

CHAPTER 1

THE CINEMATIC WRITING OF HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW

To Come

Beginning with D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the historical film has been one of the most celebrated forms of cinematic expression as well as one of the most controversial. As a genre, it has maintained a high degree of cultural prominence over a period of almost a hundred years, and it has established itself as a major form in nearly every nation that produces films. But it has also consistently provoked controversy and widespread public debate about the meaning of the past, about the limits of dramatic interpretation, and about the power of film to influence

popular understanding and to promote particular national myths.

The historical film has often served as a vehicle of studio prestige and artistic ambition, and many distinguished directors have made major contributions to the genre. In recent years, directors such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Clint Eastwood, John Sayles, Edward Zwick, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Roman Polanski have made important and powerful historical films that have reawakened interest in aspects of the past that were not previously well represented or understood. For many societies, the historical film now serves as the dominant source of popular knowledge about the historical past, a fact that has made some professional historians anxious. Other historians, however,

see these films as valuable for the discussions and debate they generate. Films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *JFK* (1991), for example, have fostered a widespread and substantial public discussion that has contributed to historical appreciation and understanding.

The Beginnings of the Historical Film

One of the earliest forms of widescreen historical reenactment was the panorama, a spectacular 360-degree circular representation that combined special lighting, sound effects, music, narration, and sometimes movement to produce a full sensory experience, an early form of sensual immersion for the pre-cinematic audience. One of several spectacular forms of mechanical illusionism that emerged in the nineteenth century, the panorama played a special role as a form of historical representation.¹ In a century that seemed to be obsessed with the dream of lifelike visual reproduction, the panorama was a popular form of visual entertainment, rendering battlefield scenes, shipwrecks, and dramatic scenes of historical events such as the burning of the Houses of Parliament or the Coronation of King George IV. As Alison Griffiths writes, “the locations and events painted by panoramists had to resonate as suitable subjects for the epic mode of representation: ‘big subjects for big pictures.’”² Spectators, sometimes situated on a raised platform in the center of the panorama, received an early experience of an immersive environment in which verisimilitude and authenticity were emphasized. Certain panoramas made such an impression on spectators that they were deemed inappropriate for women and children, with the publicity of the day suggesting that only the most stalwart males would be able to defend themselves against the vertiginous impression of what appeared to be an actual wreck at sea or the experience of explosive carnage on the water. Adding to the “reality effect” of these spectacles was the added attraction of actual movement: some famous panoramas mounted their painted canvas scenes on enormous rollers, scrolling the painting in front of the viewers to produce movement and a continuously changing vista. The panorama of the journey down the Mississippi River constructed by John Banvard, for example, a special type of river panorama, was advertised as being three miles long.³ The scale of these works – the panorama of the Battle of Gettysburg, for example, is some 20,000 square feet in size – the use of theatrical lighting and the sensational nature of the scenes they depicted suggest that these works had much in common with the epic scale of historical films.⁴

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Theatrical producers copied the effects of the panorama by incorporating moving backgrounds into certain plays. The early stage productions of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, for example, staged the climactic chariot race with real horses pulling as many as seven chariots on stage, creating a spectacular impression of movement and drama. The teams of horses, four to each chariot, ran on individual treadmills situated just beneath the stage. The come-from-behind victory of Ben-Hur was engineered by having his treadmill physically moved from below the stage by a group of men to the lead position. The treadmills of the other chariots, including that of his enemy Messala, were then moved backward. Augmenting the impression of speed was a moving background of the Circus Maximus, an enormous painted scene of Roman spectators in the arena, a background that was whipped across the back of the stage by two enormous rollers at a speed of thirty miles per hour.⁵

Panoramas also served as an early form of newsreel, visualizing recent events of national importance, military victories, naval battles, and the like. People were eager to rewitness the most recent events occurring in faraway places, and panoramas served this role in a period when a breaking news story might take two months to be reported. Major panoramas were painted in as little as one week.

Cinema in the United States received a tremendous boost in popularity with the Spanish–American War in 1898. The public had a keen interest in seeing images of the war, and filmmakers responded by providing facsimiles or reenactments that they passed off as authentic eyewitness accounts. The “newsreel” films of these events, however, were entirely staged, as the difficulty of getting cameramen to the sites of battles and naval engagements made on-the-spot location shooting impossible. Instead, scenes were reenacted for the camera, often in a primitive studio. For example, the sinking of the *Maine*, one of the most well-known and contested events of the war, was represented in a film, *The Battle of Manila Bay*, by J. Stuart Blackton, with scale models set up in a bathtub. Edison and the Biograph Company, unable to get footage of the *Maine*, used earlier footage of the battleships *Massachusetts* and *Iowa* and simply renamed the film *Battleships Maine and Iowa*. And the climactic victory over the Spanish, emblemized in the short film *Raising Old Glory Over Morro Castle*, consisted of a staged action in front of an obviously painted backdrop. Even George Méliès, the master of early special effects, contributed to the emerging war-film genre with an underwater shot of the *Maine* explosion, staged in an aquarium. All of these fabricated works were presented as “eyewitness accounts.”⁶

The public responded to these early war films in vast numbers; very short works dealing with the Spanish-American War were often the highlight of vaudeville programs, and were presented with patriotic songs and music. The popularity of the war in general, which was enthusiastically promoted throughout American media culture, gave the public a reason to pay attention to the cinema. The consensus among historians of early cinema is that the Spanish-American War fueled the public's interest in film at a time when the industry was just beginning to establish itself, a time when its future was by no means certain. James Castonguay writes that the film-producing companies of the day were literally transformed into "signifying war machines." Edison, for example, renamed his Projecting Kinetoscope the "Wargraph," and other film companies followed suit with names like the "Warscope." Cinema's role as a medium of historical representation was established with these works; as early as 1898, the war film became a major form of cinematic expression.⁷

Apart from these early war films, other historical subjects also drew the interest of filmmakers. Titles such as *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895), *Nero and the Burning of Rome* (1908), and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1908) provided early, primitive versions of what would eventually become some of the other subgenres of historical cinema, embryonic versions of the topical film and the epic. The first films to capture the spectacular power of the cinema to re-create the past, however, were epic films made in Italy between 1910 and 1914. They were also the first to extend the screening time of films to two and three hours or more. Epic works such as *Quo Vadis?* (1912), *Cabiria* (1914), and *Spartacus* (1913) were vast, sweeping depictions of the ancient world that united spectacle, lavish set design, and narrative in a way that had an enormous influence on film style, and that brought an extraordinary amount of publicity to the films even before their release. The Italian epics of the early silent period provided a particular incentive to D.W. Griffith, who after seeing *Quo Vadis?* in 1913 decided to make a two-reel biblical film, *Judith of Bethulia* (1914). The grandest of the Italian epics, *Cabiria*, by Giovanni Pastrone, commanded so much public attention for its length, epic form, and massive sets that just hearing about it prompted Griffith to begin planning his own epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). And after actually seeing *Cabiria*, according to Robert Sklar, Griffith began planning an even larger-scale narrative that would interweave four historical periods, a film that would result in the ambitious *Intolerance*, released in 1916.⁸

The Birth of a Nation is generally credited with inaugurating the genre of the historical film in the United States. Although films that used historical settings and included historical characters were fairly common by 1915, they could not be considered serious attempts to understand or explain the past: rather, they consisted of romances, costume dramas, tales of adventure, or small historical vignettes set within larger dramatic narratives, such as a scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) with Little Eva looking down from heaven on the divisive events of American history. *The Birth of a Nation*, on the other hand, attempts to offer an explanation and interpretation of the most troubled and divisive period in US history; despite its offensive stereotypes and obvious racism, it poses serious questions and makes serious interpretations about the meaning of the past.⁹

The Birth of a Nation sets forth a highly controversial thesis about the nation's past and future, and the causes and consequences of large-scale historical events – the Civil War and Reconstruction. In its ambitiousness, its notoriety, and its insistence on presenting a serious, if deeply flawed, interpretation about the meaning of the past, *The Birth of a Nation* brings into relief the distinctive characteristics of the genre and provides a blueprint for the future development of the historical film. It melds an elaborate family romance with a story of national trauma and national reconciliation; it employs a visual vocabulary consisting of wide panoramic shots, elaborate cross-cutting, and the use of close-ups as a form of historical commentary and analysis; and it insists upon the authenticity of its representations by closely imitating battlefield daguerreotypes, by asserting the authenticity of its depiction of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and by dwelling on the lived spaces of the historical past, the porches, picket fences, and dirt roads of the South.

Yet for all its bigotry and offensive stereotyping, the film accurately reflected the prevailing historical understanding and knowledge of the era in which it was produced. Although it was challenged at the time, its depiction of Reconstruction matched the beliefs of the most powerful school of American historians of that era, including President Woodrow Wilson, the former head of the American Historical Society, who, after a private screening, purportedly commented: "It's like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."¹⁰

Partly in response to the negative publicity Griffith received with *The Birth of a Nation*, he produced an even more ambitious film, *Intolerance*,



FIGURE 1.1 “Sic semper tyrannus!” Reenactment as facsimile: John Wilkes Booth (Raoul Walsh) leaping from the balcony after assassinating Abraham Lincoln (Joseph Henabery) in D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) [Joseph Brenner Associates Inc./Photofest]

in 1916. This massive work combines four stories set in different time periods, and interweaves them in a complex arrangement, like a musical fugue. The thematic link among these stories was the idea of intolerance through the ages and the overcoming of it through love. By cutting these four stories together through parallel editing – which up to that time had been used strictly for cutting between parallel actions in the same time frame – Griffith attempted to articulate a universal historical patterning, one that linked the story of Christ’s crucifixion with a modern story of injustice, the fall of ancient Babylon, and the story of the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre in sixteenth-century France. This innovative use of parallel editing to link and harmonize four separate historical narratives was a dazzling conceptual breakthrough, but it was not well received by the public, and *Intolerance* was a commercial failure. The artist who had accustomed audiences to a certain style of cinematic discourse contradicted his own proven model and fashioned a work that was experimental, formally complex, and driven by ideas.



FIGURE 1.2 Outside the Babylon Gate, one of the magnificent sets of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) [Photofest]

Griffith's Influence

Nevertheless, *Intolerance* had a widespread impact on later filmmakers, particularly the Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Vledesov Pudovkin, and also on the work of French filmmaker Abel Gance, who used many of Griffith's ideas in *Napoleon* (1927).

Griffith's influence in creating a cinematic style of historical narration is perhaps best seen in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. Eisenstein expanded on Griffith's formal innovations in editing to create an even more advanced visual aesthetic known as montage editing, a style characterized by rapid, dynamic combinations of shots of very short length. Eisenstein used this style to create a history, or better, a foundational mythology for the fledgling Soviet Union. In *Potemkin* (1925), Eisenstein takes a small-scale historical incident – the mutiny of a small group of sailors on board the battleship *Potemkin* during the czarist period – and turned it into a stirring dramatization of the power of the proletariat to overcome oppression and create a revolution. In *October* (1927), also known as *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Eisenstein followed the turbulent events of the ten days of the Bolshevik revolution. The film combines close attention

to the actual events with an elaborate set of visual ideas including the use of visual metaphors, repetition, humor, and a highly charged sense of movement and dynamism.

The Soviet filmmakers were experimental in their treatment of the historical past, exploring ways of creating a revolutionary historiography for a revolutionary time. The style of historical narration that they pioneered had an impact on the Latin American cinema of the 1960s and, more recently, on Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995).

The War Film

The war film is one of the great modes of cinematic expression, with outstanding examples of the subgenre stretching from the silent period to the contemporary era. It includes such formidable Hollywood productions such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Hell's Angels* (1930), *The Big Parade* (1925), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *The Longest Day* (1962), *Tora, Tora, Tora* (1970), *Glory* (1989), *Saving Private Ryan* (1999), *The Thin Red Line* (1999), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2007). The earliest war films coincide with the beginnings of the cinema itself. Widespread enthusiasm for rewatching war on film motivated people to rush to the vaudeville houses and other sites where films were shown to see images of the troops, the battleships, and staged battle scenes.

These very early films can be grouped into three main types that together comprise the major conventions of the subgenre: the documenting of events connected to the war, such as the Edison film, *The Burial of the "Maine" Victims*; reenactments of major battles, such as *U.S. Infantry Supported by Rough Riders at El Caney*, and short narrative films that combine battle sequences, scenes of life in the camp, and images of life on the home front, such as *Love and War*.¹¹ Films such as these were extremely abbreviated, lasting only a minute or two in length, but they can be seen as rough sketches of the war film in its full development. In some cases, scenes reenacting combat were juxtaposed with sequences set at the home front, or representing the give and take of life in the camp "behind the lines." Battle, the camaraderie and horseplay of the soldiers, the families at home, the funeral and the homecoming, can be found in the earliest war films, and have remained standard throughout the history of the form.

Many war films have been applauded for their realism and for their focus on the cruelties of war, as well as for their portraits of heroism.

The authenticity of the war film, however, often considered its most outstanding feature, is achieved in almost every case through extraordinary artifice. D. W. Griffith, for example, was severely disappointed with the reality of the battlefield when he was granted access to the front during World War I to film *Hearts of the World* (1918). The monotony of trench warfare, and the lack of drama in the protracted battles or sieges where soldiers went for months without even seeing the enemy, was not what he had envisioned the struggle of men and armies would actually look like. The documentaries coming from the front were equally drab, consisting mostly of exercises, military parades, and the aftermath of battle. The actual battlefield was far too dangerous for the cameraman, and the bulkiness and weight of film equipment made it impossible to document actual hostilities. Griffith found that combat scenes could only be fashioned in the studio.

The war film achieved both critical and popular success with *The Big Parade* (1925), *Hell's Angels* (1930), *Wings* (1927), *The Dawn Patrol* (1930), and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). *The Big Parade*, directed by King Vidor and released in 1925, became the model for many subsequent films of ground combat. The film's centerpiece is its battle sequences, especially a night battle scene that captures the nightmarish aspect of war on the Western Front. *Hell's Angels*, directed and produced at great expense by Howard Hughes, captured the extraordinary excitement of aerial combat. Hughes purchased and equipped his own squadron of World War I-era fighter planes, and filmed the dogfight sequences with an eye to verisimilitude. The extraordinary authenticity of the aerial combat, filmed entirely in live action sequences, compares with the most accomplished work of much later films. Moreover, the heartbreaking scenes aboard a German zeppelin, and the more intimate moments of character illumination between the two brothers who serve as the main characters, provide a counterpoint to the excitement of the spectacle of air battle, emphasizing the human dimension of war and the poignancy of loss and sacrifice that it demands.

Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which won Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director in 1930, received international and popular acclaim for its portrait of the horrors of war as experienced by a young German soldier. *All Quiet on the Western Front* established not only the power and commercial viability of the war film, but also established the Great War as an enduring emblem of human loss. Although war is one of the subjects that helps define the genre of the historical film, *All Quiet on the Western Front* articulated the antiwar sentiment that is so often a theme of these films: it posed serious questions about the



FIGURE 1.3 Carnage in the trenches: the war film as antiwar drama in Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) [Universal Pictures/Photofest]

consequences of nationalism and patriotism, and stressed the dehumanizing effects of war, themes that would be taken up in later films such as *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The film is also unique for showing the effects of war from the perspective of a young German soldier, the first time Germans were treated sympathetically in Hollywood films made after the war. On the technical and artistic level, the film broke new ground with its use of elaborate, moving camera shots, created by using a mobile crane in the battle scenes – the most extensive use of moving camera in a sound film up to that time.

The Longest Day (1962), produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, is often considered the most towering achievement of the war film subgenre. Zanuck called it the “most ambitious undertaking since *Gone with the Wind* and *The Birth of a Nation*” when he announced it in 1960.¹² It inaugurated a trend toward combat spectacles in the historical film genre, a trend that extends to the present. The combination of extraordinary realism in the battle scenes and exceptional attentiveness to the small dramas

unfolding among the individual soldiers provided the model for many films to come, among them *Saving Private Ryan* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The film also set a new standard for authenticity in the historical genre, in some scenes replicating the Normandy invasion so closely that stills taken from the shooting of the film and stills taken from the actual invasion are almost indistinguishable. Moving away from the one-sided patriotism of earlier films dealing with World War II, the film depicts the German soldiers in a somewhat sympathetic light. *The Longest Day* solidified the importance of the historical film in the second half of the twentieth century, and drew a worldwide audience to its treatment of the Allied effort. It successfully merged a documentary approach to historical filmmaking with the needs of commercial drama.

In the late 1970s, the American cinema began to take on the subject of Vietnam. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* was released in 1979, and along with Michael Cimino's 1978 *The Deer Hunter*, films began portraying the war as a pathological endeavor that suggested the ruin of a generation of young Americans. Moreover, both the budget and production problems associated with these films seemed to mirror the self-destructive nature of the subject of the Vietnam War. Although both films had moments of exceptional cinematic grandeur, they became as well known for their outsized budgets and on-set turmoil as for their messages about the self-destruction and insanity of war. It was not until 1986, with the release of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, that the Vietnam sub-genre began to flourish as a dominant mode of cinematic expression. Stone followed *Platoon* with the magisterial *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), a powerful and moving antiwar film that dealt with the trauma of the returning Vietnam veteran. A sober and scathingly critical work, *Born on the Fourth of July* followed in the tradition of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) in illustrating the profound alienation of returning veterans who have been traumatized by the experience of war.

The traditional war film experienced a resurgence at the turn of the century with films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Glory Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *The Patriot* (2000) reestablishing the power and appeal of films that crystallize the heroism and sacrifice that war entails. *Saving Private Ryan* is an especially good example. Celebrated for the authenticity of its battlefield sequences as well as for its powerful evocation of nostalgia for the certainties of the "last good war," the film resurrected the traditional war film, which had fallen into disrepute in the post-Vietnam period, and reestablished it as a dominant form in American cinema. In rehearsing and reinvigorating the genre motifs and conventions of the war films of the past, however,

Saving Private Ryan also broke new ground in its technological innovations. Much of its success was based on its special effects, most powerfully displayed in the Omaha Beach landing sequence, in which the film blends computer-generated imagery, live action photography, reenactments of documentary photographs and sequences, accelerated editing, slow-motion cinematography, and electronically enhanced sound design. *Saving Private Ryan* combines the traditions of the war film – stressing the importance of the individual soldier and the success of the collective endeavor mounted on his behalf – with advanced visual and acoustic techniques that give it a powerful claim to authenticity. It became the defining expression of the culture of commemoration that has developed around the achievements of the veterans of World War II.

Quite different in tone and message, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* explore the culminating battle in the Pacific during World War II and emphasize the vast gulf between the images of war promoted by the media, including the cinema, and experiences “on the ground.” The two films, both directed by Clint Eastwood, are the first war films to tell both sides of the story in a full-length and fully considered fashion. *Flags of Our Fathers* focuses on the American experience during the Battle of Iwo Jima and the subsequent media campaign the US government developed around the iconic image of the American flag being raised over the island. The soldiers involved in the flag-raising were celebrated in US media culture, and were immediately pressed into service to perform reenactments throughout the United States for the purpose of raising war bonds. As the reenactments unfold, each of the four soldiers remembers the actual events that occurred, memories that foreground the difference between the public relations campaign and the reality of the battle, and each experiences a crisis of conscience. *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which was released soon after *Flags of Our Fathers*, presents the story of the battle of Iwo Jima from the Japanese perspective, rendering the extraordinarily harsh experience of the Japanese soldiers defending their homeland during the attack. The human story of the Japanese general commanding the island, whose letters and drawings to his son and wife were buried in a cave and not discovered until 1996, provide the rhetorical frame for the story. The events play out from the perspective of the general, the enlisted men, and the lower-ranking officers, with the dialogue almost entirely in Japanese. And the ostensibly iconic moment of the first film, *Flags of Our Fathers*, is registered in *Letters from Iwo Jima* as barely visible, a small speck on a hilltop, signifying to the Japanese merely that a certain position had been overtaken. The two films together, although quite different in terms of style

and approach, provide a powerful and heartbreaking portrayal of the catastrophic consequences of war to those fighting it, even to the victor.

The Epic Film

Many of the most important filmmakers in world cinema have created epic films, including D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, William Wyler, Anthony Mann, Sergei Eisenstein, Stanley Kubrick, and Akira Kurosawa. As Derek Elley writes, “The epic genre has seen some of the cinema’s greatest stylists and craftsmen working at full stretch, several spending their formative years associated with historical films.”¹³ The Italian filmmaker Enrico Guazzoni inaugurated the form with *Quo Vadis?* in 1912, a story of the legend and martyrdom of St. Peter. An early version of the Spartacus story, *Spataco* (1913), by Ernesto Pasquale, soon followed. With the world success of Giovanni Pastrone’s *Cabiria* in 1914, the elements of epic cinema were established. A vast, sweeping work of monumental sets and massed crowd scenes, featuring a romance between a slave girl and a Roman centurion, *Cabiria* was the first true screen epic. It was quickly followed in Italy by many films dealing with ancient Rome, Greece, and early Christianity.

Following the worldwide success of the Italian spectacle films, which were widely regarded as the finest achievements of the early silent cinema, Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that established the viability of longer, ambitious historical films for the American cinema. And driven to produce a film of even greater scope by a desire to compete with the monumental *Cabiria*, Griffith expanded on his earlier biblical film, *Judith of Bethulia*, to create *Intolerance* (1916), which remains today one of the most ambitious films ever made. *Intolerance* did not meet with commercial or critical approval, however, and the production of epic films in America lapsed. In the early 1920s, the epic form was half-heartedly revived in DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and Alexander Korda’s *Samson and Delilah* (1923), both of which were only partially set in the ancient past.

In 1925, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, directed by Fred Niblo, was released by MGM. Building on the enormous success of the stage production and the continuing success of the novel by General Lew Wallace – apart from the Bible, the novel had been the bestselling book in America for many decades – *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* became a commercial blockbuster. Featuring stunning color sequences, a chariot race that remains one of the greatest action sequences ever filmed, and



FIGURE 1.4 Judah Ben-Hur (Ramon Novarro) driving the chariot in a scene that defined the American epic on stage and on screen (1925) [MGM/Photofest]

exceptional treatments of the set pieces that made the play the most successful theatrical production in history, *Ben-Hur* was a magisterial accomplishment, consolidating the reputation of Hollywood as the primary producer of epic films.

In the 1930s, films such as *The Sign of the Cross* (1933), *Cleopatra* (1934), and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) drew enormous crowds. *The Sign of the Cross* also created a good deal of controversy for its depictions of “pagan” sexuality and the extreme violence and sensationalism of scenes set in the arena. Its message of Christian uplift notwithstanding, the film was largely responsible for the institution of the Hayes Code, the censorship formula adopted by the studios in order to placate conservative critics. DeMille produced the more restrained *Cleopatra* the following year, and demonstrated that suggestiveness and indirection could be as effective as blatant sensationalism in conveying the ancient milieu. *The Sign of the Cross* was reissued during World War II, with a prologue and coda added. The new release featured a Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish chaplain in an airplane approaching Rome as part of a bombing run.

Here, the Allied liberation of Italy was compared with the liberation of pagan Rome by early Christianity, as the fires from the bombs dissolve into the burning by Nero of the ancient capitol that inaugurates the film. A film that had been widely criticized for its overt and sensational displays of sex and violence was converted to a message of liberation and American virtue on its re-release during wartime.

In the mid- to late 1930s through the 1940s, however, the epic form waned as audience's tastes turned to contemporary subjects, exemplified in the sophisticated musicals and comedies of Hollywood, and in the later development of realism, exemplified by the rise of serious dramas and the ascendance of the psychological thriller. But the form returned full force in the early 1950s, with *Quo Vadis* (1951), directed by Mervyn LeRoy, and *The Robe* (1953), directed by Henry Koster, the first film to be shot in CinemaScope. The epic, with its lavish sets and mass choreography of crowds and armies, lent itself to the widescreen format that was one of Hollywood's responses to the threat of television.

DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) marked a return to the subject he had first treated in 1923. Perhaps more than any other film, *The Ten Commandments* embodies the historiographic vision of the Hollywood epic, which the theorist Gilles Deleuze defines as an overlay of three different ways of depicting the past: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical-ethical. In its dazzling portrayal of ancient Egypt, especially in its enormous sets and its massed crowd scenes, the film exemplifies the monumental vision of the past. In its use of color, especially in the concentrated attention to fabrics, jewelry, and ornamentation, the film renders an antiquarian perspective on the past. And in its spectacular scenes of the green, snaking fog descending from on high to fell the first-born of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and the exodus from Egypt, the film expresses an unambiguous critical-ethical message linking religion and popular liberation. In 1956, it was also seen as an expression of American virtue in the threatening political environment of the Cold War, a statement against totalitarian regimes past and present. In the closing shot of the film, Moses, played by Charlton Heston, stands on an outcrop of Mount Sinai, his right hand raised in farewell, his left hand clasped across his chest, emulating the pose of the Statue of Liberty. The American epic, Deleuze writes, "communicates via the peaks" with the great civilizations of the past. *The Ten Commandments* has been re-released several times since its initial 1956 run, and remains today a staple of television programming, especially on major holidays.

In 1959, William Wyler directed *Ben-Hur*, a film that for most critics represents the high point of the style. Wyler had been an assistant on

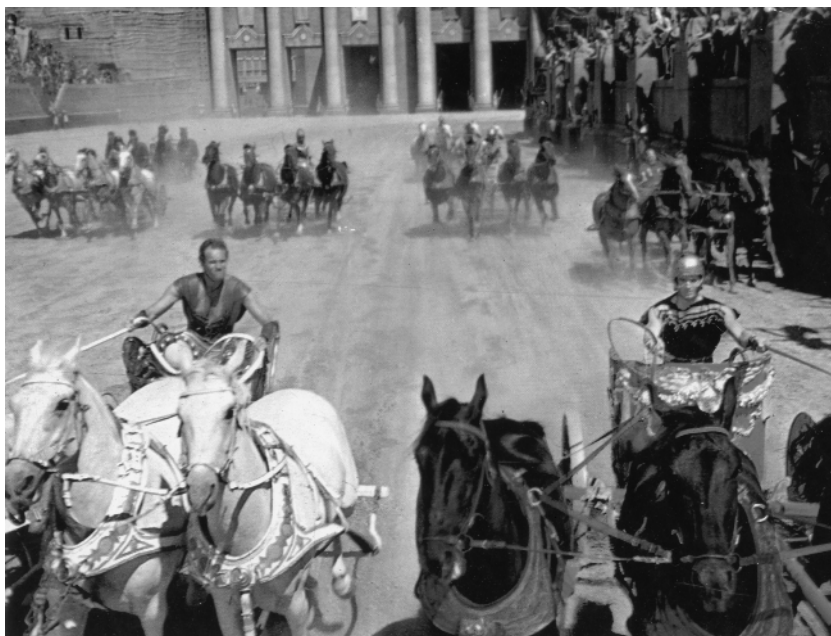


FIGURE 1.5 Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd) in *Ben-Hur*, considered by many to be the highest achievement of the epic form (1959) [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Photofest]

the set of the 1925 *Ben-Hur*, and quotes the earlier film in a number of sequences, including the famous chariot race, which has numerous shots taken directly from the original. Among its many outstanding accomplishments, the score by Miklós Rózsa is widely considered to be one of the finest works of music written for film. The overall progress of the film, which moves from Judea to Rome and back, depicts two great civilizations in conflict. But rather than rehearsing the traditional epic themes – the emergence of a people or the fulfillment of a heroic destiny – *Ben-Hur* culminates in an act of forgiveness, a theme that is expressed throughout the film in the simple symbolism of water, which, at the end, floods the courtyard of Ben-Hur's home.

King of Kings, directed by Nicolas Ray, and *El Cid*, directed by Anthony Mann, both released in 1961, were also accomplished works. *El Cid*, a medieval epic, depicts the story of the Cid, the Spanish national hero who united the Christians and the Moors in Spain against the conquest of a radical Islamist sect from Morocco, the Almoravid. Loosely based on the Spanish national epic poem, the *Poema de Mio Cid*, the film is

a compelling work that in today's political context seems remarkably prescient. Produced by Samuel Bronston in Spain, the film strove to be received as an international production, with stars from America (Charlton Heston), France (Geneviève Page), and Italy (Sophia Loren). With a score by Miklós Rózsa, the film has an epic grandeur that is stately, poetic, and moving.

The epic form in Hollywood reached its zenith in the early 1960s with *Cleopatra* (1963), directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), directed by Anthony Mann, and *Spartacus* (1960), directed by Stanley Kubrick. An impressive work, *Spartacus* became famous upon its release for the fact that it credited as screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, a prominent leftist who had been blacklisted in Hollywood for refusing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. *Spartacus* became known as "the film that broke the blacklist." Partly because of expense and partly because of extraordinary off-screen publicity, *Cleopatra* also became notorious for its production circumstances, namely the romance of its two stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, factors that had nothing to do with the exceptional quality of the film. Although three of the top five grossing films in Hollywood during the 1950s were epics – *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Ben-Hur*, the cultural mood in the 1960s had begun to shift.

The epic form went into sudden eclipse with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, a film that was critically well received but did not connect at the box office. From 1964 until recent years, the epic was decidedly out of fashion. With the release of *Braveheart* (1995), directed by Mel Gibson, and *Gladiator* (2000), by Ridley Scott, the epic has renewed itself in a way that heralds a return to cultural prominence. *Gladiator*, in particular, provides a fascinating example of the use of new visual technologies to narrate the Roman past. Its use of computer-generated imagery to re-create the Colosseum and the Roman Forum gives the film a spectacular visual style that updates and goes beyond the monumental style of earlier epic films, equaling in visual excitement the accomplishments of *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*. Like *El Cid*, *Gladiator* was produced and marketed as an international production, and enjoyed enormous world success. Following the success of *Gladiator*, several new epic films have been released, including *Troy* (2004), directed by Wolfgang Petersen, *Alexander* (2004), directed by Oliver Stone, and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), also directed by Ridley Scott.

One of the leading scholars of epic film, Derek Elley, maintains that the epic form requires a certain temporal distance from the period being portrayed; the quality of mythic grandeur that we associate with the

epic, he feels, can only be fully expressed in works that deal with the remote past. He sets the outer historical limit of the epic at the early medieval period, arguing “It is the peculiar ability of the epic to derive its basis from very real events but to transmute the ingredients into a timeless form; the past has always excited man’s imagination more than the tangible present, since it gives him greater scope to dream.” To support this point, Elley draws on the description of the epic, given by Aristotle in his *On the Art of Poetry*: “it is clear . . . that the [epic] poet’s job is not to say what happened but what *could* happen.”¹⁴ Historical periods that are too close to the present, in Elley’s view, restrict the timeless, mythic qualities that distinguish epic form.

Many critics would regard Elley’s requirement of historical distance as too limiting. It eliminates a great many films that seem to possess the requisite epic grandeur and scale of epic cinema, films such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather, Parts I and II* (1972, 1974), Bernardo Bertolucci’s *1900* (1977), and Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York* (2003). These films create a powerful impression of a historical world and a historical milieu, although actual historical events are only incidental to their plots. Here, the traditional epic themes – the founding of a people or nation, the advent of freedom, the fulfillment of a heroic destiny – are expressed in terms of generational struggles and the rising and falling arc of a long family history. These films form a subset of the epic film, the family epic, a type that accents certain features of the epic while others recede into the background. The critical-ethical perspective that Deleuze finds to be essential to the epic form manifests itself throughout these works. The monumental and antiquarian characteristics of epic style, however, are largely missing from the family epic.

The Biographical Film

Despite its small-bore critical reputation, the biographical film has a long and distinguished history in world cinema. In addition to its surprising and enduring popularity – more biographical films have been produced than any other type of historical film – it has often advanced the fortunes of entire national cinemas. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), directed by Alexander Korda, for example, was the British cinema’s first international success, and Charles Laughton won an Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of the monarch. Abel Gance’s *Napoleon* (1927) brought a similar sense of national pride to France, a country whose film industry had been devastated by World War I. Still regarded as one of the most

outstanding achievements in the history of the cinema, *Napoleon* was seen as the culmination of the French cinema's rise from near-annihilation in 1914. Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) was produced with the specific intention of rallying the Soviet people and troops to the effort required for World War II. And more recently, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), the story of a character who started life as the Emperor of China and ended under Mao's rule as a humble gardener, won nine Academy Awards and claimed the historical significance of being the first film to be shot on location in Beijing's Forbidden City, heralding a more open era in Chinese–Western cultural relations.

Nevertheless, the biographical film suffers from a lack of critical respect. Roland Barthes has called biography “the fiction that dare not speak its name,” and the biographical film, apart from a few works that have achieved worldwide success, has often been taken as a kind of critical embarrassment.¹⁵ It is widely regarded as a lesser cultural form, a mainstream entertainment that creates mythic figures out of complex human beings. Its style of historiography is also regarded as suspect, a dubious attempt to encapsulate or exemplify a major historical period in the life of an individual protagonist.

Further appraisal of the form, however, reveals the biographical film to be part of a deep cultural tradition of depicting exemplary lives for the purpose of ethical instruction, a tradition that dates back at least to the medieval period. Leo Lowenthal, an influential member of the Frankfurt School, described biography as a continuation of the forms of instruction found in the “Lives of the Saints.” As one writer explains, “Lowenthal felt that biographies . . . helped prepare average people to accept their place in the social structure by valorizing a common, distant, and elevated set of lives that readers could hope to emulate.”¹⁶ The form taken by this tradition in the 1940s, however, revealed to Lowenthal a drastic decline in American culture. Analyzing popular magazines, which often featured biographies of famous Americans, he discovered a substantial shift: where American biography of the early twentieth century focused on industrial leaders, such as Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, and emphasized effort and achievement, contemporary biography privileged movie stars and celebrities, icons of glamour and consumption. The public celebrity that defined success in American culture, in Lowenthal's view, illuminated the pervasive and negative effects of the “culture industry,” which promoted acquisition over achievement, consumption over effort.¹⁷

Although Lowenthal had a negative view of American culture, his recognition of the importance of biography as a form of cultural expression is borne out by the success and the influence of the biographical

film. It emerged as a recognizable Hollywood subgenre in the 1930s, with films that focused on humanitarian and political figures. The first major biographical film is generally considered to be *Disraeli* (1929), a film starring George Arliss and marketed as a Warner Bros. prestige production. Arliss won an Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal. In 1931, he starred in *Alexander Hamilton* for Warner Bros., and in 1933 he continued his success in these films with *Voltaire*. The commercial and critical accomplishment of these works paved the way for several later Warner Bros. films directed by William Dieterle, including *The Life of Louis Pasteur* (1936), for which Paul Muni won the Oscar for Best Actor; *White Angel* (1936), a story of Florence Nightingale; *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937); and *Juarez* (1939), both also starring Muni. Darryl F. Zanuck recognized the strength of the biographical film, and when he left Warner Bros. in 1933 to found Twentieth Century Pictures, he immediately began making films with George Arliss such as *The House of Rothschild* (1934) and *Cardinal Richelieu* (1935).

The heroic tradition established in the Warner Bros. films was advanced by movies depicting the early life of Abraham Lincoln in the late 1930s. John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), starring Henry Fonda in his first film with Ford, and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, starring Raymond Massey, were not so much historical as mythological exercises, as neither film was particularly accurate with regard to the actual events of Lincoln's life, nor to his character. Nevertheless, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, in particular, succeeded in elevating Lincoln's early years to the level of national myth, reinforcing the widespread cult of Lincoln that had developed in the mid- to late 1930s, exemplified by Carl Sandburg's popular biographies.¹⁸

Biographical films are often driven by a national, myth-making impulse, but as the subgenre matured, complex portraits that revealed the darker impulses of character became more prominent. Outside of the American cinema, Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1945), for example, focused on an individual protagonist, rather than the collective protagonist of his earlier films, in part in order to rally the Soviet people during World War II by giving them a biographical hero who had unified Russia, fought off treachery, and defeated external enemies in the sixteenth century. But it may also be the first biographical film to explore the darker side of its main character, depicting Ivan, especially in Part II, as driven by revenge. He presides over mass executions, tortures, and murderous intrigue, and turns into a cruel dictator, a monstrous figure, a portrayal that led to the film being banned by Stalin in 1946. As David Bordwell writes in his magisterial study of Eisenstein, "Surrounded by enemies and traitors, increasingly isolated from family and friends, Ivan

ruthlessly pursues his goal. Yet the closer he comes to achieving it, the more empty of human contact his life becomes.”¹⁹

The shift in biographical films to more complex portraits is exemplified by the powerful portrayal of T. S. Lawrence, another biography made outside Hollywood. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), starring Peter O’Toole, paints an arresting portrait of its main character that shows him as both heroic and fatally flawed. The Hollywood biopic took a similar multidimensional approach with *Patton* (1970), in which George C. Scott depicts the notorious World War II cavalry general as both a noble warrior and a vainglorious egomaniac. The complex and subtle shadings of character that distinguish films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Patton* are also found in more recent examples of the form. The important and innovative *Reds* (1982) by Warren Beatty – the story of the left-wing journalist John Reed, the only Westerner buried in the Kremlin, also exemplify this tendency. Works such as *The Last Emperor* (1987) by Bernardo Bertolucci and Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* (1995) are distinguished examples of works that take a complicated view of the link between the individual subject and the historical process, refusing to see the individual agent as simply the crystallized expression of historical forces. *Schindler’s List* (1995), directed by Steven Spielberg, *Malcolm X* (1993), directed by Spike Lee, *Gandhi* (1982), directed by Richard Attenborough, and *Aviator* (2005), directed by Martin Scorsese are also fine examples of films that consider the question that is at the heart of the biographical film – the relationship between the currents and forces of history and the charismatic individual who strives to shape those forces.

The cultural shift to cults of celebrity that Lowenthal noticed in the rise of fan magazines in the 1940s seems not to be the case with the Hollywood biopic, which even in its most popular forms centers on the lives of figures whose confrontation with celebrity is often their undoing. The musical biopic, perhaps the most successful variant of the form, has provided powerful and sobering portrayals of figures as diverse as Benny Goodman, Cole Porter, Jim Morrison, Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, Ludwig von Beethoven, Frederic Chopin, and Amadeus Mozart. Recent musical biopics have been enormously successful, winning numerous awards and drawing large audiences. *Ray* (2004), directed by Taylor Hackford, renders the story of Ray Charles in a form that emphasizes his overcoming of extraordinary adversity, including childhood blindness, guilt from the accidental death of his younger brother, racism, and drugs. In *Walk the Line* (2005), a powerful portrayal of the singer Johnny Cash, the early history of rock and roll is vividly portrayed. Here, the redemption of the character from drugs and self-loathing is

folded into the story of Cash's famous climb-any-mountain love affair with June Carter. In the musical biopic form, the dramatic arc is redemptive; in contrast to the tragic denouement that is so powerfully expressed in films such as *Patton*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *Nixon*; the musical biopic is most often resolved in scenes of reconciliation and acceptance. Where a tragic ending occurs, it comes not from the characters' own flaws, but rather from accident, almost as if fate had intervened, as in the plane crash that ends the lives of Buddy Holly and Richie Valens, and the illness that leads to the early death of Amadeus Mozart.

The Topical Film

Many important historical films center on a particular incident or focus on a specific period rather than on the grand narratives of war, the fulfillment of a heroic destiny, or the emergence of a people or a nation. Films that deal with a specific event may be called topical films, as exemplified by such celebrated works as Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), and *Paisan* (1946), Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938), Andrez Wajda's *Danton* (1982), *Eight Men Out* (1988) and *Matewan* (1987), both directed by John Sayles, Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1999). The most recent examples of important topical films are *United 93* (2006), directed by Paul Greengrass, and *World Trade Center* (2006), directed by Oliver Stone.

Independent filmmaker John Sayles has provided a capsule definition of the topical film:

Am I going to recreate this entire historical world, or am I going to take one episode that stands for it? In making *Matewan* I chose to focus on the Matewan Massacre because it seemed to me that this episode epitomized a fifteen-year period of American labor history. To make it even more representative, I incorporated things that weren't literally true of the Matewan Massacre – such as the percentage of miners who were black – but were true of that general fifteen-year period.²⁰

Similarly, Sayles's *Eight Men Out*, a film that focuses on the Black Sox scandal of 1919 in which several players conspired to throw the World Series, dug under the surface of the incident to show the period as a moment of cultural transition in which sports, advertising, public relations, gambling, leisure, and mass communications were beginning to transform the nation from an agrarian culture to an urban, commodity-based society.

Other historical films are important not for the specific events that they portray, but for their exactitude of period detail and for their attempt to render the social codes of the past, what Collingwood might call the “inside of the historical event.”²¹ A kind of shorthand phrase – period films – has been used to describe this type, which in general are characterized by their attempt to express fully a cultural order that is remote and is organized according to different allegiances and beliefs. Examples include *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1981), by Daniel Vigne, *Black Robe* (1991), by Bruce Beresford, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), by Julie Dash, and *Gangs of New York* (2003), by Martin Scorsese.

Black Robe, a particularly fine example of a period film, centers on the challenges facing Jesuit missionaries in French Canada in the 1600s. The story revolves around the attempt by one young priest to travel to a distressed mission in the Ottawa River valley, a journey that becomes an ordeal. The film captures the strangeness and sense of otherness that the priest experiences while traveling among the Algonquin band that serve as his trading partners and guides, but it also gives us the perspective of the Indians and effectively opens a window onto their cultural sensibility. The priest, Father Laforgue, is as strange and incomprehensible to the Indians as they are to him, with his black robes, his lack of interest in women and pelts, his ability to read minds at a distance (which is how they interpret his ability to read), and what seems to them odd behavior, as when he tries to baptize a dead Indian child, an act that the Indians interpret as a curse. Each culture is presented to the viewer in its unfiltered strangeness, much as it must have seemed to the Algonquins, on the one hand, and the Jesuit missionaries, on the other, in 1634.

Martin Scorsese has said that *Gangs of New York* is not based on actual historical events: “the film isn’t based on facts in the way that, let’s say, *Glory* is . . . History is suggested and there’s the impression of a world.”²² The film portrays a little-known period in American history, beginning in 1846 and ending in the early 1860s with the draft riots in New York City. Bitter conflicts between the native-born residents of the slums and the multiple waves of Irish immigrants entering New York to escape famine provide the historical context for the story. The film begins with a bloody tribal battle between two slum gangs, the “Native Americans” and the “Dead Rabbits,” who have allies among other Irish gangs such as the “Pug Uglies” and the “Forty Thieves.” When the leader of the Dead Rabbits, Priest Vallon, is killed in the battle, the film develops into a classic revenge tale, as the young Amsterdam Vallon, the son of the slain leader, seeks to avenge his death at the hands of “Bill the Butcher.” The psychological tension between the two, which one figure in the

film calls “Shakespearian,” complicates the story. It is the portrayal of the notorious “Five Points” neighborhood in Manhattan, however, described by one writer as the “world’s worst slum,” that distinguishes Scorsese’s film. It immerses the viewer in a spectacularly squalid and primitive world whose epicenter is the “Old Brewery” building situated in the Five Points. Scorsese built an enormous set at the Cinecittà studios in Rome, and rendered the style of the era with exceptional vividness, bringing to life the description given by the Revd. Matthew Hale Smith in the 1840s of the Five Points: “it is a region of wickedness, filth, and woe. Lodging-houses are under ground, foul and slimy, without ventilation, and often without windows, and overrun with rats and every species of vermin . . . Children are born in sorrow, and raised in reeking vice and bestiality, that no heathen degradation can exceed.”²³ Although the film is loosely populated with actual historical figures, such as “Boss” Tweed and Horace Greeley, the main focus of the film is the portrayal of the milieu – the setting of the Five Points, the codes of honor that characterize the various gangs that vie for dominance, such as the “Native Americans” and the “Dead Rabbits,” and the volatile mixture of different populations – Chinese, Irish, African, and Anglo-American – that fill the dance halls and saloons. In rendering this explosive period setting, *Gangs of New York* fulfills the dictum laid down by Natalie Zemon Davis for historical films to “let the past be the past.”²⁴

United 93 and *World Trade Center* are primary examples of the topical film, works that focus on a singular historical event. Each film portrays the events of 9/11 in a deliberately circumscribed way, restricting themselves to first-hand, immediate experiences of the event. *United 93* depicts the hijacking of Flight 93 and the fear and resolve of the passengers on board in a form that can best be described as adrenalized stasis, the camera moving rapidly from static character to static character, in a fashion, to capture the initial terror, the surreptitious tactical planning among the passengers, and their cathartic storming of the cockpit to try to seize control of the plane. Cutting between the scenes inside the aircraft and the frantic but wholly ineffective actions of air traffic control and the military on the ground, the film produces a seemingly documentary record of a single occurrence, and suggests in the process the seismic shift in the national reality that results. *World Trade Center*, directed by Oliver Stone, renders the events of 9/11 in a very different style, focusing on the grim experience of two firefighters trapped for thirteen hours in the pile of the World Trade Center. The true story of the last two survivors to be rescued from the rubble is rendered in an intensely claustrophobic manner, the survivors’ physical immobility

emphasized by almost motionless long takes. The only movement in certain drawn-out sequences is the movement of the two characters' mouths as they try to keep themselves conscious by talking. With occasional parallel sequences depicting the families and the friends of the two firefighters, the film contrasts these scenes of the anxious families, filled with both tension and color, with extended scenes under the pile, which become almost abstract studies in charcoal and ash. The agitational style typical of Oliver Stone gives way to a somber effort that might be compared to the "working through" of traumatic memory.

The Metahistorical Film

Certain films can be called metahistorical because they offer embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented. Although this approach to representing the historical past is rare in Hollywood, in many ways it highlights the cinema's potential for a critical, historiographic questioning of the past and its strengths as a form of thought experiment.

JFK (1990), directed by Oliver Stone, aroused intensive controversy for its blending of fictional and documentary techniques, and its radical practice of speculation and hypothesis in presenting a critique of the Warren Commission Report on John F. Kennedy's death. It presents a provocative interpretation of the assassination in a highly charged, polemical style that mixes idioms, splices together documentary and historical footage, and uses montage editing to disorient and "agitate" the viewer in a manner that calls into question accepted interpretations of the past.

Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) exposes the public relations campaign that followed the famous photo of the flag-raising over Iwo Jima, and the efforts to promote this image as a national icon. It provides a sobering account of the gulf between the actual event – and the men involved – and the way the event was promoted by the government for the purpose of raising war bonds. Edward Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996) uses multiple subjective flashbacks, each narration contradicting the others, to attempt to determine the circumstances that led to a female helicopter commander's death in the first Gulf War. The military establishment is seeking to award her a posthumous Medal of Honor, the first to be awarded to a female officer, but the eyewitness accounts of the soldiers under her command vary widely. The legitimizing narrative that would convey the leadership qualities of women in the military is concealed among a complicated array of inconsistent

interpretations. Alex Cox's *Walker* (1987), which has been characterized as a postmodern historical film, brings present-day objects from consumer culture – computers, Coke cans, 1950s automobiles – into its collagelike narrative of the nineteenth-century adventurer, William Walker, who invaded Nicaragua with a band of mercenaries and declared himself emperor.

These intricate and interesting movies depart from conventional approaches to history in the Hollywood film, but can be understood as part of another cinematic tradition, mainly European, of interrogating the process of historical representation, both in written and cinematic form. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film From Germany* (1978, also known as *Our Hitler*), for example, attempts to confront the German amnesia concerning Hitler and complicity in his crimes by rendering the phenomenon of Hitler's rise as a disorienting operatic production, calling to mind the German fascination and investment in this form. The film's extreme length (seven hours and nine minutes), its use of dolls, dummies, and caricatures – Hitler is portrayed variously as a house painter, as Chaplin's Great Dictator, as a Frankenstein monster, and as Parsifal – underscores the way historical events and characters take on meaning through the way they are presented in the media. The film illustrates the way historical facts, such as the genocide practiced by the Third Reich, can be made to seem operatic, trivial, commonplace, or distorted, and emphasizes the way the memory of Hitler continues to influence the German national psyche.

In a very different way, Rossellini's series of nondramatic "history lessons" can also be seen as metahistorical works. In a series of films made late in his career, Rossellini explored the lives and times of various historical personages in a studiously nondramatic, non-psychologized way. His films *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), *Socrates* (1970), and *The Age of the Medici* (1972) are made with nonprofessional actors and avoid following the dramatic arc of most fictional historical films. He attempts to capture the daily round of life in past historical times, bringing an almost documentary approach to the treatment of the past. Here Rossellini highlights the fact that we are viewing the past from a particular point of view with emphatic zoom shots drawing our attention to the presence of the camera in the reenactment of the historical past.

The Costume Film

The costume drama can be distinguished from other variants of the historical film by virtue of its fictional basis – its plot is most often based

on a fictional literary source, and it does not depend on actual historical events as its main focus or framing material. Nevertheless, the costume drama provides many pleasures for viewers, for it often features a sumptuous re-creation of a historical period and setting, with the density of detail in the costumes and décor providing a source of sensual pleasure that equates history with emotion and passion.²⁵ In the 1940s the Gainsborough Studio produced a number of notable costume dramas, including adaptations of literary works such as *The Man in Grey* (1943), *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944), and *The Wicked Lady* (1945). Recent examples of the costume drama, such as *The Mark of Zorro* (1998), *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), employ historical settings for their aesthetic value, allowing the viewer to become a voyeur of the past. Historical films in general appeal to this emotional, voyeuristic interest on the part of the spectator, but the costume film allows its fullest expression, untrammelled by the sociopolitical conflicts that dominate the plots of films that deal with actual historical events.

The historical film emerged as a strong genre form very early in cinema history, and has renewed itself many times over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the world of the past is its subject, the genre is often in the vanguard in terms of visual style and cinematic technique. The dramatic, compelling portraits of the past that are brought to life in the historical film have made it one of the most prestigious as well as one of the most controversial genres in film. It provides both a lens onto the past, which it frequently re-creates with exquisite attention to detail and period style, while also reflecting the cultural sensibility of the period in which it was made. Above all, the historical film provides an emotional connection to history in a way that foregrounds the power and importance of the past in shaping the cultural imaginary in the present.

Notes

- 1 As Robert Sklar writes, “If the cinema was something new for spectators of the 1890s, seeing larger-than-life projections of still and moving images was not.” Exhibitions included magic lantern shows, dioramas, panoramas, and various forms of mechanically produced illusion. Some of the most successful and impressive of these projections were the Phantasmagoria and the Théâtre Optique. See Robert Sklar, *Film: An International History of the Medium* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002): 16–24.
- 2 See Alison Griffiths, “‘Shivers Down Your Spine’: Panoramas and the Origins of the Cinematic Reenactment,” *Screen* 44(1) (2003): 1–37.

- 3 John Banvard, *Descriptions of Banvard's Geographical Painting of the Mississippi River* (New York: L. H. Bigelow, 1862). Quoted and cited in Griffiths, "Shivers Down Your Spine": 11.
- 4 Griffiths, p. Griffiths, "Shivers Down Your Spine": 20.
- 5 "Ben-Hur' Passes Over to the Movies," January 7, 1923.
- 6 See James Castonguay, "The Spanish-American War in United States Media Culture," <http://chnm.gmu.edu/aq/>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Sklar, *Film*: 56.
- 9 Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England and New York: Pearson Education, 2006): 13.
- 10 Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984): 270.
- 11 Robert Eberwein, ed. *The War Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005): 2–3.
- 12 Laurence Suid, *Guts & Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978): 142.
- 13 Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984): 6.
- 14 Ibid., 12, 13.
- 15 Quoted in Rosenstone, *History on Film*: 91.
- 16 Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in *1942–43*, ed. Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duel, Sloan & Pearce, 1944). Quoted in George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992): 32.
- 17 Custen, *Bio/Pics*: 32–4.
- 18 See Mark E. Neely, Jr., "The Young Lincoln: Two Films," in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995): 124–7.
- 19 David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 224.
- 20 John Sayles, "A Conversation with Eric Foner and John Sayles," in Carnes, *Past Imperfect*: 13.
- 21 For a careful analysis of Collingwood's philosophy of history, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Reality of the Historical Past," (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984).
- 22 Martin Scorsese, "Manhattan Asylum," interview with Ian Christie, *Sight and Sound*, January 2003.
- 23 Quoted in Daniel Stashower, *The Beautiful Cigar Girl: Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Invention of Murder* (New York: Dutton, 2006): 14.
- 24 See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2000): 136.
- 25 See Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

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1	can you avoid repeating "painted canvas"?	
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