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Feature Films as History

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Overview

Long dismissed by historians as unworthy of serious consideration, feature films' popularity, as well their marketing to schools as teaching resources, have prompted a reexamination of their merit as sources of history. The recent popular and critical success and public conversations surrounding films like *Selma*, *Lincoln*, and *Twelve Years a Slave*, make this reexamination particularly relevant, as do the promotion of feature films as teaching tools in the history classroom. For three decades, a discussion has been gaining currency among historians as they debate the role of feature films as a medium for conveying and teaching history. For many, engagement with historical films has moved beyond the model of historians simply criticizing films for factual inaccuracies to viewing them as legitimate tools of historical inquiry.

Within the larger discussion, there is still disagreement over what constitutes a "historical film." I find Jonathan Stubbs' definition to be the most helpful, "films which engage with history or which in some way construct a relationship to the past" including, "films regardless of whether or not they purport to deal with 'real' people and events."¹ In hopes of helping readers develop their own methodology for engaging this medium, this essay introduces historians' various approaches toward historical films. Discussing an assortment of arguments about the efficacy of historical films, I highlight the work of the most prominent writers on the subject. Finally, I will briefly discuss my own experiences as a teacher using historical films in a college history class designed to explore the intersection between Southern history and popular culture. This brief essay is not prescriptive—each teacher must decide for themselves their own level of engagement with historical films. However, whether teachers choose to engage historical films or not, it is important they are at least familiar with the ongoing discussion.

This discussion is important because popular culture offers to people explanations for the world around them. When the popularity and immediacy of film combines with history's ability to explain how things came to be, millions of people can have their understanding of the past and present influenced by historical films. The longtime editor of the *Journal of American History*, David Thelen, argues the "challenge of history is to recover the past and introduce it to the present." In writing about the connection between memory (both personal and collective), and history, Thelen notes the "construction and narration of a memory comes from the oral and epic traditions of storytelling, the same traditions that gave birth to the chronicle and then to history."² There is a long relationship between storytelling for entertainment and the practice of history. As historian Natalie Zemon Davis reminds us, from at least the days of Herodotus and Thucydides,



poetry and prose, storytelling and history, have had a complementary but tension-filled relationship whose “distinctions were often blurred in practice.”³ Historical films, with their combination of storytelling for entertainment, historical evidence, and verisimilitude are perhaps the most powerful modern example of this legacy.

Although the professionalization of history and the standardization of methods and practice have created distance between professional historians and these storytelling traditions, often the public is not aware of these distances. Learning their history from the movie or television screen, people do not necessarily differentiate historical films from scholarship. When the words “Based on a True Story” appear at the beginning of a film, viewers often take the statement at face value. In 1998, a study of 1500 Americans found them more likely to learn history through films and television than through books or museums.⁴ “Whether we like it or not,” cultural critic bell hooks argues, “cinema provides a pedagogical role in the lives of many people....Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialog about these charged issues.”⁵ These narratives, often familiar to professional historians, take on cultural currency when films introduce them to the public.

The success and subsequent discussions surrounding the film *Twelve Years a Slave* illustrate this role. The director of the film, Steve McQueen, desired to make a film about a free man kidnapped into slavery, but had difficulty developing a story. When his partner suggested McQueen read Solomon Northup’s narrative, the story captivated McQueen. McQueen writes, “I could not believe that I had never heard of this book. It felt as important as Anne Frank’s diary...I was not alone in being unfamiliar with the book. Of all the people I spoke to not one person knew about *Twelve Years a Slave* or about Solomon Northup. This was astonishing! An important tale told with so much heart and beauty needed to be more widely recognized.”⁶ Interestingly, an edited edition published by the Louisiana State University Press in 1968 served as the basis for the film script, so Northup’s story was hardly lost before the film’s depiction.⁷ Further, the excellent Documenting the American South website at the University of North Carolina has provided a free online version of Solomon Northup’s narrative since 1997.⁸ Although *Twelve Years a Slave* was well known to historians and assigned in university classes for decades, the release of an award-winning Hollywood film brought Northup’s story to a worldwide audience and prompted a wide-ranging discussion of American slavery. To cement this educational role for the film, in 2014, the National School Boards Association collaborated with Penguin Books and the production companies and filmmakers behind the film *12 Years a Slave* to make the film, book, and a study guide available free to any public high school in the United States.⁹ As a result, the film simultaneously serves as Hollywood entertainment, an educational opportunity for its public viewing audience, and a formal part of school curriculum.

Today, in many ways, filmmakers are like the storytellers of the past, creating historical interpretations for public consumption. Students and the public often learn their history in a variety of ways, including Hollywood, and often do not draw distinctions between entertainment and scholarship. Consequently, in the classroom, even teachers who do not use historical films still face students shaped by popular culture in their



historical thinking. As historians Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky write, “If you don’t use films, your students will. Our current students are clearly a film generation. Increasingly, they see more films and read fewer books.”¹⁰ We cannot simply dismiss films as entertainment while those films continue to influence the public as history. However, it is also problematic for professionals to accept these films without interrogating their utility as sources. In a time when many Americans learn their history not from history class, but at the movie theater and on the television screen, it is imperative that professionals continue to develop new approaches to Hollywood’s depictions of history.

When the producers of *12 Years a Slave* collaborated with schools to use the film as a teaching tool, they were building on a model used by previous films. For example, when releasing the film *Amistad* (1997), DreamWorks Entertainment, the film’s production company, sent 18,000 study guides to schools across the country, encouraging history teachers to develop lesson plans and teach classes using the film as a source.¹¹ In many ways, it is quite admirable that Hollywood is searching for ways to interest students in history. However, films are also commercial endeavors, and in trying to attract viewers, films often tell history from only one perspective, contain scenes, themes, and characters that appeal to the broadest possible audience, and minimize or negate uncomfortable realities, offering an air of triumphalism. Thinking about how films represent the past and approach (or ignore) these uncomfortable realities provides insight into the society that produces them, and can help professionals in the field connect with students who are learning their history from a variety of sources. As some teachers have found with *Amistad*’s depiction of the Middle Passage, films can potentially convey images, moods, and a sense of time and place better than books. For history professionals, developing a coherent method of approaching historical films, and understanding their strengths while recognizing their weaknesses is an important tool.

Historians and Historical Films

From Hollywood’s beginnings, history has been a subject for films and filmmakers have recognized the potential power of film in conveying history. Filmmakers have also long used academic scholarship to legitimize their interpretations of historical subjects. For example, in 1915, D.W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, America’s most notable silent full-length feature film, and a textbook example of Lost Cause mythology. Lamenting the passing of slavery, promoting white supremacy, and portraying the Ku Klux Klan as heroes, the “radically atavistic” film brought to the public the dominant historiography of the day and sparked a revival of the KKK.¹² In order to buttress his film’s historic bona fides, Griffith released “an annotated guide to the film that drew heavily on the work of contemporary academic historians like Columbia University’s William Dunning, whose Reconstruction scholarship included racist depictions of African Americans and uncritical sympathy for the cause of the white South.”¹³ After viewing the film, President Woodrow Wilson, a historian, reportedly said that the film was “like writing history with lightning.” Although Wilson’s quote is apocryphal, for many in the public, *Birth* brought history to life and provided a framework for subsequent historical films.¹⁴



However, as both the history profession and Hollywood matured, a separation between the camps emerged. In 1935, historian Louis Gottschalk wrote to the president of a major Hollywood studio, “If the cinema art is going to draw its subjects so generously from history, it owes it to its patrons and its own higher ideals to achieve greater accuracy. No picture of a historical nature ought to be offered to the public until a reputable historian has had the chance to criticize and revise it.”¹⁵ Of course, no Hollywood studios followed this directive, and by the 1970s, historians were nearly universally dismissive of film as a means of historical inquiry. In the last three decades, this has begun to change.

Although historians are now taking films more seriously, there is still not universal agreement on what constitutes a “historical film.” Historian Robert Brent Toplin, in his book *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, argues that historical films are a separate genre with nine practices defining them as “cinematic history.”¹⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, who has both written history and collaborated on Hollywood historical films, has a very inclusive definition. Davis divides historical films into two types—those films based on documented historical events and those with imagined plots but placed within historical context, arguing that both types of historical films are useful in understanding how we think about the past.¹⁷ Robert Rosenstone, one of the pioneering historians in studying historical films, takes a postmodern approach, arguing that we cannot judge historical films by the same criteria as written history. Rosenstone argues the best historical films will, “1. Show not just what happened in the past but how what happened means to us. 2. Interrogate the past for the sake of the present. Remember that historians are working for the living, not for the dead. 3. Create a historical world complex enough so that it overflows with meaning; so that its meanings are always multiple; so that its meanings cannot be contained or easily expressed in words.”¹⁸ Rosenstone’s criteria allows for historical films to include modern elements and for fiction, as long as these elements are part of the conversation between the present and the past.

Although they are three of many, and their views do not necessarily reflect my own, Davis, Toplin, and Rosenstone are some of the leading scholars in articulating how historians should approach films. While they do not universally agree, all three consistently argue for understanding films as legitimate tools for understanding the past. For example, in her book *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, Davis blurs the lines between popular culture and history texts, viewing filmmakers as colleagues and history as “not a closed venture, fixed and still, but open to new discovery” with film an important tool for that discovery.¹⁹

While not going as far as Davis, Toplin sees value in what he calls “cinematic history.” In *Reel History*, he writes, “Comparisons with traditional methods of examining history are not fruitful. A book is vastly superior to a feature film as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis....nevertheless, in many important respects, the two-hour movie can arouse emotions, stir curiosity, and prompt viewers to consider significant questions.”²⁰ Aware of the shortcomings of historical films, Toplin argues that films “do not bring closure to discussions about history. But they do have the potential to open them,” a role borne out in the public reaction to *Twelve Years a Slave*.²¹

In *Visions of the Past*, Robert A. Rosenstone notes that serious academic journals like the *Journal of American History* and the *American Historical Review* now contain articles



on film, film reviews, and reviews of books that discuss historical films. Additionally, the major historical academic conferences regularly have film screenings and discussions. However, Rosenstone writes, historians still have not reconciled how to approach films, still seeing it as radical that “the investigation of how a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, might be used as a serious vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past.”²² The film reviews and discussions in the journals and conferences range from boilerplate takedowns of films for not being factual, to nuanced evaluations with an understanding of films as a medium separate from books.

This discrepancy reveals the uncertainty many historians have about using films as sources, and the lack of a standard practice for evaluating historical film. In *History on Film: Film on History*, Rosenstone begins to articulate practices for historians to use when judging films. He argues, “it is time, in short, to stop expecting films to do what (we imagine) books do.....dramatic films are not and will never be ‘accurate’ in the same way as books (claim to be), no matter how many academic consultants work on a project and no matter how seriously their advice is taken.” In urging historians to change their way of thinking about films, Rosenstone argues, “for 25 years now, or ever since historians have begun to think and write about historical film, we have been trying to make the dramatic feature fit into the conventions of traditional history, to force what we see into a mould created by, and for, written discourse.”²³

Treating historical films in the same manner as traditional written history and simply pointing out historical inaccuracies is tempting, but ultimately not productive. According to Toplin, Davis, Rosenstone, and others, historical films are interpretations of the past, (Toplin calls them “poetic speculations” that can communicate a broader truth) that provide another avenue for making meaning of the past.²⁴ As film theorist Rasmus Falbe-Hanson writes, “the historical film should not be seen as a substitute for written history, nor simply as an illustration of written history, but as a supplement and an extension which adds depth to traditional written history.”²⁵ However, this depth requires historians to think seriously and thoughtfully about these sources. Although over a hundred years old, as a medium, film is still in its infancy compared to books. Over many years, historians have developed the rules and practices of judging historical scholarship. The rules of how to judge historical films are still developing, but it is important that many voices join the conversation.

Teaching with Historical Films

Teaching United States and African American history at a community college and two universities has reinforced for me the importance that film has in shaping students’ understanding of history and culture, so it is from that experience that I draw my examples. At Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, I designed and taught a course, “The South in American Culture,” a revised version of which I currently teach at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. I originally designed the course when I realized from other courses and from student interactions how influential popular culture is in affecting perceptions of Southern history and identity. Although the class is thematically



focused, students have indicated that the skills they have developed have not only changed how they view filmic depictions of Southern history, but have given them the ability to more critically approach the intersection between popular culture and history.

In studying slavery and the antebellum period, it was revealed that many students had their understanding of history heavily influenced by the miniseries *Roots*, the film *Gone with the Wind*, and other Hollywood productions. Released in 1939, *Gone with the Wind* built upon the legacy of *Birth of a Nation* to become arguably the most successful film of all-time, reinforcing in American culture an image of an antebellum South peopled by Southern belles, dashing cavaliers, and loyal slaves.²⁶ Writing about *Gone with the Wind*'s lasting influence, historian Catherine Clinton states, "millions of Americans have had their vision of the South, race relations, and even the entire panorama of our past shaped if not wholly defined by the movie business."²⁷ Concurring, Civil War historian Gary Gallagher stated that the epic romance "has shaped what people think about the Civil War probably more than everything we've written put together, or put together and squared."²⁸ Discussing Southern history with students, I found this to be true, and I found *Gone with the Wind*'s archetypes so embedded in American culture that the film influenced students who had never seen it.

Wanting to explore this influence, I developed the South in American Culture course, where students view *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, as well as other Civil War films, films that depict the Civil Rights Movement, and additional films that show the Southern past. Rather than simply accept these films as entertainment, as "true" representations of the past, or conversely, simply pointing out their historical inaccuracies, we analyze these films as honest attempts to understand the past, "reading" them as secondary sources, and pairing them with selected scholarly readings, using them in concert to interrogate one another.

Teaching at the college level, I have the opportunity to choose films without having to consider students who cannot watch R rated films—high school teachers may be more limited in their choices. School districts may require parental and administration permission; teachers may choose to show excerpts rather than entire films, or show edited for television versions of films. I have taught the class numerous times in various configurations of days and times, but have had the most success as a one night a week, three-hour class. We rarely watch an entire film in class; most weeks students watch the films on their own and then post questions and comments to a discussion board. I write prompts to facilitate these comments—often the goal of the prompts is to get students to think of the films beyond their entertainment value, and to think of them as historical sources. In class, we will watch excerpts for illustrative purposes, to explore points raised in the online discussion, or to compare the filmmaker's history with the history from the readings.

At the start of the semester, to get students to think about the intersection between film and history, they read many of the sources cited earlier in this essay, then, as we move into the semester, the readings become more focused on the particular subject of that week's study. For example, in our Civil War section, we work chronologically—starting with *Birth of a Nation* and working forward to *Cold Mountain*, students trace the changes in Civil War historiography, recognizing how films reflect, depart from, and challenge the



historiography. We also discuss these films as products of a specific time and place of production, and use them to provide insight into their period of creation. Considering their audience and reception, studying these films provide insight into the society that produced them, and helps contextualize the films within their respective eras. In addition to the Civil War section, there are also sections discussing slavery, civil rights, the rural south, and the mountain south.²⁹

Conclusion

Historical films can be valuable sources for understanding history, but there is no one method for their successful implementation. For a long time, historians judged films by the same criteria as books, and the films often came up short. However, as many historians are arguing, judging films by the same criteria as books is problematic, because films are a different medium with different expectations. In this essay, I have introduced the readers to the various arguments regarding the use of historical films and showed how, in my own class, I approach films as honest attempts for understanding the past and contextualize them with historical writing. Using historical films in concert with established scholarship, rather than *prima facie* discounting them, demonstrates to students that there are various ways of understanding the past.

¹ Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19-20.

² David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1117-1118.

³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 238.

⁵ bell hooks, *Reel to Real*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), 2-3.

⁶ Steve McQueen (forward) in Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), xiii.

⁷ <http://www.uno.edu/news/2013/HighlyAnticipatedMovieisBasedonUNOHistoriansBook.aspx>

⁸ www.docsouth.unc.edu

⁹ www.12yearsaslave.com

¹⁰ Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky, Eds., *Portraying the Past in Film*, (College Station: The Texas A&M University Press, 2007), viii.

¹¹ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 72-78.

¹² Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 104 and 132. James M. McPherson, "Klieg Lights and Magnolias," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2001. D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, (David W. Griffith Corp., 1915).

¹³ Roy Rosenzweig, "The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest," <http://chnm.gmu.edu/episodes/the-birth-of-a-nation-and-black-protest/> (accessed 1/9/14)



¹⁴ Sean Willentz, "Lincoln in Hollywood, From Griffith to Spielberg," *The New Republic*, December 21, 2012.

¹⁵ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 45-46.

¹⁶ Toplin, *Reel History*, 17-50.

¹⁷ Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 5.

¹⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions*, 238.

¹⁹ Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 133.

²⁰ Toplin, *Reel History*, 1.

²¹ Robert Brent Toplin in Francaviglia and Rodnitzky, Eds. *Lights, Camera, History*, 134.

²² Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

²³ Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film: Film on History*, (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2006), 36-37.

²⁴ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*, (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1996), 7 and Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 37.

²⁵ Rasmus Falbe-Hanson, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *P.O.V.*

www.pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_16/section_1/artc12A.html.

²⁶ Adjusted for inflation (2009), *Gone With the Wind* has made \$1.45B.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aLzh3gmCoWdo> (accessed 1/9/14)

²⁷ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 204.

²⁸ Bob Thompson, "Civil War, Take 2: Hollywood Captured the Blood of Battle But Shrank Away From Slavery's Reality," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2003, C01.

²⁹ Some films from my course: *The Help* (2009), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Inherit the Wind* (1960), *Matewan* (1987), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *Rosewood* (1997).