Historical events portrayed in Hollywood productions often manipulate facts in an attempt to follow a particular storyline or theme established by the director. In the case of Elia Kazan’s *Viva Zapata!* the manipulation of historical facts is used to condense the events of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) into a 113 minute production. As a result, *Viva Zapata!* contains several historical inaccuracies and fictional characters, and fails to reference several important events in an attempt to illustrate the role of Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican Revolution. Moreover, it is the presence of these historical inaccuracies and fictional characters which allows Kazan to properly characterize Emiliano Zapata in such a short period of time. This characterization is not limited to Zapata, the powerful leader of the farmers of Morelos, but attempts to identify the individual who has since become a Mexican icon. Thus, Elia Kazan’s omission of historical events, and frequent use of fictional characters and historical inaccuracies allows *Viva Zapata!* to successfully characterize Emiliano Zapata in this short Hollywood production. For this purpose, Kazan chooses to present Zapata in three different variations; Zapata as a revolutionary, as a rebel, and as a member of a higher class, in an attempt to fully orchestrate the characterization of Emiliano Zapata.

The prominent question alluded to throughout the film is whether Zapata was truly a revolutionary. This begins with the opening scene, when a group of peasant farmers from the state of Morelos visit Porfirio Diaz to ask for action regarding the loss of their lands to an armed and guarded estate. Diaz responds by stating that the courts will handle the matter correctly, however he advises the farmers to ensure that they have the correct boundaries and all the facts. As the farmers begin to exit the room, Zapata asks for permission to cross the fences in order to verify their boundaries stating, “we make our tortillas out of corn, not patience”. This is the introduction to Zapata as a revolutionary as Diaz then circles his name on a list of visitors provided before the meeting. While historically, Zapata did attend the capital to protest the land expropriations, he was not vocal during the meeting and did not have his name ‘circled’ by Diaz.\(^1\) In saying this however, depicting Zapata as the leader of the group allows Kazan to foreshadow Emiliano as the revolutionary leader from Morelos that he would later become.

This concept is then complimented in the following scene, when Zapata kills armed guards who had opened fire on the people attempting to cross the boundaries of the estate. This is a key component in the initial characterization of Emiliano Zapata as it establishes that he did not join the revolution for personal and economic gains but because of his good nature and his genuine concern for helping the people of Morelos. Furthermore, it establishes that Zapata did not enter the revolution by choice as it suggests that he was forced by his enemy, Porfirio Diaz as illustrated by the circling of his name following the meeting in the capital. In the opening scenes

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of the film, Zapata is portrayed as a genuine revolutionary; noble, brave, strong, and concerned only with improving the conditions of the farmers of Morelos.

As the film progresses however, this portrayal of Zapata as a revolutionary is quickly scaled back. Following this ordeal, Zapata seeks safety by hiding in the mountains where he is visited by the first fictional character, Fernando Aguirre. In this scene, Aguirre is seeking Zapata to relay a message from Francisco Madero asking for his support in “the fight against Diaz”. After Zapata receives the message, Eufemio, Zapata, Pablo, and the soldadera disperse in opposite directions prompting Aguirre to say, “this is all very disorganized”. The disorganization suggests that Zapata was not a revolutionary, but a rebel as it portrays Zapata in comparison to the organized Aguirre and Madero, who are depicted as revolutionaries.

Fernando Aguirre provides a revolutionary character to compare with Zapata in an attempt to differentiate between Zapata as revolutionary and Zapata as a rebel. Throughout the film, Aguirre provides structure and organization to Zapata and his revolutionary forces. One example of particular importance is during the execution of Zapata’s fictional friend Pablo Gomez. In this scene, Zapata attempts to be forgiving but Aguirre interrupts stating, “you deserted our cause”. Whether influenced by Aguirre or not, this eventually leads Zapata to execute his life-long friend and forces Emiliano to contemplate if “all this killing will bring about peace”.

The use of Zapata’s fictional friend Pablo Gomez is significant for several reasons. First, Pablo’s last words explain the true origins of Zapata’s cause, as he states, “our cause was land, not a thought, corn planted earth to feed the families”. Second, Pablo’s last words present a dilemma where Zapata has succumbed to his power. This dilemma depicts a major turning point in the characterization of Zapata because the experience causes Emiliano to contemplate his own origins and original intentions. This is imperative because it allows Kazan to successfully characterize Zapata between the power-hungry revolutionaries; Carranza, Aguirre, Huerta, and Madero; and the disorganized rebels such as his brother Eufemio.

This differentiation between Zapata and other revolutionaries is reinforced through another historical inaccuracy, when Zapata leaves the Presidency to travel south to Morelos in order to see his brother Eufemio. Eufemio had taken over an estate, removing all the farmers who had previously resided there, causing them to seek advice from Zapata. When Zapata decides to leave, Aguirre confronts him to which he responds, “now I know you….you only destroy, that is your love…you will go to Obregon or Carranza because you will never change”. Although this entire scene is fictional by nature, it allowed Kazan to accurately characterize Zapata as a genuine revolutionary who fights for the people. While Aguirre is used in this scene to depict the general pattern of many revolutionaries during the Mexican Revolution, this statement also serves to represent the final divide between Zapata and Aguirre, and illustrates the differences between Zapata and other revolutionaries.

Kazan successfully differentiates Zapata from other revolutionaries throughout *Viva Zapata!,* however his characterization as a genuine revolutionary attempts to isolate him between

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revolutionaries and rebels. While revolutionaries are depicted as organized, brave, strong, and power-hungry, Kazan depicts rebels as disorganized, violent, and ill-tempered. In order to successfully isolate Zapata from both ends of this spectrum, Kazan chooses to depict Eufemio, Zapata’s brother as a stereotypical rebel. Eufemio is a heavy drinker, violent, aggressive, classless, perverted, and obnoxious. Although Eufemio is a true historical figure, many occurrences portrayed in the film regarding his actions are fictional. For example, Eufemio’s death is portrayed in the movie as the cause of farmers gunning him down in a hacienda however his death came as a result of a “bar-room brawl” where he was gunned down by Sidronio Camacho in the street.³ This is significant for two reasons. First, it allows Kazan to raise the status of Zapata by illustrating him in relation to his brother, who is undoubtedly a rebel. By illustrating Eufemio’s fictional response to power, Kazan is able to successfully characterize Zapata as a genuine revolutionary who is only concerned with the return of land to the poor. In addition, this scene also allows Kazan to allude to the Plan de Ayala. This occurs when Zapata tells the farmers upon the removal of his brother from the hacienda, “this land is yours, you must protect it, with your lives if necessary”.

Throughout the first portion of the film, Zapata is portrayed as contemplating whether he is a leader of the poor or a member of a higher class. This is hinted at through his relations with Josefa and her father, Senor Espajo. When Josefa is first introduced, Zapata follows her in to a church to ask to speak with her father in order to ask for her hand in marriage. When she responds by saying, “I have no intention of washing clothes in a ditch or patting tortillas like a common Indian”, Zapata angrily responds, “my mother was a Salazar, the Zapatas were chieftains when your grandfather lived in a cave”. Historically, Zapata’s response is accurate. He was the son of prosperous farmers, considered to be one of the best experts on horseflesh in the village, and was definitely educated enough to read and write.⁴ In saying this however, Josefa’s sentiment towards Zapata tempers Emiliano’s assertions of strong family lineage. By doing so, Kazan is able to isolate Zapata in his own class; above the peasant farmers but below the wealthy class.

This is continued when Zapata is hired as a judge of horses for Don Nacio. When a boy is caught eating grain, a guard attempts to whip him but is stopped violently by Zapata. Zapata is then pulled away by other men and takes a walk with Don Nacio where they notice other men laughing at the guard to which Zapata responds that “they are just Indians”. As the men continue on their walk, Zapata then asks and receives a cigar from Don Nacio. This is significant because it portrays Zapata as not seeing himself equal to those who he appears to lead. The cigar is of equal importance because Zapata accepts this from Don Nacio but later refuses a cigarette offered by native Indians after he attempts to save a farmer from the rurales. Although, Zapata obtains both Josefa’s hand and the revolution, the film succeeds in characterizing Zapata as not only a leader of the poor, but isolates him to his own social status, neither poor nor rich, seeking nothing but the return of the land to its rightful owners. Kazan elevates Zapata above the class

³ McLynn, Villa and Zapata, 352-353.
⁴ Herzberg, Revolutionary Mexico on Film, 110.
he is fighting for but below the upper class in society, thus identifying him as a natural leader of the poor.

Although, *Viva Zapata!* focuses on the characterization of Emiliano Zapata and not the Mexican Revolution itself, it successfully illustrates the role he played and the legacy he left on the people of Mexico. The specific choices of Kazan with regards to historical events, characters, and dialogues allowed the film to successfully demonstrate why Emiliano Zapata is so special to Mexican heritage. Kazan successfully isolated Zapata between the countless revolutionaries present during the Mexican Revolution while keeping him above the label of an ordinary rebel. Furthermore, Kazan’s choice of dialogue and historical inaccuracies elevated Zapata above the peasant farmers but kept him below the wealthy class. This again, isolated Zapata into his own social class, illustrating why he was seen as such a venerable leader.

In conclusion however, it must be noted that this overall depiction is a product of cultural transmission. As a consequence of being a national icon, there are many myths and stories surrounding the life of Emiliano Zapata that will continue to live on. This is represented by Zapata’s white horse surviving his assassination at the end of the film, running away to safety. Ultimately, whether one views the use of historical inaccuracies as a flaw or as a strength, *Viva Zapata!* should stand as an example for any future Hollywood productions attempting to depict a historical figure. The use of fictional characters and historical inaccuracies such as Pablo Gomez, Fernando Aguirre, and the death of Eufemio Zapata allowed Kazan to ‘fast-forward’ through ten years of history in order to successfully characterize Emiliano Zapata.

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5 Cultural Transmission: The way a group of people or animals within a culture or society tend to learn or pass on new information.
Works Cited
