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Film History Digests

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Film History Digests Student Research Symposium Presentation PSU

The pursuit of knowledge in terms of filmmaking is lost on many as they research the field of filmography. Film making and the history of film as a medium has many implications that have not been given a proper spotlight within public discourse. To mitigate this problem, I plan to use all the skills I have learned and worked on my entire life to pursue a better world. As an aspiring filmmaker, I have studied film creation and worked on several other projects, which have helped me find my way as a creative. Through my research, I realized that there were several problems and significant events within the film and television industry that have impacted more critical aspects of not only the entirety of our foundation for liberal arts but as a society together. I have put together several short-form documentaries to help explore this area of understanding and correct some public discourse, which has already had some success. I began work on this project in 2019 and continued working on it through 2021. The hope was that I could help explore the intricacies of our lives through the viewpoint of motion pictures rather than the ones we have gotten so used to seeing.

Branding Film History Digests past an idea was a challenging part of the process, and it is an often overlooked part of a research project. The look and identity were critical as YouTube, the primary video hosting platform for this project, emphasized these factors. Lewis Skaja, a lifelong acquaintance and a fellow video creator, helped design the overall aesthetic for Film History Digests. He also reviewed the scripts and made sure that they were optimal. While there were still a few mistakes, it made for a generally cohesive-looking brand and a professional look to show authenticity for the work to be presented. It is essential to have good marketing and to

pay close attention to YouTube's algorithms and features, as it can help make some of the more positive and inspiring messaging in this project shine through. Having specific episodes of the series collaborate with relatively large creators also helps to improve the probability that the episodes would get an audience. The most prominent people on this project were Schaffrillas Productions, a large cartoon reviewer with over a million subscribers on YouTube, and Turkey Tom, a commentary personality with over two hundred thousand subscribers. Everyone's contributions helped make the channel have somewhat of an impact, if not a small one.

The first episode of this web series dissects the idea of censorship in film and media. It was an exciting topic and played into the general discussion surrounding former President Donald Trump's social media takedown. The idea was to explore how censorship impacts history while conducting politically unbiased discourse. The research portrayed the basis of film as a jumping-off point for criticism about censorship in the media landscape. While never directly stated within the episode, the general idea was to show a different perspective on Hollywood insider groups and show how coercion can change views in several different ways. The central philosophy established how the juxtaposition of the censorship rules and regulations had impacted us as a culture as we grew more connected, with the parental safeguard that tried to protect the youth losing a grasp over the years. It explores the backlash from Elvis Presley's overly sexualized dance moves and sets the mood for the episode and the whole channel. The organization, *Censorship and Government Regulation of Music*, posted about how dangerous Elvis and his dancing were at the time. Its implications say: "As a result of the controversy behind Presley's performances, the network decided to censor Presley's performance on the Ed Sullivan Show by filming him only from the waist up" (Beginning with television 1). A showcase for this point of view for people unaware of the surrounding circumstances helps

younger people better understand the past and set them up for the rest of the episode. This subtext implies how racism and other remarks from the former president were more than sufficient to result in his termination, especially with what would qualify as being censored in the past. Donald Trump was left out of the episode to keep the primary focus on filmmaking rather than stirring up controversy with a highly volatile figure. While never directly named, their political subtext is still there, which is why Trump appeared in the thumbnail and any promotional material for this episode.

Even though this first episode had underlined subtext, it also touched on a few other issues people might not be privy to understanding fully. The episode contextualizes the history of censorship and its events with the first-ever creation of filmography in general. The concept of the beginning of film creation acts as a thematic starting point of the channel, as it thematically fits this project's first episode. It also allows the discussion to become broader, exploring the racial divide in America. It showcases how films like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* impacted our social systems and led to the film industry enacting a variation of their rating board which is still around today. It also shows how over-correcting from an overly emotional point of view can lead to more conflicts down the line. The other development with this portion of Film History Digests was the dissection of the documentary: *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, directed by Kirby Dick. From here, it exposed the malicious practices of Dick and the private investigators that he hires in the film. This film shows off how one person can change the narrative of something to fit their context better. Several issues with the film included the director exposing the address of people who work at the MPA; the current variation of the film rating board. Dick and his associates also dig through these people's trash and spy on them when they eat out at public restaurants. These are even more abhorrent when you realize that the people who work for

the MPA are parents and people disconnected from the film industry. While his behaviors are not respectable, other parts of the film discuss inequality within the LGBTQIA+ community within the film industry. The discussion starts with the film: *Boys Don't Cry* with the film's director, Kimberly Peirce, a lesbian part of the LGBTQIA+ community. She discusses how it has been difficult for her to get her story told the way she wants to say it and that the rating board is not allowing her movie to reach viewership. It shows how difficult it is for someone from that community to get their story told correctly. Since the movie's release, innovations in how the masses take in media have changed. This episode for this project showcases how it has changed to better support people of different cultures. From this, people of the LGBTQIA+ community and other communities can understand that they have more opportunities to tell their stories than they could before. Hopefully, people can learn that the odds have become less systematically stacked against them, despite how filmmakers like Kirby Dick portray their research. While there is still inequality in the film industry, the innovations over the past decade have helped make these smaller stories reach a larger audience.

While not the second episode, the second most crucial episode created with this research was titled "The Time Beavis and Butt-Head Changed America." While a crude cartoon from the '80s might not hold up to much social debate, primarily proceeding with the previous topic, it was responsible for creating several different changes in our society. What made this substantial is how the issues of the episodes ended up sparking a discussion of reenacting what we view in media. *Beavis And Butt-Head* was the first prevalent program to depict teenage incompetence on a level through a large platform. Earlier, the closest comparisons would be something like *The Simpsons* or *The Flintstones*. *Beavis and Butt-Head*, on the other hand, glorified arson, and animal abuse in some people's eyes, when in reality, it was a commentary on how society was

shaping the youth. After an alleged recreation from a child of one of the scenes in real life, MTV (the channel that aired *Beavis and Butt-Head*) moved the show's airing after the show faced public backlash. Lee Margulies from *Los Angeles Times* had this to say, “Beavis and Butt-head airs weeknights at 7 and 11 p.m. Critics of the series--and even some supporters--have questioned the appropriateness of the earlier time slot when younger viewers can tune in. Even Mike Judge, the show’s creator, has said he envisioned “Beavis and Butt-head” as an 11 p.m. program” (Margulies 2). There was still more to come from the changes following the controversy displayed in this change. MTV and its subsidiaries changed a good portion of its policies with how it showed fire and other depictions on its television networks. However, the child himself has now grown to an adult age. The perspective of the situation was much different from his side, explaining that he had never even watched the show *Beavis and Butt-Head* and that the controversy and subsequent death were insisted on his family’s neglect and framed off as a result of the popular show. This information helped change how false information enters the public consciousness. Research into whether replicating acts on television or video games has also shown that the impact is minimal, if not non-existent. The information on replicable violence comes from *Research Gate* and *The Guardian*. This video grew quite popular, and as the most prevalent discovery with this research, it was able to close this dark chapter on this person's life.

The second episode of the series was a shorter dive into the film *Joker*, a spin-off of a character from the Batman comics, and how the themes of mental health represented in the movie *Joker* are essential to understand the film correctly. The point of the episode was to showcase why relating to the character of Arthur in the movie, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is necessary and why it is not a bad thing. One of the main points made in the research was how

that sense of relatability leads to the movie's success and why stigmatizing mental health or people that relate to the movie's themes will only make things worse. It shows how bad Arthur is and makes you feel sympathetic for him. This research shows how these themes have led to another recreation of violence. Like with the episode on *Beavis and Butt-Head*, there was no correlation between reenacting violence in real life. This episode describes a case with a shooter in Aurora, Colorado, who killed and injured several people in a screening for a different Batman film. However, the reporting on the story was false primarily, as the person who did it only had Orange hair, which people mistook as believing it was a Joker copycat. The false reporting here was also supposed to show how the news can be untrustworthy. From this, it left a stigma around violence in a Batman film, but it is essential to move past it and think about where to go from here. With the subject matter of Phoenix's Joker being so striking, it is clear why people would fear a similar instant to have happened previously. However, people were quick to step in for defense. Anthony D'Alessandro said, "We know how this pathology works: in America, there is a mass shooting or attempted act of violence by a troubled loner practically every other week. Phillips (Joker's Director) certainly knows that, and he may intend to open a dialogue about violence in America" (D'Alessandro 4). From an idea of hopeful optimism, people were open to the idea of a movie like this, which was evident with it leading to that year's Oscar nominations. While it is too soon after the film's release to say if it opened any discussion that led toward real change in America's mental health policies, it still has had the impact that it needed to. With the potion of reach the project had, the idea was to clear the air for the surrounding circumstances of the film and make it more clear what Joker was trying to say. Hopefully, as the research stays public, more people will become accustomed to the idea of getting help for their mental health. While people who clicked on it might have missed the commentary on mental health, the

research's open availability tries to help people understand even the part they missed due to its recognizability as a brand showing the more subtle narrative.

With Washington's imposing fear of failure within the last few years, two episodes following the idea of war helped bring attention to underrepresented parts of history. While not as heavily based in subtext as the previously mentioned facets from the web series, two different episodes covered similar topics. The episodes titled: "The Time Hollywood Battled The Russians!!!" and "How 1917 Is A Secret Horror Movie" both go over previous wars in a retrospective sense and how it applies to our world history. The episode on Russia looks at how the war affected the film industry more passively. The episode on *1917* is more of an active look at how war films depict the horrors of war. These two episodes are tied together with their unique visual styles. The Russia episode is primarily black and white, while the *1917* episode is purposely in letterbox, like the first episode. Since they had to say more than some of the other episodes, they are more visually distinct. The episode on Russia was started initially as somewhat of a pilot for Film History Digests. However, the upload schedule became shuffled around to become the third one during production, as many episodes joined a stockpile. It was also the only one completed before the pandemic, significantly impacting this project. While it was the first episode to get finished, somehow, it was able to stay the most relevant. With budding relations with Ukraine and Russia, as they are going to war, the episode remained too relevant despite starting development near the end of 2019. Looking into the history of the Hollywood 10 does not have much relevance, but the impact felt by their actions is still being felt today as fights for free speech weigh on people, and the film industry continues to stay quiet on their abuse of power. This episode also explains where the trope of Russian spies came from and how it entered media. As patterns repeat themselves and themes of censorship bounce between

episodes, it is essential to remember that patterns repeat throughout history. The Russia episode is about a small subset in large part of history that might not seem necessary. Even though this might be the case, it is essential to view it as the impact that might be felt in the future, just as subject matter has become more resilient in the public consciousness.

While the episode on Russia reminds us of the horrible things currently happening, the episode in *1917* reminds us just how bad it is still left to become. Even though the perspectives are different, the war with Russia connects through the same themes of *1917*. They both show two different views, which is a metacommentary on the entirety of the research project. Since the work displayed has shown both sides of every argument, it is only fair to show two sides of the war differently. The episode about the movie *1917* is more of a dissection of the film itself instead of a deep dive surrounding it. An attempt to look at the film this way portrays a different perspective for filmmakers to view the movie critically and see things under a different lens, which also has a political undertone as the differing opinions are from different viewpoints. The episode also talks about the foundation of horror and analyses *1917* and Sam Mendes as a director. A dissection helps make filmmakers more perspective towards the genre and allows them to form a distinct voice.

In terms of aesthetics, the episode that made the most significant impact was the film mid90s. While not the most extended episode, the aspect ratio differed with a letterbox format from the two previously mentioned episodes. The 4:3 look and branding made the most impact while connecting with a similar intro to the Joker episode, which is in the same sub-series. These aesthetics show how important this episode is, as it talks about drug addiction in the youth and makes commentary on the portrayal of an authentic life of a kid. Through the similar direction of mid90s itself, the aesthetics align with what the movie was trying to say all along and promote

the absence of drug use while highlighting the significant part of growing older and finding new friends.

The two episodes that tried to dissect the objectivity of movies were filler episodes for the more significant *1917* episode. The idea between the two episodes was to have little substance, but they both had a lot to say about semantics and arguments, even with little thought. While there is no natural way of quantifying the best or worst movie, answering the question as subjectively as possible is bound to have an interesting response. It also allowed discussion of the issues with the academy awards and *The Room*, a requirement for a film channel on YouTube. It was also supposed to advocate for positivity while disavowing hate culture. Seeing a new perspective on enjoying a movie for being so bad leaves further questions. That methodology could be applied elsewhere, which makes it essential. It is a commentary on how we constantly compare things and evaluate their objectivity as a culture rather than improve them.

While not similar in terms of subject matter, the last two episodes involve a view of innovation and the idea of the future of technology. With the onward perspective of technology, the fear of Facebook leaning over politics and interfering with the election, discussion on the social impact of Facebook followed by the innovation of technology-led by Facebook only seems fitting. As “The Future Of Media” was the last traditional documentary, it provides the narrative of continuing past the future just as it started with the past. The Aaron Sorkin episode, a dissection of screenwriting, comments on Facebook's drama and focuses on the company's efforts that keep Aaron Sorkin's screenplay timeless. His commentary on Facebook's creator, Mark Zuckerberg, keeps becoming more and more apparent as time goes on. Unlike in other episodes for this project, instead of using film to talk about real-world issues, this one used

real-world problems to talk about the film. This episode dissects the writing, akin to how the *1917* episode examined Sam Mendes's directing. "The Future Of Media" episode comes off more as an epilogue than a conclusion to the channel. At the same time, the last content put on this channel was a Behind the Scenes video and a two-hour and forty-five-minute compilation packaged as a "movie." These are more like little "extras" or bonus features for a Blu-ray. "The Future Of Media" talks about the ideas and future of where technology will take us, discussing the Metaverse and other ways film has changed and will change over the coming years. At the same time, an unimportant episode in the scheme of things works in parallel with the technology that has the same chance of catching on.

The last two years of research into this project might seem to be a dive into the history of filmmaking, but at a second glance, it is possible to see the more nuanced takes. With hundreds of hours' worth of time, effort, and research into this broad subject, it has shown an increased social relevance. It has demonstrated several different lenses to view our current place in history. The point of this project was to show how a little program could show how even the most minor things could leave the most significant difference. How the representation of these topics has spilled over to current public discourse has hopefully started the conversation back up and brought some of these topics back into social relevance.

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