BRAVEHEART (1995)

by

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Braveheart. Directed by Mel Gibson. Written by Randall Wallace. Music by James Horner. Production Design by Tom Sanders. Costumes by Charles Knode. Distributed by Paramount Films, 1995.

William Wallace (Mel Gibson), a Scottish farmer, wants nothing more than to raise his crops, have a family and live in peace. However, the British occupiers of thirteenth century Scotland are brutal bullies. Soldiers attempt to rape his wife, Murron (Catherine McCormack), and when she resists, the local lord executes her. Wallace leads a peasant revolt and throws the British out of Scotland and invades England. King Edward I (Patrick McGoohan) goes to France to make a treaty and leaves his gay, ineffectual son, Prince Edward (Peter Hanly) in charge. On Edward's return, the situation has deteriorated. He sends Princess Isabelle (Sophie Marceau) to meet with Wallace as a ruse to capture him, but the Princess falls in love with him and reveals Edward's evil plans. Edward then offers various temptations of land and wealth to the Scottish nobility, who eventually turn against Wallace and betray him to the British. He is tortured and, when he will not swear fealty to the British Crown, is brutally executed. (R)

Braveheart begins with an aerial view of beautiful Scottish Highlands surrounding a shimmering land-locked lake. Here is a nice visual/psychological introduction: From the air (the realm of spirit), we view the masculine land surrounding, and perhaps being nourished by, the miniature oceanic, feminine element, the water. But as we get further into the film, we soon realize that the film's politics completely overwhelm its psychology. While the psychology, symbolically introduced in the opening scenes, is played out – and at several levels – I believe it will be more fruitful to look directly at the politics.

To fully understand the politics of *Braveheart*, we must look at the genre of the historical epic. Typically, these films age very badly, especially for adult

audiences. Historical films (*Ivanhoe* [1952], *The Man in the Iron Mask* [1939], *Cleopatra* [1963], and so on) hold little interest for us today. (The exception is the religious historical film – like *The Robe* [1953] or *Quo Vadis?* [1951] – because the religious element is still relevant today.) Historical films actually address *two* historical periods. One we see on-screen (in the case of *Braveheart* this would be medieval Scotland) *and* the year in which the film is being watched, 1995. And this is the reason historical films age so poorly: they are made for a specific contemporary audience and as that audience changes, it requires new historical films with different, more relevant interpretations of history. William Wallace indeed fought for Scotland's freedom in the late 13th century, wielding his broadsword and influence to defeat the forces of King Edward I, the British monarch who had declared himself king of Scotland upon the former ruler's demise.

Gibson is not filming history here, but myth. William Wallace may have been a real person, but *Braveheart* owes more to Prince Valiant, Rob Roy, and Mad Max. Once we understand that this is not a solemn historical reconstruction (and that happens pretty fast), we accept dialogue that might otherwise have an uncannily modern tone, as when Wallace issues his victory ultimatum to the English: "Scotland's terms are that your commander present himself in front of our army, put his head between his legs and kiss his - - -." Uh, huh.

Another contemporary page from the hallowed Hollywood recipe book is used when William and Murron fall in love at first sight. Their rapid courtship and secret marriage are lovely, entirely phony, and totally reflecting 20th century manners, sensibilities, and humor.

Not very much is known about Wallace the man, so that the film can afford to invent personal details as its politics see fit. On the other hand, quite a lot is known about the history of Scotland and England, so that the eyebrows of history buffs may keep getting raised before cinematic liberties that range from ho-hum to hokum. For instance, the script has the Prince of Wales married to Isabelle of France – something that happened in 1308, three years after Wallace's death. Then the film concocts outrageous interventions by Isabelle and no less than an affair with (the apparently zombie) Wallace! It creates a power-greedy leper who is the father of Robert the Bruce; a misreading of a feudal law that gave nobles the right to sleep with newlywed women; an imaginary defenestration; and much else.

Of course, films have nothing at all to do with history – even if "based" on something that really happened, they are still, as we can see, contrivances. In fact, a historical film is as much a piece of fiction – perhaps even more so – than a film fabricated whole cloth. The best recent example of "rewriting" history for a contemporary ethic is *Dances with Wolves* [1990]. Here is the Western modified for the Nineties, an era which can no longer subscribe to the ideologies of the Westerns of previous eras. Thus, historical films, because they are being made *today* are necessarily saying something about *today*. In the case of *Braveheart*, a significant political statement is being made, presumably about medieval Scotland, but in reality about the American of here and now. So, the question we must ask is, what are the political ideologies that make it such a popular film.

We have many indicators that *Braveheart* is speaking directly to a contemporary audience. For instance, if we take the plot out of its historical context, we have heard this story before. In fact, *Braveheart* is a straightforward replay of *Mad Max* [1979] and *The Road Warrior* [1981], which ironically, both starred Mel Gibson in essentially the same role as he plays here. But, without the aura of authenticity provided by "history," the story, especially upon any sort of close inspection, becomes dismissible.

Another indication that something is going on beneath the political in *Braveheart* is the way it very selectively samples history (to make political points, I believe). A good example is the film's characterization of Edward I. Apparently, he was not the total barbarian we see in the film. He did not rule entirely by whim. In fact, he convened the first assembly of nobles *and* commoners which would eventually become Parliament. He was also a great devotee of architecture and commissioned some magnificent buildings. The brutality which Edward exhibits in the film, when put in historical context, is not out of the ordinary. We see it as a commonplace happening, but in other places. Only a hundred years earlier, during the Third Crusade, the great British hero/king Richard the Lionhearted (despite the fact that he was French and spoke not a word of English) slaughtered 3000 Muslim captives at the city of Acre simply because they were too much trouble to keep alive. Chained to the city walls along with their wives and children, it took the crusaders three days working from dawn to dusk to complete their slaughter. The Edward Longshanks of the film followed in the best of footsteps, but *Braveheart* is making him out an ogre to make a political statement: governmental authority is insensitive and brutal.

Another interesting, and closely related, problem with *Braveheart* is its violence. In an era in which Hollywood seems to be seriously cutting back on the on-screen blood and gore, *Braveheart* comes as a bit of a throwback. In current action movies with lots of action and shooting like *True Lies* [1994] or *Demolition Man* [1994], many people get killed – even on screen – but the deaths are relatively clean and bloodless. Into this atmosphere, *Braveheart* pours literally gallon upon gallon of blood and gore. (Mel Gibson wears more blood than clothes.) In the battle scenes, every imaginable mutilation is shown graphically on screen as are tortures and humiliations. Yet these are suffered by and perpetrated by, in many cases, the heroes of the film. This adds yet another political layer: not only is authority brutish, but heroes must suffer before they can overthrow it.

While these political points apply easily to medieval Scotland, we must yet bring this film into contemporary times: We must see how, like any historical film, it straddles – and, most importantly, connects – historical periods. To penetrate this time barrier, I propose to translate *Braveheart* into contemporary American terms. Let us change the Scottish serfs to an American working class, the kilts of the peasants then become blue jeans and coveralls. The nobles of England and Scotland become the political rulers of today, their gowns change into Armani suits, their armor into military uniforms. With these transitions in mind, we are ready to look at the politics of *Braveheart*.

On the surface, the politics of this film are a bit confused. This is evident in William Wallace's final cry of, "Freedom.” This is not exactly based on historical fact (the concept of personal freedom was a concept not much

celebrated in 1300), but it doesn't stop Gibson from making it his dying cry. The freedom for which he fights and gives his life is not what we, today, would think of as freedom. The film's apparent definition of "freedom" is the overthrow of a foreign king only to install a local one. I wonder how much a difference this means to the peasants, slaving as serfs in the fields, eking out a meager living, taxed into permanent poverty, conscripted into their master's lethal conflicts. This may be nice for the people at the top of the food chain, but what about everyone else? Is this freedom? What is going on in *Braveheart*?

First, the film wishes to paint William Wallace as a hero, but the viewer's only response to his "heroism" is intellectually based: William Wallace (producer-director-star Mel Gibson), because he is the central character, the ostensible hero fighting for freedom and against tyranny, we have to root for him. But Wallace's actions paint a different story. While he speaks of freedom and acts of vengeance and is thus on the “right” side, the film paints an unconvincing emotional portrait, in which Wallace is simply not quite as bad as the English king.

Let us make a catalog of who is good and who is bad. First, the bad. Both father figures, King Edward and Robert the Bruce's father are infirm. Both die from their ailments: one from tuberculosis, the other from leprosy. The film, apparently, believes that the older generation is diseased and, while they manipulate the younger and exert their power, they are not the road to the future – they are bound to waste away under the weight of their own corruption.

Another source of evil is homosexuality. The Prince of Wales is gay and is shown, clearly (according to the film) as a result of his sexual preferences, to be weak, incompetent, and spineless. (Again, historical fact is at odds with the film's presentation of homosexuality. Richard the Lion-Hearted and Philip of France were lovers and the co-leaders of the Third Crusade.) Homosexuality is presented as simply another aspect of the corruption of the rulers. It is hardly surprising that in a Mel Gibson movie, this relationship becomes a cheap device, an obvious way to denigrate the Prince as both producer and product of ideological, moral, and material corruptions. This isn't a question of historical accuracy (as there were no "homosexuals" identified as such in the 13th century; there were, rather, continuums of sexual activities), but of representation: the lovers are portrayed as ignominious, clueless, and impertinent pretty boys, images filtered through a contemporary homophobic lens.

Another aspect of the family that is portrayed negatively is the rebellion of sons and the fulfillment of their father’s desire themes runs throughout the tale. Wallace is raised by an uncle when his father is killed, and he is living his father’s warrior legacy. The treacherous English King and his son have a strained relationship to put it mildly, as do Bruce and his Machiavellian father. Two of William Wallace’s most trusted warriors are a father-son team.

Now let us look at the film's catalog of "good." First, there are the peasants. William Wallace is the medieval Cincinnatus (the agrarian patriot who becomes the Roman general and kills unmercifully while simultaneously yearning for the peace of farm and family). All he wants is to grow crops, get married, raise a family, and live in peace. Yet without losing this desire, the

farmer becomes the soldier/revolutionary. Second, it seems every peasant, either under the eaves of his hut or beneath the floorboards, has some heavy-duty weapons stashed away. These weapons are proscribed, outlawed by the British occupiers. Thus, weapons are good, especially if illegal and in the hands of high-minded peasants. It also seems that the film's attitude is that violence is good, especially in a good cause. (It has been a long time since pacifist films like *Gandhi* [1982] or *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951] have been popular.) Finally, this film is rife with paranoia, conspiracy, and a call to eternal vigilance.

By projecting *Braveheart* into the present day, it seems that we have an anti-gay, pro-gun, anti-government, pro-family film! There is little difference between William Wallace's uprising and the intentions of the various current American militias. In addition to what we have discovered so far, there are other similarities. For instance, both see the local government as operating under the influence of foreigners. The Scottish nobility clearly sold out to the British, while our governmental officials are supposedly the pawns of the Tri-Lateral Commission. It was the intention of Edward of England to make treaties with France so that he could control most of Europe under a single government. Our contemporary government, the militias say, is heading toward a one-world governance.

Furthermore, we see William Wallace trying to rouse the reticent Scottish nobles to fight the English. The commoners are willing to face the enemy, but the lords hold them back. Is this a replay of complaints from the radical right that victory in Vietnam was made impossible by our own government (*Rambo* [1982])? If so, then they have little to complain about in *Braveheart*'s

messages: the nobles not only try to block Wallace, they also betray him to the enemy, and themselves take bribes of wealth and power.

In a three-hour film, I counted four women who have lines. Two of the characters are very minor, the other two are very beautiful women, one of whom is Wallace's wife, while the other bears his child. In the world of "Braveheart", women only serve to supplement Wallace's manhood. So, in the middle of all this conservatism are two powerful women – the Princess Isabelle and Wallace's wife, Murron. What are the women doing here? In the context of this film, I can cynically propose that the writers were stuck with at least a modicum of historical fact – these women are too prominent to be written out of the story. But they serve another purpose. By being high minded and brave, they are used all the more to point out the heinousness of those around them. Isabelle manipulates Edward all the more to show his corruption. Isabelle also makes a good contrast to the gay and fay prince. Murron bravely faces the invaders and gives her life for her principles.

At the surface level, the reasons for *Braveheart*'s popularity are pretty obvious. Mel Gibson is a handsome star and a more than competent director. There is lots of action, extraordinary violence – all for a good cause. But once the audience is in the theater and the lights go down, what messages are they *really* getting? Carefully selecting a historical era and using its conflicts to make a case for a contemporary political position is a fascinating use of history – and film. Perhaps in *Braveheart* we have an updating of George Santayana's admonition that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" into "For those who do not know history, films of history can urge them to repeat it." Another problem with Braveheart is its

unhappy ending. After all that time, you want and expect evil to be confounded. What you get instead is the hero being tortured to death. The suspense is this: Will he crack, cry out in pain, thus robbing all the right-wing militias of posterity of an inspiring example of masochism – sorry, heroism?

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