

THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

“Hollywood History”

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Hollywood History

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, fellow presenter, and gentlemen of the Athenaeum Society, tonight's presentation is based upon critical analysis of one of my favorite aspects of life... watching a good movie. To name a few, Dumb and Dumber, Friday, The Hangover I, II, and III, Old School, and Ace Ventura I and II, of course, are all quotable, humorous flicks that I've probably seen more times than a human should ever invest into their quality of life. Unfortunately, I have no regrets. They are funny and I love to laugh and quote them religiously in everyday conversation. With that being said, as a historian, I also love a good movie that is laced with historical events, former Presidents, historical characters of merit, and even war. However, there are several factors that make me shy away from watching certain historically based films for a second or even a third time. Tonight, gentlemen, I present to you a closer look at "Hollywood History."

Hollywood vs. Historians – Who Owns History?

The ongoing "civil war" between Hollywood filmmakers and academic historians is more than a battle between "commerce" and "art." In many ways, the question is more fundamental: "Who owns history?" Eric Foner, one of the world's foremost historians who has written extensively about Lincoln, Reconstruction, and slavery, offered his insights. "History always has been and always will be regularly rewritten, in response to new questions, new information, new methodologies, and new political, social, and cultural imperatives," Foner explained. "But that each generation can and must rewrite history does not mean that history is simply a series of myths and inventions." Further, Foner commented, "There are commonly accepted professional standards that enable us to distinguish good history from falsehoods like the denial of the

Holocaust. . . . But the most difficult truth for those outside the ranks of professional historians to accept is that there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events.” The essence of professional historians’ work is to *interpret* the past based upon accepted forms of evidence, methods, and critical analysis. The work of scholarly historians, by its very nature, clashes with the traditional Hollywood approach to history. Harry Benshoff has noted that the “Classical Hollywood style” has remained intact since the 1930s, and its main objective “is to ‘spoon feed’ story information to the spectator, thus keeping everything clearly understood by the audience.” The filmmakers’ key aim is to “keep the story clear and characters simple and understandable.” The movie narrative usually follows a linear pattern, typically with a focus on a single protagonist, often the hero. Good and evil are clearly simplified and differentiated -- good guys wear white. “Even when dealing with complex social issues,” Benshoff explains, “Hollywood usually reduces them to matters of personal character: in Hollywood films there are rarely corrupt institutions, merely corrupt people.” Benshoff and others point out that Hollywood films have also tended to privilege white males seeking wealth or power. Film historian Robert Brent Toplin offers a succinct list of problems with Hollywood’s “historical” films: 1) movies tend to favor the “great person” approach to history; 2) films usually depict specific events and not big ideas or broad analyses; 3) “historical movies do not ordinarily offer comprehensive views of the past”; 4) movies are often one-sided not multi-sided; 5) Hollywood films “deal disproportionately with stories about war.” “Real history, as opposed to reel history,” Toplin cleverly contends, “is often complicated, contradictory, and confusing.” Hollywood’s simplistic approach does not satisfy historians who view history with complexity, particularly when confronting such significant national events and human tragedies as the American Civil War. One

telling quote is from Freddie Fields, producer of *Glory*, who said in 1989: “You can get bogged down when dealing in history. Our objective was to make a highly entertaining and exciting war movie filled with action and character.” Many historians join the lament of their colleague, Catherine Clinton, who states the obvious fact that “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.” Similarly, Gary Gallagher has commented that “More people have formed perceptions about the Civil War from watching *Gone With the Wind* than from reading all the books written by historians since Selznick’s blockbuster debuted in 1939.” Even less successful movies reach larger audience than readers of nonfiction books, and among the work of professional historians, probably only James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* has reached hundreds of thousands of readers. Other historians echo the complaint that Hollywood has long held disproportionate power in shaping America’s collective history. Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts contend that from the beginning of the twentieth century, commercial films have shaped American values, beliefs, and behavior. Further, they write that Hollywood has served as the “national dream factory” and provided Americans, and a growing global audience, with an “intensive – if highly distorted – picture of the country’s past. . .” An important fact often lost on movie audiences is that Hollywood filmmakers have, from the beginning of their industry, asserted their role as interpreters of the past. D. W. Griffith fired the earliest salvos that defended the new motion picture as a reliable and valid form of presenting history, claiming that movies like his were more “accurate” and more objective than written histories. Griffith claimed filmmakers’ right to be historians and to “present the facts of history as we see them.” Historian J. E. Smyth said of Griffith: “More than any other filmmaker of his generation, he exploited

cinema's potential to write and rewrite the text of American history, to compete with and even exceed the scope, complexity, and audience of traditional writings about the past." His 1915 movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, set a standard for the type of work expected of "historical" movies. Griffith was even more assertive in predictions that within ten years children in schools would be "taught practically everything by moving pictures" and never forced to read history again."

Many Hollywood movies have focused on historical topics, often with both critical and commercial success. Historical films tend to win acclaim and Academy Awards, such as Best Picture. "Since the 1980s, most of the movies that received the [Best Picture] Oscar were, broadly speaking, examples of historical cinema," Robert Brent Toplin points out, since these films either interpreted the past or were set in the past. Consider: *Gandhi*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Platoon*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Schindler's List*, *Braveheart*, *The Unforgiven*, *The English Patient*, *Titanic*, and *Shakespeare in Love*. Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* spurred interest in World War Two and the "greatest generation," while the James Cameron blockbuster *Titanic*, released in 1997, and piqued peoples' curiosity about that tragic event. According to Bruce Chadwick, about 500 Civil War films were made during the silent era (up to 1927), and more than 200 since then. There have been more films about the Civil War than any other conflict or historical event in American history -- triple the number of films about World War Two. Two of these movies, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, are among the top five box-office films of all time.

How should historical movies be evaluated? Film scholars and cultural historians have had a field day in analyzing Hollywood movies from any number of perspectives. Most historians ask for "accuracy" along with recognition that the past is complex and even

ambiguous. Robert Rosenstone provides the best touchstone in his oft-quoted remarks. “The historical film must be seen not in terms of how it compares to written history, but as a way of recounting the past with its own rules of interpretation.” Most significantly, he suggests that “Film neither replaces written history nor supplements it. Film stands adjacent to written history, as it does to other forms dealing with the past such as memory and the oral tradition.” An approach that is particularly helpful in examining Civil War films comes from John O’Connor and Peter Rollins who outline the “film and history” perspective as follows: 1. War films must be studied in their historical contexts. “Anyone ‘reading’ a cinematic text about war must take into account the period in which it was made.” 2. War films are propaganda vehicles. “It is safe to say that all war films have political implications, even when they appear to avoid didacticism.” Even if not explicit, the films offer insights into the “nature of America’s national character.” 3. Censorship and sponsorship influence war films. 4. War films constitute a genre of their own. 5. War films should be studied with caution. Even independent films can have ideological or other problems. Even with these caveats in mind, Gary Gallagher captures best the problem of Hollywood movies: “Hollywood’s collective portrait departs radically from the scholarly consensus.”

Myth of the “Lost Cause” and White Supremacy

This is just one of many examples, but let’s take a dive into Civil War movies. There are two primary problems to address with Hollywood’s Civil War movies, one focused on the “Lost Cause” and a second issue of “white supremacy.” Like most of the nation in the early twentieth century, Hollywood embraced the myth of the “Lost Cause” as the primary way of understanding and remembering the Civil War. Bruce Chadwick explains that this myth contained at least seven

components and constituted what historians have called the “moonlight-and-magnolias” view: 1) Southerners were always portrayed as heroic underdogs although they started the war and had a chance of winning as late as 1864; 2) films ignored slavery and paid little attention to complex causes of war -- “the films always blamed the war on the abolitionists”; 3) Lincoln is portrayed as saintly “Father Abraham” without hints about his shrewdness or animosity directed against him; 4) slaves typically shown as “helpful mammies, obliging butlers, smiling carriage-drivers, joyful cotton-pickers, and tap-dancing entertainers”; 5) Southern white women stereotyped as frail who sometimes loved Union soldiers; 6) most white Southerners were shown as slaveholders when in reality fewer than 25 percent owned any slaves; 7) most movies ended with northern and southern white people -- soldiers and civilians -- reconciling and re-uniting the country. Chadwick contends that these films added to the nations “cultural cleansing and revising” that helped to reunite the country at the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout the history of Hollywood as the center of American cinema, films have not been kind to African Americans. Movies shaped collective opinion and convinced many whites that the historical mistreatment of blacks was “perfectly justified.” A number of scholars, led by Donald Bogle and Thomas Crips, have excavated the history of Hollywood’s films to underscore the pattern of unflattering and even racist depictions of blacks in Hollywood films at least through the 1960s.

Glory (1989)

Hollywood took a new turn in 1989 with an ambitious but only moderately successful movie that focused on the famous Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored Infantry, a black regiment in the Civil War. Director Edward Zwick drew upon Kevin Jarre’s screenplay based largely on the letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, housed at Harvard University, along with several

scholarly sources. With a production cost of about \$20 million, the movie was released by Tri-Star in limited release in December 1989 and in more theaters later in February 1990. Box office receipts were probably reduced by competition from *Driving Miss Daisy*, and the film's ultimate domestic gross was under \$27 million. The film featured some moderately well-known actors including the former Ferris Bueller, Matthew Broderick, as Colonel Shaw, along with gifted black actors Morgan Freeman, Andre Braugher, and a relative newcomer, Denzel Washington, who would win one of the film's three Academy Awards (out of five nominations). The film's storyline carried the regiment from initial enlistment and training through the Union army's unsuccessful siege at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in mid-July 1863, where Shaw and many of his men died. The movie's entertainment value and historical accuracy were aided by use of some 1,500 Civil War re-enactors, with portions filmed during the 125th anniversary re-enactment of the battle of Gettysburg. Upon its release, the movie was widely and positively reviewed in popular magazines, scholarly journals, and newspapers. Pauline Kael, movie critic for *The New Yorker* wrote: "*Glory* isn't a great film, but it's a good film on a great subject." Writing in the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby praised the movie, describing it as the "first serious American movie about the Civil War to be made in years." Calling this a "beautifully acted, pageant like movie," Canby concludes that *Glory* "is a good, moving, complicated film." The climactic battle scene "comes as close to anything I've ever seen on screen to capturing the chaos and brutality that were particular to the Civil War battles." The celebrated and Pulitzer-Prize winning Civil War historian James McPherson gave the film two thumbs-up, writing: *Glory* is "the most powerful and historically accurate film ever made" about the American Civil War. Referring to a scene in which Colonel Robert Gould Shaw smashes a watermelon with his

sword, McPherson concludes: "If the image of smashed watermelons in *Glory* can replace that of moonlight and magnolias in *Gone with the Wind* as America's cinematic version of the Civil War, it will be a great gain for truth." Writing in the *Journal of American History*, Paul Finkelman wrote that "*Glory* is probably the best Civil War movie ever made. It is realistic, mostly accurate, and it tells us an important story. . . . As a war movie, *Glory* is unusually accurate." In another scholarly journal, *American Historical Review*, Gerald Horne wrote that even with its problems, "*Glory* merits the plaudits it has garnered and deserves much, much more." From a historian's viewpoint, then, the movie has many positive attributes. For one, *Glory* brought to wide popular attention the exploits of the North's most important and famous black regiment of the 166 that served the Union army. This "liberating army" was a wedge against the Confederate States, the institution of slavery, and the bulwark of racism. The movie helped to educate Americans that not all blacks were slaves and that African Americans played a crucial role in the Civil War. Denzel Washington said about the war, for example, "I knew absolutely nothing. I didn't even know that blacks fought in the Civil War. [The movie] was inspiring for me; it gave me a lot of energy to continue research and get further and further into it." In addition, the movie's battle scenes are well-done in conveying the close combat and horrors of war. Rather than romanticize or distort the suffering of military service, this movie graphically illustrates the fact that people die in wars, often horribly. Director Edward Zwick expressed his wish that audiences would "take away a new understanding that freedom was not given but rather it was fought for. The Civil War is a national myth, certainly, from which black culture has been denied a role." The movie's popularity and impact were reflected in *Time* on February 26, 1990, in an essay by Lance

Morrow who asserted that the movie “addresses the most profound theme of race in America in 1990.” Morrow concluded that

“The lesson that *Glory* teaches . . . is this: it was not the Great White Paternalist [Lincoln] alone who freed the slaves and made them American citizens. It was also blacks who freed

themselves.” This is the message endorsed by many historians of the past three decades. While

Glory does not perpetuate the myth of the Lost Cause and admirably showcases black valor in

the Civil War, it can be faulted for inaccuracies, some of them prompted by a heavy reliance on

the Shaw letters and inadequate attention to scholarly sources. Errors of fact or nuance include:

1) The movie implies incorrectly that most of this regiment was composed of runaway or former

slaves; 2) Frederick Douglass is given a cameo role, portrayed as a gray-haired man, when he

was in his mid-forties and a champion of black military enlistment that would include his two

sons in that same regiment; 3) Several fictitious scenes are dramatic but never happened, such as:

Shaw’s’ acceptance of his Colonelcy during a society party in Boston; Trip’s whipping in front of

the regiment; a racist quartermaster refusing to provide the regiment with shoes; the unit’s first

refusal to accept unequal pay; and the religious gathering the night prior to the siege of Fort

Wagner. What are we to conclude about this movie in assessing what Americans learn about the

Civil War? Historian Gerald Horne raised the following point about the accuracy of *Glory*. “It

may be difficult for a two-hour film to grapple with the subtle complexities of the past; again,

perhaps all we can ask is if the basic thrust of the film has been true to history,” Horne writes.

“*Glory* easily passes this test.” Gary W. Gallagher emphasizes the importance this movie in

pushing “into heroic cinematic relief” what he calls the “Emancipationist Cause.” He credits

Glory with creating a “sea change in popular perceptions about the conflict.” Also, Gallagher

suggests movie's powerful dramatic scenes before and at Fort Wagner emphasize the interracial and ultimate sacrifices of Union troops in defeating the Confederacy. Despite the movie's discrepancies between fiction and fact, historian Brian Wills argues that film's value is in its "powerful portrayal of the contributions that 200,000 African Americans made to winning their own or their brothers' and sisters' freedom." Finally, Bruce Chadwick contends that one of the movie's main accomplishments was to help "correct Hollywood's view of history" while adding to Americans' collective knowledge about black participation in the Civil War. Thankfully, American historians and film audiences of the past century have seen a clear evolution in Hollywood's perspective on the Civil War and the depiction of African Americans. D. W. Griffith's racist cinematic masterpiece of 1915 gave way to more subtle depictions of racism in 1939, and fifty years later Hollywood finally provided a stage for black soldiers within a historical drama. Steven Spielberg, whose historical movies have been uneven at best, has provided a useful, if tedious corrective to decades of pro-South propaganda. Still, there remains much truth to Brian Wills' comments that ". . . it is evident how little the real Civil War has made it onto celluloid. The dependence on stereotypes and broadly drawn characterizations has left the nuances of history behind. . . . Pages could be written on the anachronisms and errors that appear in any film. . . ." Civil War films often "tell us more about the times in which they appear than the periods being depicted on the screen," Wills reminds us. The best movie about the war remains the documentary series, *The Civil War*, by Ken Burns and broadcast on public television to record audiences in 1990. Historians have not always been kind to Burns, however, but his series does provide some depth and complexity to understanding the Civil War.

In conclusion, Robert Rosenstone, an influential historian, has said that the best historical films show “not just what happened in the past but also what the past means to us.” Rosenstone suggests that a good historical film will both “contest” and “revise” the past and inspire viewers to want to know more and dig deeper. Robert Brent Toplin contends that historical movies “should never be treated as the last word on a subject. They should be considered useful aids for raising questions and launching informed and insightful discussions about the past.” Critics of Hollywood’s movies need to be mindful of distinctions between filmic history and the history done in classrooms and by scholars. Viewed in a positive way, historical films can serve a vital educational purpose by raising curiosity among audiences and students. We need to understand the limitations of film, particularly when no Hollywood movie can ever deliver comprehensive interpretations of major historical events or problems. The question I leave you with is...Are historical films acceptable in your view or are they just good films on a great subject? I will certainly be interested in your thoughts about historical laced film during the comment portion of tonight’s program.