

Historical Accuracies are Beneficial for Films Depicting U.S. Crimes and Criminals

by

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The topic of my senior project is that historical accuracies are beneficial for films depicting U.S. crimes and criminals. The point of my project is to show that it is more beneficial for films to follow the history or historical evidence in order to make successful films based on U.S. crime history. It is more beneficial for the films to follow the historical evidence because they end up creating a more enthralling story, getting better reviews from both critics, audiences, and earning more money at the box office. To prove my point I will compare films that attempt to be as accurate as possible to the history of the crimes to films that embellish the truth of the past. Identifying the reasons behind the deviations from the source history for the film is an important aspect of my project. The reasons for choosing this topic stem from my love of cinema and history, I've been intrigued in the two for as long as I can remember. I originally enrolled at Purchase as a cinema studies major, but ultimately switched to history because cinema studies was not as hands-on with filmmaking as I thought it would be. I chose to switch to history over other majors because in high school I realized I had developed an affinity for history and figured to pursue it while minoring in film.

This paper combines two of my passions, history and film. I had to choose a topic and subsequently a thesis that encapsulates my love and interests in both fields. After bouncing around with a bunch of different ideas I found that the representation of history in films piqued my interest. Being aware of my own taste for crime films and the availability of contemporary evidence for U.S. based crimes I decided to look at films based on U.S. crimes. I always find myself looking up the facts of an event or character after they are depicted well in the movie because I was so engaged by the well done characterization of a person or the immersion into an

event. Conversely if the depiction is bad, I may not even bother to search for the truth of the events that the film is based off of. The easiest way to identify a good depiction is if I am emotionally invested in the story and characters. This leads to another important part of my project, if the story is not conveyed well and the audience cannot relate to the events unfolding on screen, the film is a failure. If the film depicts the events and characters differently than the history but the story is engaging and I can empathize with the characters, that is a success. I feel the latter is a more common occurrence in the history of cinema, hence my thesis.

Another big influence of my choosing of this topic is the fact that whenever I learn of intriguing historical people or events I cannot help but envision the stories of them as a film, and think about how I would make a film out of the narrative. I want to make films based on important figures or events in history, not only for pure spectacle but to shed light onto characters, ideas and themes that are worth telling. This aspiration of mine has led me to analyze films that have done just that, I want to learn from the success and failure of filmmakers past in relation to films based on historic crimes. The films that I would like to make could be either entirely accurate to the historical evidence or an interpretation of the facts, I think it is easier to weave a narrative around a film loosely based on the facts because there is more room for artistic intent, although there are some stories so intriguing, there is no need to change anything. Artistic intent is a very important thing to me, the 'why' behind a filmmaker's decision is always important to know especially when dealing with representation of historical figures.

Many characters in history based films deal with real history and real people, both are much more than just a name in a book and that it is important to remember that when depicting history. On the flip side a completely fictional character can interact with other fictional characters in a real setting, or any arrangement of these factors of character and setting be them fictional or real. There can be fictitious characters and events within the film that represent something more than the surface level facts. The real historical people or places can have some aspects of fiction, but at the end it all boils down to intent. The intentions of the filmmaker speak volumes alone, if the intentions are evident in the film or if the filmmaker came outright and stated what they were trying to convey it makes analysis much easier. The overarching reason for me writing about this topic is because I believe that truthful depictions of the past are important for the future, be that true to the historical evidence and or true to the positive intentions of the creator. Showing an accurate depiction of history in film can educate and motivate the audience to great lengths. Audiences respond more positively to true history as well, it is beneficial to the filmmaker and the viewer. Now films that create their own history can do that as well but if it is not obvious it is akin to lying, unless a filmmaker shares that the story is not attempting to be accurate to history. Deceiving groups of people never ends well, so make a historically accurate film or disclose when the story is not historically accurate. Majority of the films I will talk about do just that, while the other films fall flat in terms of accuracy.

When a filmmaker creates a piece that can emotionally and intellectually engage the audience while staying true to their intentions, that is a complete success. Many production studios do not see it like that, big budget films need to make absurd amounts of money to break

even let alone be successful. The films that stick to the historical source material may be fantastic and the filmmaker might have stayed true to their intentions but in the movie business it tends to come down to opinions and gross income. This is another reason why I am writing this paper as an aspiring feature film creator, I fear that a filmmaker can create a film with all their heart and it will not make the money required to be a financial success or it would be critically torn apart. Which happens all the time and that is just the way the industry is. These are big fears of mine but I know it is better to just stay true to myself and make what I want to make. Writing about a topic that I am genuinely intrigued by was the main goal for me, the next part is to execute and convey my love through the analysis.

The films that attempt to be as accurate as possible to the historical source material outperform the films that stray from the history. The films faithful to historical evidence outperform in terms of financial returns, reviews and my own opinion of the film. The films that embellish the past are *Scarface*(1932 and 1983). The films that stay as true to the historical evidence are *Zodiac*(2007), and *All the President's Men*(1976). All of these films are dramas based on real U.S. crimes or time periods riddled with crime, they all succeed at many things to differing degrees. Now obviously it is extremely hard to make a narrative film one hundred percent accurate to historical source material, but some of these films attempted to do that and the others loosely followed the facts or completely made up their own events. The films that loosely adapt to the history are less confined to the facts and have definite advantages in some situations. On the other hand, when the truth is stranger than fiction and there is no real need to embellish the facts, those films already have an engaging story. The choice comes down to the

filmmaker, what kind of film they would like to create and what they want to say with the film. All these films say something about the larger society around them and it is done with elements of fiction or with mostly fiction, either way they say something. The two *Scarface* films, 1932 and 1983 convey very similar themes, they both abundantly show the dangers of greed and what desperate broken men do to get what they want. The 1932 version is based on Armitage Trail's novel of the same title. These two films are based on historical events like the probation and figures like Al Capone but never follow the actions of their real life counterparts or attempt to be as accurate as possible. These films all performed well financially and critically due to the spectacle and themes they convey. More than the ideas they portray to the audience, these films were engaging which led to positive reviews and box office returns. The messages are able to be told because the films did not follow history to the letter, there was more room for embellishment and artistic intent. This embellishment of facts is not always a good thing considering the films that attempted to be as accurate as possible with the historical source material were received much better than their historically inaccurate counterparts. *Zodiac* is a film based on Robert Graysmith's book "Zodiac" which is about the Zodiac killer who was an active serial killer in California between 1968 and 1969. This film is a dramatization of real world events with sprinkles of fiction. The film says what the zodiac killer did was awful and that a few people would not rest until he was caught. It is a very enthralling story completely based on first hand accounts and documentation of the events. Another film that does a very similar thing is *All The President's Men*, this film is a dramatization of an already extremely engaging story, so in ways of themes the real world event says most of the ideas that the film portrays. Based on the non-fiction book by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, the two

journalists investigating the Watergate scandal. *Zodiac* and *All the President's Men* were based on books written by people who were actually involved in the historic events. The films stay as true to the books as possible, the books are considered non-fiction true crime accounts of the events, so following the books that follow the real world events leads to a very accurate representation of the history. Both the embellished films and the accurate films have their place and can be amazing pieces of work regardless of source material, a good film will always boil down to how it makes the audience feel. The historically accurate films had a much stronger reaction to audiences than the films based on embellished facts, according to reviews from the time of the films release.

Scarface(1932) opens up with a preface that grips the audience “This picture is an indictment of gang rule in America and of the callous indifference of the government to this constantly increasing menace to our safety and our liberty. Every incident in this picture is the reproduction of an actual occurrence, and the purpose of this picture is to demand of the government: 'What are you going to do about it?' The government is your government. What are YOU going to do about it?” this statement condemns gangster acts, pokes at the indifference of the government, peckons the populus to take action, while also stating the horrifying actions in this film have actually occurred in the real world. This film is directed by Howard Hawks and written by Ben Hect. The film is based around Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) a lowly hitman working for Johnny Lovo (Osgood Perkins) who feels he can raise in the underworld and take whatever he wants à la the world is yours motiff, but ultimately pays the ultimate price for is criminal acts. Tony Camonte and his nickname are based off of Al Capone who had the same

nickname and a similar scar on his face that the character Tony has in the film. There are events in the film that are based off of crimes that Capone was involved in as well. The most glaring are the recreation of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929, and the mention of Tony being a member of the Five Points Gang in Brooklyn. Both are things that Capone was generally considered to be responsible for or involved in.¹ The film was released in 1932 to mix reactions, many people wanted the film to be censored in many different ways. Leading up to the film's release the director Howard Hawks met with Will H. Hays president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and Hays had many problems with the rough cut of the film.² Hays states in a memo to Hawk "First, all sympathy for the heavy must be eliminated; Second, a very much stronger presentation of the anti-easy purchase of guns propaganda must be developed; Third, and very important, is the change of the title."³ Hays wanted the whole story to be reworked so the lead character Tony Camonte would look less relatable, he wanted there to be less visuals that depict the ease of purchasing a firearm, wanted the title changed and lastly an anti-gun forward statement in the film. Howard Hughes the producer of the film fought against the title change because he feared without name recognition to the book by Armitage Trail the film would be doomed to fail and not do as well financially.⁴ To comply with the demanded changes there were three cuts of the film made A,B, and C.⁵ The original was filled with all the things the censorship boards did not want to see, B had a little bit less and C was fine by the censors, according to Hughes "Version C would be released, that the

¹ Andrews, Evan. "7 Infamous Gangs of New York." History.com. A&E Television Networks, June 4, 2013. <https://www.history.com/news/7-infamous-gangs-of-new-york>.

² "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/1134>

³ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

⁴ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

⁵ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

critics were apprais[ing the film] to the skies and almost all stating they could see nothing censorable, objectionable, and nothing which should be withheld from public.”⁶ The title was ultimately *Scarface, The Shame of the Nation* upon release with different cuts in different states. New York and Pennsylvania saw a cut where Tony gets hanged at the end of the film, unlike the cut that is available today where it shows Tony getting killed by the police in a shootout similar to the B cut.⁷ Initial responses of the film were all over the place, ranging from the best film ever to this film needing to be destroyed and never shown again. *The New York Times* released a paper on May 20th 1932 with a review on *Scarface, The Shame of a Nation*.⁸ Mordaunt Hall was the author of the film review, Hall states “[it] is like that of Shakespearean Tragedy, for after all the smoke of machine guns and pineapple bombs has blown away and the leading killer has gone to his death on the gallows, the only one of the principal characters left is a blonde with carefully plucked eyebrows- she who had been the mistress of two underworld giants” Hall is referring to Poppy(Karen Morley), who was Tony’s love interest/symbol of power in the film. “the picture is dominated by Mr. Muni's virile and vehement acting.” Hall seemed to like the film saying positive things about the acting and story. *Scarface, The Shame of a Nation* was voted one of the ten best pictures of 1932 by Film Daily and the National Board of Review voted it as one of the best American films of 1932. Jack Alicoate, a writer for *The Film Daily* wrote on Thursday, April 14th 1932 issue 59th volume that *Scarface* was a mistake. Alicoate wrote “What we saw chilled us. We left, after an hour-and- a-half , with the distinct feeling of nausea.” His review

⁶ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

⁷ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

⁸ Hall, Mordaunt. “Paul Muni as Scarface Tony in a Story of Chicago's Murderous Beer Racketeers.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, May 20, 1932. <https://www.nytimes.com/1932/05/20/archives/paul-muni-as-scarface-tony-in-a-story-of-chicagos-murderous-beer.html>.

bashes the film calling it “the most unpleasant picture we have ever sat through”. Alicoate goes on to say the film should have never been made and has no place in the film industry.⁹ Others had much stronger opinions about the film upon release for example many Italian communities protested the film because they felt it misrepresented Italians in America. The Massachusetts Grand Council of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America wanted the mayors of Massachusetts cities to ban the film, the Italian Women’s Club Inc. wanted all Italian names removed from the film.¹⁰ Even overseas the film was criticized, Colonel F.L. Herron the MPPDA foreign liaison was having trouble with the Italian government, but notes that Benito Mussolini wanted to see the film.¹¹ The *Giornale d'Italia*, a daily newspaper in Rome, called for the film to be banned for “offensive allusions to Italy” within the film. The film made many people feel a full array of emotion upon its release, the critical response and the audience responses are one of the reasons for the film being so popular. If the film was not publicized so much I guarantee it would have not been nowhere near as popular. The financial returns of *Scarface* were not the best, although it was Hughes’ biggest success but because of the bans and production cost the film most likely did not break even.¹² It is estimated the film made around \$600,000 dollars upon release, adjusted for inflation in 2019 that is around 11 million dollars.¹³ These financial returns only show one aspect of the film's massive impact on its medium, the movie not doing well at the box office in 1932

⁹ “The Film Daily (Jan-Jun 1932) : New York, Wid's Films and Film Folks, Inc. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming.” Internet Archive. New York, Wid's Films and Film Folks, Inc. Accessed January 2, 2020. <https://archive.org/details/filmdailyvolume55859newy/page/888>.

¹⁰ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

¹¹ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

¹² “Scarface: The Shame of the Nation (1932).” Scarface: The Shame of the Nation (1932). Accessed January 1, 2020. <https://www.filmsite.org/scar.html>.

¹³ “Inflation Rate between 1932-2019: Inflation Calculator.” \$600,000 in 1932 → 2019 | Inflation Calculator. Accessed January 1, 2020. <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1932?endYear=2019&amount=600000>.

shows the contemporary opinions of the film but regardless the film is still mentioned in studying the history of cinema. According to the critic review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes the film sits at a 100% meaning that all 38 critics who reviewed it consider it a perfect film, while with audience members it has an 86%.¹⁴ These modern reviews along with the reviews from the 1930s paint a few polar opposite opinions of the film, although the positive reviews do outnumber the negative ones. I understand the reasons for giving the film a negative review, it seemed to be a dangerous piece of media where it shows bad acts are rewarded with wealth, fame, and power. This is partially true, but it also shows the drawbacks of the life of a gangster. The multiple attempts by rival gangs to kill Tony and each time he survives by the skin of his teeth. The paranoia of Tony is shown by his security around at all times, the fortifications he puts on his home and office. His mother shows no love towards him at all because she is aware of where this road will lead him and his sister Cesca (Ann Dvorak) if she gets involved with Tony. If all this is not bad enough Tony and Cesca die at the end because of all the things he did. At first glance it can seem that the film is glorifying the gangster life, but this is shown to be the complete opposite by the written warning in the beginning of the film and the actions that unfold in the film. I think this is an amazing film and still holds up to this day, the story, the characters and the idea are still very potent. The film was not a financial success because the subject matter was dangerous and the populus was scared that audience members would replicate the events on screen and be inspired to become a gangster. This is an understandable concern, but it is unlikely that a piece of media would fundamentally change someone like that. The initial responses to the film were bad with audiences which led to poor financial return and bad reviews. All of this is

¹⁴ "Scarface (1932)." Rotten Tomatoes. Accessed January 13, 2020.
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1018323_scarface.

true because the film uses the real world historical events and characters as a base then works off of them to create their own reality and narrative. The use of the real world was too much for audiences at the time, it seems the people of 1932 witnessed enough killings and gangster glorification to be bothered with a film that does a decent job at condemning both while portraying an interesting story of a deeply flawed, greedy man.

Scarface(1983) opens up with a preface that reads “In May 1980, Fidel Castro opened the harbor at Mariel, Cuba, with the apparent intention of letting some of his people join their relatives in the United States. Within seventy-two hours, 3,000 U.S. boats were headed for Cuba. It soon became evident that Castro was forcing the boat owners to carry back with them not only their relatives, but the dregs of his jails. Of the 125,000 refugees that landed in Florida, an estimated 25,000 had criminal records.” these sentences set the tone and setting of the film all by using contemporary history. This 1983 version of *Scarface* is directed by Brian DePalma and written by Oliver Stone.¹⁵ The film is based around Tony Montana(Al Pacino) who starts off as a poor Cuban-American immigrant but through some oddly familiar criminal acts Tony becomes a citizen and murders the obstacles in his way to inch closer to the ever elusive American Dream. “In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power. Then when you get the power, then you get the women.” Yet again the nickname of the lead character Tony is a direct reference to Al capone’s nickname, this adaptation of an adaptation has very similar characters and plot points as the 1932 *Scarface*. Both films feature an immigrant by the name Tony who raises in the ranks of an underground crime organization, kills

¹⁵ “AFI Catalog of feature films.” AFI. Accessed January 3, 2020. <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/68337>.

their former boss to gain more power after that same boss attempts to kill them, Tony attempts to provide for his family, tries to protect his sister but ultimately causes her and his closest friends deaths because of this incestual attraction he has towards her. All in all pretty similar films with different time periods and locations. The 1983 *Scarface* is not as heavily based on an exact person or action but more of a time period, the drug wars in miami were the biggest influence on the plot and characters. Screenwriter Oliver Stone was allowed access to FBI and DEA files while working on the film and used many of those reports as the basis for the events and characters.¹⁶ Another aspect of realism in the film is the shooting locations, parts of the film were shot in Miami, but once word got around what the film was about many groups protested the production. \$250,000 were spent on production in Miami but the protestors kept halting shooting with their demonstrations against the film.¹⁷ The protestors were afraid that the film would paint the Cuban population in a bad light, relating the new Cuban citizens with the rising crime rates, very similar to the outrage around the 1932 *Scarface*. Martin Bregman the producer of the film shared his experience about the protest to the production “Demonstrations, that’s what worried me. How do you shoot a movie in a street with a demonstration in progress? It’s hard enough to do it with everybody’s cooperation. It angered me that nobody asked to see the script before they made judgements.”¹⁸ I think if those outraged about the film knew what the story was about and how other people condemned Tony’s actions they would understand that the film is not trying to paint Cubans in a negative light at all. The production was moved to Los Angeles after Miami

¹⁶ “Mob Mondays – Five True Mob Stories Behind Scarface.” AMC. Accessed January 4, 2020. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-making-of-the-mob/talk/2015/07/mob-mondays-five-true-mob-stories-behind-scarface>.

¹⁷ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

¹⁸ Bouzereau, Laurent. *Ultraviolet Movies: from Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino*. New York: Citadel Press, 2000. 101.

city commissioner Demetio Perez Jr. was going to introduce a plan to not allow the production of *Scarface* to use any of the city's facilities. The production and distribution of the film had many speed bumps along the way. According to producer Bregman the budget was originally slated to be \$10 million but the film ultimately cost \$23.5.¹⁹ The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) originally gave the film an X rating which is reserved for films that can only be seen by adults. *Scarface* was rated R after a bunch of edits and with the help of two psychiatrists who watched the film and said it will not be harmful for viewers over the age of thirteen who have the mental capabilities to discern reality and things that happen in film.²⁰ *Scarface* was released on December 9th 1983 to both positive and negative reviews similar to its predecessor, most of the negative reviews stemmed from the almost three hour run time. Vincent Canby who was the chief film critic for *The New York Times* wrote in the December 9th 1983 issue that "SCARFACE," Brian De Palma's update of the 1932 classic directed by Howard Hawks and written by Ben Hecht, is the most stylish and provocative - and maybe the most vicious - serious film about the American underworld since Francis Ford Coppola's "Godfather."²¹ Both the negative and positive reviews seemed to agree that the film was violent, not unlike actual murders that occurred in the underworld of drugs. Oliver Stone based the chainsaw murder in the film off an actual DEA document he read while writing the screenplay.²² The financial opening of the film was a success and according to Martin Antonowksy "The opening business...has been bigger than anything else in the three-hour class."²³ Within a month of release the film made

¹⁹ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

²⁰ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

²¹ Canby, Vincent. "SCREEN: AL PACINO STARS IN 'SCARFACE'." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, December 9, 1983.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/09/movies/screen-al-pacino-stars-in-scarface.html>.

²² "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

²³ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

\$26.3 million dollars at the box office, a little bit more than the production budget. The original release of the film made \$65 million dollars worldwide, most certainly considered a financial success. Later that year the film was nominated for three Golden Globe Awards, best performance by an actor in a motion picture for Al Pacino, best performance by an actor in a supporting role for Steve Bauer and best original score for Giorgio Moroder.²⁴ A well received film by the critics and audiences alike, the film sits a 81% on Rotten Tomatoes, reviewed by 69 critics and a 94% by almost half a million audience²⁵ “When *Scarface* first came out, it was extremely controversial, as you can imagine. But it stays in our lexicon, in a way. It’s part of our culture.” a quote by Al Pacino at the sold out 35th anniversary Tribeca Film Festival screening.²⁶ I’d have to agree with Pacino, the film is one of the most recognizable and quoted films of all time and that can be for many reasons. Possibly because of the drugs, sex and violence or because of the jealousy and empathy audiences feel towards Tony. Tony takes what he wants and I think most people can admire or at least want that in some aspect of their lives minus the killing and all the other awful things he does. The depiction of all the characters is done so well, all the actors did a fantastic job. I think what DePalma and Stone were trying to say with this film can be summarized in a simple sentence, just because you can doesn't mean you should. This sentence encapsulates the whole dilemma of Tony, he was too busy in the fact that he can do evil acts and he only stops once or twice to not perform them. The intention of showing a man raise himself from the gutter to become a kingpin but leads himself to his downfall because of the

²⁴ “Winners & Nominees 1984.” Golden Globes, January 1, 1970.
<https://www.goldenglobes.com/winners-nominees/1984?page=1>.

²⁵ “Scarface (1983).” Rotten Tomatoes. Accessed January 6, 2020.
<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/scarface>.

²⁶ Bailey, Jason. “Revisiting the Controversy Surrounding Scarface.” Vulture, April 20, 2018.
<https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/revisiting-the-controversy-surrounding-scarface.html>.

ounce of decency he had left in him. This ounce is shown when Tony refuses to kill a woman, her two children and rather kills the hitman who works for a much more powerful drug lord than himself. The much more powerful boss Sosa then sends a hit squad to kill Tony. *Scarface* is a cautionary tale of greed, excess and how the two pollute the mind, in the case of Tony Montana his mind was already polluted so it affected him far worse than the typical person. I love this movie for a lot of reasons, the performances, the characters, the music, the set design and the way it makes me feel when I watch it. All this is possible because the stories and characters are not recreations of real life people and there is near unlimited space for artistic intent. Even if you are unaware of the events of the war on drugs in South Florida you can enjoy this film because the characters are the important part, the history is just the appetizer to set the stage.

Scarface(1983) is a success financially, critically and culturally this is shown to be true by the box office returns, reviews and how popular the film is over 30 years of its release. During the end credits the film is dedicated to Howard Hawks and Ben Hect, the director and writer of the 1932 *Scarface*. Films based on U.S. criminals are not always from the perspective of the criminal, they can be from the perspective of those who try to solve or catch the crooks. For example in *Zodiac* and *All The President's Men* both of these films are from the point of view of the investigators trying to find the truth behind the crimes.

The elusive zodiac killer was never identified or found, he claimed that he killed 37 people during his span of crime starting in the 60s and ending in the 70s. The person who called themselves the zodiac killer was officially linked to five attacks in Northern California in 1968 and 1969. The terrifying uncertainty of this person and their dastardly deeds were the subject of

many pieces of media from books to movies. *Zodiac* directed by David Fincher and written by James Vanderbilt based on the book by the same title by Robert Graysmith. “I grew up in the Bay Area during this period of time, he was a boogiemán for so long and then they stopped talking about him, stopped writing about him or stopped mentioning him, all of a sudden it was like it never happened. I do profoundly remember when my family moved away from the Bay Area looking out the back of my parents car as we drove away from my house and thinking ‘did they ever catch that zodiac guy?’”²⁷ A quote from David Fincher, it seems Fincher has had a long yearning to revisit the *Zodiac* case. The film stars Jake Gyllenhaal as Robert Graysmith, author of *Zodiac* and former cartoonist at the *San Francisco Chronicle* who worked on the zodiac case. Robert Downey Jr. as Paul Avery, a journalist at the *San Francisco Chronicle* who worked with Graysmith. Mark Ruffalo as David Toschi, an inspector in the zodiac case. Gyllenhaal, Ruffalo had the privilege to meet and study the people they were going to portray on screen, while Downey Jr. had room for interpretation. Fincher and the production team went to great lengths to make the film as accurate as possible to the real world events, from large scale efforts like creating a computer generated period accurate San Francisco to minute details like Jake Gyllenhaal using Robert Graysmith’s actual inkwell pens. Fincher and the production team were allowed access to old police records, even ones that retired police officers had in their home and that allowed them to make the most accurate recreations of the crimes.²⁸ All surviving victims, family members of victims and officers were interviewed while using the police records to draw similarities.²⁹ The recreations of the attacks in the film are all based off of witness

²⁷ *This Is Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video, 2007.

²⁸ *This Is Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video.

²⁹ “Zodiac Production Notes.” Wayback machine, September 27, 2007.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070927225954/http://media.movieweb.com/galleries/3158/notes.pdf>.

accounts and police reports. July 4th, 1969 in Vallejo, California Mike Mageau and Darlene Ferrin were attacked by the zodiac while parked Blue Rock Springs park just about 4 miles away from where the zodiac killed his first victims 7 months ago. The film depicts the attack from Mageau and Ferrin's perspective, according to Mageau and Ed Rust, retired Vallejo Detective interviews on the blu-ray version of the film the scene is extremely accurate.³⁰ The scene was shot at the same exact location the attack happened and the production team reconstructed the area to detail from police reports and descriptions from witnesses. Fincher had to remove a line of dialogue that was actually said by Mageau that night in 1969, the line was "I'm not getting shot for this", Fincher thought it was too on the nose and ruined the suspense of the scene.³¹ Although it makes the scene less accurate to the real world event it was done to make a more effective moment for the film, it is near impossible to make a narrative drama completely accurate to the real world story it is based off of, Fincher needed room for his artistic intent. Another example of how accurate Fincher wanted the film to be is the Lake Berryessa murder scene, the real world event occurred on September 27th, 1969 in Napa County, California. The production team again went to the location of the crime and constructed the area to resemble how it looked in 1969. The team terraformed the immediate crime scene and laid out the grass, shrubbery and trees exactly how they were described in police and victims reports.³² Cecelia Shepard and Bryan Hartnell were picnicking at Lake Berryessa when Cecelia noticed a man walking towards them, the man emerged and he held them at gunpoint, tied them up and stabbed them multiple times each. "To be perfectly frank, what they captured on the film you see when

³⁰ *Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video, 2007.

³¹ *Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video, 2007.

³² *This Is Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video.

Cecelia is being stabbed-that's the flash I saw happening and I had to look away and about the time you would look away, that's when that piece ends, in the film. It's an eerie reproduction of what happened in my vision. I couldn't have scripted it better.”- Bryan Hartnell, zodiac survivor. All this compilation of facts and first hand accounts led to creating arguably the most accurate true crime film ever. *Zodiac* was released in 2007 to much acclaim by all audiences. The domestic opening week the film earned around 17 million dollars, while its 9 week stay at the box office racked in a little over 33 million domestically and 51 million dollars internationally.³³ With a budget of 65 million dollars and making 84 million dollars it was financially successful.³⁴ The initial reviews of the film were positive, it sits at 89% on rotten tomatoes by critics meanwhile it has a 77% by audiences.³⁵ Roger Ebert an acclaimed film critic had this to say about the film “It's not merely "based" on California's infamous Zodiac killings, but seems to exude the very stench and provocation of the case.”³⁶ I couldn't agree more with this statement, at times the film truly feels like a hypnotic documentary riddled with suspense and it adds so much to the film. *The New York Times* published a review article the day the film came out written by Manohla Dargis that has nothing but nice things to say about the film and Fincher, “Psychology isn't Mr. Fincher's bag; he isn't interested in what lies and writhes beneath, but what is right there: the visible evidence. And what beautiful evidence it is. His polished technique can leave you slack-jawed, as can his scrupulous attention to detail”.³⁷ The film is riddled with meticulous

³³ “Zodiac.” Box Office Mojo. Accessed January 13, 2020.
https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r11031636481/weekly/?ref_=bo_rl_tab#tabs.

³⁴ “Zodiac.” Box Office Mojo.

³⁵ “Zodiac (2007).” Rotten Tomatoes. Accessed January 13, 2020.
<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/zodiac>.

³⁶ Ebert, Roger. “Zodiac Movie Review & Film Summary (2007): Roger Ebert.” RogerEbert.com, August 23, 2007. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/zodiac-2007>.

³⁷ Dargis, Manohla. “Hunting a Killer as the Age of Aquarius Dies.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, March 2, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/movies/02zodi.html>.

detail, from the time accurate clothing to trying to match the handwriting of the zodiac by hiring a forensic linguistics expert to analyze the writing patterns and the formations of his sentences.³⁸

The most common gripe with the film amongst audiences and critics alike is the 2 and a half hour runtime. I love this movie and it was an inspiration for my senior project topic. While watching the movie I was so enthralled with the characters, events and challenges I had to compare it to the real world events. I was blown away by how accurate the majority of the film is to the actual case that it led me to research more films like *Zodiac*. All the depictions of the characters are done respectfully, Graysmith shares that sentiment and himself said “Toschi sat next to me watching the film and I saw his eyes glisten, I said ‘Dave that’s how you’re gonna be remembered this is a digital film, it’s never going to degrade, a hundred years from now they’re gonna be seeing Mark Ruffalo as Dave Toschi.’”³⁹ What *Zodiac* portrays is a man who wouldn't rest in the face of evil, he wanted to unveil this evil more than anything else. This film is very accurate to the history it represents and it is an amazing film, there are moments of fiction which allow for more artistic intent but nowhere near close to the two *Scarface* films. *Zodiac* is one of the is not the most accurate true crime films ever and it was a massive success financially and critically with no controversy around it like the historically embellished films. I consider *Zodiac* a better movie that is far more intelligent and thought provoking than the *Scarface* films and according to the reviews and box office returns I am not alone in thinking that. As *Zodiac* follows Robert Graysmith, a cartoonist turned impromptu investigative reporter who is chasing leads to catch a murderer. *All The President's Men* follows two full time reporters scrounging for

³⁸ Halbfinger, David M. “Lights, Bogeyman, Action.” The New York Times. The New York Times, February 18, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/movies/18halb.html>.

³⁹ *This Is Zodiac*. Paramount Home Video.

leads to get the full picture of a Washington scandal, more popularly known as The Watergate Scandal.

On June 17th 1972 five men were arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters which were located in the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. The perpetrators were caught stealing documents, wiretapping phones and were later connected to the Nixon reelection campaign.⁴⁰ Nixon tried to hide the connections to him, but two *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward worked relentlessly to uncover his role in the operation, Nixon resigned on August 9th 1974. Bernstein and Woodward went on to write a Pulitzer Prize-winning non-fiction book *All The President's Men*(1974) and that book was the basis for the 1976 film by the same title directed by Alan J. Pakula and written by William Goldman. The film stars Robert Redford as Bob Woodward, Dustin Hoffman as Carl Bernstein and the two of them put a lot of work into accurately portraying their real world subjects. Redford and Hoffman studied their real life counterparts for months while also sitting in on conferences at the post and asking reporters about their day to day activities.⁴¹ Frank Wills, the security guard who alerted the police on the night of the Watergate break in played himself in the film. On top of the performers striving for accuracy the set designers and production team studied the real *Washington Post* office that Woodward and Berstein worked in, they took photos which assisted in making an exact replica. The completed newsroom set was around 33,000

⁴⁰ Perry, James M. Watergate Case Study. Accessed January 14, 2020.
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/j6075/edit/readings/watergate.html>.

⁴¹ "AFI CATALOG OF FEATURE FILMS." AFI. Accessed January 15, 2020.
<https://catalog.afi.com/Film/53913-ALL-THEPRESIDENTSMEN?sid=d9f14a87-a487-4510-8071-a46338eb4f22&sr=38.279846&cp=1&pos=0>.

square feet taking up multiple lots at Warner Brothers studio and cost \$450,000.⁴² George Jenkins the art director and production designer for the film said that 167 desks were built and to make the set seem worked in they used a ton of scrap paper from the Government Printing Office, the suspended ceiling was 22,000 square feet of styrofoam with 200 miles of wire to light the set with fluorescent lights.⁴³ For the set of the Democratic National Committee, which was built in Burbank but shipped to D.C., they used some of the original furniture from the building. Aside from the aesthetics and portrayals the subject matter is accurate as well, being based off a nonfiction book written by the key figures of the investigation, it only makes sense that the story of a story would be accurate. The only difference from the book is the time frame of the story, the film only shows the first seven months of the Watergate scandal while the book covers all of it. The film was given a budget of \$5 million from Warner Brothers Studios, but then later went on to cost around \$8.5 according to *The Hollywood Reporter* and took home over \$30 million on its first release.⁴⁴ The total gross of the film is around \$70,600,000 since its release on April 9th, 1976.⁴⁵ The film is a financial success without a doubt, it earned more than 10 times its budget. The initial response of the film from critics were relatively positive, Roger Ebert wrote a review January 1st, 1976 and he states “All of these elements in "All the President's Men" are to be praised, and yet they don't quite add up to a satisfying movie experience.”⁴⁶ I disagree with Ebert on this, I was engaged each minute of the film and found it to be a very satisfying movie experience. This is because I feel so immersed by the realism, the journalistic process maybe

⁴² “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

⁴³ “AFI Catalog of Feature Films,” AFI,”

⁴⁴ Canning, Mike. “PDF.” Washington D.C., n.d.

⁴⁵ “All the President's Men.” Box Office Mojo. Accessed January 15, 2020.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0074119/>.

⁴⁶ Ebert, Roger. “All the President's Men Movie Review (1976): Roger Ebert.” RogerEbert.com. Walter Coblenz, January 1, 1976. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/all-the-presidents-men-1976>.

mundane but it is portrayed, shot so well and the fact that we keep getting reminders of the bigger goal at stake, I was not bored at all throughout the film. *Variety* published an article on December 31st, 1975 praising the actors and “ingenious direction by Alan J. Pakula”, I agree every actor did a phenomenal job in this film as did Pakula with executing his vision. *The Hollywood Reporter* published a review a few days before the film released in theatres and their review can be summarized by one sentence they wrote “On purely the production level, however, *All the President's Men* can hardly be faulted.” this review has the same issue that Ebert has, that the film is repetitive and not satisfying.⁴⁷ I agree the film is repetitive, but I do not think it is its fault because it adds to the realism of how Woodward and Bernstein work was. The film has a 93% critically reviewed by 58 critics and a 92% by the audience reviewed by over 50,000 users on Rotten Tomatoes.⁴⁸ These scores between critics and audiences are closer than any other film that I’ve spoken about. The film succeeded with audiences' minds and wallets, both in exceptional ways. The film was ranked 77th on *American Film Institute's* greatest American film of the past 100 years in 2007, it also won four Academy Awards, Supporting Actor for Jason Robards as Ben Bradlee, Art Direction for George Jenkins, Sound for Arthur Piantadosi, Les Fresholtz, Dick Alexander and Jim Webb and lastly best adapted Screenplay for William Goldman. Along with winning all those awards, the film had four Academy Awards nominations Supporting Actress for Jane Alexander as “Bookkeeper”, Director for Alan J. Pakula, Editing for Robert L. Wolfe and Best Picture. The film was also nominated for four Golden Globe awards

⁴⁷ Knight, Arthur. “All the President's Men!: THR's 1976 Review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 26, 2019.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/all-presidents-men-review-1976-movie-742796>.

⁴⁸ “All the President's Men (1976).” *Rotten Tomatoes*. Accessed January 16, 2020. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/all_the_presidents_men.

for Best Director, Best Motion Picture, Best Supporting Actor and Best Screenplay.⁴⁹ *All The President's Men* is a financial, critical success and highly acclaimed film, I think this is all well deserved because I thoroughly enjoyed this movie and it is so engaging even though I know the ending. The symbolism and visual metaphors speak volumes and the film always makes me think about the United States government in a different light, just to be more weary and practice caution when learning of current events. I feel this is exactly what Pakula and Goldman were going for and they succeeded in every way, yet again proving my initial thesis that films are benefited from following the history their film is based on.

All The President's Men and *Zodiac* performed better than both *Scarface* films and I think the two are better films than both *Scarface* films in many ways although the two sets of films are very different from each other. The two *Scarface* films are crime gangster films with themes that convey the message of caution towards greedy behavior and the effects of greed, while *Zodiac* and *All The President's Men* are newspaper based investigative journalism films. *Zodiac* and *All The President's Men* are two films based on amazing stories that required no major changes while both *Scarface* films are based more on time periods and loosely around a key criminal. Perhaps audiences wanted to see films of real world events that dramatize the already dramatic story as opposed to other films fantasizing gangs and drug dealers, the numbers do suggest something along these lines. Following the history to the letter does not forgo artistic intent, there is still room to create what one wants, as seen in *Zodiac* and *All The President's Men*. These two films share a true story with real people albeit dramatized more or less at times

⁴⁹ "AFI Catalog of Feature Films," AFI,"

but all the same to share a story, ideas and people that are worth telling others about. The *Scarface* films show a more pessimistic outlook on life, it may be a fun ride but it always ends the same. In the case of the two Tonys it's their demise as well as their loved ones. While writing this paper I was reminded that films can be much more than spectacle and I am not saying spectacle does not have its place, but a film that can make you feel something emotionally, logically and be accurate to real world events is amazing. In conclusion it is more beneficial for films to follow the historical evidence because they end up creating a more enthralling story, getting better reviews from both critics, audiences, and earning more money at the box office. Audiences relate more to the truth because the truth has and always will matter.

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