are introduced to the text *Of Plimoth Plantation* and the Voice-of-God explains this is our primary source. Then we hear Bradford's voice begin to read the first paragraph, the shot of the text fades away and the camera closes in on Bradford. Edward Winslow is also heard narrating, and we are told he too wrote about the events after arriving at the New World. Nevertheless, their narration is definitely reminiscent of first-person narration in feature films, where we hear the thoughts of the main character as the events unfold. From a documentary stand-point it is also a useful way of showing the audiences where the information about the events is coming from. The documentary in fact makes this very explicit in the beginning when we see the first page of *Of Plimoth Plantation* on the screen and its origins explained. This technique therefore serves the dual function of bringing the audience closer to the characters through first-person narrative, and showing said audience that the main events are known through the writings of two pairs of eyes alone.

There are other story-telling techniques that blend the genres of documentary and feature film. They serve to heighten the audience's emotional connection to the onscreen events, and to bring us into the action itself. I am speaking here of the hand-held camera technique used in some scenes, most notably in the “first encounter” sequence when the Native Americans attack. One of the Pilgrims hears a noise and glances warily into the forest to look for signs of movement. In the next shot we see through a hand-held camera waving to and fro as if we are seeing through the Pilgrim's eyes. When the small battle is underway, the hand-held is used several times to show the Pilgrims' urgency and their fear. This technique has become standard in feature-film battle scenes during the last few decades. We can compare these types of scenes to our previous films. Whenever John Alden comes to blows with the sailors in *Plymouth Adventure* the scenes are filmed at a distance big enough to show the men from head to toe. This allows the audience to see the action clearly. The 1979 film does not have the same type of fight scenes, but generally, any action is shown from a distance here as well, but the camera work is still more intimate. The change into a close-up filming style is probably mostly due to advancements in technology with more easily moveable cameras. *Desperate Crossing's* hand-held camera footage may to some audience members also conjure up associations to actuality footage in documentaries about contemporary issues. Since it obviously cannot be *actual* actuality footage, this again may reminds us of feature films using this technique to strengthen its realism.

There is a clear blending of genres in *Desperate Crossing*, not only is it a hybrid documentary mode - like many documentaries are, both old and new - but it has strong ties to feature films as well. It was advertised as a very exciting film, a drama perhaps, more than a traditional documentary. Lisa Wolfinger expressed it herself in an interview: “This is truly an action adventure epic to end all epics!”²²⁰ Does the fact that it draws so much on feature film techniques and is telling a dramatic story mean that our faith in any documentary authority is misplaced? No, I do not believe so. The film medium gives us the opportunity to create stories, but they can be stories made of good history. The documentary does invent, but within the bounds of history, as we shall see in the next section. First I wish to leave you with Wolfinger's words once more. She puts it best herself: “Fact is almost always better than

²²⁰ From interview with Lisa Wolfinger, [\[http://americanhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/mayflower_s_desperate_crossing\]](http://americanhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/mayflower_s_desperate_crossing)(downloaded 16.03-10)

fiction. Some of the best action adventure stories are factual.”²²¹ How exactly do the action adventure aspects affect the factual story? Can we have both drama and documentary and still have good history? This is a question we should keep in mind as we examine other aspects of this film.

True invention or bad history?

The issue of invention is not reserved for feature films. *Desperate Crossing* invents whenever it places words in the actors' mouths. We cannot know who said what when Bradford describes the discussion over where to go in America, for example. Sometimes words Bradford wrote are said by other characters, but this the audience cannot know, nor does it really matter. Another example is an exchange of letters between those in England, Carver and Cushman, who are preparing for the voyage, and those in Holland. In the film it has been transformed into a face-to-face argument. This heightens the emotions, and the level of conflict, and is much better suited to the visual medium. I think it fair to say the audience accepts that most of the dialogue is either invented or at least altered to fit a scene format, and that they also accept alterations in documentary reenactments. Like a feature film, *Desperate Crossing* also invents scenes completely outside of the primary sources. Those with a stricter view of the difference between a feature film and documentary may say that such inventions are unacceptable, but definitions, as already explained, are not so clear-cut. Rosenstone's distinction between true and false invention can be applied to documentary films as well. This section highlights points of invention in *Desperate Crossing* and argues that while the film uses inventions and technique similar to a feature film, they are *true* inventions. We may keep our faith in the authority of the documentary, to some extent compared to feature films at least, while still accepting such inventions. Let us look at some of the choices the filmmakers made to create a proper adventure film while still keeping true to the historical events. Are they in fact all acceptable true inventions? First I wish to look at one character aboard the *Mayflower* forever steeped in mystery.

Once again we come back to the question of Dorothy Bradford's untimely demise. *Desperate Crossing* introduces the future married couple in a very feature film-like way, another invention in itself. They bump into each other in an orchard in Holland, and Bradford

²²¹ Personal interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, dated 10.03-10

stumbles awkwardly over his explanation for being there. This scene is an invention, but it can be counted as a true one for the simple reason that William and Dorothy had to meet in some fashion, and awkwardness is not an invention of modern man. A talking head, a professor of history named Francis J. Bremer, explains the common misconception that Pilgrims were prudish or repressed, and makes it clear that they in fact viewed their sexual urges as natural, to be expressed within marriage. On screen we see the pair's courtship progress rapidly until they are happily married.

Another invention worth noting is the scene in which Dorothy decides to leave their son behind when they go to America. We know Bradford's son joins him many years later, though we cannot know the details of that decision. Dorothy does not even consider asking Bradford for permission. When Bradford protests and asks "What about my intention?" She answers simply "I care not."²²² We get some information about women from historian O'Connell, who explains how women at the time were not as passive as we might think. Women were subject to their husband's will by law, but to see them as completely powerless is unrealistic. With this expert's explanation, the film explicitly argues for this scene being a true invention; one in the spirit of the times, but not directly derived from the sources. Not being an expert on family relations in the 17th century, I, like the majority of the viewers, must accept this as such. This important decision, (a decision we know from the sources did happen, but not who made it), becomes a factor in Dorothy's subsequent depression in the film. The fact that the film shows Dorothy making this decision is no doubt so that the audience can understand that women did have a say in the household.

As the film progresses she becomes increasingly withdrawn and sickly. She states outright that she does not regret leaving her son behind, but by the look in her eyes the viewer knows she misses him terribly. Upon first seeing the new world she comments on how desolate a place it is. Bradford tries to encourage her by saying it is only because it is winter, but she is not convinced. When Bradford leaves the ship to go ashore, she looks much worse off than the other women, and pleads for him to stay. We do not see her again. When Bradford returns he is told the news by Brewster. A talking head, historian Carolyn Freeman Travers, explains that we cannot know what truly happened, but that she can believe both. Dorothy might have fallen overboard. If she did commit suicide that would have been against the law. Another talking head, author Nathaniel Philbrick, gives a counter-argument to this

²²²Time stamp: 0:33:30

and says that even devout Christians may be pushed to suicide. For the viewer it is easy to imagine oneself on the ship thanks to the amazing special effects, and so it is equally possible to imagine feeling so hopeless that suicide is the only option. One argument one can make against suicide is why would she kill herself *after* they had finally spotted land? Was it the sight of the desolate landscape that finally pushed her over the edge? At sea there was hope of good land and possibilities to come, but now with said land in front of them, empty and cold, that hope may have been cruelly crushed.

It is important to note that Bradford makes no mention of her death or depression in his narrative. As stated before, the only recording of her death is in the appendix. Bradford does not comment on who made the decision to leave their son behind either. The film makes it clear that we cannot know the true nature of Dorothy's death. One talking head remarks that the fact that Bradford barely mentions it could be a sign that shame was a factor, and that is was not spoken of. Yet the film also makes an argument through its reenactments that Dorothy is depressed and a suicide can be inferred. Bradford's silent and stone-faced grief on screen goes well with the lack of comment in his writings. Whatever happened, the film seems to suggest he kept it bottled up. I asked Wolfinger why she chose to make this visual argument. I give her answer here in full:

No one will ever know what happened to her. But since I had at least two different interpretations I chose to show one possibility. I showed her deteriorate mentally. If I hadn't, her death and possible suicide would have come out of nowhere. This is me speaking with my dramatist hat on.²²³

This, I think, is a perfectly valid argument. Some may take issue with this “dramatist” approach to history, but we must view the film as a whole and the nature of the invention. The film makes explicit, thanks to its documentary nature with talking heads, that there are multiple possibilities. We do not simply see her depressed and then gone. The dramatist argues for one of possible interpretation, and the documentary makes it plain that it is indeed only one possibility. We can never know what really happened but both sides present their arguments, and the film allows for both. It presents one visually while letting its talking heads explain that nothing can be known with certainty. In this way its invention of Dorothy's

²²³Interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, 10.03.10, Adjusted capitalisation.

depression is engaging with history to forward a valid historical argument. While it is for dramatic effect to some extent, it is not false invention like, for example, explaining her suicide by placing her in a love-triangle with the Captain, as *Plymouth Adventure* did decades before.

The other women in the film are well aware of their subservience to their husbands, but they too speak up and are active parts of the community. As O'Connell explained, they were not completely repressed. They speak for themselves, and make household decisions, like Dorothy leaving her son behind. The film invents scenes for them like debating parallel with their husbands on how to order their society without a patent in New England, or scenes with only women where they discuss their problems just like the men. Such scenes, while invented and feature film-like, are true inventions, as the film makes plain. They were likely not completely passive as the women in the 1952 film. In fact the women scenes remind me more of the 1979 version, where we see the women discussing what it means to be a woman and the difficulties of bearing children. Our society's view on women is reflected in this, and also our modern historiography that aims to tell previously untold stories. These scenes with the women were made with the desire to give them a voice that cannot be heard in the primary sources written by the men. In this way the documentary is more like a history book. It corrects the erroneous assumptions that women before fairly recent times were completely at the mercy of their husbands.

Just like the women, the Native Americans were also given a voice seldom heard on film before. In the 1950s Native Americans were typically cast as the savages, though they are peaceful in our film from that era. We are speaking of the typical western film here. Towards the 1970s, Native Americans began to be seen in a sympathetic role. Some films even reworked the traditional western into a critique of white expansionism.²²⁴ *Desperate Crossing* recreates what might have been said between them, since all we know of the Wampanoags comes from foreigners writing about them. This is made explicit in the first scene with only Wampanoags, when the narrator explains that what we are hearing is how it might have gone. Wolfinger explains how they worked: "... the Wampanoags today do have strong cultural traditions and we were able to interpret Bradford and Winslow's observations through the prism of modern Wampanoag cultural heritage."²²⁵ This method produces what

²²⁴ Benshoff, H.M, Griffin, S. 2004:107

²²⁵ Interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, 10.03.10, Adjusted capitalisation.

are undeniably invented scenes, but all in the spirit of true inventions. They allow us to imagine what it would be like from their point of view. As the Wampanoag reviewer wrote: “It is well worth watching this documentary to hear the Wampanoag point of view from well respected keepers of the Wampanoag culture... For far too long, the Wampanoag have been hidden behind the legend of Thanksgiving.”²²⁶ Comparing this with the passive and naïve Native Americans of the 1952 version, we can clearly see the progress of respect for such cultures. Both women and Native Americans are given a voice that cannot be heard in the primary sources, but are built by using knowledge about the culture and times they lived in.

Another point of invention to discuss happens fairly early on in the film, in the scenes between William Bradford and Edward Winslow. Winslow arrives in Amsterdam and eventually joins the group. The first scene with Bradford is antagonistic. Winslow warns Bradford that King James I might not like the seditious books they are printing, and Bradford remarks “If our fire be too hot for you, you may find other work.”²²⁷ Winslow appears to be accepted fairly easily by the rest of the group, joining the congregation and marrying one of its members, but his relationship with Bradford is still strained. They almost do each other physical harm when their practice fighting turns real. In *Mourt's Relation*, which Bradford and Winslow are assumed have written, no mention is made of any difficulty for new members of the congregation. While in Amsterdam and Leiden the group grows to a substantial size, about 300, and the film mentions this also. Winslow is among the newcomers at this time. Of course, if the co-authors, presumably now friends, remembered their old rivalry at the beginning, why would they bother to include such a thing in a book that was all about selling the new world to the old? Even so it remains that we have no source for this antagonism. Bradford does not mention it in his own history. Reasons for its inclusion are not given by any of the talking heads or narrator. The audience must interpret the reasons for their hostility, as in a feature film. Having read several books on the Pilgrims and their own records, I found this relationship strange, and asked Wolfinger about it. Again, I feel it is necessary to provide her answer in full.

I did take some liberties, but I felt it made sense. They came from very different

²²⁶Gordon-Smith (date unknown) “Reveals Factual History of the Wampanoag...” at [http://www.chappaquiddick-wampanoag.org/linksrecommendations.html] (downloaded 16.03.10)

²²⁷Time stamp: 0:21:39

backgrounds with different religious beliefs, at least at first. Their initial conflict in the film helped underline how zealous the separatists were and how much they were suspicious of outsiders. Winslow would have had to work hard to be accepted into the group.²²⁸

Considering how Bradford wrote of the “strangers” onboard the *Mayflower* this is perhaps not so surprising. The argument can be made that such a scene is a true invention because it serves the purpose of showing the viewer how tightly knit the group was, even though there were many other Protestants in Holland at the time, and many of them joined the congregation, enough to swell the number to 300. Does this bumpy start on screen that eventually becomes a good working relationship serve good history? Considering Wolfinger's arguments and the nature of such a close-knit religious group, such scenes can reasonably be considered true inventions in the spirit of the historical Pilgrim story.

It is actually rather remarkable how close the film follows the written accounts. The deviations and inventions all serve to make the film more coherent, with a proper plot structure, and make it more feature film-like in my opinion. Yet, as we have seen, its explicit explanations for many of its inventions and interpretations of events are very much based in documentary-style narrative, and make it more like a book, like Rosenstone points out. One of his six points is that a film tells history without a wider context, focusing on the individuals. We have already seen how little context is given in the previous scenes. A documentary may have the same focus on individuals, but with its narrative style it clearly has an easier time of providing context. *Desperate Crossing* provides a lot of context, everything from the Reformation to women's place in the home, to the number of Native Americans and their organisations before the Pilgrims' arrival. The film has been criticised, however, for its lack of future context.

Obviously, the Pilgrim Story does not end with Thanksgiving, or their harvest feast as it is called in the film. The Plymouth Colony had a difficult future. Eventually King Philip's War, which began in 1675 and lasting for about a year, would devastate the region. Plymouth would be overshadowed by Boston soon after the arrival of the puritans, and the large city would become the centre of New England. The ending of *Desperate Crossing* focuses entirely on the individuals, which is logical considering it is above all else a story of these individuals.

²²⁸Interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, 10.03.10, Adjusted capitalisation.

Wolfinger puts it succinctly, and correctly when she says “I had to have an ending.”²²⁹ The question is whether this narrow focus detracts from the larger picture audiences are deprived. Would it improve the film's historical value if future conflicts were mentioned? I believe some mention, even if it was just a written epilogue before the credits, would have done a lot to curb any criticism for this. The previous version of this story is similarly lacking such context. They in fact only promote the idea that the Plymouth Colony is the root of America, which is a gross simplification.

Does *Desperate Crossing* venerate the Pilgrims to this extent? Certainly, there is still reverence for the past in this film. The marketing alone makes it clear that the Pilgrims are still icons for America. The film itself promotes the idea that these were ordinary people in an extraordinary situation, and that they rose to the occasion. This attempt at humanizing the Pilgrims can be found in both the 1979 and 1952 film to varying degrees. *Desperate Crossing* takes it further than ever before with its realistic portrayal of the conditions below deck and their exhaustion upon arrival. We do have some references to the Pilgrims as the roots of America. One talking heads describes the story as a “good starting point for America.”²³⁰

If there was one moment in the Pilgrim story that people expect to be romanticised it would be Thanksgiving. How does the film tackle a holiday that is celebrated across America?

Romanticising the Pilgrims:

Very late in this project I stumbled across a youtube video labeled “What is Thanksgiving?”²³¹ I realised quickly that it appeared to be a commercial for the *Desperate Crossing* documentary, though whether it ever aired on TV I do not know. It shows us a children's school play about the first thanksgiving. It does not, as the shocked reactions of the parents make plain, go as planned. One of the children tells a more realistic version of the popular tale: that they arrived and started dying, that they took corn and even robbed the Indians' graves (producing shocked gasps from the audience). It still ends, however, in the traditional thanksgiving way, “eating and watching football”. The main child looks at the camera, winks and says: “They love a happy ending.” The parents cheer as the play finally

²²⁹Interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, 10.03.10,

²³⁰Jonathan Perry, Time slot: 2.12.00

²³¹Found on ElectricArtists' youtube page, a marketing company that lists the History Channel as a client. The video can be watched at [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MQLikHsh0k>] (watched on 23.11.10)

looks like it should.

Nothing more succinctly demonstrates how this documentary may appear to many Americans. The commercial clearly plays on perceived notions about the Pilgrims and how this new documentary will tell the full gritty truth. This is also expressed in reviews of the film. One expresses gratefulness at the History Channel's correction of past myths "in an effort to clear the cobwebs off the true, multifaceted story... The documentary expands upon the oversimplified textbook chapters and Thanksgiving moralities plays [sic]."²³² How, exactly, does *Desperate Crossing* address the romantic story of the Pilgrims?

In the previous chapters the first thing I have addressed when discussing the romantic Pilgrims is the *Courtship of Miles Standish* and its impact on the films. I have no evidence as to the popularity of the poem today, though I find it interesting that I had never heard of it before I began my research, even though I have seen my fair share of Thanksgiving specials. *Desperate Crossing* does not mention Longfellow's poem in any way, not even to address its popularity and historic validity, or lack thereof. John Alden's name is thrown in with a general introduction of the strangers, as a barrel-maker. The poem's historic verisimilitude has been discredited for over a century, but considering how much influence the poem had on the previous two films, the fact that it is not even mentioned is noteworthy.

Another one of the more popular myths that still seem to be prevalent among the "Thanksgiving moralities" is the fact that the Pilgrims were peaceful, pious, a little prudish and wore black clothes with buckled hats. The experts in *Desperate Crossing* take the time to point out how the Pilgrims were far from pacifists, and that they were not at all prudish within the marriage bed. The documentary presents the Pilgrims as flesh and blood people. They are devoutly religious, yes, but they too have their fears and doubts. They were perhaps a little naïve, "constantly getting ripped off"²³³ The film features not one buckled hat and all the Pilgrims wear colourful clothing in the early 17th century style. Wolfinger makes it clear that this was important to her: "That is one thing I pride myself on. I research not just the story, but all the details of dress, food, accessories, hygiene, etc. TV is a visual medium. The production design is half the battle when bringing history to life."²³⁴ Some may argue with

²³²Brady (2007) "Desperate Crossing: the Untold Story of the Mayflower" on Popmatter, [http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/desperate-crossing-the-untold-story-of-the-mayflower/] (downloaded: 17.11.10)

²³³Time stamp: 0:12:42

²³⁴ Personal interview with Lisa Wolfinger, unpublished emails, dated 10.03-10 Some punctuation removed.

Rosenstone's fifth points about films and history: that they gets the props right to create the illusion of history, but in a film such as this we must consider that such attention to historical detail would only create such an illusion of correctness if the rest of the film is, in fact, made of bad history. As this chapter hopes to prove, *Desperate Crossing* is not that.

In *Plymouth Adventure* one of the main plot-points is that Captain Jones betrayed the Pilgrims by conspiring with Thomas Weston to land them in New England instead of the Hudson. As we discussed in that chapter, that particular plot point came from the book the film was based on, which in turn was taken from an historical source that we now know lacked proof. Later, in the 1979 film, this conspiracy theory plot is gone. Their desire to actually go to Virginia is not even addressed. Nathaniel Philbrick, who appears as a talking head numerous times in *Desperate Crossing*, is the author of a popular Pilgrim history book, and does address this theory in said book. He dismisses the idea that it was Jones who betrayed them, and concludes it is much more likely that if there was a conspiracy, it was the captain of the *Speedwell* who we have cause to suspect.²³⁵ In the film, the *Speedwell* is described as having too much sail, but no mention is made of the theory that the captain could have done this deliberately, which is what Philbrick documents in his book. One reviewer lists this lack of debate as a downside to the documentary, and thinks the film should have addressed issues historians disagree on, such as why they landed in New England.²³⁶ I am not entirely sure how big of a disagreement this issue actually is, but the film gives us the straight version from the primary sources. The conspiracy theory about Jones is mentioned by Nathaniel Morton, Bradford's nephew, and he had no sources for it, as we discussed in the introduction. The criticism could be directed towards a lost opportunity to create more intrigue, but considering the film as a whole I cannot see how a discussion of various conspiracy theories would help the overall flow and plot of the film, nor add much to the history.

Plymouth Rock is still very much a part of the mythology of the Pilgrims, and since we have commented of its presence or lack of presence in the previous films, we should mention it here. As Seeley demonstrates in the very detailed book *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (1998) Plymouth Rock came to symbolise the origin story for all

²³⁵Philbrick, N. 2006:28

²³⁶Cline (date unknown) "Desperate Crossing: the Untold Story of the Mayflower, Lisa Wolfinger." at About.com [<http://atheism.about.com/od/bookreviews/fr/DesperateCross.htm>] (downloaded 17.11.10)

America.²³⁷ Its importance gradually declined in the 19th century. While the Rock's importance has declined as a national symbol, it still has a place in the romantic story of the Pilgrims. In the 1952 film *Plymouth Rock* is mentioned, very briefly, but the Pilgrims do not land there. In 1979 no mention of the Rock is made at all. *Desperate Crossing* does clarify to the viewer that the Rock is a fabrication. The Pilgrims' arrival in the other two films is shown with no reference to the Rock whatsoever. *Desperate Crossing* shows us the same type of landing on an empty beach, while a voice-over corrects the Rock myth. The feature films need no voice-overs to explain the Rock's absence, but the documentary does. This illustrates how persistent some ideas are. The myth of the landing on Plymouth Rock is once again debunked, just like *Plymouth Adventure* did it half a century earlier.

Thanksgiving is not shown in the other two films, possibly due to time constraints. *Desperate Crossing* does have the time to explore this tradition in a good deal of detail. Thanksgiving is described as a “harvest feast” and it is presented as a fun festival, a ritual in diplomacy and a peaceful meeting of cultures. It is not the Thanksgiving Americans know and celebrate today. “I bet they were drinking together,” historian David Silverman remarks.²³⁸ From the primary sources, very little can be known, but the film presents the feast as a likely version of events. The talking heads list what they “probably ate” including turkey, but also a lot of other meats. It is also an effort to dispel common ideas about the Pilgrims, and to point out, I think, that while Americans need to realise how far from pure pacifists the Pilgrims were, they can also still be proud of this tradition. As the commercial mentioned at the beginning of this section so smartly points out about the American public: “They love a happy ending.”

The documentary itself, however, ends on a mixed message. There is a clear somber tone when describing Bradford's future loneliness without his wife and later his friends. One talking head puts the message thus: “It is a good starting point for America, to look at this story and to understand where some things went right, and some things went wrong.”²³⁹ Films are always difficult to interpret, and such interpretations almost always vary widely from person to person. In watching the film myself, I felt the Pilgrims were idealized to a strong degree, but that the documentary argues for a new type of pride in their forefathers. Instead of holding on to old myths about the Pilgrims, the viewer is left in awe of the true

²³⁷Seeley, J. 1998:1

²³⁸ Time stamp: 2:18:12

²³⁹Jonathan Perry, Time slot: 2.12.00

accomplishments of a group of ordinary people. Philbrick, who gets the last word in, explains that it was the Native Americans who taught the Pilgrims to live with others, and that “that is the true importance of the Pilgrim story.”²⁴⁰ While myths have been corrected with this documentary, and we have seen the Pilgrim Fathers as ordinary people, their message can still be a strong one. Films almost always have a moral story to tell, and documentaries are no different in this respect. That does not mean we cannot look past the uplifting messages and see whether it presents us with good history.

All three films idealize the Pilgrims to some extent, in both similar and different ways. All three attempt to show the “true” Pilgrims devoid of myths. They wish to show the real human side of them. All three films have a form of the *riding into the sunset* ending – an uplifting moral ending - without alluding to the difficult times ahead. *Desperate Crossing* alone tries for a slightly more somber tone with the description of Bradford's future loneliness. In my studies and online research especially, I have frequently come across this double desire to both find the truth about the Pilgrims, and using this true image to continue their veneration, which it is argued can now be more honest since we are venerating the true image of them. To find out if this is in fact the case would take a massive study. I merely note the interesting parallels among films made decades apart, in different genres and by very different groups of people. From 1952 to 2006, it appears not much has changed in this particular desire to tell the true story of the Pilgrims. The biggest difference between them is how much this desire took precedence over other considerations, meaning the feature films obviously use more false invention than the documentary. Another big difference is what was accepted as truth about the Pilgrims at the time. While *we* may argue that the 1952 version does not meet with today's accepted events, it still engages with its contemporary historical discourse, and we can see how contemporary society influenced the image of the past. This is true for our modern documentary as well.

Our version of history

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, commenting on a film that is so close to our own time is difficult when conducting a small study such as this. We have already looked at some issues that have affected the type of history seen in this film.

In 1952 women were not suppose to be strong or independent, or even have an opinion

²⁴⁰Nathaniel Philbrick, time slot: 2.12.30

different from their husbands. The *ideal* was the dutiful housewife. This view, combined with an ageing Hollywood elite during the 1950s, produced instances of almost uncomfortable age differences (at least to modern audiences, myself included). The type of history written at the time did not include much history from the bottom as we know it today. Even in the 1950s, however, some changes were being made in historical films.²⁴¹ In our film, however, while the Natives are no longer the barbaric savages, they are docile and silent props. The 1979 version side-steps Thanksgiving altogether, but there are small indications that there is a different view on Native Americans. Standish points out their right to be angry, and their right to the land.

Desperate Crossing is radically different from the 1952 film when it comes to certain areas. The society that created it is radically different as well, and historiography has developed much since then. We now have Native Americans telling their own story, giving us evidence based on oral traditions, a source that was not much studied before. We have women stepping into the light, as well as women scholars telling us of our previous misconceptions – perhaps even misconceptions that were originally inherited from a time after the Pilgrims lived.

Most of us would like to think this is a good type of history, where once voiceless groups get to have their story told. I think the documentary is very good at history and drama combined. Only time will tell how this documentary will age, but I think it could be used in classrooms anywhere to get children excited about history as well as teaching them a lot about the historical Pilgrim story.

Conclusions on the chapter:

I began this study because I wanted to examine how we as historians might write about historical films and make judgements about them. At first, my preconceptions told me that documentaries were in an entirely separate group, with more in common with schoolbooks or popular history books than with feature films. I had these preconceived notions about documentaries thanks to having practically grown up with The Discovery Channel and the like. Documentaries would relay the facts, with some reenactments thrown in, while feature films would take what facts were needed and invent everything else. Almost immediately upon beginning this study, such notions were put into question. The documentary form is

²⁴¹Cameron, K. 1997:123

different from feature films in that we expect them to have a different relationship to the accepted facts and the sources the facts are based on. However, because the landscape, with its mock-documentaries and reality shows, has become so complicated, we can not make big generalisations about any genre. So the study began in earnest.

Desperate Crossing is, like many modern documentaries on The History Channel, made exciting using feature film techniques far more than any traditional documentary genre. Its reenactments are of high quality, and its camera use in the action sequences has clear ties to feature films. All this serves to make the issue of historical validity more complicated. What is meant here is not that a documentary is automatically on the same level as a feature film because it uses such techniques, but that we must consider some of the same problems when dealing with documentary and feature films because of the blending of genres and techniques across the board.

Desperate Crossing follows the primary sources very closely. The filmmakers have taken great care in research of the times and places the Pilgrims inhabited. Nevertheless, the need for plot and drama has made necessary the invention of scenes. These scenes we must consider with a mind for both the documentary's authority and its entertainment value. In this chapter I have discussed several points and scenes of invention found in *Desperate Crossing* and all of them can be convincingly argued for as true inventions. We are told with documentary authority that the feature film reenactment is a likely version of events. This blend serves to make such inventions more acceptable while keeping the audience suitably entertained.

Does this blending of techniques engage with the discourse of history? In my interpretation of Rosenstone's definition of discourse, I believe the film does to a good extent. The film attempts something that has not been done in the film medium before: telling the whole story of the Pilgrims, including both the female side of it and the Wampanoag tribe. It provides the audience – in this case most likely an American audience – with new ways at looking at a popular story. This is also true of the popular myths it directly addresses, like the story of Plymouth Rock or Thanksgiving. True, there are some issues that are left untouched, like the conspiracy theories and Longfellow's poem, but most likely the Longfellow poem is not quite as popular as it once was. I have not found a single review or comment about its absence from the film. This is also true of the conspiracy theories. *Desperate Crossing* may not be a “new way of thinking about history” as Rosenstone puts it, but it certainly tries to

make the audience think about the Pilgrims in a new way.

The desire to show the true Pilgrims is in itself not new, however, and *Desperate Crossing* resembles most notably the 1952 version of the Pilgrims story. It too was attempting to dispel old myths and show the audience the true meaning of the Pilgrim story: that they were human and still managed to survive. Though this may not be their primary goal, all three films leave us with something similar: that we do not need myths to venerate the people who can still be considered the first Americans. In my opinion this new type idealization of humanized Pilgrims is a theme shared between all three films.

The history on film: a few conclusions on method.

What can we say about judging the history we see in these films? Many historians have begun to take film seriously in recent decades, but it is still a relatively new field. There are many polarizing opinions, some dismissing films as entertainment, while others are embracing the medium as a new method for bringing history to life.

Approaching this medium as a historian and not as a purely casual viewer means adjusting one's focus. This proved difficult at first, as many see films as entertainment first and informative second. Added to this was the complication of the documentary. As a casual viewer of countless documentaries, I retained a fair amount of faith in their authority. The film medium, however, makes it impossible to follow any standard set by written history of any kind. Many scholars have tried to find a balance: to both accept the medium's uniqueness while trying to find some criteria by which to judge them. Rosenstone's separating of true and false invention seems the more easily applicable approach.

The method used in this study owes much to O'Connor's early work and Rosenstone's criteria, but because of each film's uniqueness, a real pattern was only really discern after the fact. Shaping this method was the decision to focus as much as possible on the film itself and what a modern audience would see if they ever purchased the film's as I did. To judge how much a film is giving us good history, three factors needed to be analyzed. Depending on the balance between the three factors in any individual film, we can determine what kind of knowledge we can gain from it as either casual viewers or historians.

The first is contemporary society. It is always present in every work, be it an academic book, film or novel. The author's presence cannot be erased or ignored. Depending on the skill of those involved, a film may have actors in old-looking costumes playing out an entirely

modern scenario, or a genuinely useful look into the past. Just because the present intrudes in the film, however, does not mean the film cannot tell us anything about the depicted past. In our analysis we tried to determine if the Pilgrim mentality was present, and which aspects were coloured by modern sensibilities.

The second aspect is the historical past. This goes back to Rosenstone's true and false inventions, and how definition of good history: the is it likely mentality. How does the film engage with the historical discourse as it stood at the time of production? This area also includes how accurate the film is based on the historical discourse, but one must look at the entire film and not simply make a list of facts.

The third aspect is popular ideas, or common notions about the period and events in question. The Pilgrim story has been entrenched in popular culture for hundreds of years, and these ideas have changed over time. Does the film attempt to engage and question these myths, or does it reproduce them faithfully? In this aspect I also include the traditions and myths can have been passed down through Hollywood History. While this has not been brought up much in this study, it would have been analysed in a book such as *Gladiator: film and history* (2004). The book shows us how the film's representation of ancient Rome comes as much from historians as old Hollywood films. Had we had access to more time and the earliest film about the Pilgrims, a more detailed study of the filmic Pilgrims might have yielded interesting results.

A triangle of criteria, or areas for discussion when judging a film. A larger study would include production notes perhaps and audience reception theory, but when trying to make a quicker judgement of whether a film has good history, this method has been used to, I think, a satisfying degree. One area would have been of particular interest to study further, and that is modern Americans' view on the Pilgrims today, and if the 2006 documentary, along with blogs, and other sites on the internet have had some effect. Or do the majority of Americans still picture Plymouth Rock during Thanksgiving? It also appears like the techniques used in *Desperate Crossing* is becoming more common as documentaries get bigger budgets. Their relationship with history and entertainment could produce many interesting studies.

Appendix: Characters

For easy reference should the reader wish to check the names of characters and their roles in both history and films, I have provided a character list here.

The characters in order of filmic significance:

William Bradford: second governor of New Plymouth, author and co-author of the primary sources and protagonist of *Desperate Crossing* (2006).

Dorothy Bradford: wife of William Bradford, protagonist of *Plymouth Adventure* (1952). She dies while William is exploring the new world, and the circumstances surrounding her death are mysterious, for it is not mentioned at all in William Bradford's telling except a note of her death in the appendix.

William Brewster: the elder of the church and a father-figure to Bradford. He is the protagonist of *Mayflower: the pilgrims' adventure* (1979).

John Alden: though he is barely mentioned in the primary sources, he is a main character in the two feature films as a carpenter (1952) and cooper (1979). He is not part of the separatist group. His story comes from Henry W. Longfellow's poem *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (year), where Miles Standish asks him to court Priscilla Mullins on his behalf, but John falls in love with her instead.

Priscilla Mullins: She forms part of the romantic triangle in Longfellow's poem and is thus a main character in the two feature films. She does not have much significance in the primary sources.

Captain Miles Standish: A military man hired by the separatists to take care of their military needs and teach them the use of firearms. In the poem he decides to marry Priscilla after losing his wife, Rose, after arriving in New Plymouth. His wife's death is noted in the primary sources, but other than that no mention of the love-triangle can be found.

Edward Winslow: A newcomer to the separatist group while they were living in Holland. He worked with Brewster on the printing of books. He is considered the co-author of *Mourt's Relation*. He is one of the main characters in the documentary, and makes a brief appearance in the other films. His brother, Gilbert Winslow, has the role of narrator in *Plymouth Adventure* (1952), but he is not mentioned with any significance in the sources.

Christopher Martin: He was not a separatist. He represented the Merchant Adventures in the venture and was named governor of the *Mayflower*. According to Bradford, he was not well liked as he did not coordinate his efforts with the separatist who were also preparing for the voyage.

Master Christopher Jones: The captain of the *Mayflower*. He is the main character of the two feature films. In early writings by Nathaniel Morton he is described as fraudulent, and is credited with bringing the Pilgrims to settle in New England instead of Northern Virginia. Later books on the Pilgrims all insist there is no basis in fact for these conspiracy theories.

Thomas Weston: The merchant who approached the separatists and helped them create the joint-stock company that would fund the venture. He is an antagonist in *Plymouth Adventure* (1952) and appears briefly in the documentary as a slick-salesman type.

John Carver: The first governor of New Plymouth. He went to England with Cushman to prepare for the voyage. Letters show their difficulty with Christopher Martin and the new agreement with Thomas Weston. He has a substantial role in the documentary, but is little seen in the feature films.

Robert Cushman: Another who helped prepare for the voyage, but he himself did not complete it. He remained in England when it was clear the *Speedwell* would not sail. He did reach the New World a few years later. He makes an appearance in all three films.

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