

Evaluating Claims to History and Researching Films

In her review of *History on Film/Film on History*, Leen Engelen offers some guidelines on how we might conduct research on historical films. She notes, "Most historical films claim a certain link with history," in their titles, choice of subjects, props, locations, dialogue, and "crediting a historical advisor." So as we watch films, we need to alert ourselves to these details. What is more, Engelen correctly points out that "a film does not stand alone," so we must research and understand how a film is released and how it is received by audiences. Engelen writes,

Upon release of a film numerous interviews and reviews appear in the press, making claims and shaping expectations. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that any film can always be held accountable for the claims it makes. On the other hand, we must beware of the effect these claims can have. Instead of assuring the historical veracity of a film, ... these claims may also give the film a certain aura of historical veracity. More often than not, it is the aura and not the historical accuracy itself that lures the audience into believing in the historical truth of what is shown on the screen.¹

Of course, as Engelen points out, filmmakers and the aura of historical accuracy shapes or becomes our collective memory of the past on screen. Knowing our interest in how history is portrayed in film, Engelen has identified some tasks:

1. to determine the claims made to history during the film's production and release;
2. to develop awareness of what motivated the filmmakers (e.g. how current events shape their topic selection, cinematography, artistic choices); and
3. to inform ourselves on the "aura" created about the film upon its release and through audience reception.

Who all may be involved in making the claims and shaping the aura? Most often the claims will be made by those involved in the project: directors, screenwriters, producers, actors. They shape the "aura" before the film is released to the public often through news stories in newspapers and trade publications written by professionals or experts. Once the public has access to the film, the press, professional film reviewers (either journalists or historians), and social media shape the "aura."

Before conducting research on the movie, get the following essential facts to help you narrow or broaden your search:

Essential Facts	Sample of Essential Facts:	Limit strategies
1. Movie Title: 2. Release date of movie: 3. Director: 4. Screenwriter(s): 5. Producer: 6. Major cast members:	Movie title: <i>Conspiracy</i> Release: 2001 Director: Frank Pierson Writer: Loring Mandel Producer: HBO Films in association with BBC Major cast members: Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci	I set a date range to limit my search results typing " conspiracy " into search engines produces countless hits. Date range: 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2003 (helped me determine if there were any

¹ Leen Engelen, "Back to the Future, Ahead to the Past. Film and History: A Status Quaestionis," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 4 (December 2007), 560.

7. Film Synopsis:	Film Synopsis: story that re-creates the Wannsee Conference held by Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann to organize the extermination of European Jews.	pre-release news stories). I then made use of Booleans to get relevant results/hits: AND Wannsee.
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Learn how the following **Boolean Operators** can improve your search for relevant materials.

Boolean operators are words that instruct the computer how you want words to be combined. Most databases allow you to choose Boolean operators from a dropdown box. Web sites do not usually allow you to choose, and the default operator may be either AND or OR.²

AND Records retrieved must include **all** of the words or phrases. This will narrow your search. **Example:** gone wind

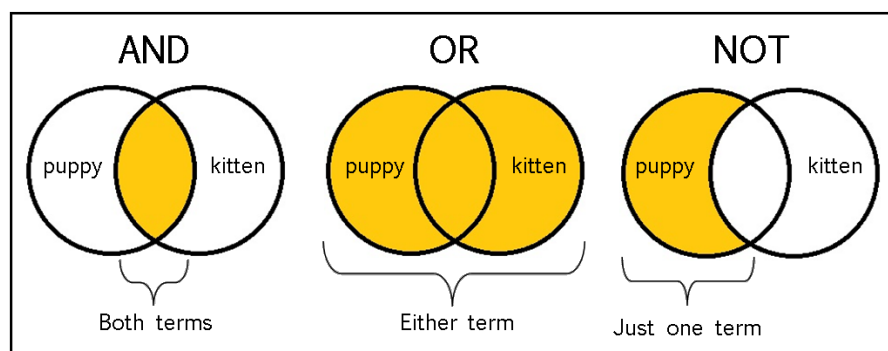
A title search using this example will retrieve the movie *Gone with the Wind*

OR Records retrieved must contain **at least one** of the words or phrases. This will broaden your search. **Example:** transformers or dark

A title search using this example will retrieve all the Transformers movies as well as any movie with the word "dark" in its title, such as *Dark Shadows*, *Dark of the Moon*, etc.

NOT Excludes records containing that word or phrase. This will narrow your search. **Example:** transformers not revenge

A title search using this example will retrieve all the Transformers movies except for *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*



In addition to Boolean Operators, another useful search technique is to use a symbol that **truncates** a search.

² <http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/c.php?g=318658&p=2128400>

Truncation uses a symbol to account for variations of a word. The database will find records containing words beginning with the word “chunk” you provide. You need to use this carefully, though, because it can result in false “hits.”

*Example: **transform**** will give you records containing the words **transformers, transforming, transformed.**

Note that the truncation symbol varies from database to database. Most use an asterisk but a few use an exclamation mark (!), a percentage mark (%) or a question mark (?). The description of the database (found by clicking on the “i” in the blue dot next to the database name) identifies the symbol used.

Besides Truncations and Boolean Operators, another tool to take advantage of when searching subscription research databases are the **fields** (keyword, subject, author, title, etc).

Fields

Most people begin searching by using a **keyword** search, which generally results in more “hits” than a **subject** search but also results in more irrelevant items. The reason for this is that a keyword search searches the entire record, including author, title, subject and abstract fields, while a **subject** search is limited to only the subject field.

So, a subject search may yield fewer results but more relevant ‘hits’. There are two ways to approach subject searching.

1. One is to identify a useful record and study its subject headings. Most databases allow you to click on those subject headings to perform another search.
2. A second tactic is to consult the database’s **thesaurus** (if available) for the proper subject terms to use. A thesaurus may also bring to light other, more specific or broader terms to use.

Don’t take a “google” or Siri approach to searching subscription research databases. In other words, do not type in entire phrases or questions. Start with single words and date limitations to develop a sense of hits, then make use of Booleans or truncations. You can also create other limits in databases such as limit to English language or types of publications (e.g. legal cases, scholarly articles, etc) depending on the results that you want.

By the way, do NOT limit yourself to what is available as PDF or HTML. The library has an inter-library loan service that quickly provides you with access often electronically.

How is a library database different from a website?³

Library Databases	Web Site
Library databases get their information from professionals or experts in the field.	Web sites can be written by anyone regardless of expertise.
Library databases contain published works where facts are checked	Web site content is not necessarily checked by an expert.

³ <http://www.prattlibrary.org/research/database/?id=39810> accessed on 19 January 2017.
Updated 2 April 2017

Library databases are easy to cite in a bibliography and may create the citation for you.	Web sites often don't provide information necessary to create a complete citation.
Library databases can help you narrow your topic or suggest related subjects.	Web sites often aren't organized to support student research needs.
Library databases are updated frequently and include the date of publication.	Web sites may not indicate when a page is updated.

Where will you acquire this information to determine claim and infer "aura" of historical veracity?

Subscription Research Databases (available through Andrus Library) to locate film production news stories, professional/expert film reviews, and sales numbers/film distribution or release information; the library has provided us with easy access to the more relevant at our course guide: <http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/HollywoodHolocaust>

The most useful **research subscription databases** to find reviews and stories about the production, release, and reception of a film are:

1. Academic Search Complete
2. ProQuest
3. Lexis-Nexis

Film and DVD **extra features** include interviews with directors, screenwriters, actors.

Specialty websites with clear authorship; see our course Library Guide at Andrus Library, either in the **area of film studies**

<http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/c.php?g=318658&p=2128500>

or history of the Holocaust

<http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/c.php?g=318658&p=2127062>

A list of **best options for film reviews** is located in our course library guide.

<http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/c.php?g=318658&p=2128451> (most of these links give you access to subscription databases)

Internet search engines that specialize in film content:

IMDB: http://www.imdb.com/?ref=mv_home

Box Office Mojo: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>

Rotten Tomatoes: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/>

If you want to learn more about general library research, visit this series of training modules called **General Library Research Tutorial:**

<http://guides.library.bloomu.edu/friendly.php?s=genedtutorial>