

Remembering Conflict

The value of public history in remembrance and fostering attitudes around war by Charlie O'Brien

War On Film

War is one of the most popular subjects in cinema and offers a range of opinions on conflict. During the Second World War the role of war films was to act as propaganda. Doherty argues that the Hollywood era of 1941-5 was designed to sanitize the realities of war and breed confidence. Combined with rudimentary film techniques, he argues they are not useful as historical sources. (Doherty, 1999, P.2) However, these films offer insight into wartime propaganda and captures the mood of the US during the war.



The Longest Day (1962), Dir. Darryl F. Zanuck

There would be a huge shift post-war and beyond as new techniques were used to immerse the viewers in the horrors of war. This is shown in the 1962 film *The Longest Day*. Filmed in black and white and with a star-studded cast, it attempted to place viewers on the beaches of Normandy during the D-day invasion.

The film had a gritty feel and impressive scale. But it also sacrificed realism for story and was crammed with stars to appeal to fans, which Ambrose argues mired its historical merit. (Ambrose, 1996, P.98)



Saving Private Ryan (1998), Dir. Steven Spielberg

A recreation of the D-Day landing would appear again on screen over three decades later in the most effective recreation yet. *Saving Private Ryan* took the realism even further, with emotional scenes of the true physical and mental scars caused by the landings. (Bodnar, 2001, P.805) The film also portrays American soldiers as normal people, not fearless war machines, and the characters feel real

Saving Private Ryan shows the value of public history for remembrance. It focuses on the sacrifices made by veterans of the world wars. The film argues that soldiers fought simply for people to live a normal life. All survivors and veterans could do was be the best person possible:

“Every Day I Think About What You Said To Me That Day On The Bridge, And I've Tried To Live My Life The Best I Could. I Hope That Was Enough.”
(*Saving Private Ryan*, 1998)



Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds

Museums have also developed more engaging ways to present history. London's imperial war museum features fighter planes suspended from the ceiling. The Royal Armouries museum in Leeds offers regular jousting recreations and competitions. Activities like this make history more gripping for those with a casual interest. This is shown in this review of the Armouries Museum:

“the Royal Armouries’ impressive mix of action and display can engage even kids who think they don't like museums (and parents who thought military museums were boring).”
(Taplin, 2019)

War In Museums

The development of war museums very closely matches that of Film. The first war museums were armories and began in a 'cabinet of curiosity' style, as little more than large collections of objects. Hacker says that early war museums were designed to boost national pride. (Hacker, 2013, P.41)

After the world Wars, museums were forced into evolution by the need to act as memorials to fallen soldiers and the popularization of social history.

This war museum saw its biggest developments in the 1980's as military history changed drastically. There was more focus on the common soldier in exhibitions, with stories crafted and more attention paid to topics such as mental health, living conditions and the role of women.



Jousting at the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds

The reason why this is important is that more engaging forms of storytelling is one of the main values of public history. This allows people to develop an interest in history, particularly children, that could lead to an interest in academic history further down the line. Popular methods like film and museums have kept many of these histories alive. World war one and two saw the loss of countless British lives, and public history has a key role in ensuring their stories are never forgotten.



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