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Founding Fathers on Screen:
The Changing Relationship between History and Film

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While historians have often addressed, and occasionally dismissed historical films, the relationship between history and film is ever changing. Examining a film for how it was influenced by the time period in which it was created has become a largely accepted practice within the field of history. But occasionally, a film or television series is actually based on a scholarly work of history. This provides the rare opportunity to move beyond a comparison of content and examine how the mediums of print and film compare at representing the same history. By narrowing the field of view from all historical films to two on the Founding Fathers, 1776 and John Adams, the benefits of both of these methods of studying history on film become apparent. Together, the analysis of 1776 as a historical artifact and analysis of how film and texts as mediums represent history through John Adams showcase how the relationship between history and film is constantly evolving. Alongside this key issue are important matters such as collective memory and the appropriation of the Founding Fathers and their filmic representations.
Introduction

“It is time…to stop expecting films to do what we imagine books to do.”¹

In this statement, historian Robert Rosenstone suggests that there is a fundamental difference in the way that print and film represent history. While print has long served as the accepted medium for representing history by historians, some scholars such as Rosenstone argue that historical films can “contribute to our understanding as well as to the larger discourse of history.”² Examining a film for how it was influenced by the time period in which it was created has become a largely accepted practice within the field of history.³ According to historian Warren Susman, “We know that film and what we associate with modern media is a function of a particular time and a particular place.”⁴ Yet, he also argues that “master directors who are self-conscious in their craft impose a vision of history – how it happens and what it means – may have a significant impact on those who see his films.”⁵ If it is the duty of the historian to explain, elucidate, and otherwise educate the public and her peers about the past, she should familiarize herself with competing narratives. According to cultural studies professor Willem Hesling, “In an age where audiovisual media have come to dominate practically every layer of communication, historical films…have been able to exercise an increasingly significant

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² Ibid., 134.
³ Through film reviews published in major historical journals such as the *Journal of American History*, it seems that while historians are quick to dismiss individual films, few, if any, are willing to make broad dismissive statements about film in general. Usually they agree that it serves a purpose, but often only as a historical artifact.
⁵ Ibid.
Historians can be quick to dismiss the director's interpretation of history as flawed in some way, often with just cause. But occasionally, a film or television series is actually based on a scholarly work of history. This provides the rare opportunity to move beyond a comparison of content and examine how the mediums of print and film compare at representing the same history. This method does not eclipse the necessity of studying films as a product of their time period, but rather serves as a useful complement. By narrowing the field of view from all historical films to two on the Founding Fathers, *1776* and *John Adams*, the benefits of both of these methods of studying history on film become apparent.

Within American history, historians have written about few topics as much as the Founding Fathers. Men such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington are a constant presence in American history and popular culture. Various monuments to them crowd our national capital, their faces are on our currency, and they have inspired prominent authors like David McCullough and Joseph Ellis to pursue biographies such as *John Adams* (2001) and *Thomas Jefferson: The American Sphinx* (1996). Over the past forty years, their stories have occasionally appeared on screen, but the Founders' presence there still lags behind the mountains of scholarly and popular print text dedicated to them.

The 1969 production of *1776* brought to Broadway and film the "Cult of the Founding Fathers," the American fascination with people such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other signers and creators of seminal documents such as the Declaration of

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Independence and the Constitution. Additionally, *1776* was a product of its time and engaged issues such as the Civil Rights Movement and the War in Vietnam. In the musical, John Adams, flanked by Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, led the charge to convince other members of the Congress to vote unanimously for independence. *1776* chronicles the events of the Second Continental Congress and their contentious journey through the many debates that led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

In 2008, the cable network HBO produced a seven-part miniseries chronicling the political life of John Adams, adapted from McCullough’s 2001 book *John Adams*. The series begins in 1770, just prior to the Boston Massacre, and follows Adams through the Revolution, his presidency, and his eventual retirement from politics after the election of 1800.

That both the book and the television series *John Adams* were largely successful speaks to an increasing trend of incorporating the Founding Fathers into the daily lives of Americans. As stated by communications studies scholar, Trevor Perry-Giles, “Perhaps it is because of the jarring events of 11 September 2001, or perhaps it is an outgrowth of the Clinton scandals and the Bush prevarications, but for whatever reason, the United States is, once again, in a period of Founders nostalgia.” In addition to the many books published on the subject, modern advertisers often lean on an association with the Founding Fathers to sell a product. In 2010, Budweiser aired a commercial in which a host of Founders celebrated July 4th by drinking Bud Lights. In the same year, Dodge

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depicted “the grim-faced Father of His Country driving a Dodge Challenger muscle car into a confrontation with armed British redcoats, flying a giant Star Spangled Banner. Naturally, the lobsterbacks turn and run without firing a shot.”

Politicians and journalists often appropriate the Founding Fathers and their ideas as political rhetoric on many topics and viewpoints. For example, a common debate among Americans has been whether the Founding Fathers were Christian and whether the United States should be a Christian nation. This issue becomes particularly controversial when incorporated into public school standards and textbooks. Quoted in a New York Times article, Rev. Peter Marshall said, “The Founding Father’s biblical world view taught them that human beings were by nature self-centered, so they believed that the supernatural influence of the Spirit of God was needed to free us from ourselves.” Yet, on the other side of the issue, the American Atheist webpage looks to Jefferson for support: “He condemned the practice of ‘established religions’ – state supported churches similar to those which had existed in colonial America…saying that to ‘compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propaganda of (religious) opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical.’” Journalist Russell Shorto quotes a letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson where he “refers to American independence as having been achieved on ‘the general Principles of Christianity.’” But others find just as many

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instances in which one or another of the founders seems clearly wary of religion.”12 In a
similar appeal in February 2011, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange claimed that the
founding values of his website “are those of the U.S. revolution...those of people like
Jefferson and Madison.”13 The ease with which the Founders can be invoked to bolster a
wide range of arguments also shows how contested the memory is of what they
symbolize. Despite their appearance in many and varied forms, surprisingly few films
have been made specifically about the Founding Fathers, *1776* and *John Adams* being
two out of only a handful.14

*1776* and *John Adams* represent different relationships between history and film.
In the case of *1776* the historical film reflects the history not only of the historical era it
portrays but also the period from which it emerged. *John Adams* demonstrates how
successfully a scholarly work of history can be transformed to the screen. The following
analysis of *1776* looks at the film as a product of its time period. In this thesis, the
musical play and subsequent film adaptation serve as primary sources. Alongside the
productions, I use the producer’s commentary and contemporary newspaper reviews to
gauge the success, or lack thereof, of the producer’s goals in putting on the show, as well
as its reception by the general public. Both primary and secondary sources on the
contemporary issues of the 1960s illustrate the political, cultural, and social atmospheres

13Peter Hutchinson, “Julian Assange compares WikiLeaks to US Founding Fathers,” *The Telegraph*, 1
14Other notable films include the made-for-TV movie *The Crossing* (2000), *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), and
*The Patriot* (2000), which simply takes place during the Revolutionary War. Many more
documentaries on the Founders exist, but few movies or narrative television series have been
made.
contemporary to the film’s release. By examining the nuances of certain songs, for example, it is possible to see the explicit analogies to events of the decade. Viewers’ varied reactions illustrate the extreme polarization of the time period. Both the producers and other political groups used *1776* as a political platform, using association with the Founders and the signing of the Declaration of Independence as validation for their own agendas.

While one could also consider *John Adams* as a product of its time period, the focus of this analysis will be to compare the HBO miniseries to the text by David McCullough that inspired it. By comparing certain sections it is possible to see the strengths and weaknesses of two mediums more broadly for representing history. Since its producers closely adapted *John Adams* from a well-received scholarly work, it gained an advantage over other historical films and the criticisms that historians often level against them, such as liberties taken with facts and ignorance of current scholarship. Indeed, it may be worthy of creating a new subgenre of film, “narrademic,” which fits into the larger trend of a new relationship between history and entertainment.\(^{15}\)

Together, the analysis of *1776* as a historical artifact and analysis of how film and print as mediums represent history through *John Adams* showcase how the relationship between history and film is constantly changing. Alongside this key issue are important matters such as collective memory and the appropriation of the Founding Fathers and their filmic representations.

\(^{15}\) The choice of the word “narrademic,” coined by this author, seeks to describe films which place a strong emphasis on the narrative as well as have academic groundings, such as McCullough’s endnoted work.
As the main, and almost only, characters in the film, the Founding Fathers are central to the production of *1776*. The production characterized the Founders as human beings, rather than demigods, occasionally engaging in petty debates but more often genuinely trying to figure out the best course of action for the thirteen colonies. Little changed in the content or cast between the Broadway musical and the film version of *1776*. The fact that *1776* received generally favorable reviews as a Broadway show, but largely negative critical reviews as a film, suggests how different audiences remembered and either accepted or dismissed the production’s portrayal of the Founding Fathers. Some viewers seem to have embraced the film’s more relatable depiction of them, while others saw it as vulgar and may have preferred to keep the Founders up on pedestals. These distinct responses also illustrate that the message of films can be hotly contested, as film’s ability to reach a mass audience makes it a battleground for contested memory.

The advent of memory as a topic of study for historians and others in the humanities has yielded a great deal of literature and theories on how both individuals and societies remember the past. In looking at the ebbs and flows of memory as a topic of interest, some historians trace the high value placed on memory back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, and see it drop off after the Renaissance. Working in the field of sociology in the early twentieth century, Maurice Halbwachs is often credited as one of the first to explore collective memory. Contrary to his mentor, Emile Durkheim, who put little emphasis on the individual, Halbwachs wrote, “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as

Beginning in the 1970s works such as Michael Kammen’s *A Season of Youth* (1988) began to examine both what and how people remembered. Kammen charts the progression of how the American Revolution is remembered by first looking at how those who lived through the Revolution remembered it and then how people preserved or adapted that memory over time. This method has been applied by many other historians for other culturally or nationally significant events such as the “Great War,” the Holocaust, and Russia’s October Revolution. In examining the events that led up to the Bolshevik Revolution, historian Frederick Corney argues that memories often become foundation a myth which “informs people and shapes their understanding of the past.”

Both *1776* and *John Adams* include the signing of the Declaration of Independence, an actual event in American history, and one that is strongly associated with the foundation of America. The way in which each of these films depicts this event may shape the viewer’s understanding of the past.

Historians continue to debate the question of why memory has been taken up with such vigor as a topic and is continually debated among historians. Historian Susannah Radstone argues that the current memory crisis is neither caused by seeing it as “modernity’s Utopia,” as Andreas Huyssen has argued, nor the “feared other,” as Richard Terdiman has put forth. Rather than seeing memory as either an escape from the present or way to break with the past, “in the late twentieth century, that crisis is inflected, rather,

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by the experience of immediacy, instantaneity and simultaneity." Radstone agrees with historians Vivian Sobchack and Alison Landsberg that modern technologies collapse the distance "that previously separated an event from its representation." Alison Landsberg has coined the term "prosthetic memory" as a way of describing the way in which mass culture has become a transmitter of memory. Landsberg argues, "In this process, memories have ceased to belong exclusively to a particular group and instead have become a part of a common public domain." Lansberg acknowledges the power of film to create the opportunity for viewers to become a part of a larger history. For audiences contemporary to the releases of 1776 and John Adams and for future viewers, these films provide a way to relate to the Founding Fathers and experience history in a method other than reading. While historians may continue to disagree on the cause for the current renaissance of memory, most seem to agree that it is constantly in flux. According to Lansberg, and echoed by many other historians, memory "is not a transhistorical phenomenon, a single definable practice that has remained the same over time. Rather... [it] is historically and culturally specific; it has meant different things to people and cultures at different times and has been instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices." Indeed, the Founding Fathers and the many instances of them in the American collective memory are ever-changing.

20Ibid.
While many historians have written about the lives and actions of those who were critical to America’s founding before and during the Revolutionary War, few have written about how Americans have remembered them since. Recently, scholars such as Allan Kulikoff have begun to address how the memory of the Founders has been treated in popular culture. Kulikoff focuses predominantly on the memory of Benjamin Franklin and argues that “every generation rethought the place of the founders in the making of the nation.”\(^2\) He draws on a wide variety of sources ranging from primary sources such as the works of Thomas Paine, to academic journal articles, to Vice President Richard Bruce “Dick” Cheney’s Christmas card, which quoted Franklin. Other historians have dealt with particular Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Historians Jan Lewis and Peter Onuf examine how by the act of writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson became almost sacralized in American history, that he is “identified with the nation.”\(^2\) Historian Marianne Holdzkom analyzes the evolution of how John Adams is remembered in history and pop culture, coming to the conclusion that works often depict him as “a frustrated, ambitious, and self-aware individual whose dedication to his country cost him dearly.”\(^2\) John Bodnar’s study, *Remaking America*, analyzes the “tension between official and vernacular memory” primarily through commemorative celebrations. A similar tension was apparent in relation to *1776*: during the process of the theatrical production being adapted to film, the White House exerted


pressure on the producers to remove a politically charged song.26 Before the film’s release, President Richard Nixon asked longtime friend and producer Jack Warner to remove the song “Cool, Cool Conservative Men” for fear that its depiction of colonial conservatives might reflect unfavorably on contemporary conservatives.27

Even before Bodnar’s 1992 study, Michael Kammen published a work on the memory of the American Revolution in popular culture, titled *A Season of Youth*. Despite being published in 1978, only six years after the film *1776* was released, Kammen does not mention it, even in his appendix on “The American Revolution on Film.”28 The films he does mention are a mere list, devoid of any commentary. Neither Bodnar nor Kammen give musicals or films a prominent place in their works. Instead, both focus on literature, commemorative events, soldiers’ or contemporary first-hand accounts, and monuments. Literature in other topical subfields of memory studies, such as on World War II and the Holocaust, has done a better job of emphasizing the impact of film to either reaffirm or revise the public’s memory of historical events. Philip D. Beidler’s *The Good War’s Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* relies heavily on films such as *Best Years of Our Lives* and *Victory at Sea* to examine how contemporaries and later generations remembered the war. He describes film made during and after the war as “the commodification of the American role in World War II as at once felt experience and collective myth.”29 The analysis of a historical film being seen as a collective myth can

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27 Director and Screenwriter Commentary on the Director’s cut of *1776*, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
be applied to both *1776* and *John Adams*, yet these films differ as they cannot be felt by modern audiences as an actual experience. Due to the great span of time separating modern audiences from the colonial era, they do not have any firsthand memories to compare alongside *1776* and *John Adams*.

Currently, Americans of all ages are learning about history increasingly from film and television. With the rise of cable channels such as National Geographic and the History Channel, as well as the ascendance of popular history texts, traditional museums and classrooms are no longer the main places people engage with history. Whether a film is historically accurate or not, such media depictions affect the way people think about history. According to historian Robert Rosenstone, “history films, even when we know they are fanciful or ideological renditions of history, have an effect on the way we see the past.”

Often those who may never read an academic text beyond the classroom will think that they know something about history after watching a historical fiction film or visiting a living history museum such as Colonial Williamsburg. Historians should be aware of how history is being consumed, either directly or indirectly, outside of academia and traditional public history venues. Whether the history presented is correct or not, it can shape the way history as either a broad topic or of a particular era is perceived by the public at large. Seeing history on film and television could lead someone to look further into the matter such as reading books by popular historians or academics. Even if someone does not pursue further research, the ways in which a society’s collective memory of a historical event is formed should be a topic of interest for historians.

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The play and the film 1776 engaged the popular discourse on both the meaning of the American Revolution and the controversial issues of their own time.\textsuperscript{31} Sherman Edwards, the onetime high school history teacher and creator of 1776, spent a decade researching and developing the show. Forty-nine years old at the time of the show’s début, Edwards had studied history at New York University and had completed some graduate work in history at Cornell. According to a newspaper interview during the show’s premiere, “He had taught briefly after getting out of college but gave that up because he also was a musician.”\textsuperscript{32} But even as he shifted to pursue music, Edwards never let go of his excitement for American history. Eventually, “the trips to the library began to crowd out the music.”\textsuperscript{33} After years of researching the Founding Fathers and the events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, most of which he carried out in the Morristown, New Jersey, library, Edwards crafted the script and songs that became the musical 1776.\textsuperscript{34}

The theatrical production of 1776 tells the story of the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence. Set in Philadelphia, in the year of its title, it most closely follows John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, creators of the Declaration of Independence, in their quest to bring about a unanimous vote for independence from a lively and opinionated Congress. John Adams, despite proclaiming

\textsuperscript{31}The musical play debuted in 1969 and the film was released in 1972.\textsuperscript{32} Lewis Funke, “‘1776’ Reaps Fruit of Long Research” \textit{New York Times}, 18 March 1969.\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
himself "obnoxious and disliked," is the central figure and a leading proponent for breaking with Great Britain. Along with Franklin, he enlists the help of Richard Henry Lee to create a resolution for independence. They subsequently form a committee to write a Declaration of Independence and persuade the reluctant Jefferson to author it. Throughout the musical, other key characters are identified including John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, John Dickinson from Pennsylvania, the leader of the contingent against independence, and John Rutledge, the delegate from South Carolina, who opposed having the Declaration mention slavery. Working within the genre of musical comedy, the "Congressmen" make jokes at each other's expense and burst into song. Over the course of the show, the treatment of the subject matter becomes more solemn as the men start to seriously consider voting for independence. After many debates, compromises, and edits to the Declaration, Congress unanimously votes to set America on the course we know it to have followed.

As Edwards researched and wrote about the turmoil in the Continental Congress he was also surrounded by the contemporary disorder of the 1960s. After years of public trials and blacklists, the grip of the powerful House Un-American Activities Committee began to loosen. But even two decades after World War II, conservative American culture still placed a strong emphasis on conformity, particularly in the face of communism. Locked in an arms race and each backed by very separate ideological convictions, the communist Soviet Union and the democratic capitalist United States "fought with sophisticated propaganda, exports of arms and military advisors, and huge

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35 1776, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
spy services.” But even under this pressure a variety of voices began to question the status quo on topics such as racial segregation and America’s involvement in Vietnam.37

Young Americans, ethnic leaders, and intellectuals all contested the question of who counted as an American and how issues such as race, class, and gender affected that identification. Visible cracks in the façade of conformity arose in the form of race riots and anti-war protests. At a time when dissent was often seen as un-American, by both the government and by older generations, many people encountered difficulty when they voiced a different opinion challenging practices previously accepted. In 1968, students at Columbia University shut down the campus by taking over college buildings in protest of the conflict in Vietnam. Demonstrations on other college campuses followed and often had to be broken up by violence and arrests.38 Even those not directly involved in these events were often made painfully aware of them and other conflicts at home and abroad, due to the prominence of national news, both in print and on television. As early as 1960, “TV developed... into a staple of the American home... close to ninety percent of families owned at least one set, and the average person watched about five hours a day.”39

Along with the violence from race riots and anti-war protests, “many Americans felt profoundly threatened by the youth counterculture’s assault on religious, political, and social authority, the critique of middle-class lifestyles, and the irreverent use and

37According to historian Isserman and Kazin, “No area of national life was more highly charged than the relationship between black and white Americans. Racial segregation was still firmly established in much of the U.S. in 1960. Across the South, thousands of public schools had closed down rather than allow black children to sit alongside whites.” Ibid., 21.
38Isserman and Kazin, America Divided (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239.
39Ibid., 20.
abuse of traditional icons. This hostility to the abuse of traditional icons could explain why many viewers gave the film *1776* unfavorable reviews. Some thought it was disgraceful for national icons to be gallivanting around Philadelphia singing songs. At the same time, many Americans during the late 1960s and early 1970s expressed great cynicism toward American government. This aspect of popular sentiment was echoed in *1776*. As John Adams, the character in the film, remarks, “I have come to the conclusion that one useless man is called a disgrace; that two are called a law firm, and that three or more become a Congress!”

The musical film version of *1776* was written and debuted in a conflict-ridden atmosphere. The events surrounding the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago represented a breakdown in civility of American politics and the general lack of consensus within the country. Although the phrase was not coined until later, the “crisis of confidence” was already beginning to appear. Across the country, Americans reacted with grief and rage to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcom X in 1965, and both Robert F. “Bobby” Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. People were fiercely divided over the issues of the conflict in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. Edwards seemed to be responding to the contentious climate; the musical highlights themes of war, and failed government, yet also showed a pull towards patriotism by highlighting nation building. As one reviewer of the show noted, “An attendant [to the show]...does not have to be a member of the SAR or DAR to feel a

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41 *1776*, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
43 Sons of the American Revolution or Daughters of the American Revolution
deep pride of a country in another troubled period."\textsuperscript{44} Just as the country had been internally divided in 1776, in 1969 America’s diverse population faced complex issues and was reluctant to compromise.

One of the proclaimed goals of the writers and producers of \textit{1776} was to “de-cardboardize all of our national cardboard heroes.”\textsuperscript{45} In the “Historical Note by the Authors” at the end of the published script, authors Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards criticized the American public school system for not teaching better American history. They argued that as products of public schools, “neither of them was given more than a perfunctory review of the major events, a roster of a few cardboard characters, and a certain number of jingoistic conclusions.”\textsuperscript{46} While they noted that it would be presumptuous to say that \textit{1776} would be able “to fill even a portion of this lamentable void,” they attributed some of the success of \textit{1776}’s Broadway début to the “new” information it provided.\textsuperscript{47} Edwards and Stone hoped to present the musical and film as a correction to the story of American political origins they felt was common among the American public, which, due to the American education system, knew a less complicated and more triumphal narrative. Edwards and Stone used their assertion of historical accuracy to bolster their claim that their interpretation of the Founding Fathers was correct. The opening of their historical note poses the question “Is it true? Did it really happen that way? The answer is: yes.”\textsuperscript{48} While they did also include a “Selected

\textsuperscript{45}Director and Screenwriter Commentary on the Director’s cut of \textit{1776}, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 153.
Bibliography,” the lack of footnotes makes the work fall short of academic standards for evidence and attribution. But the presence of any bibliography suggests that they were trying to legitimate themselves as experts to the general public, in order to further support their depiction of the Founding Fathers as “true.”

While not as clearly articulated as its educational goals, 1776 also had political goals related to the 1960s. In particular, the songs “Molasses to Rum” and “Mama Look Sharp” speak to the contemporary issues of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. As historian Allan Kulikoff argues, the symbol of the “Founding Fathers has great power because it links past and present to interpret our current predicament.”49 Stone and Edwards used the historical origins of problems in the founding era in the film to reflect on and critique contemporary struggles.

One of the contemporary issues that 1776 addressed was slavery and its remnants. Just as 1776’s producers offered an alternative interpretation of the Founding Fathers, contemporary historians were producing more critical and sophisticated histories on the topic of slavery, and the Civil Rights movement was continuing to write the history of its legacies. Slavery had divided the Founding Fathers at the signing of the Declaration, and by the 1960s, divided not only those for and against the Civil Rights movement, but even those within it. A difference of opinion emerged between the advocates of nonviolence, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend James Lawson, founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and young militants, such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. According to historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin,

"the split mirrored one developing among African Americans nationwide: older activists wanted to keep trying to influence powerful whites through peaceful protests, while the younger ones declared nothing short of a black led revolution would cleanse the nation of its racial sins."\(^5\)

Although the methods of various civil rights groups were often different in practice, Malcolm X offers a prime example of how the lines between violent and nonviolent approaches to civil rights were often blurred. Malcolm X gained prominence for his outspoken denouncement of moderate civil rights leaders.\(^5\) Originally associated with the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X parted ways from Muhammad once he became disillusioned with Elijah’s aversion to becoming entangled in racial politics.\(^5\) A year after the split, three black Muslims shot and killed Malcolm X. This action only further antagonized civil rights groups and escalated racial violence.

Both violent and nonviolent black equality groups saw a direct correlation between the remnants of slavery and the push for equality. According to historian Timothy Tyson, “the African-American freedom movement had its origins in long-standing traditions of resistance to white supremacy.”\(^5\) In a 1963 speech given in Detroit, Michigan, Malcolm X used an extended metaphor of house slaves and field slaves to

\(^{50}\)Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 236.

\(^{51}\)In a 1964 speech in Cleveland, Ohio Malcolm X denounced moderate leaders for meeting with white politicians, “These Negro leaders have the audacity to go and have some coffee in the White House with a Texan, a Southerner cracker – that’s all he is – and then come out and tell you and me that he’s going to be better for us because, since he’s from the South, he knows how to deal with the Southerner.” Social Justice Speeches, [www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html) (accessed May 14, 2012).


compare members of the Civil Rights Movement. He suggested that members of the
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern
Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who advocated integration were akin to house
slaves, while those who favored more militant approaches, such as the Black Panthers
and radical elements of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),
symbolized the field slaves due to their distance from the white masters.54

Those who favored a more peaceful approach, such as Martin Luther King Jr.
who advocated nonviolent civil disobedience and protest, also invoked the memory of
slavery. In Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” he said, “One day on the red
hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be
able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.” After the murder of Martin Luther
King, race riots and internal divisions splintered the civil rights coalition and “virtually
ended white support…the era of nonviolence had ended.”55 As part of the Civil Rights
Movement, the memory of slavery was both brought to the forefront and contested for
meaning, symbolism, and contemporary repercussions.

“Molasses to Rum” is the darkest point of the Broadway musical, mirroring a sad
chapter in America’s history: slavery.56 In the film, after the Congress has already made
many edits to the Declaration, Edward Rutledge, the delegate from South Carolina,
proposes removing a line condemning King George for perpetuating the slave trade.

54“Message to the Grassroots by Malcolm X” Teaching American History.
56This analysis is based on film version of 1776 since no recordings of the original stage production are
available. But since many aspects of the original production were kept the same or similar when
transferred to film, it can be assumed that this song was no exception.
Rutledge sings the song in response to New Englanders’ criticism of the South’s “peculiar institution.” He calls them hypocrites: “They don’t keep slaves, no-o, but they’re willing to be considerable carriers of slaves –to others!” In the song, Rutledge chronicles how ships sail from New England with “bibles and rum” and exchange them for human cargo at the African Coast. As the lights dim on the rest of the members in Congress, Rutledge struts about accusing New Englanders of being the ones on the African wharfs buying the slaves. He even jumps on a table to mimic a slave auction: “Slaves, gentlemen! Black gold, livin’ gold-gold!” He finally stops, only after being begged by a member of Congress from New England.

Throughout the song, the music builds to a crescendo and the occasional sound effect of a whip is interlaced. Rutledge’s goal throughout the song is not only to preserve slavery as an institution, but to lay some of the blame in continuing it at the feet of the self-righteous New Englanders. As screenwriter Peter Stone says, it is meant to be “almost unbearable for the men sitting there.” But in many ways, it may have been quite uncomfortable for members of the audience as well. In reference to the début of the stage production, director Peter Hunt remarked, “When we first did the play [in the] late 60s, very few people realized this whole slavery issue....was a thorn for the Founding Fathers.” Far from a simple celebration of American democracy, the production highlighted the divisions that the Founding Fathers had papered over in 1776 but had remained relevant through 1969. The lasting legacy of slavery was key to the Civil Rights

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58 Ibid.
59 Director and Screenwriter Commentary on the Director’s cut of 1776, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
60 Ibid.
Movement. White Americans were forced to confront slavery as a central part of American history because its lasting effects, in the form of segregation and Jim Crow laws, were constantly in the news and part of their everyday lives. None of the producers of the show or the film made any direct comment about the relationship between the song “Molasses to Rum” and current events, but the song suggests that both in 1776 and in 1969, the whole nation was responsible for the oppressive institution of slavery and its modern legacies, a collective sin. While many of the contemporary battles over segregation and racial violence took place in the South, the more complicated view suggested by 1776 demonstrates how contested the memory of slavery was in the 1960s and as part of the Civil Rights Movement.

The second contemporary issue 1776 engaged most directly with was the conflict in Vietnam. By 1969, the United States had been involved in Vietnam for nineteen years. Although Americans participated in independence celebrations in Hanoi in 1945 as the Vietnamese threw off French colonialism, they later became embroiled in a long and unpopular war against communist leader Ho Chi Minh and his followers. For the last years of the 1940s and the first few years of the 1950s, the United States aided French attempts to suppress Ho’s revolution.61 This internal conflict ended in 1954 when the Vietnamese pushed the French out of Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu. These efforts marked the beginning of a quarter-century of American struggle against communism and

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61 In a speech declaring Vietnamese independence from the French in 1945, Ho Chi Minh included the words of Thomas Jefferson. Although he cited “We hold these truths that all men are created equal.” And “That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights: among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” In practice, his rule would follow few of these. This provides another example of how the words of the Founding Fathers can be appropriated to a variety of ends. Isserman and Kazin, America Divided (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 68.
presence in Vietnam. From there the war in Vietnam escalated, so that by the beginning of 1966, when President Lyndon Johnson gave his State of the Union address, it was clear that the United States was deeply involved in a conflict with an indeterminate end.

The conflict in Vietnam, particularly the subsequent implementation of the Conscription Act, commonly known as the draft, deeply divided the country. American society fractured along generational lines and created dissent within the political parties. While many of the antiwar protestors were young men and women who objected to their peers being drafted into a war they might not support, a sizeable contingent of mothers protested their sons being sent off to war, a topic that the directors of 1776 drew strong American Revolutionary parallels to in the production. As early as 1961, white middle class women had banded together to form Women Strike for Peace (WSP): originally they protested the nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Russia, but they later shifted to protest the Vietnam War. Earlier in 1969, the same year that 1776 debuted, a coalition of women traveled to D.C. to implore the government to "stop the killing." According to feminist scholar Catharine Stimpson, the "WSP took on the supple role of the self-sacrificing, protective mother of young men." While mothers may have been in the minority of the people protesting the Vietnam War, the producers of 1776 thought that mothers also had a role in the American Revolution.

"Mama Look Sharp," sung by the young courier from General Washington’s army, describes mothers looking for their sons who have died in battle. While the song is

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technically about the Battle of Lexington, it can also be viewed as a commentary on the status of American soldiers fighting the Vietnam War. Citing the fact that 80 percent of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were from working or lower-class backgrounds, historian Christian Appy notes that “Vietnam, more than any other American war in the twentieth century, perhaps our history, was a working class war.”\(^{65}\) The scene in 1776 begins with McNair, the Congressional janitor, and his assistant asking the courier what it is like out in the field. The assistant says he is considering joining up and McNair discourages him. In reference to the men in Congress, he says, “Y’don’t see them rushin’ off t’get killed, do you? But they sure are great ones f’r sendin’ others, I’ll tell you that.”\(^{66}\) McNair suggests that men from the lower classes were the ones fighting and dying for American freedom.

When the show premiered in 1969, Americans had been sent to fight in Vietnam for almost a decade. Draft dodging was common and many protesters were unhappy with the prospect of sending any additional soldiers overseas.\(^{67}\) A song by the band Creedence Clearwater Revival titled “Fortunate Son,” released the same year 1776 premiered, describes a sentiment similar to McNair’s. The song suggests that “Fortunate Sons,” such as those of senators and wealthy families, did not have to go fight the war. Many of the lines the courier speaks in the song and dialogue leading up to it could have been uttered by any young man fighting in Vietnam at the time. “I seen my two best friends

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\(^{67}\)In order to avoid serving in the military and the contemporary Vietnam War, some men would leave the country, pursue a religious vocation, or seek medical dispensation.
"git shot on the very same day!" The courier sings the song from the point of view of a dying soldier who wants his mother to find him before he dies. While not all fighting during the Revolutionary War was done close enough for mothers to go look for their sons on the battlefield, the song idealizes this closeness. The courier described the two mothers looking for their sons, "Miz Lowell, she foun’ Tim’thy right off, but Miz Pickett, she looked near half the night f’r Will’m." Unlike the Battle of Lexington, where family members might be near the action and be able to attend to their loved ones, Vietnam was thousands of miles away. Many of those fighting were close in age, largely 18 to 24, to those who died at Lexington. A popular chant of the antiwar protestors was "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" On June 30, 1967, by executive order, President Johnson placed 19-year-olds at the top of the draft list. Unlike Lexington, no American mothers were able to comfort their sons before they died in Vietnam. This song might have struck a chord with an American populace tired of seeing casualties on the evening news and cynical about their president’s leadership.

The most overt instance of the politicization of 1776 occurred in 1970 when, as listed in the paper, the “producer, the authors, the director and the original cast” took out a full-page ad in the New York Times to endorse the McGovern Amendment to end the War in Vietnam. Below the headline, the ad consisted of a large illustration of the Jonathan Trumbull painting, “The Signing of the Declaration of Independence,” details of what the amendment included, and a description of the balance of power between the

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69Ibid.
70Mark Hamilton Lytle, America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 217.
Congress and the President in regard to waging war and employing troops. Although Vietnam was technically an undeclared war, Congress had ambiguously authorized it through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.\textsuperscript{72}

Overall, this ad represents a significant use of public memory. The producers and cast seemed to be trying to use their connection with the Founding Fathers through 1776 to bolster their persuasive power. They invoked the Founding Fathers in an idealized way, suggesting that the Founders would also support the McGovern Amendment: “The Amendment to end the war gives the American people a new opportunity to make our Constitution work as the Founding Fathers intended.”\textsuperscript{73} It is obviously impossible to know what the Founding Fathers would have thought, but this connection to them served the purpose of those behind 1776 to support the cause of ending the Vietnam War.

No demographic data exists regarding who went to see 1776 during its three-year run on Broadway, but it is reasonable to assume that audience members shared many commonalities. Due to Broadway’s location in New York City, a large portion of the audience was probably from New York or bordering states. Non-residents would have had a level of income that enabled them to afford travel expenses in addition to the cost of the ticket. It is impossible to know the political leanings of the audience as a whole, but it is doubtful that people went to see shows they found objectionable. The contemporary reviews of the show seem to reflect an audience drawn largely from the

\textsuperscript{72}In 1964 Johnson went before Congress to ask for a “resolution authorizing him to ‘take all necessary measures to repel an armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.’ The resulting Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed the House of Representatives unanimously, and passed the Senate with only two dissenting votes...and went on to serve as the legal justification for the war until its repeal by Congress in 1970.” Isserman and Kazin, America Divided (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120.

\textsuperscript{73}Display Ad 33 -- No Title. New York Times, 22 June 1970.
vicinity of New York, the upper-middle class, and probably white and middle-aged or older. By no means was *1776* as politically charged as another contemporary musical, *Hair*, but in some ways more was at stake in *1776*. By placing the Founding Fathers on stage as characters, the creators of *1776* were making a claim on American nationalism. Their portrayal of the signing of the Declaration seemed to be in line with the historical notions of their audience, due to the show’s favorable reviews and the fact that it ran for three years on Broadway after it opened.

Although film reviewers are an elite group who may hold different opinions than the general public, they also have the ability to shape public opinion and often provide the only material historians can access to gauge public response. Historian Lawrence Levine points out that critics of popular culture argue that it should be used “primarily to represent the consciousness of its producers, not its consumers.” While it is true that the mindset of the producers often influences a show, the historian can understand the consciousness of the consumers when reviews are available. Most reviews for the show came out between March 17 and 19, directly following the opening of the show in 1969. While some of the reviews applauded the historic content of the show, most focused on production qualities of the show; critics commented on who had done the choreography, marveling at the costumes and highlighting the Continental Congress set. Most seemed to have viewed it as a show first and a history lesson second. Overall, the reviews were favorable.

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75 The newspapers used were all in the vicinity of New York City. No results were found for reviews in newspapers from other geographic locations.
In many ways 1776 made sense in 1969, not despite the current turmoil, but because of it. Reviewer Richard Watts from the New York Post recognized the potential impact of the current social atmosphere when he said, “In this cynical age, it required courage as well as enterprise to do a musical play that simply deals with the events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.” Although the show deals with more than the signing of the Declaration, Watts seems to have sensed the crisis of confidence in political figures and institutions brewing among Americans, thus making the Founding Fathers the subject of a production an unexpected choice. As one reviewer put it, “The ‘fathers of our country,’ through song and dialogue, are no longer stuffy names in the history books, but they’re real people.” This reviewer clearly thought that Edwards and Stone had achieved their goal of educating the public and filling in the gap left by the American school system. In Edwards’ own words, “I thought that this kind of play was needed....I’ve always had an affection for the men of the Revolution. They were simple and honest, the kind I’ve always liked.” Even though the show makes brief allusions to some of the Founding Fathers’ flaws, such as the son Benjamin Franklin fathered out of wedlock, the extent of their flaws seem to be their reluctance to vote for independence. While the Founders may have been less “cardboard” in the show than in contemporary textbooks, the depiction of them was largely reflective of Edward’s view of them as “simple and honest.” Peter Stone also saw connections between the play and

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contemporary events saying, "We’re in a period of groping in this country. We’re trying to find out if and where we went wrong. I think our show is going to help." 79

Reflecting its critical acclaim, 1776 ran on Broadway for three years. At some point during those three years, Jack Warner, formerly of Warner Brothers, saw the performance and decided he wanted to turn it into a film. Unlike many film adaptations of Broadway musicals, almost the entire original cast participated in the movie version. Peter Stone credits this decision to Warner, who told him, “You must have all the original actors, the [film] must be basically what I saw on stage.” 80 While Warner was certainly instrumental in preserving the show intact on film, he was also responsible for certain deletions. Jack Warner and President Richard Nixon were personal friends, and just prior to the film’s release, Warner gave Nixon a preview in the White House. Nixon had already seen the musical live when it had played in the White House in 1970. Before the production was put on in the White House for the private viewing for the President, some of the White House staff suggested cutting out the song “Cool, Cool Conservative men,” allegedly due to time constraints. Suggesting that the musical was too long may have just been a convenient excuse. More likely, they recognized that Nixon would be displeased with the song’s negative depiction of conservatism. According to director Peter Hunt, two years after the private film screening when Nixon had a conversation with Warner, “President Nixon thought that the movie was just dandy, but that this number [Cool, Cool, Conservative Men] crossed the line, that it was too political, and too critical of

80 Director and Screenwriter Commentary on the Director’s cut of 1776, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
Nixon asked Warner to remove the song and Warner consented. The song was only recently restored with the release of the Director’s cut of the film in 2002.

Screenwriter Peter Stone thought that the colonial conservatives were “very much allied with modern conservatives, that they’re involved in commerce, that they’re involved in profits...because that’s what they think the health of the country should be.” While this view distorts the view of colonial conservatives, as most of the revolutionary leaders were propertied men, it is significant for the contest over memory that it raised. One reason that modern conservatives, including Nixon, might not have wanted to cultivate this connection was because the men who sing the song representing conservatives in the production are against independence. Although some historians such as Woody Holton and T.H. Breen have shown that merchants actively participated in the American Revolution, the twentieth-century memory of this group places them more in line with British aristocracy. To be compared to those men suggests an un-American quality since they were not supportive of America becoming a new nation.

Why had Nixon waited until the production was a film to voice his concern over the depiction of conservatives? Perhaps it was because, as a friend, he could ask a favor of Jack Warner. More likely, it was because so much more was at stake. Film has the potential to reach many more people than a Broadway play, not only across the country at the time, but for years to come. Thus, the message the film conveyed became more hotly contested.

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81 Director and Screenwriter Commentary on the Director’s cut of 1776, dir. by Peter H. Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2002 DVD).
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
The reviews of *1776* as it played in movie theaters in 1972 across the country were far less favorable than the theater reviews of the Broadway debut in 1969. Many noted that the film played on the assumption that the audience would be drawn to the subject matter. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, a traditionally liberal paper, called it “a clear triumph of emotional associations over material” but also recognized that “it is the first film in my memory that comes close to treating seriously a magnificent chapter in American History.” Reviews from both *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, both also liberal-leaning, used the word “vulgar” to describe the film’s portrayal of the Founding Fathers. Gary Arnold from the *Washington Post* answered Canby’s sentiment by arguing that the film was “irresponsible enough to count on our inherent respect for the heroes of ’76 to assume that it will cover their own opportunism.” If the producers of *1776* had achieved their goal of “de-cardboardizing” the Founding Fathers on stage, they fell short of their goal on screen because many viewers would not accept this new version. Or perhaps some Americans simply liked the image they already had, and they disliked the fact that *1776* challenged their ideal.

Not all of the reviews were unkind. Someone even wrote a letter to the editor in response to Arnold’s caustic criticism. William Hart, from Washington D.C., applauded the work of Sherman Edwards as “thoroughly researched” and reprimanded Mr. Arnold for not “recogni[zing] a surprising percentage of the lines as direct quotes from the

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84 Vincent Canby, “‘1776’ Comes to the Music Hall Screen” *New York Times*, 10 November, 1972, page 44.

original Founding Fathers.” Indeed, some reviewers thought that *1776* fulfilled its proposed goal of educating Americans. Joy Gould Boyum from the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that “*1776* teaches its audiences more...than most of us have learned in many times that 141 minutes in the classroom.”

More important than the general favorability of these reviews is that the reviewers agreed with, or at least did not take offense at, the way the Founders were portrayed. Edwards had constructed a particular memory of the Founding Fathers in the original play and it was fairly well received by the selective audience who saw it. Once the play was made into a film, the difference was not necessarily that the material changed, although one song was taken out. The difference was that film, as a medium, reached a broader and larger audience and had more opportunities to conflict with other memories or other perceptions of the Founding Fathers.

These reviews, even if taken together, do not provide a complete picture of the overall response from all of the people who saw the film, but they do help illustrate the large difference in critical response given to the play compared to the film. The differences may have existed because of people’s refusal to relinquish their own views and perceptions about what the Founding Fathers stood for and how they should be portrayed.

*1776* was appropriated for contemporary uses by its viewers across the country. One article covering a screening of the film in San Diego in 1972 described what was going on outside the theater, as well as on the screen. In an event staged by the League of

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Women Voters, women dressed in colonial attire staged a rally on behalf of home rule for Washington, D.C. Their rally was the first of a series which would sweep from west to east, ending in D.C. Aside from the colonial garb, the women also gave speeches and signed petitions to send to their state senators. It does not seem that any of the other rallies took place at a screening of 1776, but the choice of the venue in San Diego is significant. The story cited officials of the San Diego chapter of the League of Women Voters as saying that “the historic subject matter of the film [made] the movie a natural vehicle for their rally.”

Similar to the ad that the original cast ran in the New York Times, these women saw a connection between the Founding Fathers’ political struggles and their own. Perhaps they were capitalizing on what critic Gary Arnold had claimed in his review – that the American people have an inherent respect for the “heroes of ’76,” and were using this respect to draw attention to their cause. Their choice to associate their cause with the film and with the Founding Fathers suggests that they shared the memory of the producers of the film who saw the Founders as not only “simple and honest” men, but also political movers. Not only were they embracing this depiction of the Founding Fathers, but they were also projecting their own memories and ideas of the Founders based on their political needs and experiences, suggesting that they would have supported the movement to give D.C. representation.

1776 was not the first, and by no means the last, popular cultural phenomenon to showcase a particular memory of the Founding Fathers. As a film, the production became

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available to the masses to be deployed by individuals and groups for various political
goals. It also perpetuated the memory of the Founders depicted in the film. The ad in the
New York Times, Nixon’s request to remove the song “Cool, Cool, Conservative Men,”
and the League of Women Voters rally all appropriated particular messages of 1776 for
their own political goals. These various examples of individuals and groups
interpretations of the Founding Fathers demonstrate the debate over what the Founding
Fathers stood for and how their intent or ideas might speak to a variety of contemporary
issues.

This musical that eventually won the 1969 Tony Award winning Best Musical of
the Year and became a major motion picture began as an idea of a history-loving
musician. While its creators hoped to both humanize the Founders and teach a small
history lesson, not all critics were comfortable with their depiction. Many in the New
York area praised the musical for presenting the Founders as “real people,” but once the
musical was put on film the more negative reactions suggested that some Americans
preferred to hold on to a different version of the Founders. Some critics of both the
musical and the film saw them as commentaries on contemporary issues such as the war
in Vietnam or the Civil Rights Movement and the legacies of slavery. While the
productions do not make explicit political commentary, both were used by outside groups
to push various political ends.

Although the film version of 1776 was not as critically successful as the
Broadway musical, which continues to be produced across the country, it preserved the
original production for future generations. As Allan Kulikoff notes, “Every generation
rethought the place of the founders in the making of the nation” and Americans have continued to reinterpret the place of the Founding Fathers. Americans have also continued to watch *1776*. A director’s cut of the film, including previously deleted scenes and director commentary, was released in 2002. The message board on the Internet Movie Database website has over a hundred postings on reviews of *1776*. While it is impossible to know the background of the people who posted online, they likely represent a less elite demographic than professional reviewers, although do also seem to be composed of predominantly fans of the film, because few viewers who disliked the film would take the time and effort to post. Many of the postings tout the film as an American classic for its representation of the signing of the Declaration. Indeed, few films since have depicted the Founders or the Revolutionary time period. Multiple people wrote they watch it every Fourth of July. One person posted a specific comment on how *1776* remains relevant for today’s audiences: “Especially for a post 2001 audience, there are moments interesting to watch. The issues of protection, fear and terrorism are made clear, even for 1776.” Clearly, many people see the Founding Fathers and the issues they faced as pertinent to contemporary politics and events, but what the Founders meant and what they symbolize is still hotly contested.

According to a recent *Boston Globe* article, cable commenter Rick Santelli argued on a 2009 CNBC segment, “If you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson — what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll in
In an era where those who identify with the Tea Party political movement are laying claim to a particular memory of the Founding Fathers, it is important to recognize how that memory has been previously contested and even co-opted for political agendas. The memory of the Founding Fathers is closely tied to what it means to be an American. Both the stage musical and film *1776*, and the history of their production, remain significant because the Founding Fathers continue to be very present in American popular culture, and the memory of them will continue to be contested.

*John Adams*

The HBO miniseries *John Adams* offers a particularly useful means to examine the issue of how print and film can each represent history, since its producers adapted it from the academically researched history text of the same title by David McCullough. The two versions of *John Adams* do not necessarily come to different conclusions, but the path each takes illustrates where film and text diverge in method and how each uniquely contributes to collective memory on the topic. While it is impossible to quantify the effects of the book or the miniseries *John Adams* on the collective memory of those who encountered them, taking a serious look at how they compare suggests the values of each in representing history.

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92 The Tea Party is an extreme right wing political movement. On the Tea Party Patriots web site they cite one of their core principles as fiscal responsibility and use the words of a Founding Father to support their claim. “In the words of Thomas Jefferson: ‘the principle of spending money to be paid by posterity [is] swindling futurity on a large scale.’” About Tea Party Patriots. [http://www.teapartypatriots.org/about/](http://www.teapartypatriots.org/about/) (accessed June 5, 2012)
As separate mediums, textual and filmic representations of history differ in some fundamental ways. In film, the scholarly apparatus is much less transparent than in a book; it tends to be more narrative than argumentative, and can often have multiple authors. Yet, both forms strive to create a complete picture or understanding of history. Both authors and directors must be selective in their material, and each must adapt the material to fit the requirements of their medium. In regard to providing a sensual experience of what the past was like, film far exceeds the power of books.

Although the main point of comparison is between text and film since these are the two forms of *John Adams*, an examination of the possibilities of live character interpretation, such as programs in Colonial Williamsburg’s Historic Area, demonstrates an additional way to represent history. Live historical programs fall in between text and film in that they display some of the successes and failures of each in how they portray history.

*John Adams* as a miniseries requires consideration separate from many other films or documentaries which depict history. Two of the major criticisms that historians have leveled against historical films are that it is difficult for the viewer to question the content provided, and that film has fewer capabilities to cite its sources. But the directors and producers of *John Adams* are able to mitigate these criticisms through a variety of methods. In contrast to most other historical films, the camerawork in *John Adams* calls

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attention to itself, subtly reminding the viewer they are watching a film.\textsuperscript{94} \textit{John Adams} is also unique in that it has been adapted from an academically written text. As a miniseries, it is able to include much more content than a feature film. Yet, it also forgoes the traditional methods of documentary and favors live action for the entire series and does not include a narrator. \textit{John Adams} as a book succeeds in creating a historical narrative while the miniseries works off of McCullough's textual foundation to produce the visual world of the past, allowing the viewer to engage both the characters and the period as more of a direct experience.

Since the 1980s, historians have been explaining the connections between history and film and many have analyzed historical films' merits and shortcomings. Peter Sorlin, an early author on the subject, characterized historical films as useful tools for examining how a society viewed history. In his 1980 book, \textit{The Film in History}, Sorlin argued that, "Historians who tried to list the historical inaccuracies in \textit{The Birth of a Nation} would be ignoring the fact that their job should not be bestowing marks for accuracy, but describing how men living at the certain time understood their own history."\textsuperscript{95} Historical films can often convey information about the time period in which they were created, and Sorlin seems primarily interested in convincing other historians to view film as a valid primary source, but does not push the boundaries in how film and history could relate to one another.\textsuperscript{96} The debate continued in 1988 when the \textit{American Historical Review} published a forum on history and film. Introduced by Robert Rosenstone, who has been a

\textsuperscript{94} Although \textit{John Adams} uses continuity editing methods, some of the camerawork seems purposefully obvious, such as filming hand held. This may prohibit the viewer from being fully immersed in the experience and thereby not take everything presented as fact.


\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 211.
continual leader in this subfield, the articles in this forum expressed a wide range of views, both for and against the use of film by historians and in regard to film depicting history. In “Am I a Camera?,” historian David Herlihy cautions that “films make history seem too easy and our knowledge of the past too certain.” Yet in the same forum, film historian Robert Brent Toplin argues that film can present an “interplay of diverse historical elements [which] form an insight into something larger than the individual parts.”

Toplin has continued to urge historians to grant film a place in the field of history different, if not greater, than what has previously been offered. Toplin’s 2002 study, Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood, explains the historical film as a genre and argues that film and print should be judged by separate standards. “A book is vastly superior to a feature film as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis...Nevertheless, in many important respects, the two-hour movie can arouse emotions, stir curiosity, and prompt viewers to consider significant questions.” He also parallels Sorlin and chides historians who latch on to the accuracy or misrepresentation of details in historical films, “Preoccupied with small lies, they fail to recognize the larger truths.” Toplin outlines the “larger truths” for particular films in his work, and while he has difficulty forming a set of standards by which all historical films could be judged he also admits having trouble finding any historical films which have no historical merit.

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100 Ibid.
Most recently in this subfield, Robert Rosenstone's 2006 book *History on Film/Film on History* advocates for film as a method of presenting history and examines different genres of film such as mainstream drama, "innovative drama," and documentary. Similar to Toplin, Rosenstone agrees that film should be judged by different standards than print and that film is capable of doing things books are not. Two areas he emphasizes are films' ability to convey the "pastiness" of the past and to influence how we think about the past. Through the use of set dressing, costumes, and acting Rosenstone describes historical films as creating "moving images and soundscapes [that] create experimental and emotional complexities of a sort unknown upon the printed page... the historical film can convey much about the past to us and thereby provide some sort of knowledge and understanding – even if we cannot specify exactly what the contours of such understanding are." \(^{101}\) "History films," he observes, "even when we know they are fanciful or ideological renditions of history, have an effect on the way we see the past."\(^{102}\)

Since both of these works were published prior to 2008, neither addresses *John Adams*. In addition, aside from the movie *Reds*, which was adapted from one of Rosenstone’s early works and about which he writes, few if any of the films these scholars address are adaptations from academic texts, as is the case for *John Adams*. Both occasionally discuss directorial reasoning in inaccurate presentations, but neither seems to have a strong grasp on the process of filmmaking. Although Rosenstone served as a consultant while his book was made into a film, few of the historians who write about film have actually made a film themselves or understand what it entails. Their use of film analysis informs their interpretations of the films they address, but they are not interested in other factors that matter to filmmakers, such as the stylistic elements of shots. This

\(^{101}\) Through the use of set dressing, costumes, and acting Rosenstone describes historical films as creating "moving images and soundscapes [that] create experimental and emotional complexities of a sort unknown upon the printed page... the historical film can convey much about the past to us and thereby provide some sort of knowledge and understanding – even if we cannot specify exactly what the contours of such understanding are.” \(^{159}\)

type of informed analysis would push some of the arguments made by scholars, such as Rosenstone, a step further by demonstrating how film, while different than printed history, is capable of making arguments and presenting narrative in a manner similar to academic historians.

As a *New York Times* number one bestseller, *John Adams* by David McCullough is an award-winning biography about the life of the founding father after whom it was named. Beginning just before the American Revolution, McCullough uses the first few chapters to both describe Adams’ political role during this time as well as provide background information on his earlier years. While McCullough does not have an advanced degree in history, his work is very well researched. He drew heavily from the *Adams Family Correspondence*, the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, and many other primary and secondary sources. His bachelor’s degree in English from Yale provided him with the tools to craft an engaging narrative from such a wide range of historical sources.

In 2008, seven years after the book was published, HBO debuted its seven-part miniseries film adaptation of *John Adams* starring Paul Giamatti. The series follows the same narrative arc as the text, but necessarily omits details and condenses time. As explained by Robert Toplin, “Consider that the dialogue in a two hour movie is no more than ten to twenty book-size pages (sometimes fewer).” While almost all historical films are criticized for oversimplification, the miniseries did more justice to McCullough’s 650-page book than a two-hour film could have.

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Stylistically different from most academic historical texts, *John Adams* lent itself to being adapted for film. In general terms, scholarly historical texts require argumentation, while most films don’t require or employ argumentation. This difference can help explain why some history does not translate well to film. Many historical films focus on either recognizable figures such as kings, or recognizable events such as battles. Additionally, historical films often present an exceptional individual, an ordinary person doing exciting things, or, as is often the case, falling in love. Another biography on John Adams might also be reasonably successful in being adapted into a film since Adams is a recognizable figure from history. But McCullough’s attention to narrative, as well as much more than just John Adams himself -- including his family, colleagues, travel and even purchases -- made the transition from book to film simpler than it might have been with another biography.

The reader traces Adams’ path from humble country lawyer through his involvement defending the British soldiers accused of the Boston massacre in 1770, which brought Adams both scorn and respect. McCullough then highlights Adams’ essential role in the proceedings at the Continental Congress and his advocacy for the Declaration of Independence. The author then follows Adams overseas during the late 1770s and 1780s, describing his trying time as ambassador to France, Holland, and later England, a section of Adams’ life much less known than his actions within the country before and during the Revolution. Adams returned to politics in the new nation from the 1790s into the early 1800s, serving as Washington’s vice president and eventually president from 1791 to 1801. The book follows Adams through to the end of his life in
1826. While he is best known in his roles as a Founding Father and a politician, McCullough includes a great deal about his personality and family life. Abigail Adams has certainly been remembered in history in her own right, but few other family members have been chronicled aside from son, John Quincy. In this book, the Adamses' two other children, Nabby and Charles are both written back into history.

McCullough draws a continual comparison between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. While Jefferson and Adams worked together on the Declaration of Independence and as delegates to France, later in life their political differences estranged them. They reconciled after both were out of office and resumed their correspondence. For a biography on Adams, there is more detail than would be expected about Jefferson. It seems as if McCullough is trying to redeem Adams and bring him up to the same standing as Jefferson and Washington. For example, after describing how Jefferson had written that he was unable to return to Congress, McCullough notes that Adams had "never walked away from work that needed doing." A review by John Howe in *The Journal of American History* argues that "McCullough's portrayal is basically celebratory, a not uncommon characteristic of biography." Overall, McCullough brought many details to light regarding John Adams, his experiences and that of those around him.

While this paper is not focused on pointing out all of the discrepancies between the book and the series, some of these differences can shed light on how each medium

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104 Recently (2010), acclaimed historian Woody Holton wrote a biography entitled *Abigail Adams*. Abigail Adams is also often included in historical works on women of the American Revolution.


can succeed and fall short in representing history. Many of the questions applicable to this research are relevant to a larger study of how films and text each represent history: What can each medium convey about the past? What information is needed to convey history and where is it coming from? Who is assembling the information?

Although there are many similarities between the two versions of *John Adams* in regard to content, the differences lie in how each is best able to present that information. For example, film is much better at creating a complete picture of the past than print. Robert Rosenstone argues that “the basic element of the medium, the camera, is a greedy mechanism which, in order to create a world, must show more precise details – arrangements of furniture, the way tools are handled, stances or gestures, the exact location of warriors in a landscape or strikers before a factory – than historical research could ever fully provide.”¹⁰⁷ When McCullough writes about John Adams and his cousin Samuel Adams departing from Boston to the Continental Congress he notes that Samuel, “never a fancy dresser, had appeared in a stunning new red coat, new wig, silver-buckled shoes, gold knee buckles, the best silk hoes, a spotless new cocked hat on his massive head, and carrying a gold-headed cane, all gifts from the Sons of Liberty.”¹⁰⁸ While this sentence tells the reader something about what Samuel Adams was wearing, to describe every little detail of the send-off would fill a book. Due to page limitations, and often a lack of documentary evidence, the historian can only paint a partial picture. A reader of McCullough's book could easily imagine Samuel Adams, but what about John Adams, or any of the other people present? There would have been others in the street and John

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Adams might have been wearing something of note, but these are not as important to McCullough’s narrative so he can justifiably leave them out.

Unlike the historian, the filmmaker is not granted the luxury of leaving out surrounding visual characteristics. How strange the film would have been if John Adams had argued for the Declaration of Independence in a white, empty room. While this type of performance might be acceptable for a stage production, a film viewer has different expectations. The background details in a film reaffirm the time period in which the story takes place. In addition, the film viewer usually subconsciously expects that the film will present a complete picture of what real life might have been like in another era. Historian David Herlihy explains that filmmakers “must fill the screen with scenes and backgrounds that may or may not be accurate…they must also place in the actor’s mouths words that were probably never spoken but that seem appropriate to the person and the occasion.” To leave the background blank or fail to include props would undermine the possibility of film to present a realistic portrayal of history to the viewer. Every detail that must be included involves research and conscious decisions. For each frame of the film the actors must be wearing period clothes, have period props and the background must not have any anachronisms in it. Each of these details subconsciously, if not directly, tells the viewer something about the time period. The misrepresentation of these details could have the detrimental effect of leading the viewer to believe something

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10 Shortened from properties, props refer to items on a film or stage set to create the world or scene, including furniture or any other items used by the actors.
11 If an actor in *John Adams* was wearing a modern digital watch, the illusion of the colonial era would be compromised. Thus, even if many of the items used are reproductions and not actually originals from the 1770s they must appear to be so in order to not distract the viewer from the story. All pieces on the set and seen in the frame must make sense to the viewer to be there.
contrary to historical research. But the potential for film to provide more information than a text is worth noting. While historians may often strive to present a representation of a world from the past, the filmmaker is required to show the whole picture.

For comparison, director Tom Hooper opens the send-off scene mentioned in the book in the upstairs room of John Adams’ row house where John and Abigail discuss his departure. The family then moves downstairs and out into the street with the rest of the crowd to see John Adams off with the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress. The entire scene is comprised of multiple shots, a variety of angles, and dozens of extras. In order to create a believable scene, the filmmaker must rely on a wealth of sources, particularly work done by historians and anthropologists on material culture. In this manner, the work of the filmmaker is similar to that of the historian. Each requires research tailored to their individual end products.

While film may succeed in creating the visual world of the past, it falls short of chronicling frequency or summary. While describing Adams’ voyage to France, McCullough notes, “For every sailor in the British navy killed in action or who died of wounds in the era of the American Revolutions, seventeen died of disease.” This single sentence would be very difficult to depict on film visually. Even if there were eighteen soldiers and one died from a wound and the others died from disease it may not be clear that these soldiers represent a general statistic.

Print text is also better suited for summarizing what has transpired. Describing Adams’ ordeal in France and Holland when attempting to solicit support for the

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112 John Adams, dir. by Tom Hooper (2008; HBO, DVD).
American cause, McCullough writes, “He had been ignored, ridiculed; he had very nearly
died in the process. Yet he had persisted and succeeded.”114 While the film was able to
show each of these events individually and suggest a connection by the placing certain
scenes in sequential order, the filmmaker must rely on the viewer to make the
connections for themselves. Other films may be able to convey this information through
on-screen text or a narrator but since the miniseries did not use either of these a single
instance would look out of place. If the directors had wanted to use this line from
McCullough’s book, they could have had one of the characters say it, but doing so may
have been criticized for seeming out of place or anachronistic.

After examining some of the ways in which the print and the film convey
historical information, it is necessary to look at who is assembling the information.
Historical monographs most commonly have a single author, which makes it easy for the
reader to determine who was responsible for the research and choices made that
determined the end product.115 Occasionally, and particularly with biographies, authors
risk becoming too attached to the subject about which they are writing. A review of John
Adams in The New England Quarterly by Robert Middlekauff levels this critique,
“McCullough seems to believe that Adams was too hard on himself, a judgment at
variance with the opinions of many who knew Adams in the eighteenth century.” 116 At
times, the reader can see this affinity in McCullough’s claims about John Adams. Writing

115 While usually only one or two historian’s names appear on the cover of a book as authors this obscures
the fact that prior to publication historians have their manuscripts vetted by colleagues and
publishing committees; this process, along with any assistance from researchers, makes historical
monographs much more of a collaborative effort.
116 Robert Middlekauff, “John Adams by David McCullough.” The New England Quarterly 75, no. 1
about the spring of 1776, McCullough suggests “the respect he commanded at Philadelphia that spring appears to have been second to none.” And later he claims, “No one in Congress had worked harder or done more to bring about a break with Britain.” In contrast with Adams’ own later comment that people would think of the Revolution as being brought about solely by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, McCullough argues that John Adams was a causal factor. Adams may well have been the force McCullough suggests, but without in-depth comparison to other members of Congress, his claims sound exaggerated.

Films also often exaggerate their depictions. But the process of filmmaking provides opportunities for the dilution of one person’s exaggerated opinion of a person or character. Just as many historians distribute their ideas and arguments to get feedback at conferences and through the peer review process, a filmmaker’s vision must be approved by many different people, each with his or her own considerations. The scriptwriter, producer, costume designer, staff historians, and researchers must all work with the director in order to create a film. Having the historical content checked on a variety of levels such as costumes, props, and dialogue mitigates the chances of inaccurate or exaggerated portrayals. As one of the DVD extra features of John Adams “the making of” shows the costume designer making different sketches of how John Adams’ wardrobe would have changed over the course of the time depicted in the series.

An exception to this system of checks and balances is when there are exaggerations in the historical text that are simply mimicked on film. For example,

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117 David McCullough, John Adams (New York: Simon and Scuster, 2001), 120.
118 Ibid., 123.
119 John Adams. dir. by Tom Hooper (2008; HBO, DVD).
Alexander Hamilton is very negatively described in the book *John Adams* and is similarly depicted as a villain in the series.\textsuperscript{120} This part of the adaptive process shows how filmmakers are often unlikely to question the accuracy of the content presented to them by a historian. The collective nature of filmmaking may be able to mitigate overstated portrayals or inaccuracies, but it often focuses more on providing accurate mise-en-scène.\textsuperscript{121} Due to the cooperative efforts by many levels of crew for a film, it is often difficult for viewers to determine where different information in a historical film originated, particularly when compared to a written text.

The presence of footnotes in a book allows the reader the option of checking the sources for themselves. Film as a medium, however, does not offer a parallel to footnotes. In some ways, the credits can serve this function, but few go into details such as where each prop originated. Credits are usually more akin to a bibliography, a listing of material used, whereas the footnotes in a book show where and explain how the historian is using a particular source. Without an outlet for checking to see if a film’s interpretation is based on historical evidence, some viewers may simply take it at face value. This can create a false sense of certainty that what a film depicts is accurate.

For the *John Adams* series this illusion of certainty is mitigated by the scholarly foundation of the book and in the choice of filming techniques. The camerawork in the miniseries draws attention to the fact that the viewer is watching a film, thus making it more difficult to get lost in the world of the film.

\textsuperscript{120} *John Adams*, dir. by Tom Hooper (2008; HBO, DVD).
\textsuperscript{121} Mise-en-scène, meaning “put in the scene,” describes all aspects of a shot including costumes, props, setting, lighting, and actors.
The most common method for shooting film is to place the camera on a tripod, or for larger productions, to lay down dolly tracks. Filming in this manner creates a smooth picture since the camera is rarely, if ever, shaken or jarred. While *John Adams* does employ this method of filming at times, for large portions of the series the camerawork appears to be done by hand without the aid of a tripod.122 The effect of this camerawork can be seen in a variety of scenes throughout the film. During the Continental Congress, John Adams meets Benjamin Franklin at a tavern, and the two discuss the possibilities of passing a motion for independence. This scene cuts back and forth between close ups of both men and a slightly removed wide shot.123 In the wider shot the camera hovers; it is not perfectly still, suggesting perhaps the point of view of another person in the tavern. While this hovering technique is not always suggestive of a particular point of view, the departure from traditional camerawork draws attention to the fact that the viewer is watching a film, therefore encouraging the viewer to examine it critically.

Another way in which the filming style of *John Adams* aids its depiction of history is the way the camera frames the shot through props and set pieces. In the abovementioned scene, the camera also is positioned on the other side of some woodwork so that Adams and Franklin can only partially be seen. This technique is used with regularity throughout the film. When Adams visits the British soldiers accused of the Boston Massacre, the camera hovers on the other side of the bars so Adams and the soldiers can be seen in between them. Although the director has not explicitly stated his

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122 With this method the cameraperson may hold the camera on his/her shoulder or use a device called a Stedicam where the camera is held slightly away from the body but also attached to a counterweight so as to mitigate shaking the camera while moving.

123 In the close-ups, the head and shoulders of one man is seen, while in the wider shot both are seen sitting at a table together.
intent in shooting with either of these techniques, it is possible that it symbolizes both the historian and the filmmaker looking back on the past. Any historical topic is often only accessible through limited sources and occasionally biased accounts. Therefore, it is rare that a historian would have a clear view of what actually happened. By having the camera film through a variety of objects, the director could be suggesting that our perception of the past is never unambiguous. It is always contingent, always constrained by viewpoint.

Historical films are often criticized for their inability to analyze the history they present. The previous discussion addressed how the filming style of *John Adams* made it easier for the viewer to remember they were watching a film and thus possibly treat the content critically. But the camerawork in *John Adams* also demonstrates some analysis of the period put forth by the series creators. Aside from the physical position of the camera, the angle of the camera can subconsciously suggest a great deal to the viewer on how to interpret the subject. The *John Adams* series makes use of the canted angle technique, where the camera is slightly tilted to one side or the other rather than being on a flat horizontal. As this makes the frame seem off balance, it can imply that the subject matter is as well. Reflecting the Revolutionary period as a generally unstable time, the director uses canted angles to highlight points where the outcome is unsure. For example, when *John Adams* is discussing the closing of Boston Harbor with friend and British official Jonathan Sewall, the camera uses canted angles to show both men, signaling their unsteady relationship as they become estranged due to their different loyalties. Similarly, when many of the delegates from the Continental Congress are dining at John Dickinson’s house, Adams and Dickinson embark on a tense conversation on both the
usefulness of the Congress and what the next course of action should be. As each man holds opposing views, the canted angle highlights this early difference of opinion as Dickinson would later be one of the strongest opponents to Adams’ motion for independence.

While camerawork carries a significant amount of film’s ability to offer interpretation, editing can also provide analysis and argument. In an early scene, John Adams and his cousin Samuel Adams are walking down by the Boston Harbor when a British official demands the tax on the goods aboard a recently docked ship. A crowd gathers as the ship owner confronts the official and refuses to pay the tax. The confrontation escalates and the crowd turns into a mob, physically stops the official from leaving, and proceeds to tar and feather him. The main focus of the scene is the man being tarred and feathered, but the film editor inter-cuts footage of several slaves walking up onto a platform, presumably to be sold. A variety of explanations are possible for this decision to implicitly compare the two scenarios. The filmmakers could be suggesting that as awful as the tarring and feathering certainly are, the horrid practice of slavery was largely accepted. They could also be suggesting that the colonists’ rage over taxed imported goods is misplaced, and perhaps they should consider the moral implications of not just what, but who they are importing. This scene demonstrates the ability of film to combine and compare different instances of evidence, much like historians, to offer argument, yet leave the connection up for interpretation to the viewer.

Since John Adams the miniseries was adapted from a book, the primary comparison has been between how printed text and film can each represent history. Yet
this ignores another important way in which people can directly interact with history. Public history museums such as Colonial Williamsburg hire character interpreters to interact with visitors as well as to put on demonstrations and historical scenes. This type of interpretation of history falls somewhere in between the capabilities of print and film; visitors are able to see and talk to people in period attire and walk through reconstructed buildings, but many concessions to modernity have to be made, such as water fountains and public restrooms.

A triangulation between how print, film, and live performance represent history shows that museum programs exhibit some of the benefits and pitfalls of the other two mediums. Museums such as Colonial Williamsburg partially succeed in presenting the visitor with a complete picture of the past, but they are unable to present it without anachronisms as completely as films can. Although it is equally difficult to footnote a live performance as it is a film, museums provide the option for visitors to interact with the character interpreters after a show where they would be able to ask what research went into the program, or read signs and captions to get evidence about the historical context. More than one historian usually conducts the research for these programs, thus hopefully avoiding the pitfall of misrepresentation through a method of checks and balances. Like film, these live programs require attention to period clothing and props, but since the visitor experiences these first hand, this eliminates the various possibilities of camerawork.

The scene depicting the tarring and feathering of the British official offers a useful point of comparison between film and public history as Colonial Williamsburg has
a program entitled “A Court of Tar and Feathers.” In the Colonial Williamsburg program, a man is hauled out of a tavern and accused of being a British sympathizer. Other character interpreters threaten to tar and feather him but the accused eventually claims loyalty to the American cause and the men relent. Since this scene is played out before a live audience, it is obviously impossible to actually tar and feather an actor. Contrastingly, with the use of specially designed props, editing, and special effects, John Adams depicts a man forced through the entire process.

The depiction in the miniseries is also better able to educate viewers about the horrors of the process of tarring and feathering. Spectators of the Colonial Williamsburg program often cheer for the accused man to be tarred and feathered, something they would hopefully not do if they understood that the process could often lead to death. By seeing the brutality with which it is carried out and the actor’s portrayal of extreme pain on screen, viewers may better understand the gravity of the situation. A visitor or viewer’s idea of what tarring and feathering involves might be either confirmed or shaken depending on whether they viewed the live program or the film. Many cartoons depict a comical version of tarring and feathering where a character is doused with black goo and often hit with a pillow. The character rarely suffers anything more than annoyance. Due to the prevalence of variations on this skit, visitors to Colonial Williamsburg may be under the impression that tarring and feathering is, at most, an inconvenience. Despite high quality acting by the character interpreters, the program can do little to change the audience’s possible preconceived notion since they cannot actually tar and feather someone.
In more general terms, the different versions of *John Adams* have the ability to impact the public memory on the subject due to the individual strengths of each medium. Through the daily life of most Americans, potential readers or viewers would probably have already encountered John Adams in some form. But the level of their exposure could vary widely. According to historian Alison Lansberg, author of *Prosthetic Memory*, “modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory…[which] emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum.” Essentially, she argues that mass media has made clear connections for people so that they are able to deeply experience historical moments through which they did not live and feel connected to the memory of that event. Film’s emotive and visual power make it better suited for creating this prosthetic memory than written history.

Historians should view *John Adams* as part of a separate category and examine it on its own terms. While historian Robert Rosenstone has studied history in mainstream drama, innovative drama, and documentaries, *John Adams* merits a new category of film which should be called “narrademic.” A combination of narrative format and academically researched content, this category is the result of a well balanced compromise between the requirements of academia and entertainment. Filmmakers have adapted other historical works into films and these should be compared alongside *John Adams* to determine how this genre differs from other types of historical film and whether or not it is better suited for presenting history. The book and the film of *John Adams* do

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not necessarily come to different conclusions in their portrayal of the same subject, but how each interprets the material is largely dependent on the demands of the medium.

Conclusion

If 1776 and John Adams were placed on a timeline, they would show how the relationship between history and film is constantly changing. Although not demonstrated by either of these works, a new type of history on film is developing – the reimagined past.  

Recent movies such as Captain America and X-Men First Class engage real historical events such as World War II and the Cuban Missile Crisis, yet deploy ahistorical protagonists to reach the historical conclusion in a different manner. Unlike movies such as Gone with the Wind where the characters live during the Civil War, but do not directly affect the war or its outcome, for these new movies history is not just a backdrop, nor is it static. According to Entertainment Weekly writer Anthony Breznican, “Where sci-fi and fantasy have traditionally focused on the future, the new trend is to backtrack and reenvision world events - with films adding mutants, monsters, and robots to the historical record.”

It has yet to be determined exactly how or if this new type of historical movie will influence the collective historical consciousness, but there is indeed a new relationship between history and film developing. In many ways there seem to be two branches to

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125 This type of relation between history and popular culture has previously existed in other forms, particularly comic books and graphic novels, but is just now being adapted for film.
this new relationship, one branch being “narrademics,” such as *John Adams*, where the past is researched and represented as accurately as possible, and the other branch being the reimagined past which engages actual historical events with a twist. Both of these new subgenres may circumvent the traditional criticism leveled from historians that film confuses viewers as to American history. By grounding itself in historical research, narrademic films will follow the same research paths as academic historical scholarship, thus hopefully relating to the viewer history according to the historians, but given in a rich visual medium. On the other side, thus far the reimagined past films have tended more towards science fiction rather than “real life.” Ideally, this will leave little room for viewers to think what is shown actually occurred. Writer Jeff Goldsmith believes “there is little chance these more outlandish films will confuse young minds. ‘If any student really thinks that the Cuban Missile Crisis ended because of mutants, God bless them…I hope they are doing well in their other subjects.’”¹²⁷

Plans for other reimagined past films are already in the works, demonstrating that this trend is just beginning. Unfortunately, films which can be classified as “narrademic” are fewer but films such as *The King’s Speech* show that history, even without being reimagined, is a popular topic for film.

Since *John Adams*, as of this date, there have been no major films or miniseries depicting the Founding Fathers, yet they are still continually being creatively quoted in newspapers, on television, and in political debates. Few other eras of history have such a continued impact on our national consciousness, but increasingly history and

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entertainment are merging. These new developments and all intersections between history and film should continue to be researched. Films such as *1776* and *John Adams* reflect one way in which the Founders are interpreted via film but also a means of exploring the possible future of history on film.
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