Mapping Inconclusiveness: Media and the Contested Narratives of the Mutiny on the Bounty

Omar Ahmed Muhammad
Ain Shams University,
Cairo, Egypt,
omarelnamr@edu.asu.edu.eg

Abstract

This paper examines the multilayered and multifaceted 1789 mutiny aboard HMS Bounty, a historically contested maritime event characterized by divergent narratives that are inherently inconclusive. While Captain William Bligh's official account framed the mutiny as an act of treachery led by Fletcher Christian, subsequent retellings—ranging from historical analyses to fictional adaptations—have complicated this narrative, often portraying Bligh as a tyrannical figure whose harsh leadership justified the crew's rebellion. Given these contested narratives, the paper adopts an intermedial approach to investigate how Captain Bligh's original account inspired diverse representations across fiction, film, and art. To trace the mutiny's evolution across media, the paper employs such key concepts in intermedial studies as media transmediation and representation. The paper also adapts Lars Elleström's intermedial framework with targeted modifications to analyze how each media representation transmediates the mutiny narrative. This analytical approach systematically reveals narrative gaps and biases across the different versions, exposing how each medium selectively emphasizes or omits aspects of the historical event. Focusing on Nordhoff and Hall's novel as a pivotal case study, the paper argues that its fictitious narrator, Roger Byam, functions as a medium. Through Byam, the contested narratives can be collated, juxtaposed, and tentatively synthesized, offering a more comprehensive understanding of this enduring maritime controversy.

Keywords: Mutiny on the Bounty; intermedial studies; transmediation; narrative inconclusiveness; Nordhoff and Hall; qualified media.

Introduction

Sea mutiny is a phenomenon deeply rooted in political history, particularly during The Age of Revolution (1760s–1840s), a period marked by a significant rise in acts of insubordination aboard ships isolated from their homelands. European war and trade fleets expanded their sovereign dominance across the American, Indian, and African theatres, leading to the imposition of maritime articles of war that established a socio-militant hierarchy aboard ships, effectively transforming them into semi-sovereign states.

At the pinnacle of this hierarchy, captains are likened to uncrowned kings, wielding absolute authority that extends beyond political and social affairs to encompass religious duties, ensuring that "prayers and preaching be performed diligently" (Great Britain, 1762, p. 326). Mathew Bishop, a ship veteran, asserts that "a Captain is like a King at Sea, and his authority is over all that are in his possession" (1744, p. 78). Acting as tyrants over their floating kingdoms, captains are granted

free rein, as illustrated by the advice given to a "*green hand*": "There is no justice or injustice on board ship my lad. There are only two things: duty and mutiny. All that you are ordered to do is duty," while "all that you refuse to do is mutiny" (Rediker, 1987, p. 211). Any act defying the captain's authority was automatically deemed mutinous under the Royal Navy Articles of War, carrying potential death penalties. Captains wielded absolute disciplinary power, extending beyond "run their ships" to "reform the character of their men" (Rediker, 1987, p. 209)—a duty codified by the 37 Articles of War, which authorized "such punishment" as they deemed "fit to impose" (Great Britain, 1762, p. 326).

This absolute authority frequently cultivated a pervasive sense of injustice among the crew, creating conditions ripe for mutiny—exemplified by Fletcher Christian's rebellion aboard HMS Bounty against Captain Bligh's tyranny. However, this mutiny also demonstrates the unchallenged authority of captains, who believe themselves to have a direct influence over the course of history, and subsequently take liberty to act as historians, transforming personal logs into ostensibly authoritative accounts of their voyages. These documents give rise to a subgenre of nautical historical writing—sea mutiny narratives—where fictional and nonfictional retellings resurrect contested versions that official records often overlook. This genre embodies what Scott (2012) terms a "*double conspiracy of silence*": mutineers obscure their involvement for self-preservation, while captains suppress evidence of "rising levels of disobedience" to mask ineffective leadership or "fragile moral sway" (p. 8). Thus, critical details are often omitted, leaving an inconclusive narrative space ripe for exploration.

The Bounty mutiny is defined by this inconclusive narrative space, situated between the captain's tyranny and the mutineers' drive to voice and enact their insubordination. This space is amplified by the ship's isolation from its homeland, transforming mutiny from a purely geopolitical event into a literary and fictive phenomenon. As Herbert (2008) argues, Victorian-era rebellions should be seen not just as geopolitical events but as stories retold in varying "stylistic inflection[s]" and "literary register[s]" (p. 3). This idea is evident in the diverse literary and artistic media reproducing the mutiny's historical and fictional accounts. These range from Bligh's (1792) official narrative to Dodd's (1790) dramatic pictorial interpretation, extending through Nordhoff and Hall's (1932) novel, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which inspired cinematic adaptations like Donaldson's (1984) *The Bounty*.

All these versions exist within the inconclusive narrative space shaped by the unique spatial and temporal dynamics of the mutiny, expanding this event to accommodate such diverse historical, fictional, visual, and cinematic versions. The mutiny's adaptability lies in its capacity for "transgressing media borders" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 13), enabling historians, novelists, filmmakers, and artists to explore often-overlooked aspects or highlight elements that factual narratives might neglect. As a result, the mutiny transcends its historical origins, evolving into a multilayered and multifaceted transmedial event.

Research Methods

The mutiny's complexity—with its contested narratives and layered perspectives—defies singular interpretation, making reliance on either fictional depictions or biased historical accounts inherently

reductive. An intermedial approach, examining how "the interaction of similarities and differences between media" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, pp. 3-4) shapes meaning, proves essential. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) asserts, "all media are mixed media" (p. 260), and by tracing how different media compensate for one another's limitations and leverage their unique affordances, this method reveals the mutiny as an evolving construct rather than a fixed event. Analyzing convergences and divergences across representations not only highlights how media reinterpret the same events but also synthesizes a more nuanced, transmedial understanding of the mutiny's enduring legacy.

This intermedial synthesis allows for the integration and fusion of different versions portrayed across various media. For such fusion to occur, a clear and conclusive version—against which the diverse media portrayals can be compared—is implicitly assumed to exist. However, this assumption does not hold for the Bounty mutiny. Its events, as depicted across media, are so inconsistent and inconclusive that they highlight the existence of ample narrative space, open to interpretation and filled with subjective truths. The events are either narrated by Bligh, whose account is shaped by personal agendas and prestige, or by the mutineers, whose dual status as both condemned criminals and narrators pursuing exoneration inherently compromises their testimony. The result is an unbridgeable narrative gap between the various media representations of the mutiny.

Addressing this gap, the intermedial approach provides the conceptual tools necessary to fully investigate the mutiny, establishing connections between its diverse media products. These tools derive their feasibility from the argued transmedial nature of the mutiny. One central tool is that of *media transformation*, which traces "all kinds of processes" through which "the form or content of one media type is reconstructed and thus transformed by another media type" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 104). These processes are rooted in the interwoven concepts of *transmediation* and *media representation*. Together, they provide the analytical tools necessary to investigate how authors, artists, and filmmakers transmediate and represent the mutiny, revealing aspects that a single media product would likely overlook.

Transmediation occurs when an event is reconstructed to be "mediated by another media type" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 104). The focus is not on the media type itself—such as how a historical account is adapted into a novel or a novel into a film—but on how previously communicated "ideas, narratives, and concepts" in a source media product "are reproduced or reconstructed in the target media product" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 104). For example, Bligh's historical account of the mutiny, as a source media product, creates vivid mental images for its readers despite being a written account. These images are so powerful that they are transmediated into a target media product, as seen in Dodd's (1790) painting. The process continues as the sense of movement in the pictorial version is again transmediated into multiple cinematic adaptations, where audio, visual, and written elements combine to reimagine the same event.

Media representation shifts the focus from the event to the medium, exploring how "one medium represents the characteristics of another medium" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 104). This process examines whether and how aspects of one media type can be transferred to another. It involves identifying the tools each medium uses to represent the event and determining whether these tools are preserved, modified, or abandoned. For instance, a media-representation analysis of Nordhoff and Hall's novel *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1932) and Roger Donaldson's film *The Bounty*

(1984)—two media presenting different versions of the same event—would trace the absence of the novel's fictitious narrator, Byam, in the film. The focus shifts from the mutiny itself to how the tools unique to one medium are influenced or altered by those of another in representing its version of the mutiny.

Theoretical Framework

In light of these analytical processes, the concept of medium is expanded to encompass any meaning-bearing mediator—or, in McLuhan's (1964) words, "any extension of ourselves" (p. 7)—that communicates messages across time and space. This broader definition suggests that media transcend traditional or typical communicative tools, like films or novels and may include *atypical media*: entities not traditionally recognized as media but still capable of shaping meaning, events, and narratives. Examples include the ship or the fictitious author, Byam, which transcend their conventional roles to become integral to the mutiny's mediation, embodying McLuhan's (1964) assertion: "the medium is the message" (p. 7).

This makes a medium multilayered and intangible. To address this complexity, Elleström (2021) distinguishes between basic media—described as "tangible, flat, static, visual, and iconic" configurations like words and images (p. 55)—and qualified media, the end-products of integrating basic media within social and cultural contexts, like novels. This model appears flexible enough to trace the transmediation of one media product into another, with the relationship between basic and qualified media resembling a loop, traceable forwards or backwards. However, when applied to the Bounty mutiny, the model reveals limitations. Its inadequacy stems from the mutiny's inconclusive narrative space, which facilitates the shifts from Bligh's historical accounts to diverse fictive narratives.

According to Elleström's model, each of these narratives is mediated through a qualified medium. Yet, when these qualified media are transmediated further, the process becomes more complex. The mutiny's narrative inconclusiveness creates a palimpsestic effect, where each layer of mediation is partially visible in the next, complicating the distinction between basic and qualified media. This introduces a sublevel, in which qualified media function similarly to basic media, becoming building blocks for further transmediations. For instance, Bligh's historical narratives shape subsequent adaptations.

This implies that the interrelation between basic and qualified media is not as straightforward as that between words, images, and scenes (basic media) and their corresponding qualified media, like novels, paintings, or films. Elleström's model does not account for the recursive nature of transmediation, where qualified media are continually recontextualized, blurring the line between basic and qualified media. Instead, each media product functions as a layer added to another, forming a grander, more comprehensive view of the mutiny—echoing what is described as "different layers of mediation" (Bruhn & Schirrmacher, 2022, p. 8).

Additionally, applying this model to a single media product proves impractical. Its unidirectional approach struggles to account for deeper interrelations within a single media product, where one qualified medium mediates and represents another. The rigid distinction between basic and

qualified media becomes problematic when analyzing how atypical media like the ship function within established qualified media like the novel. Elleström's framework may fall short in recognizing atypical media like the ship as a significant medium that does not only function materially but also spatiotemporally and semiotically, influencing events like the mutiny through its spatial design (e.g., deck, beams) and symbolic roles (e.g., authority, confinement). However, the framework's focus on established qualified media (e.g., novels, films) risks marginalizing the ship's potential as a qualified medium.

This limitation stems from the model's hierarchical structure, which prioritizes established qualified media over unconventional ones. In the Bounty mutiny, the novel would likely take precedence, while the ship's role might be dismissed or diminished. This oversight arises from the model's assumption that qualified media are primarily cultural artifacts, rather than dynamic, multifaceted entities like the ship. Consequently, the ship's potential as a qualified medium—actively shaping the mutiny's events and narrative—may be overlooked or undervalued.

Thus, the transmediation of the mutiny must account for the fact that its initial qualified medium, such as a novel or film, encompasses other atypical, qualified media, with the ship being a prominent example. However, this process is complicated by Elleström's implicit assumption that qualified media are static end products, created solely through the configuration of basic media. This overlooks the dynamic, multilayered nature of media, where qualified media can also function as building blocks for further transmediation, rather than merely serving as final outputs.

While Elleström's model does not explore these depths, it provides a foundation for classifying qualified media within the same media product. To enhance its applicability, a straightforward classification is recommended, distinguishing between two types of qualified media: *outer media*, aligning with Elleström's concept, and *inner media*, referring to qualified media mediated through the outer medium. Their relationship is interdependent: inner media are realized through the outer medium, while the outer medium's message is complete only when it incorporates the inner media.

This adapted framework provides a more functional approach for analyzing complex media interrelations. While maintaining Elleström's flexible foundation, it resolves the model's limitations in studying the mutiny's unique case. By circumventing its rigid classifications, it can more effectively trace transmediation processes—focusing not just on message adaptation but on how both outer and inner media reshape narratives. The modification proves particularly valuable when examining qualified media like the ship, which operates as the mutiny's origin. Far from a passive setting, the ship as a medium shapes perception of the mutiny, framing narratives toward particular truths. This becomes evident in Bligh's account: when lashed to the beam, the ship's spatial constraints literally narrow his perspective, creating narrative blind spots that perpetuate conflicting mutiny narratives.

The proliferation of mutiny narratives across diverse media complicates analysis but Elleström's adapted framework resolves this by establishing certain atypical media—such as the ship—as anchor points that recur across the different adaptations. These anchors facilitate a structured comparative analysis while accommodating media-specific variations. A salient example is the figure of Roger Byam: while constructed as a narratorial authority in the novel, he remains

conspicuously absent from both historical records and cinematic retellings. This deliberate presence/absence dynamic renders Byam a traceable analytical node, his narrative function—including its omissions—providing a framework for systematic cross-media examination.

Discussion and Analysis

Nordhoff and Hall's Mutiny on the Bounty as a Starting Point

The Bounty mutiny is among the most famous sea mutinies. Its enduring fame is rooted in its lasting impact and amplified by countless retellings across historical, fictional, and artistic media. Chief among these is Bligh's historical narrative. It arguably fails to provide a viable starting point due to its inherent bias, prioritizing Bligh's interests, prestige, and authority. This bias is evident in Joseph Banks' edits, where he "abridge[d] considerably what [Bligh] wrote . . . to satisfy the public and place [him] in such a point of view as they shall approve" (Christian, 2021, p. 205). Personal disputes, like the "notorious incident" of Bligh accusing Christian of stealing coconuts—notably "absent from his narrative" (p. 205)—are omitted. The result is an unrealistically reductive account, with Bligh (1792) portraying the voyage as one of "uninterrupted prosperity" (p. 153).

These omissions in Bligh's narrative create gaps that other media have sought to fill by offering alternative perspectives on the mutiny. Among these is Nordhoff and Hall's (1932) novel, which serves as a more viable starting point for examining the event due to the authors' deliberate narrative choices. In their preface, authors state their purpose is to "unfold the events of [the Bounty's] voyage" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. v), distancing their novel from proving or disproving any specific account while linking it to prior representations, such as Bligh's. This positions their novel as an objective and inclusive retelling.

A key narrative choice is the introduction of Byam as the narrator, replacing his historical counterpart, Peter Heywood. While substituting a real figure with a fictional one may seem unnecessary—especially in a novel framed as a continuation of its historical predecessors—Byam's role extends beyond that of a mere "imaginary homodiegetic narrator" (Largeaud-Ortega, 2018, p. 127). He serves as an atypical, qualified medium, granting the authors narrative flexibility to navigate the mutiny's ambiguous and inconclusive space. Byam's fictional mission to compile a dictionary—a task he diligently maintains throughout his narrative—mirrors his function as a medium. His remediation of Cook's interpretation of the Indian greeting as "nose-rubbing" into "a smelling of cheeks, corresponding to our kiss" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 62) epitomizes his mediating role. Akin to the dictionary itself, Byam offers a fresh perspective, while remaining faithful to historical peculiarities.

When the authors identify Heywood as Byam's counterpart, three interlocking effects that establish the novel's plausibility as an intermedial nexus emerge. First, Byam serves as an anchor point, enabling a nuanced investigation of the mutiny by inviting readers to juxtapose his fictionalized perspective with historical records of Heywood. This deliberate intertextuality bridges earlier and subsequent representations, weaving competing narratives while resisting reductive interpretations understanding and preserving the mutiny's complexities. Second, Byam's narrative fundamentally destabilizes Bligh's authoritative account. Where traditional naval narratives privilege captains'

perspectives, Byam's fictional viewpoint—rooted in Nordhoff and Hall's (1936) tracing of "various and discrepant accounts" of the mutiny back to the "source" narrative of Alexander Smith, the last surviving mutineer, whose version is recounted to multiple captains over decades (pp. vi-vii)—embodying the mutiny's inherent intermediality. Each retelling in this chain becomes, as noted, "remarkable for its differences" (pp. vi-vii). Finally, Byam's liminal position affords creative latitude. Though Nordhoff and Hall (1936) claim adherence to Admiralty records (p. v), his fictional status permits the synthesis of contested narratives, transforming the novel into what can be referred to as a historiographical palimpsest, where layered interpretations coexist without privileging one as definitive.

Byam as a Medium

Byam's full significance as a narrative medium emerges when imagining the novel without him. While the mutiny's facts would remain, the story would collapse into a reductive arc of betrayal and triumph—echoing Bligh's own simplified account. Byam's transmedial role instead complicates this narrative, challenging Bligh's version and deepening the mutiny's complexities. Evidently, Byam's narrative serves to exonerate Heywood, a contested figure whom Bligh branded "one of the ringleaders," writing: "I have now reason to curse the day I ever knew a Christian or a Heywood" (Famous Trials, n.d., Letter #1). Byam reframes Heywood as a victim, shifting focus from Bligh's emotional appeal—centered on betrayal by his close friend—to the factual causes of the mutiny, rooted in Bligh's ineptitude and tyranny.

Byam's transmediation fundamentally reshapes Bligh's relationship with Christian, countering Bligh's (1792) claim of being "on the most friendly terms" (p. 164) that inspired Donaldson's (1984) familial dinner scene in *The Bounty*. Where Bligh appeals to their bond during the mutiny—"Think of my family and my friendship. Think of my wife" (01:31:07)—Byam dismisses this bond, depicting it as rooted in hidden animosity and abuse of power:: "His friendship took the form of inviting Christian to sup or dine one day, and cursing him in the coarsest manner before the men the next" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 33). This retelling shifts focus from perceived betrayal to systemic injustices: while Donaldson's Bligh acknowledges a "crisis" and "deeply demoralized" crew (00:50:20-45), he blames Christian's "lethargy, impudence, and defiance" (01:16:10-53), whereas Byam meticulously details Bligh's leadership failures, devoting much of his narrative to incidents that highlight Bligh's unsympathetic and self-serving leadership.

Central among these incidents is Bligh's suspected corruption and profiteering. Byam highlights how the Bounty "carried no purser," leaving Bligh and his disliked assistant, Samuel, to manage provisions in a way that favored themselves, leaving the crew with "scarcely fit" remnants Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 33). This abuse of power breeds discontent, as Byam notes that "seamen can endure a harsh captain, but nothing incites mutiny faster than a captain suspected of profiteering at their expense" (p. 33). Tensions escalate during the Bread and Pumpkin Incident, where Bligh replaces bread rations with smaller portions of spoiled pumpkin, prioritizing profit over the crew's well-being. Despite the crew's docility—bearing their suffering "with patience" and "begging" for redress—Bligh dismisses their grievances, declaring himself the "only judge of what is right and wrong" and threatening them with being "seized up and flogged" (p. 40). Byam's transmediation of the surgeon's death leaves no doubt of Bligh's corruption. While Bligh reacts with apathy in his

narrative—a detail maintained in Donaldson's version, which omits a burial scene—Byam transforms the incident into a pivotal moment, attributing the death to "fish poisoning" (p. 76). He links this tragedy to Bligh's earlier corruption, suggesting that "fifty pounds of fish" that were clearly "different from the others" (p. 75) were likely purchased to save money, highlighting Bligh's systemic embezzlement.

Byam intertwines Bligh's corruption with instances that demonstrate his ineptness and cruelty as a captain. Among these is the Cheese Incident, where Bligh paranoically accuses the crew of theft, labeling them a "damned set of thieves" whom he will "tame," and Byam captures the crew's reactions, such as Fryer's offense and Christian's humiliation, describing the latter as "a man of honor" (p. 34). These details humanize the crew, contrasting sharply with Bligh's view of them as "the dregs of the public house" (pp. 37–38). The Shark Incident epitomizes Bligh's cruelty when Mills is flogged "three dozen" lashes for catching a shark—deemed "mutinous conduct"—with Byam vividly describing the "blood and bits of flesh" to expose Bligh's brutality (p. 44). He deliberately mediates the specific number of lashes to highlight Bligh's disregard for the Admiralty Regulations, which stipulate a "maximum of twelve lashes" (Lavery, 1989, p. 218). Similarly, in the Tinkler Incident, Bligh ties Tinkler to the rigging through a "bloody cold night" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 47) for a harmless game. He follows it by Young's humiliating flogging—particularly shocking for an officer "rated as a gentleman"—which Byam describes as "almost without precedent in the Service" (p. 51). Through these accounts, Byam's transmedial function emerges clearly, his descriptions evoking images parallel to (FIGURE 1) (Lavery, pp. 218-220).

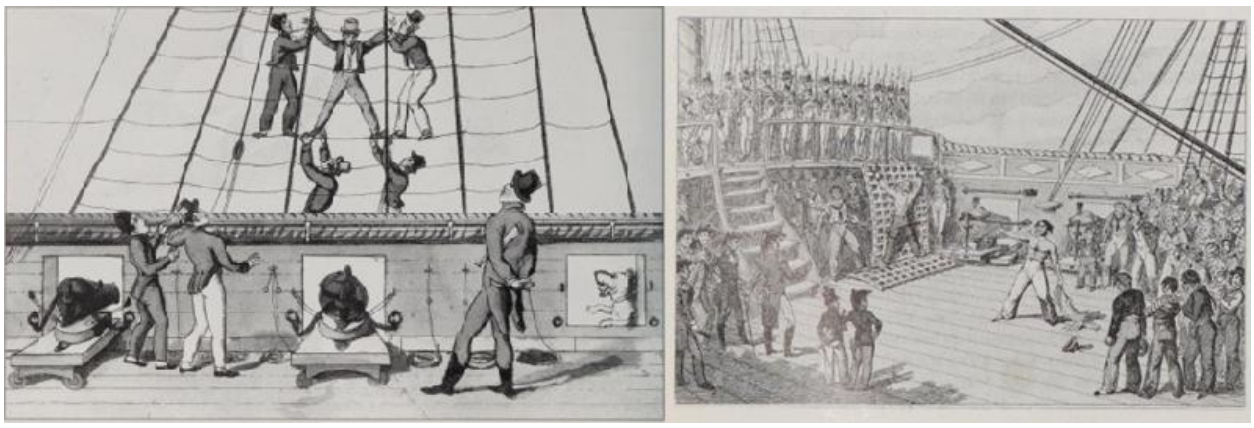

FIGURE 1. Intermedial corroboration of Byam's accounts: (Right) Flogging scene mirroring the Shark Incident, (Left) Midshipman punishment reflecting the Tinkler Incident.

When examined collectively, these incidents reveal Byam's deliberate narrative pattern, as he enumerates them one after another without pause. This creates a list of events that collectively justify the mutiny, serving as its prelude and particularly highlighting the discontent "among the officers" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 49). Each class of the ship's crew is symbolically represented by a specific character: Purcell, representing the common seaman, "was in irons"; Fryer, representing those second in authority, openly dislikes Bligh; Tinkler, a midshipman, was tied to the rigging; and Young, another midshipman, "was lashed to a gun on the quarter-deck and given a dozen with a colt" (p. 49). By listing these incidents in this manner, Byam ensures the reader retains a vivid memory of each injustice while mediating the overarching message that Bligh has wronged every individual aboard the Bounty.

The irony of Byam's narrative lies in his conspicuous absence during these incidents. Despite often being the first—and sometimes the only—one to know about them, maintaining a semi-omniscient and semi-omnipresent status, his presence is strangely unnoticed. He is miraculously absent when these events unfold, evident in how Byam never refers to himself as a victim of the discontent caused by Bligh's tyranny and corruption—even when his counterpart, Heywood, suffers a fate identical to Young's in Donaldson's (1984) *The Bounty* (01:04:35).

This deliberate absence may be justified when Byam is read as a medium transcending the role of a typical fictional character. Despite his vivid descriptions of incidents testifying to Bligh's tyranny and corruption, Byam never lends his own voice to these accusations. His voice is unheard, his actions untraceable, and his reactions nonexistent. Instead, he mediates these incidents through the crew's voices, positioning himself as an invisible observer, meticulously capturing every detail (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 34). He even avoids taking responsibility for the details he introduces, often claiming he merely "chanced to know" such information, portraying himself as coincidentally present to "eavesdrop" on incidents—even when he has "no desire" to do so (pp. 50, 52).

By remaining voiceless, actionless, and reactionless, Byam appears detached from events, reinforcing his role as an impartial medium rather than an active participant. This strategic self-effacement fulfills his purpose of proving his innocence while allowing him to present a damning indictment of Bligh with an air of objectivity and detachment.

Mediating the Mutiny

Byam's narrative pattern undergoes a significant shift during his account of the mutiny, abandoning his characteristic semi-omniscient perspective and semi-omnipresent tone for deliberate obliviousness. His admission about "two men, whose name I do not remember" rushing into his berth (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 98)—his first memory lapse—reveals this strategic shift. Though seemingly minor, this feigned cluelessness serves a crucial purpose: Byam's previous invisibility becomes unfeasible during the chaos, so he assumes the role of an oblivious officer, even mistaking the mutiny for an attack (p. 98). This calculated cluelessness maintains his mediating function while explaining his presence during the event. Byam's strategic obliviousness paradoxically sustains his mediating function. His feigned cluelessness maintains an appearance of neutrality, insulating him from mutiny involvement while enabling him to reconcile contradictory narratives. This complex positioning serves dual purposes: demonstrating loyalty to the Bounty while exposing Bligh's leadership failures—objectives fundamentally at odds, given Bligh's accusations against Byam (or Heywood) as a ringleader. Nevertheless, Byam skillfully balances these tensions, showcasing his nuanced role as narrative mediator.

To counter Bligh's accusations, Byam crafts an account that reads more like a confession than fiction. He meticulously names every mutineer encountered—from the unexpectedly disloyal Smith to the presumed "ringleader" Churchill (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, pp. 99–100)—while detailing his own resistance efforts (unarmed, allied with Morrison). Yet their failed attempt to reach Bligh's launch ironically brands them as conspirators (p. 99). This strategy allows Byam to affirm his loyalty while embedding damning evidence of Bligh's leadership failures. He saturates the chaotic mutiny scene with voices condemning Bligh: Churchill's "Bligh has brought all this on himself"

and Ellison's mocking repetition of Bligh's threats (p. 101). Through this chorus of grievances, Byam ensures Bligh's tyranny dominates the reader's mind.

Byam's strategic cluelessness does not diminish his meticulous attention to detail, using both to expose Bligh's fallibility. The parallel between Bligh—stripped to a shirt, tied to the mizzenmast with an "expression of incredulity" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 100)—and Byam's own bewilderment implicitly questions Bligh's credibility. This is reinforced by Bligh's erratic shift from violent threats—"Master of my ship, you mutinous dog!" (p. 100)—to desperate pleas—"Mr. Christian, allow me to speak" (p. 101). This disorientation is mirrored Donaldson's (1984) portrayal where Bligh struggles to identify loyalists: "Are you in this, Norton?" (1:30:05–45). Byam's cluelessness thus becomes a deliberate device to undermine Bligh's authority and narrative reliability. This constitutes Byam's most critical function as medium: preventing the mutiny's reduction to a simple exoneration tale. By revealing Bligh's account as partial and unreliable, he not only proves his own innocence but also exposes the mutiny's fundamental inconclusiveness—its resistance to any single, definitive version.

This notion explains Byam's vivid mediation of Bligh's tyranny as an effort to shift focus from Bligh's undisputed nautical achievements to the overlooked aspects of his leadership. These aspects, overshadowed by the magnitude of Bligh's celebrated endeavors, are deemed unworthy of inclusion in his narrative. This is evident in gaps like the omission of the coconut incident: "All reports agree that after this blowup, Bligh went contentedly about his business; the coconut incident receives no mention whatsoever in either his private or official log" (Alexander, 2003, Mutiny chapter). The fulfillment of this purpose is evident in how Byam voices what Bligh excludes from his account, dedicating narrative space to the downtrodden to voice their accusations. Byam's version creates a parallel image in readers' minds, contrasting Bligh's perspective with that of the mutineers. Bligh's historical account rarely accommodates such a narrative space, as evidenced by versions of the mutiny that directly contradict Byam's portrayal.

One key example is Dodd's (1790) artistic representation of the mutiny (FIGURE 2), which focuses solely on Bligh's perspective, depicting him being forced off his ship. Out of context, the painting offers a definitive but incomplete view, portraying Bligh as a dethroned captain usurped by pirates. This interpretation is reinforced by the unrecognizability of the crew except for Bligh and Christian, and by a caption explicitly describing the mutiny, eliminating ambiguity. However, the caption also reveals the painting's reductive nature, as without it, the scene could be misinterpreted as a rescue or evacuation. This one-sidedness stresses the impossibility of capturing the mutiny's complexity in a single image, leaving narrative space for other mediums to fill.

FIGURE 2. Dodd's *emblematic-yet-inconclusive* depiction of the mutiny collapses into ambiguity without its caption.

When viewed alongside Byam's narrative, the painting's meaning expands beyond a simplistic rebellion. It invites consideration of the mutineers' motivations and the consequences of their actions, including why they armed Bligh with weapons that could be used against them. Byam's narrative complements the painting by providing the voices and perspectives Bligh's account omits, vividly recounting the crew's grievances and Bligh's tyranny. This interplay between Byam's narrative and Dodd's painting highlights the limitations of any single perspective and emphasizes the need for an intermedial approach to fully grasp the mutiny's complexities.

Another example is the heralding of Bligh as the "hero of the Bounty saga" (Alexander, 2003, Return chapter), portraying him as sparing in disciplinary punishment rather than sadistic. This view is supported by Bligh's correspondence, where he states, "what has given me much pleasure is that I have not yet been obliged to punish anyone," and in a letter to Joseph Banks, writes, "I have no cause to inflict punishments for I have no offenders and every thing turns out to my most sanguine expectations" (Alexander, 2003, Voyage Out chapter). However, these accounts come solely from Bligh's perspective, reflecting the tendency of captains to present themselves as authoritative historians.

Bligh may have believed his efforts, such as maintaining the ship as "perfectly Sweet & refreshing" with regular scents and enforcing strict hygiene through "Sunday inspections of his mustered men, whose clothing and even fingernails he personally checked for cleanliness" (Alexander, 2003, Voyage Out chapter), were for the voyage's benefit. Yet, his perspective remains one-sided. From the crew's viewpoint, as depicted in Donaldson's (1984) *The Bounty,* these measures are seen as tyrannical control, culminating in Bligh's threat: "I'll make you lick them clean with your tongues" (01:20:35–01:21:00). The film transmediates these actions from innocent precautions to the mutiny's catalyst, highlighting the disparity between Bligh's self-portrayal and his crew's experience.

The Aftermath of the Mutiny and an Interplay between Mediums

Byam's most crucial function as a medium emerges not in recounting the mutiny itself, but in mediating its contested aftermath during the trial. His narrative underscores how the mutiny affords multiple conflicting accounts, each shaped by participants' limited perspectives. Rather than asserting his version's superiority, Byam highlights truth's inherent multiplicity—a strategy epitomized when he includes Bligh's damning testimony verbatim. Though acknowledging its "deep impression upon the Court" and that "no more damning statement could have been brought forward" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 227), Byam's purpose is not to disprove Bligh's account but to challenge any narrative's claim to absolute authority. His seemingly futile defense strategically sows reasonable doubt, demonstrating how dominant versions eclipse alternatives and that no single perspective can fully contain the truth.

Positioned as an anchor point, Byam facilitates an interplay between his version and others shaped by their corresponding media. Rather than proving one version's credibility over another—a reductive effort likely resulting in a stalemate—the focus should be on piecing these versions together across media, acknowledging their unique differences while reconciling conflicts where possible. The more conflicting they are, the better, as this process allows for multidimensional perspective on the mutiny.

Bligh's statement exemplifies how differently the mutiny can be perceived. For instance, Bligh makes no mention of the loyalists who were unable to join him in the launch due to the risk of capsizing. While this omission neither harms nor benefits Bligh's case, it suggests that, in the chaos of the mutiny, he may have forgotten or failed to grasp this detail. Bligh's acknowledgment that the boat was "so lumbered and deep in the water" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 225) leaves room for this interpretation, though it remains unstated. His focus on the dire situation, compounded by the mutineers' ridicule, likely overshadowed such details, creating a narrative gap that Byam's account fills.

Another instance highlighting the reconciliation of discrepancies across media is the provision of four cutlasses to Bligh's company. This moment appears pivotal across the different versions. Dodd's (1790) painting distills the essence of the mutiny into this moment, while Donaldson's (1984) film implicitly acknowledges it without depicting what Bligh (1792) mentions in his statement: "four cutlasses, however, were thrown into the boat" (p. 158). Though portrayed differently, all versions agree on the act itself, yet none explains it. Byam's account fills this gap by mentioning his persuasion of Christian to provide the cutlasses. His inclusion bridges the narrative gap, illustrating how different media can complement and clarify one another.

The interplay between media and their corresponding versions continues as Byam follows Bligh's version with Fryer's testimony, which he introduces as providing "what was seen by the Bounty's master on the day of the mutiny" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 227). This framing suggests that Fryer's testimony should not be taken as the ultimate truth, as it is limited to his perspective. Fryer's account reveals details unstated by Bligh, such as the cutter's worm-eaten bottom (p. 228), confirming Byam's narrative of Purcell's plea to provide Bligh with the launch instead.

What is more important, however, is that the inclusion of Fryer's version demonstrates how the ship itself functions as a medium, shaping the perceptions and testimonies of those aboard. Fryer's admission that he "did not see any more" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 231) illustrates how the ship's layout and the chaos of the mutiny limited each witness's view. Byam's question to Fryer—"did you overhear anything that was said?"—to which Fryer answers "no" (p. 233), reinforces the idea that no single testimony can capture the full truth. Byam explicitly states that "each man had witnessed events from different parts of the ship," resulting in versions that, while covering "much the same ground," involve "important points of difference" (p. 234).

This divergence highlights how the ship, as a medium, influences and fragments the mutiny's narrative, suggesting that the truth is far more complex than Bligh's account alone. For instance, Peckover, the Bounty's gunner, testifies that only four mutineers were armed—a claim that defies reason yet is taken seriously by the court. Purcell, the carpenter, contradicts this by naming seventeen armed mutineers, yet omits Muspratt from his list, despite Byam's account of Muspratt's involvement. However, Purcell had not been atop the Bounty at this specific moment, again demonstrating how the ship dictates the version of the mutiny being narrated. In Purcell's version, Muspratt is innocent, whereas in Byam's he is not. Purcell, however, is the first to mention that Byam was asked to "intercede with Christian for the launch instead of the cutter" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 240), an instance that may have gone unnoticed by many. These inconsistencies demonstrate how the ship's layout and the chaos of the mutiny shape each witness's testimony.

Another contradiction arises in Hallet's testimony, where he claims Byam "laughed, and turned and walked away" from Bligh during the mutiny (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 247), aligning with Bligh's accusation of Byam's involvement. Byam discredits this, arguing Hallet was "terrified" and "ignorant" due to the chaos (p. 246). This gains credibility in Hallet's letter to Nessy Heywood, Peter Heywood's sister, where he confesses that he was "totally ignorant" and unable to "declare positively" Heywood's role (Tagart, 1832, p. 12). This explains Byam's deliberate use of the word "ignorant" as an allusion to Hallet's letter. As a medium, Byam utilizes this contradiction to demonstrate that the truth about the mutiny is elusive and fragmented.

Byam's defense fails when the judges dismiss his account as a fabricated tale "to save his life" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1936, p. 253). This failure stems from his narrative's selective editing—mirroring Bligh's own manipulations—as Byam admits his lawyer "point[ed] out omissions and mak[ing] suggestions" (p. 249). His bias is further exposed by omitting Purcell's testimony that he saw Heywood, Byam's counterpart, "with a cutlass in his hand," which he "dropped" when confronted, appearing as a "victim of his youthfulness and the excitement of the moment" (Hough, 2000, p. 279).

Conclusion

Though Byam fails to prove his innocence in court, he succeeds as a medium in revealing a fundamental truth about the mutiny: the futility of privileging one narrative over others. Any attempt to validate a single account would only lead to a reductive conception of the mutiny, since its inherent inconclusiveness, intensified by the event's remoteness further diminishes objectivity, renders all judgments mere opinion—easily contested by the other narratives. The charges against

Byam and Morrison exemplify such futility. The court's contradictory rulings—initially sentencing both to death, only to acquit them later, with Morrison cleared in the same session—highlight the impossibility of proving any version true or false. Such indecisiveness exposes the flaw in seeking a singular authoritative narrative. Embracing all versions, with their inconsistencies and contradictions, is crucial to forming a comprehensive understanding of the mutiny.

References

Alexander, C. (2003). *The Bounty: The True Story of the Mutiny on the Bounty* [E-reader version]. Penguin Books.

Bligh, W. (1792). *A Voyage to the South Sea: Undertaken by Command of His Majesty, for the Purpose of Conveying the Bread-fruit Tree to the West Indies, in his Majesty's ship the Bounty Commanded by Lieutenant William Bligh*. George Nicol.

Bishop, M. (1744). *The Life and Adventures of Matthew Bishop of Deddington in Oxfordshire. Containing an Account of Several Actions by sea, Battles and Sieges by Land, ... From 1701 to 1711, ... Written by Himself*. J. Brindley, G. Hawkins, R. Dodsley, J. Millan.

Bruhn, J., & Schirrmacher, B. (2022). *Intermedial Studies An Introduction to Meaning Across Media*. Routledge.

Christian, H. (2021). M*en Without Country: The True Story of Exploration and Rebellion in the South Seas*. Ultimo Press.

Donaldson, R. (Director). (1984). *The Bounty* [Film]. Dino De Laurentiis Corporation; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Dodd, R. (1790). *The mutineers turning Lieutenant Bligh and part of the officers and crew adrift from His Majesty's Ship the Bounty* [Painting]. National Portrait Gallery.

Elleström, L. (2021). *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 1 Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Famous Trials. (n.d.). *The mutiny on the Bounty: Letters from Captain Bligh and others*. University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law. Retrieved February 25, 2025, from https://famous-trials.com/bounty/401-letters

Great Britain. (1762). *An Act for amending, explaining, and reducing into one Act of Parliament, the laws relating to the government of His Majesty's ships, vessels, and forces by sea (30 Geo. II c. 33). In D. Pickering (Ed.), The statutes at large, from the 20th to the 23rd year of King George II (Vol. 19, pp. 325–339)*. Cambridge: Printed by Joseph Bentham. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=wa03AAAAMAAJ

Herbert, C. (2008). *War of no pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*. Princeton University Press.

Hough, R. A. (2000). *Captain Bligh and Mr. Christian: The Men and the Mutiny*. Chatham Publishing.

Lavery, B. (1989). *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men, and Organization 1793-1815*. Conway Maritime Press.

Largeaud-Ortega, S. (2018). Nordhoff and Hall's Mutiny on the Bounty: A Piece of Colonial Historical Fiction. In *The Bounty from the Beach Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Essays* (pp. 125–153). essay, ANU Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). There are no visual media. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4(2), 257–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412905054673

Nordhoff, C., & Hall, J. N. (1936). *The Mutiny on the Bounty Trilogy*. Little Brown and Company.

Rediker, M. (1987). B*etween the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700 - 1750*. Cambridge University Press.

Scott, J. C. (2012). *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. Princeton University Press.

Tagart, E. (1832). *A Memoir of the Late Captain Peter Heywood, R.N.: With Extracts from His Diaries and Correspondence*. Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange.