

INTRODUCTION

FILM AND HISTORY: OUR MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AS A NEW FRONTIER

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Contemporary Americans know what they know about foreign affairs, domestic politics, and history primarily from what they see on the motion picture screen, television, and—in a recycled form—on videotape and DVD technologies. The latter bring classic fiction films and documentaries to homes as rental items or purchases, blurring the distinction between movie attendance and home entertainment. These developments in access to television and film are simultaneously a threat to our culture and a boon to educators. It is up to us, in fact, to grasp the challenge and to devise ways in which to make these entertainment media work to enhance our popular memory. Back in 1970, John O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson saw this challenge looming on the intellectual horizon. In response, they founded a journal entitled *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television History* (www.filmandhistory.org). That journal has passed through various hands over the last thirty-five years, but it has addressed many of the issues that are explored in this fine collection of essays. The main purpose of this book is to shed light on the fascinating, and sometimes troubling, subject of how films interpret history. The five essays in this collection explore significant frontier trails for film/history studies.

In the first essay, "In Praise of the Biopic," Robert Rosenstone addresses a persistent theme—*the way in which film treats controversial events in history*. In describing how the film *Reds* treated Jack Reed's involvement with the Communist Party, Rosenstone reminds us that it is impossible to separate a film from its own place in social history. Then, too, there is always the filmmaker's agenda. Whether they tell

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the story of great leaders or ordinary people, motion pictures put their spin on history. Custer's "last stand" was a high moment of courage in the pre-WWII film *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941, starring Errol Flynn), yet the same story later became an example of personal hubris and national arrogance in the Vietnam-era *Little Big Man* (1970, starring Dustin Hoffman). The Errol Flynn version saw a heroic expansion of white civilization into a savage wilderness, while the Dustin Hoffman perspective questioned, during the Vietnam conflict, the right of Americans to invade and acquire lands not their own. More recently, both *Seabiscuit* (2003) and *Cinderella Man* (2005) portray the Great Depression in a manner that celebrates the power of individuals to triumph over nearly overwhelming conditions. Both films give a hopeful interpretation on the impact of the era on ordinary citizens; not everyone was destroyed by the nationwide setbacks of that crucial decade, John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1941) notwithstanding.

The second essay, by Geoff Pingree, is titled "History Is What Remains: Cinema's Challenge to Ideas about the Past." In it, Pingree asks very broad questions about the nature of history and historical interpretation, focusing on Jay Rosenblatt's *History Remains* (1998). Explored are basic questions about historical documents as texts, the nature of historical "truth," and how differently readers/viewers relate to verbal and visual messages. Here, Pingree calls attention to the creative talent needed to write history and/or to produce cinematic interpretations of the past. In a review of the film included in the press kit, noted scholar Ernest Giglio has urged that "*History Remains* will prove to be a valuable classroom resource. No viewer will leave the film unchanged." To question the very nature of documents is also to question the insights to be gained via documentary film; *Human Remains* thus becomes a thirty-minute Rorschach training ground for classes discussing historical method. (The film won a Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival, a major coup for any film.) Those interested in such object lessons for exegesis should consider two other very successful pedagogical films: *Goodbye Billy: America Goes to War, 1917-1918* (1970, Cadre Films) and *Will Rogers' 1920s: A Cowboy's Guide to the Times* (1976, Cadre Films). Both have been discussed at length by the filmmakers in the pages of *Film & History*.

The third essay, "Crusaders and Saracens: The Persistence of Orientalism in Historically Themed Motion Pictures about the Middle East," traces a pervasive theme in Western perceptions of the Orient. Richard Francaviglia applies the concept of "Orientalism" (and, conversely, Occidentalism) to both cultural history and to a rather broad spectrum of major motion pictures from Howard Hughes's unconvinc-

ing *The Conqueror* (1956) to more recent productions such as Joe Johnson's *Hidalgo* (2004) and Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). Francaviglia argues that negative—indeed, antipathetic—stereotypes about the East pervade Western culture; these simplified codes are then exaggerated by screenwriters to suit the dramatic needs of motion pictures. After 9/11 (USA) and 7/7 (UK) terrorist crises, every citizen of the globe needs to be aware of cultural prejudices and their implications. As Edward Said wrote, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunted memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences—that now form part of a colonial discourse with the eastern world.” That is true, but Francaviglia also observes that Orientalism involves considerable appreciation of Eastern cultures—and that exposure to the East can reorient, in Francaviglia's words, the Westerner's viewpoint. Teachers are urged to study the method of this essay, as it explores details of real history in relation to the reports of the reel history.

The fourth essay, “‘The Truth Wrapped in a Package of Lies’: Hollywood, History, and Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*” examines Martin Scorsese's critically acclaimed *Gangs of New York* (2002) with a historical magnifying glass. Authors David A. Nathan, Peter Berg, and Erin Klemyk see many virtues in this historical film about the 1863 draft riots in New York City, arguing that it is an intellectually complex interpretation of the immigrant experience. Even invented scenes in *Gangs of New York* are praised for their evocation of historical truth. The Tammany Hall political machine, the class chasms and conflicts, the racial antagonisms were all part of the city's experience, and Scorsese is given high marks for vividly bringing these social tensions to the screen. According to the authors of this essay, “*Gang's* greatest accomplishment . . . is its emotional force, its ability to communicate the texture and furor of the past.” Implicit in their interpretation of the historical value of the epic film is the assumption that the analysts' own interests in race, class, and gender have been overlooked by historians. Our young scholars are often excited to find their interests reflected in new motion pictures.

The fifth essay in this volume, “In Defense of the Filmmakers” by Robert Brent Toplin, directly addresses the second point that I would like to discuss in this introduction that is also a major subtext in this book, namely, *that (and how) films reflect history*. Before discussing Toplin's essay in some detail, however, I would like to place his work in both historic context and in the context of the Webb Lectures.

It is often the case that motion pictures reflect the attitudes of their time—often unconsciously. The sound-era films of Will Rogers—feature productions such as *David Harem* (1934), *In Old Kentucky* (1935), and

Steamboat 'Round the Bend (1935)—were written and produced as what is often described as “pure entertainment.” Those of us who study motion pictures in a cultural context see more in these productions: as a film icon, Will Rogers appealed to a strong longing for a nineteenth-century, rural-based, community-oriented society that had been destroyed by the industrial age. As the Great Depression deepened, many Americans became wistful for the pre-1900 years when people lived—at least as viewed retrospectively—in an era of *gemeinschaft*. The popularity of these rural fantasies says much about the rejection of modernity under the pressures of hard times. But one thing is clear: these escapes into the 1890s were a reflection of the inner spiritual life of the 1930s.

The genre approach to film (i.e., war film, western film, musical film) has shown that generic conventions evolve over time as the preoccupations of filmmakers and audiences change. Even the work of particular filmmakers evolves, reflecting changing attitudes. For example, in 1939 John Ford’s *Stagecoach* told the story of civilization vs. the wilderness in a manner that could have been endorsed by the most ardent advocate of Manifest Destiny. Yet, by the end of his career, in *The Searchers* (1956) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) this great director revised his sanguine vision of white expansion into Indian territory. His *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) condemned the evils of racism during the height of civil rights activism. Yet all of these films were Westerns; the changes in plot, characterization, setting, and theme reflected the evolution of an artist’s sensibility and a nation’s conscience.

This subject has an international dimension. Francaviglia’s essay addresses this issue by identifying the pervasiveness of Orientalism in European and American thinking and then traces how this view of the East (i.e., the Middle East), as a result, has been a basic organizational principle for such popular films as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), *True Lies* (1994)—even the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3). As they provide entertainment their vision is often distorted by deep-seated negative attitudes about the Oriental “other.” Yet, as Francaviglia shows, we are ambivalent about the East, and our films reveal that ambivalence.

Another theme worth mentioning in this introduction—but not discussed much in these essays—is that *films attempt to influence history itself*. If we think about this carefully, we can recognize countless examples of motion pictures made to influence their times. During World War II, Frank Capra—the Academy Award-winning director of *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936)—was called to Washington to produce a series of “orientation films” for troops headed overseas. The *Why We Fight* series he developed consisted of eight hour-long films designed to erase the last vestiges of isolationism in the minds of troops,

especially those from the American heartland (Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas), the breadbasket of isolationism. In addition, by showing the brutality of the Axis enemies and the scope of their global objectives, the films fostered a fighting spirit that would lead to victory. In recent times, Michael Moore has made a number of documentaries designed to change history: *Roger and Me* (1989) is his critique of America's big corporations and their lack of compassion; *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) tried to show that America's gun culture—with the help of a villainized Charlton Heston—was responsible for a national tragedy; *Fahrenheit 9/11* was an explicit effort to influence a presidential election in 2004 by showing the putative mendacity and greed of the Bush family and former Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney. There is a long list of films and filmmakers intent on influencing the American demos. In such discussions, the name of director Oliver Stone is bound to be mentioned.

In this collection there is less emphasis on films designed to sway audiences because so much attention has been devoted to the representation of the past, but some examples discussed are worthy of mention. Consider again, for example, Robert Rosenstone's considerably detailed discussion of the film *Reds*. No doubt Warren Beatty, in making *Reds*, was attempting to connect the international saga of radicalism to an American setting. This is powerfully embodied in the career of John Reed, one of the few Americans buried in the Kremlin, but also reinforced by interviews edited into the film with American radicals who offer "witness" about their goals. Such a theme is close to Hollywood's heart and was in harmony with the activism of the 1960s and 1970s; that *Reds* appeared in the same year that Ronald Reagan moved into the White House made the film all the more important as a countercultural statement.

The historical romance *Walker* (1987) was seen as a belated condemnation of America's adventurism in Vietnam in the 1960s; the film contains an anachronistic reenactment of the evacuation of the Saigon Embassy in 1975—albeit placed in the 1840s at the end of Walker's reign in Nicaragua. The director's strategic placement of deliberately anachronistic items from American culture—a Coca-Cola bottle and a *Time* magazine, for example—is a jarring reminder of the United States' involvement in the third world. Director Alex Cox was clearly using an eccentric case study in imperialism to editorialize about a recent American failure in southeastern Asia and the Reagan administration's putative adventurism in modern-day Nicaragua.

Now that I have set the scene, so to speak, I shall address Robert B. Toplin's contribution to this collection of essays. As Toplin points out in his essay, one of the most negative films made to influence popular

audiences was *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). It served as a major prop for the return of segregation in America during the otherwise progressive administration of Woodrow Wilson (1913–21). The film celebrated the heroic return to white dominance after the era of Reconstruction (1865–77). Its popularity continued in later years as the proud emblem of the Ku Klux Klan. (Every chapter of the illicit organization owned a print of the perverse epic.) Toplin also suggests (with others) that President Richard Nixon gained confidence in his strategic plans for the Vietnam War by watching George C. Scott portray a decisive *Patton* (1970). Basking in a cinematic afterglow, Nixon ordered the invasion of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, thereby setting off protests on campuses across the nation, most notably at Kent State in 1970, where four students were killed during the third day of protests.

All of the essays more or less address a major underlying issue about writing history—*accuracy vs. truth*. We know that many historians are dismissive of motion pictures because they manipulate facts, conflate historical characters, and communicate through symbols and microcosms rather than employ word-laden discursive techniques. Like many traditional scholars, historians are uncomfortable with visual language and—although influenced by it—have never studied the techniques and tricks filmmakers use to get their interpretations across to audiences.

In the first essay, Rosenstone defends a genre, the “biopic” (biographical film), in a manner that runs against the grain of existing scholarship, most notably George F. Custen’s fascinating study, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. Custen’s overview is highly critical of the biopic genre for representing the views of the filmmakers and studio executives more than those of the ostensible subjects of such “prestige pictures”—Louis Pasteur, Emile Zola, Alexander Graham Bell, and Marie Antoinette. Rather than being a detractor of the genre, Rosenstone—who completed an important biography of John Reed in 1975 and then served as historical advisor to Warren Beatty when that youthful actor directed (and starred in) *Reds*—argues that both authors and filmmakers must make a number of similar artistic decisions about their subjects. Each must cast the person into a story that includes both his personal life and the public life of the era; each must decide what incidents are to be examined in detail and what people are to be prominent to fulfill the story arc, including invented characters; finally, each will inevitably “invent” incidents that allow the artist—literary or cinematic—to evoke the inner truths about character.

Borrowing from Ira Nadel, Rosenstone suggests that biographies should subscribe to “Boswellian understanding rather than Baconian data.” Some leading examples explored are John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*

(1939), a film often criticized by Lincoln specialists and *Walker* (1987), a rendering of history that counts Rosenstone as a rare—albeit prestigious—admirer. As an expert on John Reed, Rosenstone examines three very different films about the young cheerleader for the Bolshevik Revolution and finds that each, due to a different approach, has its own insights. The real John Reed eludes all of them, but these biopics are valuable as historical interpretations: they are, in Rosenstone's words, more than pale reflections of some sterile "true history." In his support for films as "interpretations," Rosenstone is very much in agreement with Robert Brent Toplin.

Toplin's essay addresses the great paradox of film as an art form. While conceding that films have inherent weaknesses because of their visual mode and time constrictions, Toplin argues that historical interpretations in film have an impressive track record. For example, the television series *Holocaust* (1978) sparked discussion of that historical nightmare not only in the United States but also in Europe. Reviewers, scholars, and citizens were forced to reexamine the legacy of Nazi Germany and to discuss the evils of racism, clearly a heuristic exercise in all eras. In conjunction with the D-Day memorials, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) stimulated an enormous market for monographs and oral histories focused on World War II. Tom Brokaw, in this context, coined a familiar term, "the greatest generation," which seems, unfortunately, to have been accepted as a basic concept of history rather than an honorific moniker bestowed by an admiring network reporter.

Toplin astutely notes that films set an emotional hook: "By engaging the audience's sympathies for principal characters, these movies arouse a hunger for greater knowledge about the historical context." For example, the Civil War film *Glory* (1989) portrays the New England regiment of African Americans as former slaves when, in fact, they were predominantly free citizens. James McPherson, a major scholar and former president of the American Historical Association, is cited as approving this distortion of fact because it better spoke to the African American military experience during the conflict: As Toplin observes, "The director (and screenwriter, Kevin Jarre) manipulated a small 'truth' in order to advance understanding of an important larger 'truth.'" The final thrust of Toplin's contribution aims in the direction one would expect from an educator. While no booster for Hollywood history, Toplin observes that "Hollywood movies do not bring closure to discussions about history. But," he concludes, "they do have the potential to open them."

This debate about artistic vs. historical truth is not new. In recent times, Oliver Stone has defended such controversial films as *JFK* and *Platoon* as a form of cinematic history. At great length, Stone has argued

that, while distorting details of his stories as understood by historians, he has been after a “deeper” truth—as it were, a truth below mere surface facts. This debate about “facticity” is not a new one, and we commit a grave error to restrict it to the discussion of motion picture history. For those of us with a literary background, the debate about artistic vs. historical truth goes back to nineteenth-century discussions of the contrasting purposes of the “romance” as opposed to the “novel.” In the various prefaces to his novels, Nathaniel Hawthorne argued that the artist studies history to discover truths of the human heart. To accomplish that end, the artist *must* distort and invent because mere facts often obscure important personal and corporate truths. The very first paragraph of Hawthorne’s preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) would serve well as a defense of liberties taken by *conscientious* directors who render history into film:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation.

The essays by Rosenstone and Toplin support this tolerance of license in the name of truth (rather than mere accuracy). With special skills in summing up this issue, Geoff Pingree describes the creative opportunity for all histories—written or cinematic: “So it is with history in film: that things happened, that events occurred, we can agree, but the problem is how we negotiate the distance that exists inevitably between us and these events and happenings.” Here, indeed, is an opportunity for imagination to dredge meaning out of experience.

I shall conclude this introduction by noting that these essays’ namesake—historian Walter Prescott Webb—would have been pleased with the work of the authors included in this collection. Like his mentor, Frederick Jackson Turner, Webb was concerned with historical method and particularly interested in the relationship between people and their environments. In our media age, it is essential for citizens to be aware of the power of motion pictures and television to determine our *media*

environment. The sheer duration of viewing each day by the ordinary American—as much as six hours—cannot be dismissed as “mere entertainment” because the popular arts entertain only when they touch audience anxieties and aspirations. In the process, they shape popular culture and, over time, popular perceptions.

By treating historical films as works of art, we can appreciate the productions as we keep alert to the interpretations imposed by cinematic artists. In doing so, we become visually literate and better able to understand our past—and, therefore, our responsibilities in the present. Students can be reached in this way, and they are our future. In the days of Turner, historians were overemphasizing the European roots of American institutions, and he stepped in to remind his colleagues about the influence of the frontier in American history. This collection, in studying the pitfalls and positive potentials for historical films, has further called attention to a scholarly frontier for our own time—the study of film and history.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Peter C. Rollins, ed., *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television History.
www.filmandhistory.org