

## Cinematic History as Genre

When examining problems with the historical portrayals in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), a reviewer concluded that the movie's distortions of history were hardly surprising. "What do they expect?" asked Alan Taylor in an article in the *Scotsman*. The production had been designed for the mass market. "This is Hollywood, not a BBC documentary," he observed, "and it's best to remember that everything is a sacrificial lamb [in Hollywood] to the demands of studio moguls and box office returns."<sup>1</sup>

This kind of cynicism toward Hollywood's handling of history is a familiar characteristic of film commentaries. Reviewers frequently point to egregious factual errors and cinematic manipulations, lambasting moviemakers for taking too many artistic liberties. Sometimes they lash out against Hollywood's storytelling in general, as did Walter Goodman, who warned in the *New York Times*, if you are looking for history, "stay away from docudramas, which are driven to distort for the sake of drama."<sup>2</sup> In even more biting language, he suggested that "the only good docudrama is the unproduced docudrama."<sup>3</sup> Jerry Kuehl, writing in the British magazine *Vision*, exhibited similar contempt for Hollywood's presentations of history. He urged filmmakers not to make historical dramas if they could produce documentaries instead. Hollywood's version of history was so flawed by misrepresentations, Kuehl argued, that movies ought to feature a disclaimer announcing, "Any resemblance between the characters portrayed in this film and any person living or dead is purely coincidental." Kuehl demanded that filmmakers be held accountable for their outrageous distortions. At stake in controversies about the movies, he asserted, "is nothing less than the old, inconclusive struggle between those who are interested in history and those who are interested in fiction."<sup>4</sup>

Ken Burns, the accomplished producer-director of many outstanding historical documentaries, also expressed strong suspicion of the dramatic medium. He directed strong complaints against *Glory* (1989), a much-acclaimed feature film about black soldiers who served in the Union army under a white leader during the Civil War. Burns claimed the movie suffered from several anachronisms, historical gaffes, and sins of omission. In *Glory*'s climactic battle

scenes, for example, the Yankee soldiers attack Fort Wagner from the north, yet in the actual assault, the Union troops attacked from the south. Burns also made fun of the movie's characterizations. *Glory* showed nineteenth-century black leader Frederick Douglass "with his fake, glued-on beard." Furthermore, black Civil War soldiers in the film reflected a familiar variety of personality types, much like the stereotypical characters in Hollywood's World War II combat pictures. Burns also maintained that "the film missed . . . opportunities." For example, even though historians had fascinating letters at their disposal written by African Americans who had participated in the Civil War, the makers of *Glory* did not use them.<sup>5</sup> Burns's damning remarks about *Glory* suggested that the movie paled by comparison with his informative documentary series on a related subject, *The Civil War* (1990).<sup>6</sup>

Complaints such as those registered by Goodman, Kuehl, and Burns appear frequently in published reviews and in radio and television commentaries about the movies. Enthusiasts of history communicate a sense of frustration and disgust when assessing Hollywood's treatment of the past. They vigorously denounce the latest Hollywood productions, urging audiences to cast a suspicious eye on them. Often these critics affect a scolding tone when reminding audiences that veracity and authenticity are of great importance. The stakes are high, because Hollywood entertainment has become an enormously influential cultural force. Movies and television programs deliver popular perspectives of the past, stories that have considerable appeal with the youth in America and the world. Young adults obtain a good deal of their understanding about the past from dramatic films rather than nonfiction history books, critics of cinematic history point out. Students are learning history from the dramas they see on the screen, and, unfortunately, they are often subjected to a deeply flawed portrayal of the past.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1990s, two of Oliver Stone's movies excited particularly strident complaints about historical representation: *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995). David Armstrong argued, for example, that *JFK*'s mixture of archival and dramatic film confused young viewers. Stone presented his interpretation of John F. Kennedy's assassination as if it were the literal truth.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, historian Alan Brinkley warned that *JFK* delivered "what an entire generation of Americans will remember as something like the truth about the Kennedy assassination."<sup>9</sup> Referring to Oliver Stone's *Nixon*, Charles Colson, a former top aide to President Richard M. Nixon, warned that gullible young people "who don't know the facts" could easily be seduced by the media, "where falsehoods and distortions work their greatest harm."<sup>10</sup> David W. Belin, who participated in the Warren Commission's investigation of Kennedy's death, said that Stone and other Hollywood artists needed to be cognizant of their power at a time when young

Americans gained much of their knowledge about the past from movies. Belin said that filmmakers “have a moral obligation to avoid major distortion of the facts in films such as ‘Nixon’ and ‘JFK,’ which purport to tell the truth about important historical figures or events.”<sup>11</sup>

Years ago, David Wolper, executive producer of the enormously popular TV miniseries *Roots* (1977), gave a poignant response to these familiar complaints about Hollywood’s treatment of history, and other filmmakers have echoed his argument since then. When reviewers attacked *Roots* for delivering a simplistic portrayal of history, Wolper challenged them to make their own movies about slavery. He replied that if the detractors of *Roots* demanded a much more complex portrayal of history, let them incorporate all the details they desired in their own dramas about slavery, and see if anybody cared to watch. Wolper’s put-down was harsh, but his challenge was an appropriate one. Those who berate filmmakers for giving primacy to entertainment values should recognize that cinematic history will never come to the screen if it cannot excite the interest of a wide range of viewers with different income levels, cultural interests, and educational achievements. These audiences will quickly turn away from cinematic history if they do not find its dramatic presentation compelling.

*Roots* was an extraordinary hit on television because it effectively employed many of the essential elements of mainstream cinematic history. David Wolper and his production team drew lessons from earlier films when fashioning their television drama. They created stories on the basis of filmmaking practices that had pleased audiences in earlier productions with historical themes. *Roots* simplified a complex historical record, focused on the experiences of just a few people, viewed issues of the past in terms of an uplifting morality tale, and populated its scenes with stark characterizations of heroes and villains. Through attention to these successful narrative devices, the creators of *Roots* drew millions of viewers to their cinematic perspectives on history.<sup>12</sup>

Cinema studies specialists often speak of “genre” when identifying the themes and formulas that please audiences and thus are repeated in various forms over and over in later movies. When filmmakers rely on genre, explain Harold Schecter and Jonna G. Semeiks, they are involved in a “skillful retelling of an archetypal narrative that has always exerted a powerful grip on our collective imagination.” Genre has the “power to communicate stories that audiences love to be told, stories that we never grow tired of hearing.”<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schatz, one of the most influential cinema studies professionals, has identified the principal structures of movie genres of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. He notes, for instance, that westerns frequently dealt with struggles to bring civilization to a wild and untamed frontier society. Often the western hero (a man of action rather than words) was seeking revenge for violence committed

against himself, his family, or his friends. Gangster movies typically followed the rise and fall of a tragic figure who emerged from a humble background and then fell into trouble with the police or with rival gangs. Horror pictures frequently showed the danger of scientific hubris, evident when inventors discovered that they could not control their creations (in a variation of this plot, an individual was reluctant to destroy a monster because of its possible value to science).<sup>14</sup>

Genre is never static, Schatz reminds us. It is always changing, evolving. Audiences want to see much that is familiar in a movie, but they also expect to encounter unique qualities. Viewers quickly lose interest in a story that looks and sounds like a replica of previous productions. Successful filmmakers understand this complex expectation—the mixture of story elements that are old and familiar with those that are new and intriguing—and offer moviegoers recognizable plots as well as significant elements of surprise.<sup>15</sup>

Societal developments can also effect changes in the genre, forcing new twists in story lines as times change. Cinematic artists often adjust traditional tales or create new plots based on recent events. In the 1950s, for example, growing fear about the impact of radiation from nuclear testing created an attractive environment for the production of horror movies about mutant insects threatening humankind, such as the huge ants in *Them* (1954). When public apprehension over nuclear testing subsided in the 1960s, these plots became less evident in sci-fi productions. Changing social conditions also affected the character of westerns. For many years, American moviegoers and television audiences loved the genre. Westerns frequently communicated upbeat tales about tough men defeating criminals or Indians and advancing the march of “civilization.” That formula became less successful by the 1960s and 1970s, when the Vietnam War, racial strife, and a failing economy brought into question many of the progressive, optimistic elements of the western genre. In the late twentieth century, westerns fell out of fashion, and the few that did succeed often incorporated a good deal of parody or cynicism.<sup>16</sup> Also, some of the familiar western themes transformed into detective and science fiction films.

Sometimes genres run in cycles. The success of a particular blockbuster can inspire many copycat efforts in Hollywood. *The Godfather* (1972) started such a cycle, inspiring a number of new gangster movies. *Star Wars*’ popularity in 1977 helped promote the development of science fiction movies. When a cycle seems to be near its end, filmmakers are likely to parody the genre. In these cases, the story outlines are so familiar that they serve as attractive targets for humor. Movies such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Cat Ballou* (1974), and *Blazing Saddles* (1974) made fun of the traditional western. *Airplane!*

(1980) parodied disaster films. Historical genre has been the target of parody, too. Mel Brooks's *The History of the World, Part 1* (1981), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Cheech and Chong's The Corsican Brothers* (1984), and the musical comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966) drew laughs while referencing familiar themes and characterizations from Hollywood's historical genre.

Among the most important genres are western, noir, romance, gangster, musical, horror, science fiction, woman's, thriller, detective, action-adventure, war, courtroom drama, martial arts, comedy, and disaster movies. Some movies combine genres. *Alien* (1992) was part horror, part science fiction, and part thriller. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) involved both the horror and the detective genres. *Guys and Dolls* (1955) combined the musical and the gangster film. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) mixed the western and the musical. There are also subgenres such as the "screwball comedy" (*Twentieth Century*, 1934), the "backstage musical" (*Fame*, 1980), and the Vietnam film within the war or historical genre (*Full Metal Jacket*, 1988).

Students of film remind us that genres communicate strongly through iconography. Movies from a specific genre feature familiar scenes, characters, and story structures. In terms of visual imagery, for example, classic westerns were known for their scenes of dusty towns situated on the edge of a desert. The bad guys rode dark horses, wore black clothing, and often sported beards or mustaches. Saloons, dance-hall girls, and posses were also among the familiar icons. Horror films featured gothic castles, shadowy nocturnal photography, and plenty of lightning. Gangster movies had urban settings with nightclubs, card games, and car chases; they featured tough-looking men who wore long coats and fedoras, smoked, and drank bootleg liquor.<sup>17</sup> Through a variety of familiar visual elements, Hollywood's genres established icons that audiences could easily recognize.

Can we identify the principal elements of historical cinema, including plots and characters as well as visual imagery? The task seems difficult, because the scope of historical film is broad. Cinematic history incorporates many different eras, geographic locations, nations, cultures, and classes. It appears quite difficult to pick out a few obvious icons. History-oriented movies may focus on Roman times or the twentieth century, on the United States or Asia, on a queen and her court or the life of an immigrant family. Cinematic history exhibits such great diversity in terms of settings, plots, and characters that it seems far less encoded than Hollywood's gangster films or horror movies are.

Yet subgenres of cinematic history do incorporate familiar conventions—popular storytelling strategies, icons, and characterizations. Movies about Roman times, for instance, often feature imposing classical buildings with

huge columns and chambers. Their stories usually feature a power-hungry, egomaniacal emperor who speaks in high English and acts like an effete and sometimes sadistic aristocrat. Audience sympathy is frequently directed toward the Christians, who are victims of oppression. The heroic figure in these films usually appears in garb that contrasts sharply with the emperor's. The hero's more subdued apparel suggests a democratic attitude; he is a man of the people. Toward the end of the film, he is usually engaged in a titanic battle against powerful and dangerous enemies in a great public arena before a huge crowd.<sup>18</sup>

Combat movies are another subgenre of the historical film with familiar elements. These movies often focus on a platoon, introducing audiences to a small force of five to ten men. Usually there is tension between the group's leader and a feisty, rebellious soldier who at first refuses to cooperate and be a team player. The combat group is typically diverse, frequently including a guy from Brooklyn, a religiously inclined sharpshooter from the South, and a variety of other stock characters. Action in the film waxes and wanes. There are lively moments of tense firefights and calmer periods when the men talk about their girls back home and what they want to do with their lives. The conclusion of the combat movie almost always involves a superbattle that claims the lives of some of the leading characters but nevertheless produces a victory. In this lively finish, the rebellious figure in the unit usually proves his loyalty and mettle.<sup>19</sup>

More broadly, moviegoers can often recognize the historical genre from the texture of the film. Cinematic artists often manipulate a movie's grain and coloration, attempting to give their productions a look of period authenticity. They can adjust colors by shooting scenes through filters that provide a brownish tint. This technique creates a resemblance to the brownish orange shades of early Technicolor movies, and it also makes the film look somewhat like old color photographs stored in an attic. Not surprisingly, the History Channel features this color icon in its brownish orange logo and in the background sets in its studio. Director John Sayles took a different approach to colors in *Matewan* (1987), a movie about a coal miners' strike in West Virginia. To give his movie a historic-looking quality, Sayles washed sharp colors (such as reds and yellows) out of the scenes and emphasized the drab grays, browns, and blues.<sup>20</sup> Steven Spielberg operated in a related way, washing sharp colors out of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), especially in the opening scenes depicting the D-day assault. Spielberg wanted to create the appearance of an old newsreel. He employed a different technique in *Schindler's List* (1993), in which cinematographer Janusz Kaminski used black-and-white photography throughout most of the story, giving the film a documentary-like appearance.

Audiences have also come to recognize the historical genre through the people associated with it. Just as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson were well recognized in the 1930s as frequent actors in classic gangster movies, and John Wayne and Clint Eastwood became identified with westerns in later years, some actors become associated in the public mind with historical films. During the 1930s, Paul Muni enjoyed such recognition because of his portrayal of a number of historical figures in Hollywood biopics. More recently, Edward Hermann has been associated with cinematic history because of his roles as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Alger Hiss in televised docudramas. Sam Waterston earned the same distinction by playing President Abraham Lincoln in *Gore Vidal's Lincoln* (1988), nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer in *Oppenheimer* (1982), and *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg in *The Killing Fields* (1984). In large part because of their performances in cinematic history, Hermann and Waterston have served as hosts for History Channel programs.

More specifically, how can we recognize the principal characteristics of the historical genre? Do the plots in cinematic history have a traditional structure? How do historical films characterize individuals? In what ways has the historical genre changed over the years, and why? What is the role of subgenres in cinematic history?

Questions about this important category among the major genres produced by Hollywood have received little professional attention. Despite considerable commentary about cinematic history in the mass media, including much attention to debates and controversies about the depiction of history on the screen, little has been written about the historical genre's fundamental characteristics. Robert A. Rosenstone offers some insightful commentary on generic structure in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, but his analysis adds up to only a few pages.<sup>21</sup> Leger Grindon and Robert Burgoyne suggest a need for greater study of the historical genre, yet they provide little specific discussion of the broad characteristics of cinematic history in their books.<sup>22</sup> Other authors focus on subgenres (such as biopics and epics), describing the stories and visual achievements of such films, but they give almost no analytical treatment to the overall generic elements. Fortunately, we have a few excellent investigations of the structure of historical subgenres, such as Jeanine Basinger's informative book *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*.<sup>23</sup>

Any attempt to identify a framework associated with this genre is, of course, subject to considerable debate. Efforts to describe a framework are inherently subjective because they call for judgments. There are no true "rules" for fabricating popular docudramas. Filmmakers do not consult a respected guidebook that lists successful strategies for the design of cinematic history. Furthermore,

many other factors come into play that color the presentation of history in the movies. Individual artists stamp their personalities on their projects. Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, and Steven Spielberg exhibit diverse storytelling approaches and directing styles. As an auteur, each artist creates his or her own cinematic designs.

Nevertheless, we can make a cautious case for cinematic history as genre. There *are* some familiar practices in the craft. Specific films may not contain all these elements, but most Hollywood movies feature many of the basic components. Aspects of these stylistic approaches appear time after time in cinematic history because the techniques work. These approaches make the movies comprehensible and entertaining to audiences. As Schatz points out, filmmakers respond to proven "formulas"—narrative traditions or conventions that have achieved successful audience reactions in other movies.<sup>24</sup> Hollywood artists keep in mind common strategies that have helped make cinematic history understandable, exciting, inspiring, relevant, and intriguing to those who pay to see it.

These strategies can make risky investments in cinematic history more secure. Dramas about significant historical events or situations frequently call for expensive forms of presentation: a substantial cast of leading characters, large scenes involving crowds, panoramic perspectives, historic-looking buildings, period costumes, antique furnishings, and modes of transportation that are no longer in fashion. Historical cinema is also a risky investment because it involves a particularly challenging effort to establish an emotional "hook" that draws in the audience. Filmmakers know that it is generally more difficult to interest viewers in a story about the 1820s or the 1920s than it is to get them emotionally involved in a drama set in the present. Too many problems can easily interfere with the suspension of disbelief—a critical achievement in successful drama. The dialogue in a historical film may not ring true; actors may look silly in their dated apparel; the scenery may not appear authentic. Quite easily, the movie can communicate phoniness to the audience, drawing attention to the fact that the portrayal is staged and that the characters are only pretending that they are living in the past. James Cameron expressed this concern during the months *Titanic* (1997) was in production. The director worried that his expensive project would seem unbelievable and be one of the biggest financial disasters in the history of Hollywood. Additionally, cinematic historians confront the challenge of making historical problems and topics relevant to viewers. Audiences may be only vaguely familiar with the conditions in which the characters find themselves and the difficulties they face. Filmmakers must introduce viewers to different times and places, acquaint audiences with distinctive physical and emotional environments, and familiarize

them with political and social controversies that can appear, at first glance, to have little to do with issues of the present.

Cinematic historians turn to generic strategies to make these difficult and financially risky dramas succeed at the box office and in the television ratings competition. They incorporate well-developed conventions of their craft, borrowing techniques of storytelling that have evolved over the decades.

Each of these techniques interferes in some way with the kind of interpretations that professional historians, lay history buffs, and media critics want to see on the screen. The generic strategies tend to limit the amount of specific information audiences can learn about historic situations. Employing practices of the genre, filmmakers reduce the number of characters in the stories and compress time, directing audience attention to only a few individuals and events. These familiar dramatic strategies often simplify portrayals of the past. They frame issues starkly in terms of conflicts between heroes and villains. The generic style favors highly partisan perspectives that show audiences only one side of a complex controversy. Furthermore, filmmakers draw heavily from contemporary sensibilities in framing their stories, viewing issues of the past through the lens of the present. In all these respects, the conventions of cinematic history lead to manipulations of the historical record that often trouble students of the past.

Some observers find these formulaic elements so disturbing that they dismiss cinematic history altogether. They consider their worst suspicions confirmed when they discover that filmmakers attempt to make their dramas conform to the patterns of successful entertainment. Evidence of these generic practices seems to demonstrate the pecuniary fixation of Hollywood; to critics, it confirms that filmmakers produce cinematic history to make money, not to inform or educate audiences. Detractors claim that the attention to entertainment strategies proves that filmmakers are not really interested in producing "true" pictures of the past. Instead, they employ formulas of genre and conform to the established techniques of mass entertainment. The result is Hollywood-style entertainment, but not sophisticated history.

Such a broad dismissal of cinematic history is much too extreme. It reflects a closed-minded and unsophisticated perspective. As subsequent chapters demonstrate, history-based movies *can* deliver much of value to their audiences. But assessing that value requires a recognition of the dramatic conventions that influence virtually every Hollywood filmmaker who produces pictures for mass audiences. Blaming cinematic historians for incorporating strategies of the genre is like criticizing football coaches for promoting aggressive behavior on the playing field. Judgments about coaches' effectiveness relate, most fundamentally, to their win-loss records and success in building the

skills, character, and self-confidence of their players. In a related way, judgments about cinematic historians must take into account both the market appeal of their productions and their success in communicating informed, thoughtful, and provocative perspectives on the past.

How does the history-oriented movie communicate? What are some of the most familiar practices of the craft? Which narrative strategies have filmmakers repeated in a variety of ways because the techniques worked effectively in previous movies? How does Hollywood attempt to tweak genre, sometimes producing variations on familiar themes? What is the risk of deviating radically from the familiar generic practices? The following discussion identifies some of the major components of cinematic history. It serves, too, as a useful checklist for wide-eyed history enthusiasts who believe they have good ideas for historical movies. These wanna-be cinematic historians need not follow the popular formulas slavishly, but they may seriously jeopardize their projects if they disregard the established procedures wantonly.

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY SIMPLIFIES HISTORICAL EVIDENCE AND EXCLUDES MANY DETAILS

When media commentators and professional historians complain that a motion picture left out too many important facts or failed to give audiences a complete picture of events, often they fail to acknowledge a fundamental structural component of cinematic history. Critics forget that a dramatic film cannot deliver a comprehensive assessment of its subject. To make history understandable and exciting, filmmakers have to narrow the scope of their portrayals. Usually they dramatize only a few events, cover a narrow space of time, and give detailed attention to the thoughts and actions of only a few key people. The subject of the movie is also rather tightly focused on one situation from the past. Memorable movies about World War II, such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *The Longest Day* (1962), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), and *Midway* (1976), draw attention to specific battles, not to the overall progress of the war. In this respect, Alfred Hitchcock's general observation about the movies applies very well to this genre. "Cinema is not a slice of life but a piece of cake," said the famous director.<sup>25</sup>

Motion pictures cannot present comprehensive, definitive studies, and filmmakers understand the foolishness of even trying to cover a topic's length and breadth. Adrian Scott, producer for the 1947 movie *Crossfire*, explained this viewpoint when he responded to critics who complained that *Crossfire* looked only at extreme forms of anti-Semitism; these reviewers wanted to see a story that dealt with the many kinds of bigotry Jews experienced in America, including

the much more subtle and disguised variety. Scott acknowledged that his screenplay was “limited and confined.” *Crossfire*’s story was purposefully designed to approach only one element of prejudice against Jews, he explained. His storytelling strategy was similar to the approach of theatrical writers. “To attempt to do a definitive study of anti-Semitism in one picture is a fool’s errand,” Scott argued. “It is proper material for pamphlets and books. But even in those media it is doubtful if definitiveness is possible. Find, if you can, a definitive one-volume analysis.”<sup>26</sup>

Scott’s defense of his film appears justified when we consider that the dialogue in a two-hour movie consumes no more than ten to twenty book-size pages (sometimes fewer). More important, that language communicates only tidbits of specific information. Words exchanged by the actors ordinarily do not present much detailed evidence about military operations, diplomatic crises, political conflicts, or important social developments. They do even less to explore ideas or to analyze and interpret the larger lessons of history. Most of the verbal exchanges in a Hollywood film deal with interpersonal relationships. The actors express love, passion, hope, frustration, humiliation, joy, and anger.

*Reds* (1982), Warren Beatty’s epic drama about a radical journalist’s activities during World War I and the Russian Revolution, contains little specific information about political events of the era. It offers virtually no interpretation of the causes of the Bolshevik Revolution, nor does it attempt to explain that event’s significance in history. Most of the movie’s dialogue relates to the tensions associated with a love affair between John Reed and Louise Bryant, two historic figures. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) only briefly informs audiences that the movie’s fighting men are part of the D-day invasion force, and the actors say virtually nothing about the issues that led America to fight against Hitler’s Germany in the Second World War. *The Thin Red Line* (1998) contains only a few sentences uttered by Nick Nolte that explain why the Americans need to wrest a Pacific island from the control of Japanese soldiers. The actors in *Ride with the Devil* (1999) offer only a few brief remarks in the opening moments that suggest how disagreements between Northerners and Southerners led to the American Civil War in 1861.

Moviemakers who attempt to pack a lot of historical information into their productions incur considerable risk. Fact-laden dramas can confuse and tire audiences, and cinematic historians who lose their audiences in a labyrinth of detail and complexity may have difficulty raising funds for future projects. They can also encounter another kind of problem that is less obvious. Artists who attempt informational overload often come under fire for leaving out other essential details. By presenting a good deal of specific evidence about history, they raise the expectations of reviewers, leaving critics hungry for more.

Norman Jewison encountered these problems in his production of *The Hurricane* (1999). The movie was criticized not only because of artistic liberties taken in the script but also because Jewison invited debate over how to interpret many basic facts about Rubin “Hurricane” Carter’s life. Jewison’s movie introduced so many characters associated with Carter over several decades that the filmmaker gave the critics plenty of targets to attack. Similarly, Oliver Stone created abundant targets for critics in his two fact-laden political films: *JFK* and *Nixon*. Of course, Stone also invited criticism when he promoted controversial conspiracy theories in both movies.<sup>27</sup>

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY APPEARS IN THREE ACTS FEATURING EXPOSITION, COMPLICATION, AND RESOLUTION

In ancient Greece, Aristotle described the three-act structure in dramatic presentation, and in fundamental ways, these principal components are still recognizable in today’s movies. Wells Root, screenwriter for *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1952) and *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), identified a related story structure in his influential book *Writing the Script: A Practical Guide for Film and Television*.<sup>28</sup> In the first act of a movie, said Root, the writer introduces his characters, confronts them with a problem or crisis, introduces the antagonist, sets up difficult choices for the hero, and clarifies stakes in the crisis. In the second act, the hero’s problems intensify. Finally, the writer resolves the hero’s problems in the third act or ends the story tragically.<sup>29</sup> S. J. Perelman described this structure humorously, explaining that in the first act you put a man up in a tree, in the second act you have characters throw rocks at him, and in the third act you bring him down from the tree. Bruce Robinson, who wrote the screenplay for *The Killing Fields*, observes that “these three acts are almost inviolate in terms of the business—all producers, directors, executives always talk in terms of the three acts.”<sup>30</sup> Robinson points out that there needs to be a problem with the relationship between the principal characters, a serious element of tension. A simple, cheerful story will not work: “A beautiful boy meets a beautiful girl, they fall madly in love, they meet each other’s respective parents who adore the union, they get married, and live happily ever after—i.e., no story. But, boy meets girl, they fall in love, meet respective parents, and one is called Capulet and the other Montague and they *hate* each other, and you’ve got *Romeo and Juliet*.”<sup>31</sup>

#### Act One: Exposition

In the opening minutes of a film, viewers meet some of the principal characters and learn about the social or political conditions that threaten them.

Often cinematic history sets up a rather pleasant picture of the protagonists' lives in these early minutes. Then viewers witness disturbing events that create trouble and lead to the second section of the story, the time of struggle. Early in *JFK*, for instance, Oliver Stone introduces newsreel footage showing President Kennedy presiding over a Camelot-like America. Then the assassination occurs, and the drama takes viewers through a detective-style search for the killer or killers. A similar introductory scheme figures in two of the most successful history series on television: *Roots* and *Holocaust* (1978). *Roots* opens with scenes of Africans living happily in their peaceful native villages. Then the series' first hero, Kunta Kinte, is captured by slave traders and transported to a Virginia slave market. *Holocaust* opens with a happy wedding scene in Germany. Then a few guests espouse anti-Semitism, and before long, the groom and his family suffer oppression at the hands of the Nazis.

Some docudramas change the order of this presentation and open with a shocking event, attempting to engage the audience's interest in the subject quickly. Then, in following scenes, the action slows down and the audience receives a fuller introduction to the people and the problems. Steven Spielberg took this approach in *Amistad* (1997), beginning with a provocative event as the African hero Cinque breaks from his shackles during a stormy night on a slave ship and leads his fellow slaves in a bloody mutiny. The rebels wrest control of the vessel from the captain and crew and attempt to return to Africa. This action-packed beginning is a familiar feature of many Spielberg movies. *Jaws* (1975) starts with a shark attack on a beach, one of the Indiana Jones films begins with a huge rock crashing through a cave and threatening the life of the hero, and *Jurassic Park* (1993) starts with a vicious attack by a caged dinosaur.

The artists behind cinematic history often employ this first-shock strategy. For instance, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) begins with scenes of the hero in the midst of a Civil War battle. Then the story turns more contemplative as the main character takes a lonely military assignment on the western frontier. Biographical films often start with an extraordinary event that sparks audience curiosity about the protagonist's life. Attention to this moment of crisis arouses audience interest in the individual's past, and an exploration of the background to the event follows. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) begins with the enigmatic figure's 1935 death in a motorcycle accident. Then the film turns back in time to show Lawrence as a young man. *Eleanor and Franklin*, a popular TV miniseries of the 1970s, begins with Eleanor Roosevelt receiving news of the death of her husband, the president of the United States. The heroine then learns that the president's secret lover, Lucy Mercer, was with him on the day of his death. As Eleanor contemplates the news, the movie shifts to the period of her youth and begins its biographical treatment.

### Act Two: Complication

The second section of the dramatic structure usually follows naturally from the disturbing events that broke the calm and happiness of the introductory setting. In this phase, the heroes begin a struggle, determined to resist the villains who have brought trouble to themselves or their communities. These tales of personal transformation often employ a story device found in Hollywood westerns: a peaceful character reluctantly chooses to fight back after witnessing injustice. These figures resemble Jimmy Stewart's character in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). In that film, a peace-loving man reluctantly concludes that he must use his gun against the brutal bully, played by Lee Marvin. At this point in *Braveheart*, Scottish hero William Wallace decides that he cannot tolerate the oppressive domination of the English any longer and leads his fellow Highlanders in a fight against the evil English. In the second "act" of *Roots*, Kunta Kinte vows to escape from slavery, and in *Holocaust*, a young Jew goes into hiding, determined to join the underground resistance against the Nazis. In this segment of *Norma Rae* (1979), the spunky Norma, a textile worker, decides that she has seen too much suffering by her father in an unsafe factory, and she is fed up with management's treatment of her coworkers. The earthy rebel joins a trade union, and she boldly stands up on a factory table holding a defiant sign with the word "Strike" scratched across it.

The protagonists often experience frustration in this second phase, especially in the latter part of the film. Heroes and heroines suffer major setbacks; they fail to achieve their goals or lose ground. Toward the end of the film, they appear close to defeat. Late in "act two," for instance, the astronauts in *Apollo 13* (1995) are low on oxygen, freezing in their cabin, and losing power in the command module; they seem about to die in space. Soldiers in *Battle of the Bulge* (1965) find themselves overwhelmed by the surging German offensive, and in *U-571* (2000), the American sailors who are attempting to get back to safety in a disabled submarine look like they are about to become victims of German attackers. This familiar device of the cinematic genre—the creation of a severe crisis late in the story—works splendidly to keep the audience's emotions tied to the film.

### Act Three: Resolution

Many cinematic histories end with victory for the virtuous and heroic figures at the center of their plots. In *All the President's Men* (1976), for example, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein succeed in bringing down President Nixon, and captions on the screen tell the audience about other culprits in the Watergate scandal who received criminal sentences. The slaves in *Amistad* win their freedom in court, and then a British naval bombardment destroys a principal

slave-trading garrison in Africa. In *The Killing Fields*, Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran, the Asian friend Schanberg lost in the Cambodian revolution, are reunited, and in *Norma Rae*, the heroine's trade union wins an election and the right to bargain for the suffering textile workers.

History is not always so generous to the crusaders for freedom and justice, of course. Sometimes heroes and heroines lose. In a variety of ways, cinematic historians have grappled with these tragic endings, attempting to give meaning to the protagonists' struggles by suggesting some basis for hope, some means of drawing inspiration from a tragic story. Often docudramas remind audiences that slain heroes did not die in vain. At the end of Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952), for instance, political enemies assassinate Emiliano Zapata, but his white horse escapes to the mountains. The audience senses that public memory of the man who fought for the rights of Mexico's lowly peasants will have an impact on future generations.<sup>32</sup> In *Spartacus* (1960), the dying slave hero sees his infant son held up before him as a free person, and the audience senses that the hero's struggle will pave the way to freedom for many more victims of Roman oppression.<sup>33</sup> Late in Constantine Costa-Gavras's *Missing* (1982), Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon) realizes that his son lost his life in the violent military coup in Chile, but he vows to sue the U.S. officials who may have been implicated in the abduction. Horman's statement tells the audience that the case is not closed; critics will keep it alive (as the movie itself surely aimed to do).<sup>34</sup> And in James Cameron's *Titanic*, hero Jack Dawson dies on the frozen sea after the great ship sinks, but Rose DeWitt Bukater's life is changed for the better because of her brief relationship with Jack, and the memory of her young lover goes on, as Celine Dion's passionate song reminds viewers.

Some historical movies finish with half a victory for the protagonists, showing triumph but also reminding the audience that many people were not as fortunate as the survivors. *Schindler's List* effectively applies this dramatic strategy. Although Oskar Schindler was able to protect more than a hundred Jews from Nazi death camps during World War II, in a speech near the end (invented for the movie), Schindler expresses regret that he could not save more people from extermination. This scene reminds viewers of the six million European Jews whose personal stories did not end so happily. *Saving Private Ryan*, another movie directed by Spielberg, ends with triumph over the German armed forces in a fierce battle in a European village. It is a Pyrrhic victory, however, for most of the platoon members featured in the drama lay dead, including the enigmatic but lovable captain played by Tom Hanks. In a coda, an elderly Private Ryan visits the soldiers' graveyard and ponders whether he was worthy of the gift of life he received from the men who rescued him. A number of moviegoers left the theater in silence after viewing *Saving Private Ryan*.

The film's tragic ending forced them to think about the tremendous personal contributions American soldiers made in the Second World War.

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY OFFERS PARTISAN VIEWS OF THE PAST, CLEARING IDENTIFYING HEROES AND VILLAINS

Critics of Hollywood dramas often demand complex portraits of the subjects being portrayed. They want to see conflicting viewpoints dramatized, demanding that the filmmaker develop two or more perspectives on historical people, events, and issues rather than just one. In this regard, they often speak glowingly about *Rashomon*, the influential 1950 motion picture by the acclaimed Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. *Rashomon* examines a murder in medieval Japan and asks What is truth? How do different individuals see it differently? Through four flashbacks, the movie exposes the audience to distinct perspectives, which stimulates thinking. Enthusiasts of Kurosawa's artistry praise his imaginative exploration of conflicting viewpoints about a specific subject. They applaud Kurosawa's creativity and encourage Hollywood filmmakers to engage in similar experiments that confront audiences with questions about perception.<sup>35</sup> But Hollywood's artists rarely act on these appeals. Instead of producing entertainment that gives expression to multiple outlooks, they design stories that essentially present only one viewpoint. Movies do not typically raise questions about the "truth status" of their interpretations. Through their tendency to resolve problems by the end of the story, to close the subject with dramatic resolution, they leave an impression that their interpretation is the only viable one. Filmmakers usually opt for highly opinionated, partisan interpretations of their subjects.

Why doesn't the technique applied in *Rashomon* attract many practitioners in Hollywood? Why are most filmmakers unwilling to incorporate contradictory evidence in their stories and thus expose viewers to contrasting perspectives of the past? Why do their dramatizations of history offer heavy-handed interpretations that press one conclusion on viewers?

Dramatic film is not a very good communicator of contradictions. Cinematic historians have a language reservoir of limited size to explicate contrasting views. As mentioned earlier, a script containing dialogue for a two-hour movie (free of lengthy descriptive information for the actors, director, or cinematographer) amounts to only about ten to twenty single-spaced pages. A movie's potential for communicating specific verbal information is minute in comparison to a book's capacity for delivering detailed commentary. There is no opportunity to explore multiple interpretations of events in a drama, whereas a book can attempt such an exploration in 200 or 300 pages.

Furthermore, drama forces its creators to make opinionated decisions throughout a story's development. Characters in a motion picture, whether major or minor, are never truly neutral figures. When introducing each figure to the audience, dramatists must communicate clear messages. A sinister-looking man with a mustache who is dressed in dark clothing and speaks in a surly voice suggests villainous qualities. A good-looking young man whose countenance, gestures, and attitude imply trustworthiness and sincerity can hint of heroic qualities. In setting up scenes, establishing the relationships between characters, making decisions about camera angles and lighting, composing background music for important dramatic moments, and deciding on many other visual and aural elements that go into a motion picture, cinematic historians create the building blocks for a specific thesis. Dramatic film requires them to reveal some form of partisanship in every frame. Hence, cinema's interpretations of the past almost always come to us in highly judgmental form.

Consider the partisanship of Richard Attenborough's much acclaimed movie *Gandhi*, which received the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1982. Attenborough's big-budget biographical film examined the life of the influential Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. Many reviewers applauded the director for crafting a visually dazzling and sophisticated movie, and viewers were impressed by his characterization of Gandhi's heroism. The film gave an inspiring portrayal of Gandhi's fight against discrimination in South Africa, his efforts to break India away from British colonial rule, his commitment to nonviolent tactics, his personal dedication to maintaining a simple, ascetic life, and his courageous efforts to promote peace between Hindus and Muslims in a period of great religious conflict. But some observers drew attention to the strongly hagiographic character of Attenborough's movie, noting that the film showed the Indian leader in a highly favorable light (these observers also pointed out that the Indian government had subsidized about one-third of the cost of producing the film).

Richard Grenier presented one of the sharpest criticisms at the time. He took aim at the movie's one-sided, celebratory portrayal. Showing readers a very different perspective on the popular Indian figure, Grenier accused Attenborough of bringing "a pious fraud" to the screen. The real Mahatma Gandhi tolerated India's brutal caste system for many years and was rather late in coming around to a critique of it. Also, during Gandhi's protests in South Africa against the discrimination suffered by India-born minorities, he demonstrated little concern for the fate of South Africa's blacks. Nor was the real Gandhi always the supreme pacifist that is presented in the movie. India's famous leader enthusiastically supported England's fight in the First World War, and he



In Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), Ben Kingsley stars as the Indian spiritual and political leader, and Candice Bergen plays photographer Margaret Bourke-White. Like many biographical treatments from Hollywood, this movie presents its subject in a very favorable light. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

helped form the Indian Volunteer Corps. In fact, until the age of fifty, Gandhi was not ill disposed toward war at all.<sup>36</sup>

Fourteen years later, a playwright raised a number of related questions in a theater production called *Mahatma vs. Gandhi*. Feroz Khan's stage drama focused on the troubled relationship between Gandhi and the oldest of his four sons, Harilal. Khan's production revealed that Harilal ran afoul of the law on charges of fraud, suffered from chronic alcoholism, and engaged in sexual philandering in the red-light districts of Delhi and Bombay. The drama suggested that Gandhi had failed as a husband and a father. Khan's story maintained that the very qualities that made Mahatma Gandhi a great public leader—asceticism, self-righteousness, and single-mindedness—contributed to his obstinate behavior, didactic attitude, and unfeeling relationship with his wife and son.<sup>37</sup>

Could cinematic history give audiences both perspectives on Mahatma Gandhi? Was it capable of introducing audiences to a flawed figure as well as a heroic one? Hollywood's portrayal of the Indian leader, like its representation of many other historical figures, failed to offer that balance. Attenborough's portrait lacked ambiguity; it delivered a single, dominant message. The screen Gandhi came across as an earthly saint.

In many other cinematic histories as well, the fundamental interpretation is anything but subtle. Almost always, cinema sharply distinguishes between good and bad, right and wrong. In judging events and characters, there is not much gray. This convention has been evident in Hollywood-style docudramas since the early days of filmmaking. D. W. Griffith contributed significantly to the tradition of portraying heroes and villains in the extreme. His most notable film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), favors the respected Cameron family of South Carolina and portrays villains representing northern interests, including Austin Stoneman, a powerful congressman, Silas Lynch, a power-hungry mulatto, and Gus, a renegade black soldier.

Modern-day moviemakers introduce their characters with more subtlety, but their practices only slightly obscure the fundamental partisanship. Filmmakers are less likely today to use telltale mustaches and dark clothing to distinguish villains from heroes, but they employ a variety of methods to suggest how the audience should judge the leading characters. Moviegoers understand the principal messages, learning to distinguish the good guys from the bad. In *Braveheart*, William Wallace (Mel Gibson) and his Scotsmen are clearly the figures to root for in their clash with the sinister Englishmen. In *The Patriot* (2000), Gibson is again the obvious hero in his portrayal of colonial widower Benjamin Martin. In both films, Gibson steps up to battle a group of despicable British characters.

As Attenborough did for Gandhi, screenwriters and directors often clean up the historical records of the heroic characters in their stories. Rarely do they present heroic figures with serious flaws to match their achievements. In *Spartacus*, for instance, screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and director Stanley Kubrick show the rebel leader of Roman times attempting to end slavery everywhere, when in fact, Spartacus aimed principally to get his men out of Italy. The movie characterizes the protagonist as a great humanitarian, yet the real Spartacus participated in the slaughter of hundreds of innocent Romans. *Christopher Columbus* (1985) sanitizes its explorer-hero while assigning evil (particularly enslavement of the Indians) to other Spanish members of his expedition, as well as to representatives of the Crown and the Church. Yet the real Columbus was enthusiastic about the potential for enslaving natives when he reported his discoveries to the Spanish sovereigns.

Cinematic history needs demons, too, and they are often assigned rather cavalierly. *Tucker* (1988) greatly simplifies the problems of the automobile entrepreneur who is at the center of the story, laying most of the blame for his failures on a conspiracy of powerful figures in Detroit and Washington, D.C. The movie suggests that executives from the Big Three auto companies and politicians in the nation's capital succeeded in crushing the brainchild of Preston Tucker, the visionary who tried to create a new car that featured an

aerodynamic design, seat belts, disc brakes, a pop-out windshield, and fuel injection. The real Tucker failed for a variety of reasons, and many of his difficulties were self-inflicted. He rushed his new automobile into production well before significant mechanical difficulties had been resolved. He made exaggerated and misleading claims about his product to the press and raised funds for the enterprise in ways that concerned the Securities and Exchange Commission. Also, there is no evidence that leaders from Detroit's Big Three manufacturers were involved in a conspiracy against him.<sup>38</sup>

*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) portrays Frank Hamer, the man who led the pursuit of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, as a nearly silent, cold-hearted lawman dressed in black. The real Hamer was a much-respected peace officer who became a folk hero in the Southwest for ending the bloody crime streak of the real Bonnie and Clyde.<sup>39</sup>

*The Patriot* depicts a vicious British colonel named Tavington who commits atrocities against the colonials. The characterization is based on the real-life Banastre Tarleton, who was indeed a violent military officer, but he never committed the wanton brutality seen in *The Patriot*, such as the burning of a church packed with men, women, and children.<sup>40</sup>

In taking these strong stands, filmmakers simplify their portrayals, glossing over the shortcomings of individuals or groups and exaggerating the sinister qualities of others. Often, they rub out the grays of history, producing portraits in white and black.

Occasionally, a filmmaker sets out to engage a controversial subject cautiously, trying not to paint a strongly partisan picture of heroes and villains. These efforts are commendable but difficult to accomplish. In such films, directors boldly challenge a basic Hollywood convention by resisting the simplistic white hat–black hat story design. By shunning the familiar partisan characterizations, however, they risk washing emotional color out of their dramas. Director Ron Maxwell experienced this difficulty with *Gettysburg* (1993). His epic film premiered briefly in movie theaters and later appeared on Ted Turner's TV network. *Gettysburg* dramatizes Michael Shaara's popular novel about the greatest battle of the American Civil War.<sup>41</sup> The movie characterizes both Northerners and Southerners rather favorably and features no clear villains (although, as in Shaara's book, General Robert E. Lee takes some blame for the Confederates' defeat in the famous battle). By treating both Yankees and Rebels with respect, Maxwell seemed to reflect the mood of the nation in the 1990s, a time when Americans were moving away from sectional hatreds and lost-cause polemics. *Gettysburg* presents the Civil War as a national tragedy, a costly affair in blood and treasure. Although the film blames the war on slavery, it depicts Union and Confederate officers and men with sympathy,

recognizing the basic humanity of all combatants, both Southern and Northern. This equanimity is generous, but it softens the movie's dramatic punch. Despite an impressive supporting cast of 5,000 reenactment specialists performing on the actual field of battle at Gettysburg in authentic uniforms, the film proved somewhat disappointing to audiences. *Gettysburg* failed to produce the level of viewer interest that many Civil War history enthusiasts expected. Neither the American people's fascination with the subject nor the movie's connection with Shaara's popular book could rescue it from the dramatic weaknesses associated with a villainless story.

In contrast, *Glory* delivers a more emotionally compelling tale about the Civil War by employing the generic convention of partisanship. Edward Zwick's 1989 movie portrays the formation of African-American regiments in the Union army during the Civil War. His film clearly identifies heroes and villains and directs audience sympathy to the black soldiers and their white commanding officer, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. *Glory* makes a prejudiced Yankee officer the object of scorn, although it shows him learning to respect the black soldiers after months of training them. Later in the story, various other Union officers who exploited the blacks or hampered their progress serve as the movie's heavies, and in the end, of course, Confederate soldiers represent the dangerous enemy. *Glory* portrays the Confederates only as a mass of well-armed gunmen firing on the attacking Union troops; it does not introduce them as distinct personalities. This strategy of presenting the heroes' adversaries impersonally reduced the likelihood of offending white southerners in the audience. Overall, *Glory*'s inspiring tale of frightened but courageous black men risking their lives for the cause of freedom succeeded in exciting viewer enthusiasm. The movie's strongly partisan picture of the war created more dramatic energy than did *Gettysburg*'s less biased approach.<sup>42</sup>

Dramatic film's connection with documentary film is closer in this respect than is commonly assumed. Many critics of history by Hollywood argue that documentary film is far less biased and is generally more objective in its treatment of historical subjects. They hold documentaries in higher regard, believing that they are much less given to partisan excesses than is history delivered in the form of dramatic, commercial entertainment. These observers are wrong in their fundamental assumptions. Although documentaries often appear to be more balanced in their treatments, they usually support a one-sided, opinionated point of view. In many respects, documentary films are as emotionally and politically committed in their judgments about right and wrong, good and bad, as Hollywood's dramatic productions are.

The documentary medium favors partisanship. Each decision made by a documentary maker calls for judgment, perspective, opinion. For instance, the



*Gettysburg* (1993) depicts hand-to-hand combat at Little Round Top. Despite the impressive supporting cast of 5,000 reenactment specialists, the film proved somewhat disappointing to audiences. *Gettysburg* suffered, in part, from a villainless script. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

filmmaker's selection of a series of photographs depicting the Great Depression or characterizing Franklin D. Roosevelt communicates an interpretation. Similarly, the documentary maker's selection of interviewees also calls for judgment and opinion; for example, should the filmmaker pose questions to someone who was unemployed during the Great Depression, or ask questions of someone who owned a successful business throughout the 1930s? Judgment is also required when the filmmaker creates narration to describe the causes of the Great Depression or to comment on President Roosevelt's actions to combat it. Musical accompaniment, as well, can suggest a cheerful or sad perspective on the people and events under examination.

Not surprisingly, many of the best documentaries exhibit considerable partisan clout and convey strong points of view. For instance, Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) contains no narration, yet his juxtaposition of disturbing images and sounds adds up to a forceful indictment of U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War. Barbara Kopple's memorable *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976) also eschews narration, yet audiences can easily recognize her message. *Harlan County U.S.A.* presents Kentucky's striking coal miners in a favorable light and offers a critical perspective on the mining company and power company executives who oppose them. Similarly, a popular film about the experience of female workers in America's industrial plants during World War II offers a sympathetic perspective on its subject. Through interviews and pictures,

Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) suggests that American women were treated unfairly after the war when industries forced them out of good jobs to make room for the returning GIs.

Of course, many documentary films address historical subjects with a greater sense of balance, yet these productions, too, deliver opinionated perspectives. Filmmakers cannot avoid bias, for their selection and arrangement of interviews, photos, film, narration, music, and other elements direct the presentation toward a particular outlook. Ken Burns's enormously popular television series *The Civil War* is a good example. The program received praise for its judicious treatment of a controversial subject, yet its presentation reveals an interpretive slant. Burns's documentary argues strongly that slavery was the central cause of the Civil War, and his visual and aural evidence subtly but persuasively challenges the arguments of those who maintain that the South's "peculiar institution" was less significant in stimulating the conflict than other factors were. His documentary elevates slavery and racial tensions to primary importance and suggests that disagreements over industrial and agrarian interests, tariffs, culture, and states' rights were much less important. His treatment of the Civil War also reflects the American people's post-Vietnam sensitivity about combat. Throughout the film, depictions of battles stress the tragic nature of the conflict. Whether presenting Sullivan Ballou's emotional letter to his wife, Sarah, shortly before his death at Bull Run or examining photographs of the numerous bodies of slain soldiers left on the fields at Antietam and Gettysburg, Burns's documentary concentrates on the horrible human price of war. His series resonated with Americans who were accustomed to seeing war presented on the screen in less gung-ho fashion than films produced before the Vietnam War.

Thus, both documentary films and fictional films from Hollywood tend to present partisan perspectives and accentuate clashes between heroes and villains. The medium of film provides artists with numerous opportunities to display partisanship in words, pictures, and sounds. Filmmakers recognize that they are much more likely to hook an audience's interest and emotions when their productions communicate strong points of view. They also understand that they may incur considerable financial risk if they attempt to create films with conflicting messages that communicate no particular perspective.

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY PORTRAYS MORALLY UPLIFTING STORIES ABOUT STRUGGLES BETWEEN DAVIDS AND GOLIATHS

Many decades ago, Hollywood's cinematic historians were inclined to study the lives of the elite. This tendency was not just the result of the filmmakers'



*Cleopatra* (Elizabeth Taylor) receives a royal reception in *Cleopatra* (1963). Like many cinematic histories produced from 1930 to 1965, *Cleopatra* focuses on the lives of the famous, rich, and powerful. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

enthusiasm for stories about the rich, famous, and powerful; movie audiences seemed particularly interested in these tales. From the 1930s to the 1950s, especially, Hollywood released abundant docudramas dealing with prominent figures from history. Some of these films looked at the ancient world such as *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), and *Cleopatra* (1963).<sup>43</sup> Other dealt with British royalty, including *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) and *The Virgin Queen* (1955). In Hollywood's early years, Warner Brothers developed a strong reputation for creating biopics about famous people. Warner's offerings included *Disraeli* (1929), *Alexander Hamilton* (1931), *Voltaire* (1933), *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), *Juarez* (1939), and *Dr. Erlich's Magic Bullet* (1940).<sup>44</sup> MGM

offered two biographies in 1940 about America's most famous inventor: *Young Tom Edison* and *Edison the Man*. A number of other Hollywood films examined the upper echelons of the white South in antebellum times, such as *Carolina* (1934), *So Red the Rose* (1935), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).<sup>45</sup>

By the late twentieth century, however, cinematic attention to the high and mighty was less in favor. Perhaps Hollywood producers were responding to a general change in professional scholarship. In the 1960s and after, historians were increasingly approaching their subject from the bottom up rather than the top down. Their books and articles concentrated on the masses—factory workers, miners, immigrants, ethnic minorities, and other representatives of the poorer classes—rather than the privileged few who had served as emperors, kings, queens, or patriarchs and matriarchs of Southern plantations. More likely, filmmakers were responding to a broad general trend in Hollywood's pattern of storytelling. All movies about contemporary life were shifting toward a focus on the common folk. By the late twentieth century, tales about little people successfully fighting control by the rich and powerful had become a familiar staple of the popular cinema.

Frank Capra demonstrated the appeal of this formula back in the 1930s and 1940s. His films often featured noble common men doing battle with influential and wealthy politicians, bankers, and media moguls. Mr. Deeds, Jefferson Smith, John Doe, and George Bailey were humble and decent folk who struggled for good causes in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Capra's populist heroes were often thwarted by greedy, power-hungry tycoons (frequently played by Edward Arnold). By the last reel, "David" seemed likely to fall victim to "Goliath," but Capra created a variety of contrived solutions in the final minutes of his movies to rescue the battered heroes (in the case of *Meet John Doe*, he boxed himself into a difficult storytelling corner and needed assistance from a movie viewer to devise a corny strategy for a happy ending).<sup>46</sup> Capra-esque tales still work well today. Most moviegoers are, after all, hard-working citizens of the lower-middle and middle classes who can easily sympathize with down-to-earth celluloid heroes. Even well-heeled movie audiences appreciate an uplifting drama depicting conflicts between the humble and the powerful.

There can be little doubt that varieties of the Capra formula continue to drive Hollywood's general entertainment in modern times. Related themes are evident in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), which shows a clerk in a Brooklyn paint store escaping from his lowly position on weekends by competing as a dance star at the local disco. They are evident, too, in *Rocky* (1976), which tells the story of a down-and-out Philadelphia boxer stepping into the ring against a



Attorney Ed Masry (Albert Finney) and twice-divorced high school dropout Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts) make an unlikely team as they take on a public utility company in *Erin Brockovich* (2000). Like many modern cinematic histories from Hollywood, Steven Soderbergh's film celebrates the superior virtues of the common person. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

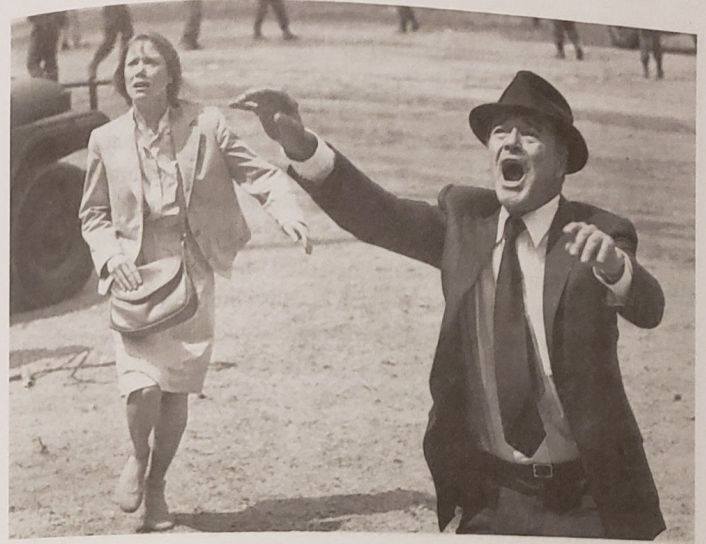
heavily favored champion who is supported by the sport's big-money interests. The Capra formula is also transparent in *Rainmaker*, a 1997 movie that features Matt Damon as a young, poor, struggling lawyer doing courtroom combat against a powerful law firm that represents a big insurance company.

The Capra approach is especially noticeable in historical docudramas, because the genre often contains implied messages about the supremacy of

democracy over autocracy and aristocracy. It appears, for instance, in the epics about Roman times produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In *Ben-Hur* (1959), Judah (Charlton Heston) turns against the Romans after Emperor Tiberius oppresses the Empire's minorities, and Kirk Douglas leads a rebellion of the lowly slaves against Roman oppressors in *Spartacus*. In more recent cinematic examples, James Cameron introduces Jack Dawson, a commoner traveling in steerage who is clearly a man of greater decency and essence than Cal Hockley, the snobbish millionaire traveling in the first-class section of the luxurious *Titanic*. A similar statement about the superior virtues of the common person appears in *Erin Brockovich* (2000). Steven Soderbergh's movie features Julia Roberts as the brassy and buxom file clerk who helps win a legal challenge against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company for polluting a California desert town with toxic wastes. This story is based on the experiences of the real Brockovich, who discovered information about contamination in the 1980s.<sup>47</sup>

The historical genre also favors stories that place these common folk in struggles against some terrible injustice affecting them or their family or friends. Cinematic history often portrays its heroes in noble fights against oppression, exploitation, or prejudice. There is an uplifting quality in this kind of historical drama. Audiences sense early in these stories that the heroic characters are right in their beliefs, but people in positions of authority will not listen to them or respect their ideas. In *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* (1955), for instance, the aviator (played by Gary Cooper) warns military leaders that aircraft carriers will be essential in the next war; he predicts a future conflict with Japan and calls for a separate air force group within the U.S. military. But leaders of the armed forces find him annoying; they demote Mitchell and dismiss him as a dreamer. Similarly, *JFK* shows Jim Garrison trying to demonstrate that there was a conspiracy in the president's assassination, but few take him seriously, and even his wife thinks he may be going too far. In *Silkwood* (1983), a worker in an Oklahoma nuclear plant (Meryl Streep) attempts to prove that her fellow workers are dangerously affected by radiation, but the company denies her accusations and appears to be complicit in efforts to silence her. The reality of the early AIDS epidemic is the theme in HBO's *And the Band Played On* (1993). A researcher at the Centers for Disease Control detects the lethal new disease, but when he tries to alert the public to the danger, he confronts apathy, disbelief, and prejudice.

Two made-for-TV dramas about American involvement in recent wars defend the courage of individuals who challenge the claims of military and political authorities. *Bright Shining Lie* (1998) shows a U.S. military leader in Vietnam trying to prove that American actions in the war are losing the hearts and minds of Vietnamese villagers and harming the U.S. position. *Thanks to a*



*Ed and Beth Horman (Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek) search for their son after a military coup in Chile in Missing (1982). The movie blamed U.S. foreign policy, in part, for the Horman family's tragedy. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

*Grateful Nation* (1998) shows a U.S. Senate investigator trying to convince authorities that veterans of the Persian Gulf War are suffering from strange and related health problems. In these and many other examples of history from Hollywood, the stories arouse feelings of moral outrage among viewers. Cinematic history's protagonists face formidable obstacles in their fights for justice because of widespread public indifference or the influential resistance of powerful figures.

Modern-day cinematic history also favors stories about individuals who challenge prejudice and oppression. Spielberg's *Amistad* makes heroes of the African captives and some of the whites who attempt to defend them (particularly John Quincy Adams), and *Schindler's List* shows a hedonistic German businessman acquiring a sense of sympathy for Jewish victims of Hitler's extermination campaigns. The television movie *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys* (1976) builds its tension around a struggle to free black men who were unfairly accused of raping two white women in Alabama in the early 1930s, and *Mississippi Burning* (1988) makes the catalyst for its action the brutal murder of three civil rights workers in 1964 and the struggle to find the culprits.

Sometimes the guilty party in these injustices is U.S. foreign policy, broadly speaking. Movies that focused on America's anticommunist excesses during

the Cold War years were especially likely to communicate this form of outrage. In *Missing*, for instance, Jack Lemmon plays the real-life character Ed Horman, who goes to Chile to seek his missing son. As Lemmon investigates events connected to the 1973 military coup there, he discovers that U.S. officials maintained close ties with the Chilean military and may have been implicated in his son's political execution. U.S. foreign policy is also the source of human suffering in Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields*. Joffe's film shows *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg learning that secret B-52 bombings by the United States wounded many Cambodians during a time when Cambodia was a neutral nation. No director has done as much as Oliver Stone in associating U.S. policies in Vietnam with injustice and suffering. Through films such as *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1990), and *Heaven and Earth* (1991), Stone maintained that the war brutalized Americans and created considerable hardship and pain for the Vietnamese people.<sup>48</sup>

Arousing a sense of moral indignation is an effective strategy for exciting the audience's interest in a historical subject. It pulls viewers into the drama, makes them care about issues addressed in the film, and attaches their sympathies to the characters that attempt to right the wrongs. It is no surprise, then, that numerous historical dramas develop stories about injustice and the struggle to correct it.

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY SIMPLIFIES PLOTS BY FEATURING ONLY A FEW REPRESENTATIVE CHARACTERS

To make the plot fundamentally simple and easy to understand, cinematic historians usually focus on just a few individuals. Writers frequently "collapse" several historic figures into one or a few so that audiences can easily get acquainted with a small cast of principals. For instance, in *Bonnie and Clyde*, a young man who joins the criminals (played by Michael J. Pollard) represents several men who worked with the Barrow gang at various times, and the character's behavior in the movie combines a number of their actions and experiences. *The Hurricane* shows three white Canadians and an African American working together to help Rubin "Hurricane" Carter win release from prison, even though the real Canadian group consisted of a commune of nine to twelve members (it expanded and contracted from time to time). *The Hurricane* presents just a few composite Canadians, a strategy that helped the audience recognize these figures individually.<sup>49</sup>

Cinematic historians often characterize diverse groups from the past through representative stereotypes, drawing on traditions of the genre. They introduce viewers to completely fictional characters whose backgrounds and personalities

reflect the diversity of people one might encounter in a historical setting. John Ford's classic western *Stagecoach* (1939) proved so effective in introducing such stereotypes that it influenced a whole generation of Hollywood westerns. Ford put a variety of stock figures on the stagecoach: a drunken doctor (Thomas Mitchell), a woman of ill repute (Claire Trevor), a handsome cowboy who was a fugitive from the law (John Wayne), a dapper and deceitful gambler (John Carradine), a comic stagecoach driver (Andy Devine), and a pompous banker (George Bancroft). These characterizations suggest a microcosm of western types. World War II movies feature a similar assemblage of stock figures whose backgrounds represent the diversity of American fighting groups. An early and particularly influential use of the formula appeared in *Bataan* (1943), and *Saving Private Ryan* borrowed heavily from the World War II combat genre, featuring a cast of familiar military characters that included a Jew, a wise guy from Brooklyn, and a deeply religious southern sharpshooter. *Glory* also reflected the pattern, focusing on a group of black soldiers that included a gung-ho intellectual, a surly rebel who learned to be a team player, an older father figure, and a stuttering former field slave.

The principal action in historical movies is generated by just one or two central figures. Cinematic historians almost always distort the historical record, giving inordinate responsibility for moving and shaking society to only a few individuals. For example, *All the President's Men* focuses on the activities of two journalists from the *Washington Post*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and traces their investigation of the Watergate scandal. It leaves the impression that these highly motivated reporters almost single-handedly brought about the downfall of President Richard Nixon. Viewers unaware of the history of the Watergate investigations would not know from watching the film that several other individuals played significant roles, including John J. Sirica and Leon Jaworski (both judges), Senator Sam Ervin, and Nixon's own legal counsel, John Dean.<sup>50</sup> Another production by Robert Redford, *Quiz Show* (1995), leaves the impression that Richard Goodwin almost single-handedly exposed the television scandals of the 1950s to a shocked nation. Redford bases much of his movie's story on Goodwin's book *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties*, and in doing so, he overlooks the important contributions of a number of other individuals.

Occasionally, a filmmaker challenges the generic practice of focusing on the actions of one or two principal characters. John Sayles, writer and director of a number of thoughtful, low-budget movies, sometimes addresses historical subjects in this manner. Sayles's movies often feature an ensemble of principal figures rather than just one or two key personalities. He tells stories about "community," tracing the interactions of a number of people in a historic



Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) and Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) investigate the Watergate scandal for the Washington Post in *All the President's Men* (1976). Alan J. Pakula's movie creates the impression that these journalists almost single-handedly forced the downfall of President Richard M. Nixon. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

setting. Examples of his attention to groups can be seen in *Matewan*, a 1987 drama about a miners' strike, and *Eight Men Out*, a 1988 film that dealt with a famous scandal in professional baseball early in the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> Sayles's approach is idiosyncratic, however. When Hollywood artists and producers gamble with projects that cost much more than Sayles's low-budget productions, they are inclined to stick with the familiar storytelling formulas that have proved successful over the years.

In many respects, cinematic history promotes a "great man" or "great woman" theory of change, a perspective that has long been out of fashion in the historical profession. Movies frequently suggest that energized, aggressive, and strongly determined individuals are the primary sources of significant historical developments. Hollywood's version of history personalizes the narrative, putting dynamic people at the center of the action. Cinematic history gives little attention to the many impersonal forces that are often important factors behind major changes. It says little about broad economic developments (depressions, surges in unemployment, cycles of prosperity) and does not usually associate characters' actions with broad social trends. For example, it rarely connects a woman's rebellious behavior to the rise of the feminist movement or a labor organizer's decision to strike to national campaigns to

establish the right of collective bargaining. History by Hollywood gives audiences little sense of the power of new intellectual currents or of the impact of environmental concerns on citizens' actions. Instead, it shows individuals who are rather unaffected by the changing society around them. Hollywood's heroes are rarely blown by the major winds of change. They tend to create their own personal storms, displaying admirable determination to effect large improvements in society. As self-motivated dynamos, these heroes—the "great men" and "great women" of cinematic history—transform the world around them.

Leger Grindon, a film studies specialist, criticizes this element of Hollywood storytelling in his book *Shadows on the Past*. Grindon says that this mode of interpretation runs counter to important trends in modern historical writing. He notes, for example, that writers from the Annales school had a tremendous impact on historical scholarship in the twentieth century. The French historian Fernand Braudel was one of the most influential figures leading this revolution in interpretation. Braudel urged scholars to move away from the "great man" approach to history, with its emphasis on exceptional people who acted as masters of their own fate and the fate of many others. Instead, Braudel drew attention to broad developments that occurred over vast periods of time. He examined significant economic, environmental, and institutional conditions and trends. Braudel found this big picture to be far more important and revealing than history's record of the rise and fall of kings, queens, emperors, and presidents. His wide-angle lens examined slowly moving developments rather than the specific actions of political and military leaders.<sup>52</sup>

Grindon praises the Italian filmmaker Roberto Rossellini for taking an impressively Braudelian approach to history in his movie *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966). Grindon observes approvingly that Rossellini's film portrayed the daily life of the French nobility, such as the etiquette at court, rather than the record of "extraordinary events" connected to Louis's politics and personal life. Rossellini's direction "cultivates detachment and contemplation in the audience," Grindon writes, and it "contemplates the necessity of confronting history without the means to completely know it." Such a movie can show that "history is not truth, but a means to knowledge, a variable method in the construction of social memory."<sup>53</sup> Grindon also praises the Italian director for his expression of contempt for "great man" perspectives. "What do exceptional men matter to us?" Rossellini asked. "I'm quite unmoved by the myth of the superman."<sup>54</sup> In view of Rossellini's skill in bringing an Annales-like perspective to the screen, Grindon judges *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* quite superior to the rather traditional "great man" presentation in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), which deals with a related historical setting and situation. Fred Zinneman's movie

examines Sir Thomas More's troubled relationship with Henry VIII of England. More, a Catholic statesman and adviser to the king, cannot sanction Henry's divorce, and More's stand on principle leads to his execution.<sup>55</sup>

Grindon is certainly right in pointing out the value of Braudelian perspectives for advancing scholarship, but his observations are less relevant to cinematic history. As Grindon observes, insights from historians of the Annales school elevated research to a higher plane. That scholarship also paved the way for specialists in "social history" to challenge the traditional studies of major political and military leaders and to draw readers' attention to the lives of ordinary people. Still, a cinematic historian faces difficulties when dramatizing the perspectives of Annales scholars or the new social historians. Movies must entertain in order to secure a life in the theaters, a shelf life in video stores, and a programming life on television. Rossellini's approach (cultivating "detachment and contemplation in the audience") is not an attractive option for market-minded Hollywood executives. The format of Zinneman's film about Sir Thomas More is much closer to the familiar Hollywood pattern than the one seen in *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*. This generic tradition is precisely what Grindon scorns—the view of a heroic personality, a driven individual who stands on principle and by doing so makes a significant impact on the world around him or her. *A Man for All Seasons* is representative of the historical genre that has emerged in Hollywood, as well as in British motion pictures that have received Hollywood's blessing in the form of wide-scale distribution. Zinneman's drama about More is in many ways a traditional biopic, a focus on the life and actions of an extraordinary individual.

In recognizing this convention of cinematic history, we need not surrender enthusiasm for the Annales perspective or deny an appreciation of social history, the field of study that illuminates the lives of ordinary people and gives less attention to the rich and famous. Sophisticated approaches to historical analysis will continue to thrive in publications, lectures, seminars, and discussions at professional meetings. These perspectives will not find much expression in Hollywood films, however. The dramatic format does not serve well as a communicator of the "big picture." Movies can easily lose audiences if they portray material that calls for statistics, abstract analysis, or attention to the condition of groups rather than individuals. Hollywood movies cannot tell us much about broad economic, social, and environmental developments. They are not attractive instruments for communicating a view of developments that take shape over hundreds of years. And in the rare moments when they focus on politics, they usually show the exploits of one or two figures rather than wide-ranging political movements involving the participation of the masses.

Still, cinematic history can perform a useful function by making the indi-

vidual stand for something larger. A movie's small glimpse of life can represent a broader picture. Sir Thomas More's fight with Henry VIII can suggest the resistance to absolutism that gained strength in the Western world in later centuries. The tightly focused biographical perspective can raise important questions that have animated controversies through the ages, particularly debates about the value of standing on principle or negotiating practical compromises. *A Man for All Seasons*, limited by its tight focus on a confrontation between a few important people, can nevertheless stimulate the audience's interest in broader forms of historical inquiry. To appreciate this film's potential, though, the student of film needs to recognize the medium's conventions and limitations. History from Hollywood almost always appears in its familiar generic form, with the principal characters' encounters standing in for the experiences of hundreds, thousands, or millions.

In this respect, critics of Hollywood productions often raise irrelevant objections when they complain that a drama shows the leading characters participating in too many extraordinary developments. Critics demand a *typical* experience for the major figures when, in fact, events portrayed in the movie are designed to *represent* experiences that a much larger group of people might have. Such complaints appeared in reaction to NBC Television's popular 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*. Some critics called the story silly and unrealistic. They asked, how could a few people connect to so many important historical figures and situations? In the series, virtually all the important Holocaust-related events of the Nazi years touched the Weiss family (the principal Jewish victims in the drama). This improbable tale was too contrived, said the film's detractors.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* came under fire from some Vietnam veterans. They complained that Stone's movie gave an unrealistic portrayal of the soldiers' experiences. These veterans asserted that a typical Vietnam grunt did not come into contact with all the disturbing situations in Stone's picture, including ambushes, firefights, drug dependency, fragging (violence against American officers), and the attempted execution of Vietnamese civilians. Stone made the Vietnam experience look far worse than it actually was, the detractors charged. But of course, the intended message in a docudrama is not that the characters' experiences are typical. Cinematic history compresses many important events into the lives of leading characters to address larger historical issues.

#### CINEMATIC HISTORY SPEAKS TO THE PRESENT

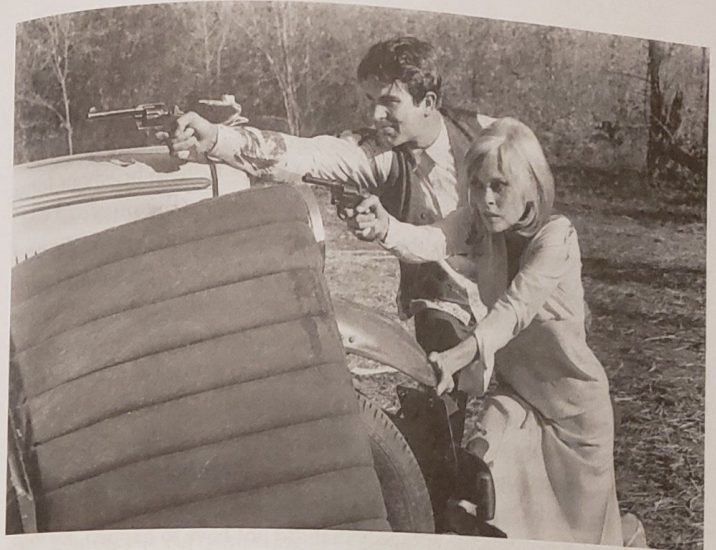
*The Sea Hawk*, Michael Curtiz's fast-paced 1940 movie about English privateers raiding Spanish ships in the age of Queen Elizabeth, features a frightening reference to the threat Spain's imperialism poses for all of Europe. The movie

suggests that all the peoples of the continent may soon be dominated by oppressive tyrants. To confront this danger, Queen Elizabeth gives swashbuckler Geoffrey Thorpe (played by Errol Flynn and modeled after Sir Francis Drake) unofficial authority to attack the Spanish fleet. This popular film refers to conditions in its period of production as well as to conditions of the late sixteenth century. The movie's references to imperial Spain provided audiences of 1940 with thinly disguised hints about the Nazis' expanding influence over Europe.<sup>57</sup>

Virtually all of cinematic history references the present when interpreting the past. Filmmakers attempt to show audiences the modern-day relevance of their historical interpretations. To make cinema meaningful to audiences, artists incorporate a variety of subtle hints about their stories' connections to current issues. Indeed, in choosing their subjects, filmmakers often seek topics that relate to current fashions, attitudes, hopes, and anxieties of the viewing public.<sup>58</sup> Screenwriter Aeneas MacKenzie referred to this practice in an interoffice memo explaining the importance of the story he was planning about the heroism of George Armstrong Custer. At the time of production planning, the United States was moving closer to intervention in the Second World War. MacKenzie wrote, "I need not mention that this picture will be released at the moment when thousands of youths are being trained for commissions, when hundreds of new and traditionless units are being formed. If we can inspire these to some appreciation of a great officer and a great regiment in their own service, we shall have accomplished our mission."<sup>59</sup> *Bonnie and Clyde* also spoke to people of the times. The film dealt with criminals of the 1930s, yet aspects of the story looked familiar to audiences of the 1960s. Hollywood's Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were antiestablishment, rebellious, and independent minded; they also craved celebrity. David Newman, who helped develop the original concept for this movie, promoted his project as a story about an unconventional couple that "would have been right at home in the Sixties." *Bonnie and Clyde* was not only about two historical figures, he said; it was also "about what's going on now."<sup>60</sup>

William Goldman, an enormously successful screenwriter, provides an intriguing example of how the creators of Hollywood movies think about the relevance of historical subjects. In his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting*, Goldman writes about production planning for *The Right Stuff*, a 1983 movie (based on Tom Wolfe's bestselling book by the same title) that deals with America's struggle to send astronauts into space. He notes that current conditions in America were very much on his mind when he was developing a thesis for the movie.

When Goldman began preparing a script, the American people's confidence in their nation was at low ebb. Jimmy Carter's presidency was coming to a



Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway star as Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, the violent gangster couple of the early 1930s. Despite its depression-era setting, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) related to the feelings of many young Americans in the 1960s. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

close. The United States had recently dealt with recession, inflation, unemployment, and a hostage crisis in Iran. America's manufactured products were shoddy, and Japan seemed ready to surpass the United States as a manufacturing giant. In reaction to this depressing state of affairs, *The Right Stuff* could send an uplifting message, Goldman argued. It could show that Americans had experienced similar anxieties back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when they thought their country had become second-rate. The Russians had succeeded in putting a satellite in space before the United States, and then they had succeeded in sending the first animal and man into space. In contrast, American rockets were exploding on the launchpads. Then, rather slowly, the United States began to pull out of its slump, Goldman observed, and the country eventually demonstrated its technical superiority. Writing to the producers at the time of planning for *The Right Stuff*, Goldman said, "we can indicate to the audience today that we are still, in spite of our faults, a great country. Remember, this is to be a movie that, if we're lucky, sends the people home with a good feeling about America."<sup>61</sup> Like many members of the film community, Goldman sensed that Americans needed an uplifting, inspiring message for the 1980s, and he thought Hollywood could serve that function.

Often, new patterns of interpretation emerge over the decades as filmmakers respond to changing attitudes and changing notions of political correctness. The shifts were rather dramatic in the depiction of Native Americans. In the decades before World War II, many Hollywood films portrayed Indians as savages, showing them assaulting wagon trains and scalping their victims. A late example of this imagery appears in 1939, when Indians turn up briefly in John Ford's *Stagecoach*, standing on a cliff before descending on the surprised passengers. Ford's movie introduces the Indian group with ominous music, and the warriors look sinister. By 1942, the year *They Died with Their Boots On* appeared in theaters, Hollywood needed to exhibit more sensitivity toward Native Americans. America was at war with the Nazis, and international concern about racism had grown stronger. Raoul Walsh's movie offers a much more appealing picture of Indians than *Stagecoach* did. It portrays the Sioux warrior Crazy Horse rather favorably, while also presenting George Armstrong Custer in a positive light (the English-speaking world needed military heroes in 1942). *They Died with Their Boots On* managed to straddle this historical fence, treating the white man-red man conflict as a tragedy that did not have to happen. By 1950, Hollywood was responding to the public's heightening concern about minority rights with *Broken Arrow*, Delmer Daves's movie that encouraged sympathy for the beleaguered Apaches. John Ford later came out with a positive spin on Indians struggling to return to their homeland in Wyoming in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). By the early 1970s, Native Americans were the heroes of the western action movie, and whites served as the villains. *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970) suggest that American massacres of Indian communities resembled the U.S. soldiers' execution of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. More recently, Hollywood has handled the complicated challenge of balancing the pressures for political correctness and dramatic complexity by distinguishing between good and bad Indians (as in *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last of the Mohicans*).<sup>62</sup>

As mentioned before, westerns carry different messages in different periods. For many years, their upbeat tales resonated with the public, perhaps because they related progressive stories about America's successful expansion across the frontier. Richard Slotkin noted that the heroes in traditional westerns encountered savage Indians, outlaws, power-hungry cattle barons, and other troublemakers, but the heroes usually triumphed by the conclusion of the last reel. Law and order, peace and tranquility came to the frontier community; civilization moved a step forward. This comforting narrative pattern no longer seemed appropriate in the more cynical 1960s and 1970s. Americans lost their sense of moral innocence in the Vietnam era, and economic setbacks in the 1970s left Americans feeling uncertain about the future. The progressive theme of Hollywood's traditional westerns did not resonate at a

time when Americans were troubled and pessimistic. The few westerns appearing in this era depicted a decline of the cowboy, as in *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (both 1969). Hollywood also presented a dark picture of the frontier scene in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Robert Altman's movie focuses on an ugly town in the northwestern wilderness, where the hero keeps a lover established as a madam in a whorehouse. In the end, he dies in a snowdrift.<sup>63</sup>

How much contemporary meaning can we draw from the themes of cinematic history? To what degree do filmmakers reference the present in portraying the past? Grindon stretches the connections rather extensively in his analysis of *Reds*, suggesting that Warren Beatty's 1981 film contains abundant hints about modern times in its story of John Reed's activities in the early twentieth century. Grindon claims that Beatty sees John Reed as a precursor to the radical figures of the 1960s. The film's depiction of opposition to World War I resembles protests against the Vietnam War. *Reds'* attention to conflicts at the Democratic National Convention of 1916 contains messages about the divisive 1968 Democratic Party meeting in Chicago. The Emma Goldman character in *Reds* represents, in some ways, New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug, and Reed's lover Louise Bryant suggests a feminist of the 1960s and 1970s. Grindon believes that the scenes showing divisions in the radical community of Greenwich Village suggest the modern-day fights between hippies and the New Left, and the movie's portrayal of factionalism in the Bolshevik Revolution references conflicts over George McGovern's Democratic Party nomination for the presidency in 1972 and the demise of the New Left.<sup>64</sup>

These speculations about ties between the past and present in cinematic history are intriguing, but we should be cautious about stretching the connections too far. The search for links to current conditions can lead to a rather cynical view of Hollywood's portrayals of the past, suggesting that the stories really have very little to do with history. Film historian Pierre Sorlin falls into this trap when he says that the history employed in film is "a mere framework, serving as a basis or a counterpoint for a political thesis. History is no more than a useful choice to speak of the present time."<sup>65</sup> This statement expresses an extreme position on the subject. A more sophisticated view holds that history-oriented movies often reference the present, especially in their principal messages about the general lessons to be learned from their portrayals. We push the issue of relevancy too far if we suggest that filmmakers have almost nothing but the present in mind when they shape their stories. Not every event and action out of history nicely conforms to the political interests of the moviemaker. Indeed, artists who manipulate every detail for purposes of demonstrating relevancy may find that they have created agitprop or parody

rather than the kind of production that audiences can accept as a representative form of cinematic history.

### CINEMATIC HISTORY FREQUENTLY INJECTS ROMANCE INTO ITS STORIES, EVEN WHEN AMOROUS AFFAIRS ARE NOT CENTRAL TO THE HISTORICAL EVENTS

Academic historians and critics in the mass media often pooh-pooh cinematic history because it gives excessive attention to the romantic activities of a movie's central characters. These critics are certainly right in observing that movies provide much more coverage of the amorous side of people's lives than mainstream academic histories do. But again, we are speaking here of reel history, a genre that, of necessity, makes love and sex prominent in dramatic entertainment. The romantic elements of a story heighten the emotional impact for most audiences; in particular, they help attract women to the theaters. Occasionally, war movies have virtually no romantic content (such as the submarine film *U-571* or the combat movie *Saving Private Ryan*), but the handsome male stars provide the attraction to female moviegoers. Most cinematic histories incorporate some portrayal of male-female mutual magnetism, and some films elevate the amorous relationship to the center of attention. Such movies usually approximate the familiar storytelling pattern: in the first act, the couple falls in love; in the second act, disagreements between them or intrusions from outside threaten their relationship; and in the final act, the lovers are reunited (or death ends their relationship tragically).

Cinematic history often focuses on the romantic aspect of life, making it one of the principal narrative themes. This attention is evident in one of the few major films to dramatize the life of Dwight David Eisenhower. This World War II hero and later president is an important figure in twentieth-century American history, but dramatists have virtually ignored his wartime and political experiences as the stuff of good drama. Filmmakers have drawn attention, however, to speculation about the possibility of a wartime romance between Eisenhower and his driver, Kay Summersby. *Ike: The War Years* (1978), an ABC television movie that features Robert Duvall and Lee Remick in the leading roles, suggests the possibility of such a love affair. Similarly, Cambridge University's famous scholar C. S. Lewis is a giant of the modern literary world, but the element of his life that made good drama concerned his late-life relationship with American Joy Davidman Gresham, a woman who adored his work. The story of Lewis's discovery of love and Gresham's death from cancer generated an emotionally powerful stage play and a touching 1993 movie (*Shadowlands*) starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger.

Moviemakers often manipulate the historical record to ensure that their stories will feature a workable romantic interest. Wives and children can stand in the way of such portrayals—or certainly complicate them—so they are often erased from the story. For example, the main character in *The People versus Larry Flynt* (1996) is a single man. This plot adjustment simplifies the movie's depiction of Flynt's romantic relationship with sexually liberated Althea Leasure (Courtney Love). The real Larry Flynt (creator of *Hustler* magazine) had a wife and children during his struggles against lawsuits and censorship. Similarly, Al Capone was a married man at the time of his famous criminal exploits, but *Al Capone* (1959) shows him as a bachelor who establishes a romantic relationship with a fictional widow. Of course, many filmmakers incorporate a love relationship where none existed in the historical record. *Broken Arrow* does this in its story about Tom Jeffords, a real-life frontiersman in Arizona who tried to work out agreements between the Apaches and the U.S. military in the 1870s. The movie invents a romance and marriage between Jeffords and an Apache princess (the union brings together Jimmy Stewart and Debra Paget). In *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), Michael Curtiz creates a romance between Queen Elizabeth (Bette Davis) and Essex (Errol Flynn). The real Essex was thirty-four years Elizabeth's junior and certainly not the queen's amorous partner.<sup>66</sup>

The prominence of a romantic element in cinematic history does not constitute grounds for dismissing the genre's value as a perspective on the past. Romantic themes are useful for the design of successful Hollywood docudramas. They provide a vehicle for introducing history to the public in an entertaining format. The dramatic study of C. S. Lewis's relationship with Joy Davidman Gresham introduces audiences to one of the century's great men of letters. *Reds*' story of the on-again, off-again romance between John Reed and Louise Bryant exposes viewers to the life of bohemians and radical leftist revolutionaries of early-twentieth-century New York City. Romantic themes draw audiences to cinematic history, adding strong human touches to topics that may, at first glance, seem too dry for mass entertainment.

### CINEMATIC HISTORY COMMUNICATES A FEELING FOR THE PAST THROUGH ATTENTION TO DETAILS OF AN EARLIER AGE

Hollywood's directors, producers, and publicists are usually eager to advertise the authenticity of their movies, often claiming that their films pay great attention to period detail. This kind of advertising encourages audiences to believe that these movies provide a form of stimulation not available from other genres: a realistic picture of life in a distant time and place. Often filmmakers

boast about conducting careful research into the historical record and sparing no effort to re-create the look of the past down to the smallest props. These claims about meticulousness are designed to give moviegoers confidence in the seriousness of the productions.

Advertising the authenticity of cinematic history is as old as the genre. D. W. Griffith, one of the first prominent cinematic historians, was emphatic in pointing to the careful research he had done during the production of *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith announced proudly that he had hired a prominent university professor in California to assist him in the interpretation of historical evidence. He also noted that veterans of the Civil War had counseled him in the design of the battles and that scenes such as the one showing Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theater had been composed from details found in period photographs and documents.<sup>67</sup> A more recent example of attention to authenticity appears in the promotional efforts for *Titanic*. Publicists for James Cameron's movie emphasized that the production had used carpet woven in the fashion of the original design, created a replica of the ship's great clock at the central staircase, provided 450 authentic-looking wigs for actors and extras, and trained numerous players in the etiquette of the Edwardian era.

Historian Daniel Walkowitz points out that filmmakers do not necessarily produce great historical movies when they include plenty of authentic details in their productions. He stresses that it is not enough for Hollywood to get the shoes right or the uniform buttons correct or to feature genuine antique silverware on a dinner table. Filmmakers must also create engaging stories that raise significant historical questions, notes Walkowitz. A movie may feature numerous authentic-looking props yet still communicate poor history.<sup>68</sup>

Still, much of value can be achieved in motion pictures that effectively create the look and feel of a distant time and place. When movies project images of the past through myriad, often dazzling period details, they can educate audiences in a variety of subtle ways. As some historians describe the achievement, films can demonstrate the "pastness of the past," communicating a sense that conditions in historic times were, in many ways, different from those of the present. The visual elements help draw audiences into the story, encouraging them to suspend disbelief and imagine that they are witnesses to history. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) established that feeling, featuring 19,000 extras (many of them soldiers from China's People's Army), 9,000 costumes, vintage cars from several decades, and extraordinary cinematography taken throughout Beijing's Forbidden City.<sup>69</sup> David Lean, who had a distinguished career as film editor before he became a director, was a master in creating the look of historical authenticity. *Lawrence of Arabia* gives audiences a memorable representation of conflicts associated with World War I

in the barren and forbidding North African desert. Lean's picture includes sweeping desert vistas shot on location in Saudi Arabia. In some cases, the temperatures were so high on the set that the thermometers could not register them. Lean found the city of 'Aqaba too developed for filming, so he arranged for the construction of a duplicate of the old 'Aqaba outside of Seville, Spain. The movie's designers also created sets representing Damascus, Cairo, and Jerusalem. *Bonnie and Clyde* incorporates the music of Rudy Vallee, a film clip from the movie *Gold Diggers of 1933*, campaign posters for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and a segment from Eddie Cantor's radio program.<sup>70</sup> All these elements contribute to the appearance of authenticity.

Other moviemakers establish the look and feel of the past by painting on a much smaller canvas, examining historical situations in microcosm. William Wellman realized this achievement in his portrayal of the combat experience in World War II. *Battleground* (1949) presents a tightly focused picture of a small group of American soldiers fighting through a bitter winter in the Ardennes forest. German director Wolfgang Petersen also proved extraordinarily effective in establishing an authentic look in a microcosmic setting in *Das Boot* (The Boat), which received wide distribution in the United States in 1982. Petersen's movie depicts the frightening experiences of a German U-boat crew during World War II. Unlike many earlier American submarine movies, which show well-dressed sailors and generally clean submarines, *Das Boot* presents the crew as a dirty, pale, and weary bunch and reveals how cramped and cluttered U-boats could be. George Lucas also effectively communicates the "pastness of the past" in *American Graffiti* (1973). His exploration of American social history is tightly focused on a microcosmic environment, as *American Graffiti's* entire story unfolds in a small California town on a summer night in 1962. As numerous rock and roll songs play in the background, Lucas takes audiences back to the America of hot rods, crew cuts, and girls in bobby socks.

Whereas films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *American Graffiti* represent superb examples of cinematic histories that successfully create the look of verisimilitude in both epic and small-story form, other history-oriented films have treated period details with much less integrity. Often these movies are low-budget, quickly made productions designed to capitalize on a popular entertainment trend. *Young Dillinger* (1965) is such an example. Its creators responded to the public enthusiasm for gangster stories that grew in the years after ABC's popular TV series *The Untouchables* (1959). Not only did *Young Dillinger*, starring Nick Adams, play loosely with facts about the gangster's exploits; the production also reflected little care for visual details associated with Dillinger's time. Except for the appearance of a few old cars, the costuming, sets, and scenery bore little resemblance to the 1920s or to the locations where

Dillinger actually engaged in crime. The gangster apparel in the movie looked like it had been tailored in the 1960s, and the scenes of police chasing criminals in cars speeding across steep mountains certainly did not suggest America's prairie, where the Dillinger gang operated.

### CINEMATIC HISTORY OFTEN COMMUNICATES AS POWERFULLY IN IMAGES AND SOUNDS AS IN WORDS

Book-oriented enthusiasts of history are accustomed to focusing on narrative when examining a movie's interpretation of the past. They give careful attention to the language employed by the actors, the captions that appear on the screen, and the major plot developments that give direction to the story. Many of these observers are more interested in the movie's communication through language than in its interpretation in images and sounds. Often, they concentrate on details in the script rather than on the visual and auditory devices employed by the director, the cinematographer, the sound engineers, and other artists and technicians who play important roles in shaping a film's presentation. Book-oriented observers of film produce useful insights on cinematic history, but they often overlook the subtle yet impressive ways that movies deliver messages.

Nonverbal techniques are not, of course, unique to cinematic history. Filmmakers use similar devices when making various kinds of commercial entertainment such as courtroom dramas, westerns, and crime pictures. Generally, specialists in cinema studies are more accustomed to analyzing visual and aural strategies than students of cinematic history are, and individuals interested in studying Hollywood's treatment of the past can sharpen their analyses by giving greater attention to the nonverbal techniques employed by moviemakers. This approach reveals that a film often communicates as powerfully with pictures and sounds as it does with words.

In *Schindler's List*, for example, Steven Spielberg presents much of his movie's essential interpretation in nonverbal form. The director introduces Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) in a montage of pictures that conveys a strong impression of Schindler's personal ambition. Frames showing a smart-looking suit, tie, and watch (as well as a wad of money) indicate that Schindler is an urbane man who consciously attempts to project an image of high social standing. Throughout the film, Spielberg (and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski) shoot pictures of Schindler from a low angle, presenting him as an exceedingly tall and powerful man. Spielberg introduces the story's principal antagonist, Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), through visual messaging as well. Audiences first see the Nazi military officer dabbing his nose several times with a



Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson, right) converses with Nazi officer Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes, left) in *Schindler's List* (1993). Through the use of light and shadows, director Steven Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski communicate their interpretation in nonverbal form. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

handkerchief. In another scene, the camera focuses on Goeth's nails, which are sanded and polished by a subservient woman. Spielberg and Kaminski also focus the camera on Goeth's poor posture and protruding stomach. These pictures succinctly inform viewers that the movie's villain is a self-indulgent and effete snob who is given to excess.

Visual communication in *Schindler's List* informs the audience in many other ways, as well. Sometimes images interpret the story more effectively than the words spoken by the principals. For instance, Schindler's assistant, Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), a Jewish businessman, accepts Schindler's offer of an unusual manufacturing and financial relationship simply through the movements of his eyes and lips. Stern's physical response to the invitation reveals that he is suspicious about working with the German but senses that the proposed arrangement may prove useful in the Jews' difficult circumstances. Later Schindler witnesses the destruction of a Jewish ghetto. This experience, especially, moves him toward a personal commitment to help the Jews. Words do little to suggest Schindler's important inner transformation. Instead, his facial contortions inform viewers of his shock and disgust.

Spielberg and Kaminski employ numerous visual devices to arouse the viewers' sympathy for the persecuted Jews. At some points in the story, glaring

lights suggest the terror of people who feel like trapped animals. In scenes showing the destruction of a Jewish community in Poland, for instance, Jews desperately attempt to conceal themselves in ghetto buildings, and German troops search for them with flashlights. Bright beams sweep across dark rooms and then fill the screen with light. Viewers have the perspective of fugitives who have suddenly been discovered. Later, when Jewish women are pushed into the concentration camp at Auschwitz, floodlights from the camp's watchtowers glare into the cameras. The powerful beams symbolize the Nazis' control over all the captives in the concentration camps; escape from the track of the searchlights seems virtually impossible. When portraying the victims' intense fear, Spielberg and Kaminski focus closely on faces. They show the Jews trembling and sweating. These pictures reveal the personal struggles of frightened people who try desperately to stay alive but recognize that their efforts are likely to fail.

*Schindler's List* also employs visual techniques to characterize the Nazis' evil. Late in the story, for example, the fate of many Jews working under Oskar Schindler depends on a decision made by a menacing-looking Nazi officer. Spielberg and Kaminski cast a dark shadow over the upper half of the Nazi's face, drawing attention to the man's ugly teeth. Lighting creates as strong an impression of the Nazi's villainy as anything he says.

Spielberg and Kaminski also employ a documentary filmmaking style to suggest that their accounting of the Holocaust aims to be realistic. Often they use a handheld camera that gives a shaky quality to the pictures. Cameramen seem to be jostled along with the rest of the Jews who are herded into city streets, forced into boxcars, and squeezed into buildings at a concentration camp. The documentary style is also evident in the camera's placement. In several instances, the audience's view of key figures is obscured by trucks and people that pass by in the foreground. Spielberg and Kaminski sometimes place the camera behind a window or a curtain, partly obscuring the view of Schindler. All these strategies, along with the use of black-and-white film, give *Schindler's List* the look of gritty actuality rather than the appearance of a slick and fictional Hollywood production.

Sound, too, contributes to the appearance of authenticity. For instance, Spielberg does not simply employ generic sounds for gunshots. He uses very different noises for rifle and revolver blasts and for close-up murders and shootings that occur at a distance. Pops, cracks, bursts, and booms punctuate the execution scenes. Sometimes the blasts are accompanied by sounds that represent exploding flesh. These distinct noises draw attention to the individual nature of each murder, making every shot horribly distinct. Spielberg accentuates the tragedy of a ghetto's destruction by providing the audience with

a frightening three-dimensional auditory experience. In the scenes depicting Nazi attacks on a Jewish neighborhood, he places microphones at the center of the action. Viewers hear anguished shouts from desperate victims, screams that appear to emerge from every direction. An understated score by John Williams complements these scenes. In the course of watching an orgy of destruction and murder, the audience is hardly aware that Williams's music subtly provides emotional force to the pictures and sounds.

#### DEVIL IN THE DETAILS: THE PERILS OF CONTESTING GENRE

How important is it for filmmakers to employ elements of genre when crafting a work of cinematic history? Can artists move dramatically away from the genre's conventions and still succeed broadly at the box office, in the video and DVD stores, and in the television ratings competition? Do filmmakers risk commercial failure when they dispense with many of the time-honored practices of Hollywood storytelling? Can they turn their backs on the three-act design? Can they excite strong audience response with movies that do not offer a partisan view of heroes and villains? Can cinematic historians succeed when they do not simplify plots by featuring just a few representative characters and when they do not provide morally uplifting tales about struggles between Davids and Goliaths?

Consider the problems that one very talented moviemaker faced when he created a story for the cinema that dared to break from the well-established generic standards. Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* (1999) was a fine movie in many respects, and it featured many fascinating and authentic-looking representations of the past. Yet the film passed almost unnoticed by the viewing public and critics in the mass media. A fundamental cause of the movie's oblivion can be traced to its unconventional story structure, which on many fronts violated Hollywood's unwritten codes that guide dramatic presentation. The director paid a price for his courage. Instead of winning accolades for creating a distinctive kind of cinematic history, he experienced the Hollywood nightmare. His film was a financial disappointment, and it disappeared into relative obscurity soon after its release. Could *Ride with the Devil* have been a commercial success if Lee and his production team had given more attention to Hollywood's storytelling practices? In view of the movie's many admirable qualities, it probably could have attracted some of the attention it deserved. *Ride with the Devil* is a good example of an intelligent cinematic treatment of history that lacks a successful narrative structure.

We can appreciate the tragedy of this film's box office failure by considering its sophistication in dealing with the past. *Ride with the Devil* delivers a

remarkably sensitive and realistic-looking picture of the American Civil War in the border region of Missouri and Kansas. The story begins in the spring of 1861, when war between Union and Confederate forces is about to break out. The drama concludes at an undefined time well into the war. In subtle, often indirect ways, *Ride with the Devil* imparts a great deal of information about wartime conditions. Its most memorable portrayals relate to military actions in Missouri and Kansas, but the film also offers a plethora of interesting details about the lives of noncombatants.

Director Ang Lee's picture, based on a novel by Daniel Woodrell, presents mostly fictitious figures, but the situations these characters encounter and the behavior they exhibit are well supported in historical documents. Above all, *Ride with the Devil* demonstrates how fragile civilization in the border region became when the Civil War interrupted domestic life. The movie shows small bands of pro-Union Jayhawkers and pro-Confederate Bushwhackers raiding each other's communities at the start of the war (these attackers are following up on hostilities that had been growing since the days of "Bleeding Kansas" in the 1850s). *Ride with the Devil* presents the war from the viewpoint of the Bushwhackers. Although the slavery issue affects the Bushwhackers' attitudes, it is not a prominent factor in their belligerence. Western Missouri is home to relatively few slaves, and the Bushwhackers are much more interested in getting revenge for blood and treasure lost in raids committed by Jayhawkers and Union troops. Guerrilla warfare in the region soon escalates into brutal savagery, quite similar to the real conflicts that wrecked many homes and lives in western Missouri and eastern Kansas in the early 1860s. Taiwan-born Lee reminds Americans that these local vendettas led to senseless violence, similar to the violence that has troubled thousands in Ireland, Bosnia, and East Timor in modern times. In this manner, *Ride with the Devil* introduces movie audiences to a side of the American Civil War they did not see in *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>71</sup>

Lee's movie features many authentic-looking scenes portraying life in the border area during the 1860s. It shows the condition of noncombatants in exquisite detail, such as the Missouri environment of small farms and farmhouses rather than great mansions. *Ride with the Devil* also reveals that military activities in the region forced neighbors to choose sides. Confederate sympathizers became very suspicious of strangers, worrying about which side the intruders supported, yet these citizens fed and hid pro-Confederate guerrillas at great personal risk. Wartime deprivations, as the movie shows, led citizens to treasure a simple chicken dinner or a few pieces of bacon. The movie also effectively portrays the awkward nature of romantic liaisons among young people who lacked movies, television, or steamy novels to inform them about courting skills. In one of the film's best lines, Sue Lee (played by pop singer

Jewel) asks her new husband on their wedding night if he has ever made love before. "Well, I've killed fifteen men," responds Jake Roedel (Tobey Maguire).

In the film's strongest action sequences, William Quantrill (John Ales) leads his famous raid on Lawrence, Kansas, that results in the wanton murder of more than 180 male citizens. This depiction accurately portrays some of the brutal behavior recorded in the eyewitness accounts. One of the story's characters, Black John, closely resembles the psychopathic killer "Bloody" Bill Anderson, who murdered several people in the raid on Lawrence.

Another interesting character in the story is Daniel Holt (played by Jeffrey Wright), a slave who rides and fights with the Bushwhackers. Some moviegoers questioned whether an African American would have participated in the activities of Missouri's pro-Confederate guerrillas.<sup>72</sup> The historical records indicate that a few blacks did, in fact, play such a role. One was Henry Wilson, who lost family members in Jayhawker raids (Wilson rode with the Bushwhackers and served as a bodyguard for Quantrill). Another, John Noland, spied for the Bushwhackers.

*Ride with the Devil* is a beautifully photographed, intelligent, and informative drama about the Civil War in the borderlands. It deserved the Herodotus award it received from the History Channel for the best 1999 movie on a historical subject. Yet *Ride with the Devil* attracted only small audiences, received little attention in the mass media, and never reached the theaters in many of America's smaller communities. Lee's remarkably authentic historical portrayal failed to draw the audiences it deserved. What went wrong?

Poor marketing can hurt a new film, and evidently, *Ride with the Devil* did not receive much promotion (it lacked the sizable publicity budget needed to create a successful media blitz). It is doubtful, though, that large-scale promotion could have launched the picture as a major box office attraction. The film suffered from more than poor publicity. It so consistently evaded the principal rules of genre that it left audiences perplexed. *Ride with the Devil's* dramatic structure, quite different from the familiar design, threw viewers off balance. Its failure provides an instructive example of the problems that can develop when a script deviates radically from Hollywood's conventions. Lee's courage in attempting to make a different kind of drama is commendable, but it is also regrettable that his clash with traditions of the genre limited the film's potential to reach many viewers who could have learned a great deal from the story.

*Ride with the Devil* lacks focus, direction, and denouement. Its dramatic structure does not closely follow the basic three-act form of most cinematic history, by which the script establishes a situation and introduces principal characters, creates problems for them, and then resolves their difficulties in the final act. The screenplay by James Schamus does not truly build toward

a climax. Instead, its storytelling seems episodic, presenting a number of vignettes that lack strong connections. At some points in the drama, the audience cannot clearly distinguish which character is supposed to have the spotlight. Jake Roedel (Tobey Maguire) is the movie's principal figure, but he often fades into the background while other characters command the foreground. In the first part of the film, two Bushwhackers, Jack Bull Chiles (Skeet Ulrich) and George Clyde (Simon Baker), emerge as principals. After their deaths, other figures move to center stage. Sue Lee (Jewel), the only important female in the film, does not appear until late in the story, at which time she plays a major role. The slave (Jeffrey Wright) also emerges as a major figure late in the film after remaining rather silently in the background through much of the picture. Other characters briefly play important parts at different moments in the action, including Pit Mackeson (Jonathan Rhys Meyers in a brilliant role as a psychopathic killer), Black Jack (James Caviezel), and Willam Quantrill (John Ales). In short, Lee's movie does not focus on just a few major figures, as does most cinematic history, and its point of view shifts confusingly among several principal actors.

*Ride with the Devil* also lacks the clear-cut message evident in most cinematic history. It does not clearly identify heroes and villains. In some respects, the movie sympathizes with the Bushwhackers, especially when these pro-Confederate guerrillas become outnumbered and outgunned and have to go into hiding. Yet the movie also invites viewers to look critically at the Bushwhackers' participation in vicious slaughters (particularly the bloody massacre in Lawrence). Lee deserves praise for examining the historical events with an eye toward moral ambiguities, but the complexity he brings to this story often leaves the audience feeling bewildered rather than enlightened.

Furthermore, the film's message is obscure at the end. *Ride with the Devil* looks, in many ways, like a war picture, yet it contains no violence in its final thirty minutes. The fighting simply winds down, as Jake Roedel and his new wife, Sue Lee, attempt to build a domestic life together, as many Americans had to do in the aftermath of war. Through this soft conclusion, Lee's movie suggests a thoughtful view of the challenges Americans face when they prepare for peace. Jake Roedel's last words finish the story in a manner that accents the movie's tendency to deliver ambiguous messages. "It ain't right, and it ain't wrong. It just is," says Roedel after an encounter with two Bushwhackers who are heading off for a suicidal mission in a Yankee-controlled area.

An enthusiast of experimental drama can applaud Lee's iconoclasm in fashioning an unorthodox story structure. The director refused to conform to the familiar patterns of cinematic drama. Lee's courage is impressive, but his unique approach evidently damaged the movie's prospects for a favorable

public and critical reception. Indeed, reviewers of the film were rather consistent in noting shortcomings in the dramatic presentation. These commentators praised the attention to historical detail but sensed that something was missing. Stephen Holden, writing in the *New York Times*, said the film "feels at times like an anthropological study" and observed that its view of the border wars "veers about as far from the high-romantic flourishes of 'Gone with the Wind' as a movie can go." Holden concluded that the film's "meditative quality and attention to detail" tended to "keep the story at a distance and make 'Ride with the Devil' dramatically skimpy, even though the movie stirs together themes of love, sex, death, and war."<sup>73</sup> Engel Ringel Gillespie concluded with a similar perspective in the *Atlanta Constitution*. "For some, 'Devil' will seem ultimately too scattered, too lacking in dramatic buildup and focus," wrote Gillespie. "Others may find it a sublime contemplation of the American character at a particularly revealing time in our struggle to become a nation."<sup>74</sup> These critics identified impressive qualities in the picture but also observed some specific difficulties in the storytelling. They did not recognize a common denominator associated with the shortcomings: *Ride with the Devil's* deviation from practices of the cinematic genre.

Would greater conformity to the conventions of Hollywood-style storytelling have seriously harmed the movie's integrity? If Lee and his writer had done less to break from traditions of the genre, could they still have produced a sophisticated commentary on history? These questions can be answered in the negative and the affirmative, respectively. As shown later in a discussion of some outstanding examples of cinematic history, filmmakers can borrow liberally from the traditions of dramatic presentation and also produce imaginative and intriguing cinematic perspectives on the past. Recognition of the achievements of other cinematic histories throws light on the tragedy of *Ride with the Devil's* commercial failure. Greater attention to practices of the craft could have rescued the film from obscurity and brought its many sensitive and intelligent representations of the past to a much wider audience. An understanding of this lost opportunity should serve as a valuable lesson to those who flippantly argue that cinematic historians should abandon the conventions of Hollywood storytelling. Radical departures from the familiar standards can prove artistically and financially disastrous.