

## Judging Cinematic History

In a sensitive review of the 1993 movie *Shadowlands*, Carlos Villa Flor identifies several of the film's manipulations of historical facts but draws greater attention to its broader achievements. Flor notes that *Shadowlands* adjusts certain details in its portrayal of a late-life romance involving the distinguished British author, theologian, and professor C. S. Lewis (played by Anthony Hopkins). At various points in the drama, the filmmakers take artistic liberties in order to design a comprehensible and entertaining story, Flor notes. They show one son instead of the two belonging to Joy Davidman Gresham (Debra Winger), the woman who eventually becomes Lewis's love interest. To give the story more action sequences, the filmmakers portray Lewis driving a car around Herefordshire (the real Lewis never mastered driving; he walked). Additionally, the movie associates Lewis with Oxford University (the most familiar symbol of English higher education, and a comfortable point of reference for moviegoers). In fact, Lewis worked at Cambridge during the years portrayed in the drama. Furthermore, *Shadowlands* places Mrs. Gresham in Lewis's home during the final days of her bout with cancer, even though she actually died in a hospital. Flor defends the artistic value of these manipulations and judges the production a success. *Shadowlands* views Lewis's life and the tragedy of Gresham's death intelligently. Its creators rearrange the historical record somewhat, yet the film holds together "as a balanced masterpiece."<sup>1</sup>

Flor's assessment of *Shadowlands* reveals an impressive sense of balance, a recognition that artists must shape evidence for dramatic effect and that these adjustments can sometimes serve a respectable purpose. The errors, omissions, simplifications, inventions, and manipulations in *Shadowlands* need to be identified, Flor demonstrates, but these matters do not destroy the movie's fundamental value. *Shadowlands* effectively studies the case of a talented and prominent individual who is confident of his intellectual sophistication and spiritual strength. His discovery of romance late in life and the eventual loss of his beloved wife present a stinging challenge to his Christian faith. Can Lewis maintain his confidence in the ultimate goodness of God after dealing with this tragedy? *Shadowlands*, based on an outstanding stage play, provides a



In *Glory* (1989), Trip (Denzel Washington) and other soldiers of the Fifty-fourth Regiment tear up their pay vouchers rather than accept less money than the white soldiers receive. Director Ed Zwick exercised some artistic liberties in telling this story about African Americans in the Civil War, but historian James M. McPherson applauded the movie as an impressive cinematic perspective on history. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

thoughtful and ultimately uplifting view of Lewis's internal struggle. Despite its adjustments of the details in Lewis's life, the performance gives audiences plenty of attractive food for thought.

Flor's example is useful for a consideration of the challenges of assessing cinematic history. Much too often, reviewers are preoccupied with pointing out tiny factual mistakes. They focus on artistic liberties taken by filmmakers, comment cynically on Hollywood's cavalier relationship with historical evidence, and rail angrily at the cinematic artists who rearrange historical evidence in order to design compelling drama. These caustic critics can find an example of a more balanced and sophisticated analysis in Flor's insightful review.

One of the historians' favorite examples of a balanced and thoughtful approach to questions about artistic license is James M. McPherson's generous review of *Glory* (1989), which portrays the efforts of a group of African Americans fighting as Union soldiers during the Civil War. McPherson, a distinguished Civil War scholar, could easily have assumed a scolding attitude when dealing with the movie's treatment of history. As in all cinematic views of the past, *Glory's* presentation includes manipulations of the evidence. McPherson points them out in his review but does not consider them outrageous. He

observes, for example, that the real African-American soldiers who participated in the battle of Fort Wagner attacked from south to north; *Glory* shows them making the assault from the opposite direction. Also, *Glory* focuses on an African-American military unit made up of former slaves, when in fact, free blacks manned the real Massachusetts Fifty-fourth. A caption at the end of the picture claims that the bravery of the Fifty-fourth at Fort Wagner inspired Congress to authorize more black regiments for the Union army, but that actually occurred months before. The movie also leaves the impression that the Fifty-fourth concluded its activities with the bloody confrontation at Fort Wagner; in fact, the unit continued to serve through the war and participated in several more battles and skirmishes.<sup>2</sup>

*Glory's* misrepresentations do not, however, detract from its overall accomplishment, McPherson concludes. The adjustments can be defended. For example, the configuration of the Georgia beach where filmmakers shot the assault on Fort Wagner required a southward movement. Also, notes McPherson, most of the 188,000 black soldiers and sailors who served the Union in uniform were slaves until a short time before they enlisted. Furthermore, although the bravery of the Fifty-fourth at Fort Wagner was not the only factor in Congress's decision to authorize more black regiments, it at least helped to transform the experiment with black soldiers into a policy of black recruitment. *Glory's* portrayal is not literally true in these and other depictions, but it certainly contains many symbolic truths. Movies can teach history, McPherson insists, as *Glory* nicely demonstrates.<sup>3</sup>

Our understanding of the conventions of dramatic development should also inspire a more balanced and tolerant view of cinematic history. As we have seen, these Hollywood traditions of storytelling often force manipulations of evidence. Moviemakers employ successful practices of their profession, attempting to create emotionally stimulating entertainment. For instance, they condense time and collapse several historic personalities into one or two figures. Filmmakers emphasize a biographical approach to history, treating the experiences of a few characters as suggestive of the troubles and progress experienced by many people. Moviemakers also establish a rather simple story structure, presenting history in the form of a three-act play that introduces situations, creates problems for the protagonists, and then resolves their difficulties or hints at a symbolic triumph in the final act. Cinematic history often delivers an uplifting conclusion, communicating a sanguine view of the potential for human progress. It also creates a tightly focused view of the past, giving specific attention to just a few people and events. Movies do not present the "big picture" very effectively. They leave out much—not only details but also analysis. Cinema is certainly not comprehensive in its approach to history. Frequently

it privileges stories about war, personality conflict, romance, and tragedy. Its dramas characterize historic figures in white and black, as heroes and villains; portrayals in gray are much less evident. And of course, cinematic history often features fictional men and women, invented protagonists and antagonists whose actions and statements facilitate the filmmaker's efforts to create an entertaining tale. By employing invented characters, filmmakers can also take the action to diverse locales and give personality to specific individuals when, in fact, we know relatively little about the lives, thoughts, and emotions of these historic figures.<sup>4</sup>

The need for these forms of artistic license should be evident, yet critics of cinematic history continue to devote a good deal of energy to angry denunciations of Hollywood's playfulness with history. They fume against the collapsing of characters, the hero-villain depictions, the invented scenes, the simplification of plot, and other adjustments that filmmakers incorporate to produce dramatic effect. Critics also draw attention to specific factual errors, noting that *real* individuals did not speak or act in the ways depicted in the movies. They observe mistakes in presentation, too: the wrong uniform, erroneous chronology, or the placement of a leading figure where he or she could not possibly have been. By focusing on misrepresentation of details, they often miss the larger cinematic accomplishments. Preoccupied with small "lies," they fail to recognize larger "truths."

Of course, these lies can add up. They may accumulate to a disturbing level, destroying public confidence in a movie's relationship with history. Some films develop tainted reputations, and for good reason. Their manipulations of evidence take artistic license to excess. When media coverage of these problems in historical depiction becomes extensive, the negative publicity can harm a film financially and set critics against it. This condition may surprise some, because they assume that Hollywood filmmakers can distort history with impunity. But as I discuss later, some filmmakers have been called on the carpet in recent years for their failure to depict the past with integrity. They have paid a price for their manipulations in dollars and artistic reputation.

A serious and balanced look at cinematic history requires a more complex response to movies than the simplistic "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" approach of movie reviewers on television and in popular magazines. Even good cinematic history contains a great deal of fiction and manipulation of the facts, and even poor cinematic history that bends the facts to a troublesome degree can dramatize aspects of the past impressively. To state this case starkly, it is impossible to find an example of cinematic history that can be held up for unquestioned praise because it depicts the past without stretching the truth in any way. Conversely, it is difficult to find an example of cinematic history that

distorts the record so thoroughly that it should be rejected for having no redeeming value. Even problematic films frequently offer insights. In sum, we need a sensitive effort to judge integrity and an informed view of film that balances the defense of artistic liberties with the recognition that some dramatic flourishes can be problematic.

A comparative view of four major Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s is useful in this regard, because it helps distinguish between plausible distortions and more troublesome ones. James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) is an example of defensible exercise of artistic license. Cameron's film manages to present an intelligent view of the past even though it contains significant manipulations of the historical record and a good deal of fictionalizing. Against the example of *Titanic*'s achievement we can consider three motion pictures that came under attack in the mass media for exceeding reasonable bounds of artistic license: *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Amistad* (1997), and *The Hurricane* (1999). Each of these problematic films delivers some riveting drama, and each raises important questions about racial injustice. Yet all three stretch the truth in ways that undermine their interpretations of history. Some of the criticisms leveled against *Mississippi Burning*, *Amistad*, and *The Hurricane* were substantive, and justifiably, the public and the critics lost confidence in the movies' integrity.

#### A TITANIC ACHIEVEMENT

When James Cameron released *Titanic* late in 1997, the media gave considerable attention to his efforts to give the movie a look of historical authenticity. News stories about Cameron's re-creation of the fateful 1912 voyage made interesting reporting, because the director had devoted a large part of his record \$200 million budget to verisimilitude. The production team created a version of the *Titanic* on a beach in Baja California that was 90 percent the length of the original ship. This huge set was attached in four sections so that it could be assembled or disassembled for various scenes, with individual parts raised or lowered into the water. Cameron's production team also built a 17 million-gallon water tank that covered eight acres, which allowed cinematographers to "sink" rooms and decks to a depth of thirty feet. The team used smaller models of the ocean liner for staging the disaster and spent millions on special effects that created ocean backgrounds, icebergs, and the appearance of bodies falling off decks. For the scenes depicting the leisurely days before the encounter with the iceberg, Cameron brought in carpet woven in the designs used on the original *Titanic* and used old photographs to build the vessel's social halls and staterooms. To give the extras an authentic appearance,



Passengers board ship in James Cameron's blockbuster *Titanic* (1997). The production team created a replica of the liner on a beach in Baja California that was 90 percent the length of the original ship. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

he purchased 450 wigs and hundreds of hairpieces and schooled the actors in the manners and sounds of 1912 with etiquette and dialogue coaches.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this attention to authentic details, some critics lambasted the movie. They claimed that the syrupy love story, punctuated by a strong emphasis on class conflict, was so exaggerated and simplistic in its characterizations that it was not believable. *Titanic* "fails utterly" and is "dead in the water," declared Richard Corliss in *Time*.<sup>6</sup> He said that everybody in the story is a "caricature of class, designed only to illustrate a predictable prejudice: that the first-class passengers are third-class people, and vice versa." The story about Jack, Rose, and Cal "isn't half as poignant as the true ones known from books and films of the event," argued Corliss. "On this vast canvass, the problems of three little people really don't amount to a hill of beans."<sup>7</sup> The *Washington Post*'s Ken Ringle also reacted sarcastically to the production. *Titanic*, he wrote, is a "high-tech, low-brain, big-budget" movie. The scenes of Jack and Rose splashing around in twenty-eight-degree water with no signs of hypothermia are hardly believable, he claimed, and Cameron's depiction of lusty, good-time souls in steerage and cruel, sterile passengers in first class constitutes "kindergarten Marxism."<sup>8</sup> In these and other negative reviews, commentators laughed at the corny qualities of the Jack-Rose-Cal triangle and the movie's heavy-handed depictions of heroic passengers in steerage and effete snobs in first class.



Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) leads Rose (Kate Winslet) through the flooded first-class reception area in *Titanic* (1997). A critic complained that the movie shows Jack and Rose splashing around in twenty-eight-degree water with no signs of hypothermia. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

Critics leveled a number of other specific complaints, too. They noticed the appearance of anachronisms, such as when Rose extends her middle finger in defiance of the ship's authorities (a distinctly modern gesture). Some noticed that the story focuses on first- and third-class passengers, giving virtually no attention to the large second-class contingent on the ship. A few wondered why the filmmaker did not build the drama around real-life figures on the *Titanic* rather than the fictional characters of Jack and Rose (the elderly couple hugging each other as the boat is sinking were good candidates, for they presumably represented Isidor Straus, owner of Macy's department store, and his wife).

Others drew attention to scientific investigations of the sunken *Titanic* reported on the Discovery Channel. That program revealed that some scientists believe the ship sank so quickly because of technological flaws in its construction. The ship's builders used metal with impurities in the design of the hull, and the rivets they employed to hold the large metal pieces together popped out when the *Titanic* hit the iceberg. These difficulties, discovered through underwater exploration two and a half miles below the ocean's surface, supposedly gave a real explanation for the *Titanic* disaster. Fifteen hundred passengers and crew died because of shortcomings in the ship's design and materials, said enthusiasts of the television program, not because of factors advanced in the movie.

These critics raise interesting questions, but not one of their complaints represents a serious assault on the integrity of Cameron's film. Even when considered in their totality rather than individually, the criticisms do not reduce the film's essential accomplishment of rendering a thoughtful and memorable perspective of the past.

The fictional Jack and Rose, objects of much derision by critics, serve a brilliant narrative purpose. Their presence facilitates Cameron's effort to study the disaster in far greater scope than would have been possible if he had focused on real figures from history. Using Jack and Rose as the protagonists allows Cameron to take the camera all over the ship—in the first-class dining hall, on the decks, alongside the captain, down in steerage, in the engine room, at the site of contact with the iceberg, and in the flooding staterooms and halls. If Cameron had used actual passengers as the key figures in the story, he would have been limited to showing them in just one section of the great vessel. Furthermore, a drama about the experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Straus would have drawn objections from detail-oriented historians who could claim that little is known about their specific thoughts and actions (and perhaps their descendants would object to depictions that were not sufficiently flattering). Cameron found a way to cover diverse events in the *Titanic* tragedy by placing his fictitious characters at the center of the most important action. Also, by focusing on the personalities of Jack and Rose, he strengthens the audience's emotional attachment to the passengers. Viewers care about the fate of the young lovers after watching their romance grow amidst their ordeals. When Jack dies on a frozen sea, viewers sense the larger tragedy. His passing symbolizes the suffering that many passengers, friends, and relatives experienced in April 1912.

Some of the specific objections to the movie can easily be dismissed. Certainly Cameron is guilty of reading the present into the past when he shows Rose making a late-twentieth-century gesture, but this is only a tiny anachronism. The complaint about Cameron's focus on first- and third-class passengers is technically correct but artistically insignificant. Simplification is inherent in docudrama, and when artists employ it, the strategy usually accents differences, so understandably, the director draws attention to the contrasts between rich and poor. A truly comprehensive movie about the tragedy would introduce us to the second-class group as well, but cinematic history cannot deliver an exhaustive treatment of all major facets.

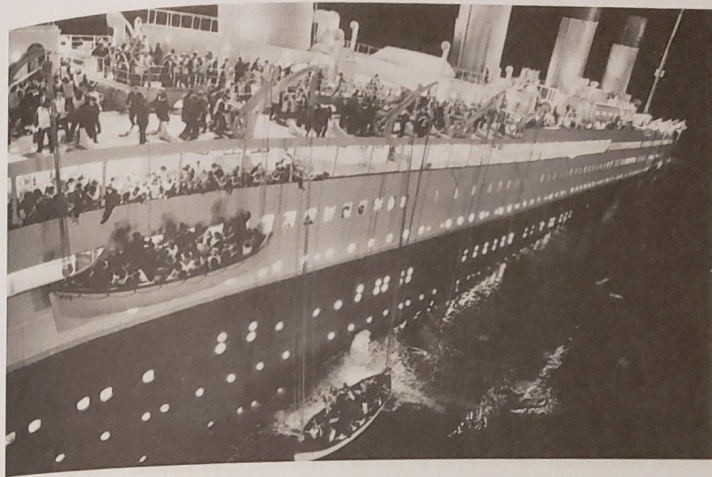
The Discovery Channel's speculation about the effect of popping rivets and impurities in the metal is based on fascinating underwater exploration, but it hardly adds up to a stronger explanation for the tragedy than that provided in Cameron's cinematic drama. *Titanic* manages to present most of the fundamental causes of the great ship's shocking demise. The movie reveals that radio

operators received several reports of icebergs ahead, but the captain and the director of the White Star Line ignored them. The ship reached the highest speed of its journey (twenty-two knots) as it approached the danger zone, and the men posted in the crow's nest lacked binoculars. The *Titanic* should have been equipped with sixty-four lifeboats, but the White Star Line had shaved that number down to sixteen to provide ample deck space for promenading guests (rules at the time did not require a full complement of lifeboats). After the rendezvous with the iceberg, the ship remained afloat only a few hours. During that brief period, the captain failed to sound a general alarm, and many crewmen were inadequately trained to handle an emergency evacuation. When the Americans and British learned about the numerous fatal errors associated with the tragedy, they screamed for reforms, and dramatic changes in regulations followed. New rules required a twenty-four-hour radio watch, adequate lifeboats for all travelers, and evacuation drills. Sea travel became much safer in subsequent decades.<sup>10</sup>

The fact remains that any passenger ship, even a technologically sophisticated one of the twenty-first century, could encounter difficulty if it slammed its starboard side into an iceberg at twenty-two knots, as the *Titanic* did. Cameron's movie, with its attention to the numerous human failures before and after the crash, delivers the essential explanation of why the ship lost more than 1,500 of the 2,223 people on board.

It is true, of course, that Cameron portrays the wealthy characters in the story in a consistently negative way (except for the "unsinkable" Molly Brown, who comes across as a wealthy but down-to-earth figure). Cal Hockley (who inherited a Pittsburgh steel fortune) is the most reprehensible character among the snobs who look down at Jack. One of the most memorable scenes communicating disdain for the life of the idle rich shows Rose observing the way social graces are taught to a young girl. Rose watches as a mother instructs her daughter, who is about ten years old, how to sit upright and spread her napkin in a delicate manner. This image suggests that Rose's life among such people will be boring and essentially empty.

Notions of class are fundamental in the story, and not only for purposes of entertainment. Cameron associates class distinctions with injustice. His portrayal raises some important questions: Why did a much higher percentage of first-class passengers escape on lifeboats than did passengers from steerage? Did economic and cultural prejudice affect life-and-death decisions in the moment of crisis? Statistical evidence, which the movie cannot convey, is certainly disturbing. Sixty percent of the first-class passengers escaped on lifeboats while only 25 percent of steerage passengers did. The evidence is more dramatic for women. Virtually all the first-class women who wanted to enter the



*Lifeboats descend as the great ship goes down in Titanic (1997). Director James Cameron's interpretation suggests that because of class discrimination, far more first-class passengers escaped than did passengers in steerage. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

lifeboats got away on them; 94 percent of these passengers escaped. Even though a call went out to seat "women and children first," only 31 percent of third-class women escaped on the boats. Why the difference?<sup>11</sup> Did crewmen restrain steerage-class passengers from leaving their quarters during the first ninety minutes of the crisis when the lifeboats were filling, as the movie suggests? Were third-class passengers, who slept in the lower decks of the stern, too far away to hear warnings about the crisis? Were the poor immigrants who insisted on carrying their possessions with them slowed down in their attempt to escape? Was it because the number of passengers in third class was more than double that in first class? We cannot be certain of the answer, but Cameron makes a useful contribution to our thinking about these questions by elevating the issue of class to a prominent place in his story. He gives the subject much more attention than do the authors of major books on the *Titanic* (many of whom seem preoccupied with reports of the altruistic behavior of the rich and famous passengers). Cameron makes the class question even more central than it was in the classic 1958 movie about the event, *A Night to Remember*.

We can only speculate about the source of this concern about class. Perhaps the movie's sympathy for the poor can be attributed to the writer-director's personal experiences. Before Cameron struck gold as a filmmaker, he had completed only two years of college and worked for a while as a truck driver. He was familiar with want and struggle. We can also connect the movie's contrast

between vacuous millionaires and wholesome commoners to Hollywood's formulaic approach to storytelling. As noted in the discussion about genre, American cinema often shows common people outwitting the rich and powerful. Audiences—which, after all, are mostly not so rich and famous—enjoy watching these victories. Whatever the cause, Cameron deserves applause for drawing our attention to the Edwardian society that was afloat at sea, a culture that kept the classes much more separated than in our time and that evidently favored privilege in a moment of crisis.

The movie offers another achievement, one often missed in the reviews. It speculates intelligently on the emotions demonstrated by one of the principal figures in the tragedy, Captain Edward J. Smith (Bernard Hill). Extant records of the events suggest that Captain Smith was not particularly aggressive in his initial response to the crisis. From the fragmentary evidence available, it appears that at first he was hesitant and uncertain. The movie suggests that the captain became emotionally paralyzed at a time when quick and intelligent decision making was crucial. Had he sounded the alarm to abandon ship swiftly, perhaps fewer lifeboats would have left without a full complement of passengers. In an interview on the History Channel, Cameron explained the reasoning behind this depiction. He imagined that Captain Smith was briefly in a state of shock. Once Smith learned that a rescue ship could not arrive at the *Titanic's* location until after it sank, he knew he was a doomed man. Not only would he go down with his vessel in the tradition of a sea captain, but his reputation would be tarnished in the aftermath of the tragedy. He would be considered responsible for the deaths of hundreds of passengers and the crew in his charge. Cameron speculated that these thoughts could have affected the captain's performance in the crisis. Smith may have sensed that he was about to die ignominiously, and that realization temporarily froze him.

Through this speculation about the emotional impact of the event, Cameron exhibits one of cinematic history's greatest attributes: its potential to explore the psychological dimensions of an experience. In this respect, *Titanic* delivers an emotional punch that is frequently absent in books on the 1912 event. Cameron's *Titanic* attempts to put audiences in touch with the captain's inner feelings. His interpretation involves conjecture, to be sure, but his guesswork is informed and intelligent. *Titanic* presents a credible character that may resemble the real figure in history.

There is, of course, a broader achievement that makes *Titanic* a memorable historical film. Cameron's movie communicates a sense of what some historians call "the pastness of the past." It transports audiences to another era and, with careful attention to detail, gives them a sense that they are witnesses to the tragic journey. Cameron bombards viewers with genuine-looking images from

the past—from vintage clothing to silver ashtrays of the White Star Line and 18,000 square feet of authentic-looking carpet. When Cameron produces high-tech wizardry to show the ship's demise in the final hour, his use of cinematic bells and whistles does not simply offer gratuitous entertainment (as do many other disaster stories from Hollywood). The technical tricks effectively communicate a picture of an extraordinary calamity. *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin summed up the achievement succinctly when she wrote, "Astounding technological advances are at work here, but only in the service of one spectacular illusion: that the ship is afloat again, and that the audience is ultimately involved in its voyage."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, it is easy to become sidetracked in a consideration of *Titanic's* treatment of history. A critic can readily bemoan the inordinate time devoted to the actions of fictitious heroes and villains such as Jack, Rose, and Cal or complain about anachronisms, groups left out of the story, or scientific discoveries that Cameron failed to mention. Such concerns deserve consideration, but even when added together, they do not detract from the film's fundamental contribution to cinematic history. *Titanic* is "true" in many important respects. It effectively identifies many of the most important factors that explain the disaster at sea. It raises significant questions about the confining role of upper-class women in Edwardian society and offers a provocative criticism of class-mindedness in that period. The film also presents its story on a marvelous set that glitters with detail. On many counts, *Titanic* delivers a thoughtful perspective on the past.

#### THE REVOLT AGAINST AMISTAD

When do the problems with historical treatment weigh too heavily, harming a movie's credibility? How can accumulated questions about a movie's presentation of history undermine a film's reputation for delivering thoughtful perspectives? The troubled films under consideration here (*Amistad*, *Mississippi Burning*, and *The Hurricane*) did not become targets of attack in the mass media because the filmmakers made small mistakes with the facts. They did not lose credibility simply because the directors used the wrong dates, costumes, language, or other details. Nor did these movies come under heavy fire for failing to present the past through compelling drama. In fact, each film received considerable praise in the media for delivering powerful, emotionally riveting entertainment. The problems concerned excesses in artistic license. In these cases, the producers, directors, and writers manipulated so many elements for dramatic effect that they undermined the overall truthfulness of their historical interpretations.

Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* exemplifies a number of these difficulties. His 1997 production follows the story of fifty-three Africans who were taken from Sierra Leone in 1839 and sold to slave traders. Led by a twenty-five-year-old figure called Cinque by the Spaniards, the Africans manage to stage a revolt while their slave ship is off the coast of Cuba. The rebels order their former captors to return them to Africa, but the Spaniards deceive the Africans and manage to steer the ship toward the northwest at nighttime. Eventually the U.S. Navy takes control of the ship off Long Island Sound, and a long legal struggle to win the Africans' freedom begins. Many individuals played important roles in that effort, but Spielberg's movie gives particular attention to three historic figures: Roger Sherman Baldwin, a distinguished New Haven attorney who organized the court battles on behalf of the Africans; Lewis Tappan, a devoted abolitionist who raised money for the court appeals; and John Quincy Adams, the former president and then congressman, who presented a successful case on the Africans' behalf to the U.S. Supreme Court.

*Amistad* features some impressive dramatic moments. Most gripping are scenes of the rebellion and the slave trade. The opening sequence shows Cinque managing to break from his chains, free the other captives, and seize control of the ship. Later, in a flashback, *Amistad* shows the crew dumping some slaves into the ocean. No Hollywood film before *Amistad* displayed African mutiny or the Middle Passage more realistically. But these scenes occupy only a few minutes of a two-and-a-half-hour film. Most of the time, *Amistad* concentrates on the legal maneuverings in New England, and it came under sharp criticism for this depiction.

No single gaffe or manipulation dealt a telling blow against *Amistad*. Rather, there was an accumulation of complaints about the movie's handling of history. An abundance of small difficulties added up to a vote of no confidence from various historians and media critics, despite the film's commendable attention to an important subject from antebellum U.S. history.

Some of the criticisms pertained to minor details. Scholars pointed out, for example, that men did not wear beards and mustaches in the United States in the early 1840s; such flourishes did not become fashionable until the time of Lincoln's presidency. Historians noted, too, that there could not have been snow falling on Long Island (as the movie shows) when U.S. naval forces seized the *Amistad*. The movie's fictitious character Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman) secures a sailor who can help translate the Africans' Mende language; in reality, Josiah Gibbs handled that task, and he was a talented linguist, not the bumbling fool characterized in the movie. John Quincy Adams was not as committed an abolitionist as the movie suggests when he received the assignment to defend the *Amistad* captives, and his speech before the

Supreme Court ran eight hours over two days; the movie gives the appearance of a much more succinct presentation. Roger Sherman Baldwin was forty-six years old and a respected attorney when he defended the Africans, but the movie casts handsome Matthew McConaughey as Baldwin, a much younger figure. In the film, Cinque assists John Quincy Adams in creating a legal defense, a situation that never occurred. Cinque was not in Washington, D.C., at the time of the Supreme Court hearing, and only seven of nine justices were present during the Court's deliberations, not the full complement shown in the film.<sup>13</sup>

These and other complaints do not, even collectively, destroy the movie's value as a portrayal of history. Although the presence of beards and mustaches suggests a failure of the filmmakers to do their homework about the social customs of the era, other "errors" committed by the director and his staff can be defended. For instance, cinematic history almost always reduces long speeches to a few essential ideas, and Spielberg's decision to cast young, sexy Matthew McConaughey as Roger Sherman Baldwin is understandable in view of the actor's appeal to female audiences.

A second, more significant bombardment of criticism relates to the characterizations of specific historical personalities. Baldwin, a scholarly and distinguished Yale graduate who later became governor of Connecticut, was hardly the "dung-scrapping" real estate lawyer portrayed in *Amistad*. The movie shows him needing to be convinced to work for the Africans' freedom, but in fact, the real Baldwin was already a strong crusader for the antislavery cause. Lewis Tappan, another dedicated abolitionist, was chief fund-raiser for the legal appeals and certainly did not want the Africans to die as martyrs so that they could contribute to the antislavery cause, as the movie suggests. Tappan was head of the newly formed American Anti-Slavery Society, and he led major petition drives against slavery. He was so committed to the abolitionist cause that he did not even go home to visit his dying daughter while he was working on the *Amistad* case.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, scholars criticized the appearance of the fictional African-American character Theodore Joadson. Historian Eric McKittrick pointed out that in the 1840s an African American would not have been accorded the influence and respect evident in the white characters' treatment of the fictional Joadson.<sup>15</sup> Another historian, Richard S. Newman, criticized the depiction differently.<sup>16</sup> He applauded Spielberg's effort to feature a black abolitionist in the story, but he counseled incorporation of a real-life black figure instead of an invented one. Some prominent blacks were involved in abolitionist affairs at the time, wrote Newman, including James Pennington, Robert Purvis, and James Forten.

Other historians objected to *Amistad*'s simple-minded portrayal of the abolitionist group. The movie showed the abolitionists waving crosses, looking like religious zealots, and scholars complained that this depiction suggested that the reformers were fanatics. That kind of negative assessment of antislavery activists reflects an old, conservative viewpoint that has been strongly challenged in modern scholarship. The new research, they stressed, views abolitionists of the 1840s as bold crusaders for freedom who showed the courage to challenge slavery in a political environment that was very protective of the South's interests.

Eric Foner, a prominent interpreter of nineteenth-century U.S. history, drew critical attention to the way *Amistad* was being promoted. In an influential article published in the *New York Times* op-ed section, Foner complained that publicists sent out thousands of study guides to the nation's schools recommending that students discuss the Joadson character in a study exercise. Foner questioned the value of having students study a fictional character. He also objected to the way Debbie Allen, producer of *Amistad*, enthusiastically advertised the movie's contribution to learning. In statements to the media, Allen suggested that historians had overlooked this story in their research and teaching. She claimed to have rescued the *Amistad* case from the dustbin of history. She also boldly claimed that the Africans' victory in the U.S. Supreme Court had had a tremendous impact on American society, putting the United States on the road to emancipation. Foner dismissed these claims as misleading hype. He observed that professional historians had given considerable attention to the *Amistad* case, and they certainly could not be accused of neglecting slavery. Allen was wrong, too, in arguing that the Supreme Court's decision in this case dramatically changed the status of African Americans. The *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, coming more than a decade later and involving some of the same Supreme Court justices, set back African Americans' progress substantially. The Africans from the *Amistad* won their freedom on technicalities concerning the slave trade, not on a general commitment to principles of freedom, said Foner. He concluded that *Amistad* "erases the distinction between fact and fiction" and claimed that "the film is by no means a work of history, and it is certainly not appropriate for use in the classroom."<sup>17</sup>

Many historians, like Foner, concluded that publicity for the movie expressed unwarranted exuberance. Scholars became suspicious of Spielberg's claim that he had enlisted accomplished historians as advisers, including Louis Henry Gates, Jr., John Hope Franklin, Howard Jones, Rebecca Scott, Clifton Johnson, and Arthur Abraham. Historians suspected that these distinguished names were being cited to help legitimize the project. Evidently, the scholars had little input in the crucial creative stages of film development, production, and promotion. Historians' suspicions seemed confirmed when two of the



In *Amistad* (1997), lawyer Roger Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey) turns to his clients in an effort to show that the Africans were not born into slavery. A historian complained that the movie suggests that Baldwin—in real life, a middle-aged man and a committed abolitionist—was a young, “ambulance-chasing, fee-hungry attorney.” (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

advisers, Johnson and Abraham, objected to the movie's depictions and complained publicly that Spielberg had not taken their recommendations seriously. Clifton Johnson, executive director emeritus of the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, strongly criticized the movie after its release. Contrary to Spielberg's interpretation, said Johnson, Lewis Tappan had done more to win the case than John Quincy Adams had. “Other characters in the story are misrepresented in the film,” too, he wrote, “but none more than Lewis Tappan and Roger Sherman Baldwin. The first is made to appear as a hypocrite and the former as an ambulance-chasing, fee-hungry attorney.”<sup>18</sup> Arthur Abraham, former chairman of African Studies at the University of Sierra Leone, directed his fire at the movie's depiction of African society. Abraham charged that African culture was “badly represented in the movie” because the story “follows the picture given by European imperialists at the end of the nineteenth century to justify the colonial takeover.”<sup>19</sup>

The historians' judgment of *Amistad* was not universally critical. Some acknowledged problems with the interpretation but counseled appreciation of the movie's overall achievements. “At moments the drama is brilliant, sophisticated, and moving,” wrote Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of a number of

important books on pre-Civil War America, including a biography of abolitionist Lewis Tappan. "All in all," he said, "*Amistad* warrants praise for its attempt to make real a key moment on the road to war and eventual emancipation. No American, white or black, should miss it."<sup>20</sup> Howard Jones, author of a respected historical study of the slaves' case, *Mutiny on the Amistad*, also gave a generally positive assessment.<sup>21</sup> Jones had visited the set during the filming of the mutiny and had conferred with Spielberg. He was impressed with the director's effort to dramatize history and urged open-mindedness in judging the film's portrayal of the past. Most important, he said, *Amistad* was likely to excite the viewers' interest in learning more about history. Spielberg was reaching citizens in ways that university historians often failed to do, he argued. "Too many academics focus on satisfying fellow academics, boring the general public," said Jones. He praised Spielberg for "revealing the essential truths of a compelling story that will convince many viewers that history is interesting."<sup>22</sup>

How can we weigh these conflicting assessments of *Amistad*'s treatment of history? Which complaints represent powerful indictments of the movie, which pertain to defensible exercises in artistic license?

Certainly some of the moviemaker's alterations of the historical record are troublesome. The portrayal of Lewis Tappan as an abolitionist who would sacrifice the slaves as martyrs is disturbing. Also irksome are the publicists' efforts to encourage the nation's schoolteachers to lead students in discussions about *Amistad*'s fictional character Theodore Joadson.

Many other manipulations are understandable examples of artistic excess—liberties taken to advance the drama. Standing alone, the characterization of Roger Baldwin Sherman is forgivable. After all, one of the dramatic conventions of cinematic history is to show the evolution of a central figure's personality. It is much more interesting to watch Baldwin learning to appreciate the wisdom of the abolitionist cause than to see him as a fully formed antislavery crusader in his first appearance on the screen. Many cinematic histories portray the maturation of one of the protagonists. We can also understand why Debbie Allen and her publicists built up the *Amistad* case as a more important chapter of history than it actually was. When Hollywood invests millions of dollars in a production about the past, its spokespersons are likely to accentuate the significance of their subject and suggest that they alone were instrumental in bringing the story to light. The manner in which this was handled, however, badly hurt the movie's standing with history professionals. Allen's claim that scholars had overlooked the topic was wrong, unnecessarily provocative, and insulting.

Positive observations about *Amistad*'s handling of history were largely drowned out by the critical remarks. An accumulation of specific objections

about historical details began to harm the movie's reputation. By the time Academy Award nominations were being collected in early 1998, the buzz in Hollywood had turned against the movie. Many people in the nation's film community were aware that Spielberg's film was the target of a good deal of complaining because of its rendition of history. As a somewhat tainted motion picture, *Amistad* did not look like a good candidate for Best Picture. The well-publicized negative feedback showed that there was a price to pay for provoking controversies about historical representation. Of course, *Titanic* swept the awards that year, and even if *Amistad* had been acclaimed by historians and media critics, it would have been up against very tough competition.

*Amistad* got into trouble because of many small distortions rather than one or two particularly outrageous ones. Standing alone, no single objection to the movie's historical depictions could have harmed its fortunes. It was the accumulation of many objections to the film's historical details that wrecked confidence in the movie's storytelling. Surveying the extensive record of protests against *Amistad*'s portrayals, one senses that the critics felt somewhat like Thomas Jefferson when he identified the colonists' reasons for revolting against the mother country. In the Declaration of Independence, the founding father wrote that no single act of British leadership created a cause for rebellion, but when many complaints added up, there seemed good reason to take action.

Why would Steven Spielberg, a respected director who had created a brilliant historical film, *Schindler's List*, just a few years before, allow *Amistad* to perform so sloppily in its treatment of history? Evidently, Spielberg was unable to give this project as much scrutiny as he would have liked. During *Amistad*'s development, he was busy inaugurating a new Hollywood studio (DreamWorks) with his two media buddies, David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg. Also, by the time Spielberg was ready to edit *Amistad*, he was on location in England, filming scenes for another important history-oriented film, *Saving Private Ryan*. Under the circumstances, Spielberg could not deliver his best, and the difficulties were manifest in the production. Not only did *Amistad* fail to offer engaging entertainment in its talky presentation of the abolitionists' legal struggles; the movie also fudged the historical record to a degree that stirred a bees' nest of angry critics.

These failures are unfortunate, for there is much of value in *Amistad*. As Natalie Zemon Davis observes in her book *Slaves on Screen*, the film presents Hollywood's most memorable view of the slave trade. It surpasses many other Hollywood films in its treatment of slavery because it does not portray the Africans only as victims. *Amistad* shows the captives as agents in their own affairs; they help shape their experiences by taking bold action, risking their lives in a bloody rebellion. When he is brought to the United States, the energetic



In *Amistad* (1997), Cinque (Djimon Hounsou, center) and his fellow captives are charged with piracy and murder after a rebellion on a slave ship. Steven Spielberg's movie gives sensitive attention to both the Africans' cultural distinctiveness and their diversity. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

Cinque presses his case for freedom to anyone who will listen. "Give us free!" he shouts in a memorable scene.<sup>23</sup> Spielberg also demonstrates greater appreciation of the Africans' cultural diversity than other filmmakers have shown. *Amistad* reminds audiences that Africans came from a variety of regions and cultures. The movie shows the captives arguing with one another, their loyalties divided along tribal lines with origins in far-off places. Spielberg also gives the film an appealing touch of authenticity by having the movie's African-born actors speak in native dialect, much as they would have sounded to real nineteenth-century abolitionists. Spielberg also manages to introduce audiences to some of the major political issues of the 1840s, such as the complexity of the slavery law and John Quincy Adams's role in raising questions about the "peculiar institution" in Congress. Also, *Amistad* features terrific acting performances, not only from well-known British veteran Anthony Hopkins (playing Adams) but also from new discovery Djimon Hounsou, a native of Benin, Africa, who was brilliant as Cinque, the captive rice farmer turned rebel.

The chorus of criticism needs to be tempered, too, by recognition that the movie's subject was difficult to tackle; it was not the kind of material that attracts the interest of most creative talent or studio executives in Hollywood. Banking the future of a new movie studio on a story about a rather obscure

event from nineteenth-century American history was a bold move (*Amistad* was the first movie DreamWorks released). Historical dramas are generally risky investments. They do not represent excellent box office gambles, and they are not ideal first projects for a fledgling studio. Spielberg could have made DreamWorks' first venture resemble the other blockbusters on his resume: stories about a rabid shark, a courageous anthropologist named Indiana Jones, a lovable extraterrestrial, or a frightening group of Jurassic reptiles. A director who sometimes feels compelled to make meaningful and more risky films (such as *The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List*, and *Amistad*) deserves admiration.<sup>24</sup>

*Amistad* was not the financial success its promoters hoped it would be. The media offered much conjecture about the reasons for the movie's modest appeal. Some said that American society was too prejudiced to care about a story that focused on black heroes. Others maintained that Spielberg should have included different scenes in the movie or different characters. Numerous points of advice emerged from would-be filmmakers.

The roots of *Amistad*'s box office failure relate in large part to dramatic structure rather than to these other factors. At first glance, *Amistad* seems like a workable story for treatment on the big screen. It involves terrible oppression, a violent fight for liberation, and a tremendous courtroom struggle to secure freedom for the victims—in brief summary, a good design for successful entertainment. But a closer look at the details undermines confidence in the story's entertainment value. After the first minutes depicting the frightening mutiny, the drama must settle down and deal with treaties, laws, political negotiations, rights, speeches, and related matters. These are the elements of good historical interpretation through lecturing and writing, but they do not constitute attractive building blocks for a compelling cinematic drama. Most of the action occurs near the beginning of the film; it then turns into a largely talk-oriented story. Furthermore, *Amistad* lacks the focus of a movie such as *Schindler's List*, which fixes attention tightly on a hero (Oskar Schindler) and a villain (the Nazi Amon Goeth). *Amistad*'s script lacks a principal villain, and it features a large cast of diverse characters who play important roles in the movie's historical portrayals. There are three main protagonists—Cinque, Baldwin, and Adams—and the audience is not introduced to two of them until well into the story. In addition, there are numerous other figures that viewers need to learn something about to understand the historical developments: President Martin Van Buren; Princess Isabella II; the interpreter who communicates with the Africans; the abolitionists, including Lewis Tappan and the fictitious Theodore Joadson; and various judges. In short, *Amistad* attempts to deal with a complex historical record, and it does not conform nicely to practices of the cinematic genre. Its story is a scriptwriter's nightmare.

Like many examples of cinematic history that have come under assault for their treatments of history, *Amistad* is certainly not an unmitigated disaster. The film raises important questions about past injustices, addresses a number of complex historical issues, and, in some places, delivers powerful and memorable screen drama. Assessing its shortcomings should not be an occasion for partisan glee over Hollywood's familiar failure to set the historical record straight. Rather, such assessment ought to inspire a more reflective consideration of the movie's achievements, the opportunities it missed, and the reasons for its serious difficulties.<sup>25</sup>

Three conclusions are particularly salient. First, there are limits to artistic license. Manipulation of evidence and fictionalization are inherent in cinematic history, but these artistic adjustments can get filmmakers in trouble if they are exercised too liberally. In the case of *Amistad*, problems with small details added up noticeably. Second, it is not only historians who must be aware of the importance of generic practices. Filmmakers, too, need to be cognizant of the value of good dramatic structure for bringing history to the screen. In this case, an acclaimed director and his skilled screenwriter (David Franzoni) attempted to render a rather complex portrait of the past. By trying to cover too many facets of history briefly and presenting abundant characterizations superficially, they became easy targets for media critics and academic historians. Finally, the director, producer, and publicists promised too much in advertising their production. They claimed to have unearthed an important story neglected by history professionals, made unsubstantiated comments about the drama's significance, and quickly sent 18,000 copies of a companion study guide to teachers and students without vetting the publication. These provocations could have been remedied through the involvement of one or two knowing scholars from the early stages of story development through the final efforts to publicize the movie.

#### FIERY REACTIONS TO MISSISSIPPI BURNING

*Mississippi Burning* also ran into some serious trouble regarding its depiction of history, despite notable achievements in dramatizing recent American history. The movie, directed by Alan Parker, deals with the search to find the men who murdered three young civil rights campaigners in Mississippi in 1964. The story begins with scenes of the criminal actions of Ku Klux Klan members, accompanied by a local deputy sheriff. Two FBI agents lead the hunt for the culprits: Alan Ward (Willem Dafoe), a Harvard-educated liberal who plans to follow the Bureau's law enforcement procedures, and Rupert Anderson (Gene Hackman), a Mississippian who realizes that formal approaches will

not succeed in the tough Deep South environment. Anderson wants to fight the Ku Klux Klan with threats and intimidation, and Ward eventually recognizes that legal approaches will not be effective in bringing the murderers to justice. He lets Anderson shake down some redneck bullies, which helps crack the case.

Much of the action in the first half of the movie is authentic looking and dramatically powerful. The scenes at the beginning of the film showing the Klan closing in on three young men on a lonely country road demonstrate the terror that civil rights campaigners could experience in Mississippi during the tense summer of 1964. With attention to many historical details, Parker's film then follows the efforts of the U.S. government to challenge racial practices in the state and check the violent resistance to integration. Much like the actual developments during Mississippi's Freedom Summer, in the drama, President Lyndon B. Johnson sends U.S. Navy men to the area to search for the bodies, and a Choctaw Indian gives the agents information that leads to the discovery of the murder victims' car. In the same manner that real FBI agents searched for the murderers, Ward and Anderson place a bag over the head of a black youngster to conceal his identity and drive him through the streets of Philadelphia, Mississippi, hoping that he can point out suspects. The drama also reveals that television newsmen received physical threats from local citizens when they tried to cover the story for the national networks. The movie's title also reflects historical conditions. FBI agents used the code word MI-BURN for their operation, short for "Mississippi burning." In these examples and in many other small details in the first half of the picture, Parker's movie offers a rather faithful depiction of historical conditions during the summer of 1964, a time when threats of violence seemed omnipresent in some areas of Mississippi.<sup>26</sup>

*Mississippi Burning's* second hour veers so far from historical events, however, that it came under attack for fabricating the past and badly misleading viewers regarding the lessons to be drawn from the historical events. Most of the story in the second half is sheer fantasy, inspired by scriptwriter Chris Gerolmo's enthusiasm for the 1962 movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (he liked the tale about a peaceful man who learns that violence is necessary in a confrontation with a violent criminal).<sup>27</sup> In the real events in Mississippi, FBI agents did not take their gloves off and combat KKK intimidation with their own form of physical threats. In fact, the FBI broke the case by offering \$30,000 to informants. The Bureau certainly did not use an African-American agent to shake down one of the Mississippi bigots, as the movie shows. Indeed, critics complained about the movie's overall image of a determined FBI leading the fight against racial injustice in Mississippi. They pointed out that FBI



Rupert Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Alan Ward (Willem Dafoe), a tough-minded southerner and a northern liberal, investigate the murder of three civil rights workers in *Mississippi Burning* (1988). In the first half of the movie, director Alan Parker portrays the story with sensitivity, but the second half sends a false message about the work of the FBI agents involved in the case and the role of violence in undermining racial oppression in the South during the 1960s. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

director J. Edgar Hoover was not sympathetic toward civil rights campaigns and had been harassing Martin Luther King, Jr. Nor did Hoover create opportunities for blacks to become FBI agents. Critics observed that black civil rights campaigners and their white allies who had come to the South that summer from northern universities were far more significant than the FBI in challenging Mississippi's segregationists, yet those figures got almost no coverage in the movie. *Mississippi Burning* gives the FBI agents, represented by Ward and Anderson, sole credit for the progress against racism.<sup>28</sup>

Critics pointed out, too, that the movie sends the wrong message about the importance of the news media in bringing change to the Deep South. *Mississippi Burning* suggests that journalism and public opinion had little influence on the events of 1964. Toward the end of the story, for instance, Anderson concludes that the FBI's efforts to find the killers had been frustrated because the search "turned into a show for the newsmen." The record of that volatile period reveals, however, that extensive media coverage of white atrocities and intimidation contributed significantly to the national political victories for racial

justice in the South. The "show for the newsmen" in Mississippi and elsewhere was critical in giving the civil rights struggle leverage in Washington, D.C.

Like *Amistad*, *Mississippi Burning* ran into difficulty when the time came for members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to select the best picture. *Mississippi Burning* received one of the five nominations, but it did not win the prize. During the period of decision making, the movie appeared to have little chance for victory, not only because of limitations in dramatic quality but also because of criticism regarding its depiction of history. *Mississippi Burning* seemed tainted. Well-publicized complaints about the film's distortions undermined its competitiveness for the top award.

Were the critics fair in lambasting the movie? Did they take into account the complications associated with portraying the past in dramatic form? Should they have been more forgiving in their assessment of the film's depiction of historical conditions and events?

In one respect, especially, the producer had a valid response to the complaints. Fred Zollo acknowledged that his movie did not draw attention to the role of southern African Americans and northern white civil rights campaigners in bringing change to the South. He argued, however, that he never intended to suggest that the FBI deserved all the credit for the fight against Klan violence in Mississippi. The movie portrayed only one aspect of the historic situation in 1964, said Zollo, and a significant one at that. After all, FBI investigators did succeed in identifying those responsible for the slayings.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the generic practices of Hollywood-style filmmaking, Zollo's remarks make sense. His film could not provide a truly comprehensive view of the struggle against segregation in the Deep South. *Mississippi Burning* said little about the brave and important struggle of blacks in the campaigns, but that omission did not, in itself, suggest a racially insensitive view of events (as some critics charged). Zollo and his associates would have had an unwieldy script on their hands if they had attempted to tell the story of the black civil rights struggle, along with the story about the FBI investigation. The movie-makers needed to concentrate on one aspect of the complex story and make that element central in their drama. As Zollo maintained, the FBI tale was one story about the events, but not the only one. The appearance of this movie did not preclude production of another film that gave attention to the important work of African Americans in the fight against segregation. Other filmmakers were free to approach the events of 1964 with a different perspective.

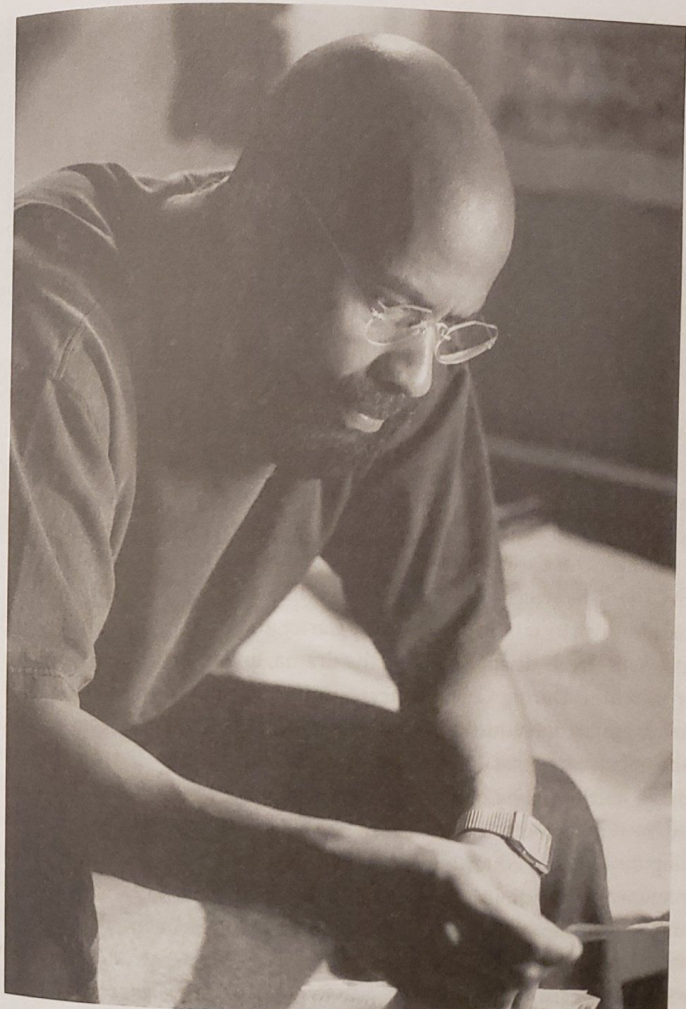
Nevertheless, by grossly distorting the record of FBI activities and communicating broad lessons about the historical events that clashed with the lessons historians drew from them, *Mississippi Burning* deserved the flack it received from critics. The movie sends a false message about the work of FBI agents in

Mississippi, communicates a misleading interpretation of the way the agents caught the culprits, and delivers a false lesson about the role of violence in bringing change to the South in the 1960s. The second half of *Mississippi Burning* ventures so deeply into fantasy and moves so far from historical fact that the film rightly came under attack for abusing the public's trust. Artistic license found excessive expression in this production, creating serious flaws in a drama that had the potential to serve as a powerful and memorable example of cinematic history.<sup>30</sup>

### STORM OVER THE HURRICANE

*The Hurricane* represents another example of history from Hollywood that dramatizes the past in some impressive ways but has difficulty with historical interpretation. Norman Jewison's 1999 movie features a powerful performance by Denzel Washington as the imprisoned boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. Jewison's engaging story seemed, at first, to be a strong candidate for major recognition at the Academy Awards ceremonies. Some thought that it might take the prize for Best Picture and also earn the Best Actor award for Washington. Then came an outburst of critical observations in the media regarding the movie's treatment of factual details from Carter's life. By the time nominations were mailed to Academy members in early 2000, the movie's reputation was too damaged to win a Best Picture nomination. Washington was nominated for Best Actor, but he lost to Kevin Spacey in that competition. Some commentators in the media speculated that controversy over the movie's truthfulness could have undermined Washington's chances, as well as the movie's prospects. Troubled by public carping over the movie's handling of facts, a frustrated Rubin Carter lashed out at the critics. When interviewed by the History Channel, he insisted that *The Hurricane* was largely true. The complainers, he protested, were obsessed with small, generally insignificant details.

Like *Amistad* and *Mississippi Burning*, *The Hurricane* has some marvelous dramatic moments. The film's most memorable scenes relate to Carter's eighteen years in prison. An especially emotion-packed example of his struggle behind bars occurs early in his incarceration. Proud and defiant, Carter refuses to follow the prison rules, and his rebelliousness earns him several days in dark, cramped, dungeon-like confinement. *The Hurricane* shows Carter at war with himself during these terrible days as he switches frequently between defiance and submission. Director Jewison and actor Washington pull off an extraordinary artistic coup in this segment. The scenes aim to enact Carter's thoughts and emotions, revealing the anger and frustration of a man confronting a tremendous test of will. Carter's emotional interior seems to become visible on

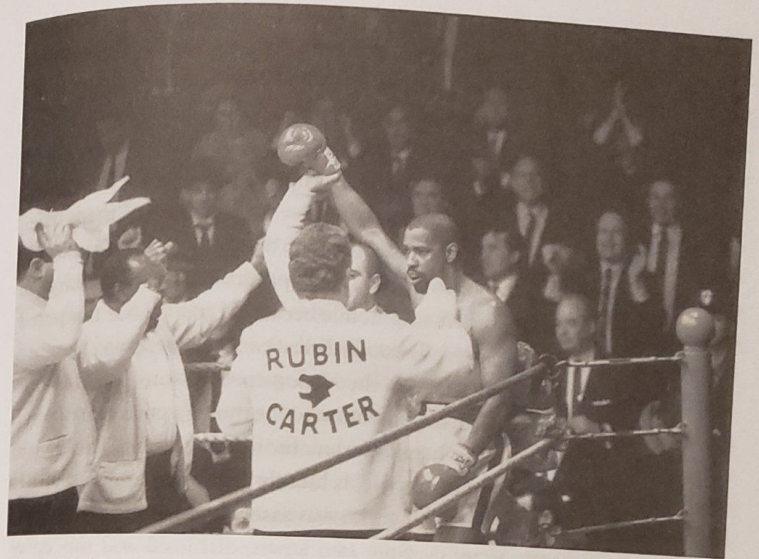


In *The Hurricane* (1999), promising boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter (Denzel Washington) has his dreams destroyed when he is sentenced to serve three life terms for a murder he did not commit. Washington received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor for his impressive portrayal of Carter's long personal struggle. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

the screen. In time, the prisoner learns to live with his ordeal and projects a kind of dignity. Carter accepts few of the amenities offered to inmates, lives austere, and claims that he enjoys a form of freedom within his imprisonment. Years pass, and Carter remains surprisingly in control of his sanity and dignity. Toward the end of the story, however, he breaks briefly in a tense scene when he is informed of delays associated with his legal defense. Carter pounds the window separating him from the prison visitors and in a cracking but angry voice demands that his supporters act swiftly. At this point in the drama, the hero appears ready to consider suicide if his struggle cannot soon be brought to a successful conclusion.<sup>31</sup>

*The Hurricane* offers tremendous breadth in its coverage of Rubin Carter's life. Through flashbacks, the movie traces Carter's trouble with the law. It shows him stealing clothing from a sidewalk display and reveals that he came under police investigation as a youngster when he was accused of cutting a man during a robbery. Most important, it portrays events associated with his arrest in 1967. When several white patrons are murdered in a New Jersey bar, the police pick up Carter and John Artis, a young admirer who is riding in a car with Carter. The evidence against the two is flimsy, but a racist cop manages to persuade two petty criminals to identify Carter and Artis as the culprits. At this point, Artis largely disappears from the drama, and Carter begins his lengthy stay in prison. During Carter's incarceration, various sympathizers protest publicly against the injustices he has suffered. Bob Dylan releases an album with a popular song that draws attention to Carter's tragedy. Eventually, a black teenager obtains a copy of Carter's autobiography, *The Sixteenth Round*. Excited by what he reads, the boy enlists the help of the people who have been caring for him and educating him—two men and a woman who live in a commune-style relationship. These four sympathizers meet with Carter in prison and declare their determination to help him win his freedom. They work diligently, gathering information about Carter's case and assisting his lawyers in preparing an appeal. Their efforts finally prove successful. A judge reviews evidence of serious misconduct on the part of the police and prosecutors who secured Carter's conviction many years before. The former boxer wins his freedom, and at the end the movie, the audience sees brief news footage of the real Rubin Carter in a moment of triumph.

Three articles among the many published criticisms of *The Hurricane* were especially damaging to the film's reputation. Selwyn Raab, whose investigative reporting years before had helped raise questions about the case, objected vigorously to the movie in an article published in the *New York Times*. Lewis M. Steel, one of the lawyers who had worked long and hard to win Carter's release, objected to the film's handling of facts in an essay published in the *Nation*. Also



Denzel Washington as boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter in *The Hurricane* (1999). An article in *Sports Illustrated* challenged the movie's interpretation of Carter's success in the ring. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)

damaging was a biting criticism of the movie's treatment of Carter's boxing experience. An article in *Sports Illustrated* claimed that *The Hurricane* lied in its portrayal of one of Rubin Carter's most important prizefights.

Raab complained that the movie gave inordinate credit to the Canadians for discovering evidence that freed Carter, overlooking the important role of several lawyers who worked diligently for a decade on the case without payment. Raab pointed out that the attorneys were much more vital in Carter's legal victory than the Canadians were. Carter's codefendant John Artis was an important figure in the case, Raab wrote, yet Artis practically vanishes from the drama once the two accused men are sentenced to prison. Raab observed that Artis was a more defensible hero than Carter was. Artis rejected offers to avoid a long prison sentence by falsely incriminating Carter, and many sympathizers were drawn to Artis's case because of his unblemished reputation and lack of a police record. Furthermore, argued Raab, *The Hurricane* makes too great an effort to portray Carter as a wronged man, failing to introduce evidence that hurt Carter's initial appeals in court. The real Rubin Carter was not a "model citizen" who easily "overcame persecution as a juvenile and remade himself as a boxer and civil rights advocate," said Raab. Carter had a long history of trouble with the law and had spent four years in prison for his

involvement in three muggings before he was charged with murder. This sorry record damaged Carter's position in the murder case. *The Hurricane* also disregards troublesome facts that the police used against Carter, such as the discovery of a shotgun in his car on the night of the murders. Raab also claimed that some of the movie's depictions were simply "fairy tales." One is an invented incident showing the Canadian sleuths uncovering a secret diary kept by a police investigator. This supposedly forged document (an invention of the movie-makers) is intended to present incontestable proof that Carter's car was not the getaway vehicle. Another troublesome invention appears in a scene showing the Canadians losing control of their automobile because someone has tampered with it—a grievous example of Hollywood fabrication, Raab observed.<sup>32</sup>

Attorney Lewis M. Steel's article in the *Nation* covered some of the same ground as Raab's but gave particular attention to the movie's portrayal of a racist cop who is determined to haunt Carter through the years. The figure, called Vincent Della Pesca in the movie, is loosely fashioned after a real-life Italian police detective in New Jersey who was associated with the investigation. The movie's gross simplification, said Lewis, distorted and misrepresented important evidence about the way police authorities and prosecutors manufactured the legal assault against Carter. By creating just one mean-spirited villain, a rogue detective, the movie greatly exaggerates the misdeeds of a single man and minimizes the wrongs committed by numerous others.<sup>33</sup> Armyan Bernstein, producer of *The Hurricane*, defended the movie's portrayal as an understandable exercise of dramatic license. To keep the film down to a reasonable length, said Bernstein, the artists created a single highly prejudiced character to represent many different individuals who were involved in the injustices. Bernstein emphasized that the movie's principal message is that an innocent man received terribly unfair treatment. The critics' protests against this effort to represent a fundamental truth constituted "nit-picking," said Bernstein.<sup>34</sup>

An article in *Sports Illustrated* entitled "Ring of Truth" drew attention to *The Hurricane*'s portrayal of Rubin Carter's 1964 boxing match with Joey Giardello in Philadelphia's Convention Hall. *The Hurricane* shows Carter pummeling Giardello and clearly dominating him, yet the judges declare a fifteen-round victory for Giardello, appearing to favor the hometown white man. In the movie, crowds protest the obvious injustice, but the decision stands. The article in *Sports Illustrated*, however, observed that this depiction is untruthful. Press reporting on the fight supported the conclusion that Giardello won the fight impressively. *Sports Illustrated* indicated that this challenge to the movie's veracity came on top of many other objections to the movie's handling of facts about Carter's life.<sup>35</sup>

The ideas expressed in these articles received wide discussion in the media and contributed to the movie's vulnerability when Academy Award nominations and selections were under consideration. Did these influential complaints justifiably damage *The Hurricane*'s credibility? Were the objections serious enough to warrant a judgment that *The Hurricane* represented a deeply flawed example of cinematic history?

In this case, and in many other films of recent years that have been attacked on grounds of historical veracity, the verdict is not simply thumbs up or thumbs down. Some of the well-publicized objections are quite justified; others reflect inadequate consideration of the challenges involved in designing a compelling cinematic drama. But an overall conclusion suggests that the creators of *The Hurricane* engaged too cavalierly in controversial manipulations. They gambled excessively, cut many interpretive corners, oversimplified evidence, and invented characters and action without much attention to the possibility that their creativity could damage the movie's integrity. Their ambitious exercise of artistic license strengthened some dramatic elements in the story, but it enhanced entertainment value at the expense of the story's credibility. Eventually, the moviemakers paid a price (as did actor Denzel Washington and the subject of the film, Rubin Carter). *The Hurricane* lost ground publicly, suffering from the many controversies surrounding it.

Certainly some of the script inventions are regrettable. A stronger word may apply (stupid?), since these inventions clashed with the evidence so directly that they were sure to draw fire in the media. Creative license is necessary in good historical drama, but exercising this license in a manner that is likely to offend movie critics and moviegoers is extraordinarily risky. Although critics and audiences do not expect wholly realistic portrayals in Hollywood dramas, they do not want to be subjected to interpretations of the past that come under severe attack for their fundamental untruthfulness. *The Hurricane*'s presentation of the Carter-Giardello fight is such an example. This portrayal occurs early in the film and in black and white, giving it a newsreel-style appearance. It frames the film's central message about racism, establishing a thesis for the rest of the story. The scenes from the boxing match suggest that Carter was a victim of racial prejudice in his prizefight with a white man, and they suggest that bigotry continued to plague Carter for the rest of his life. Yet this fundamentally important depiction is problematic. The movie builds its thesis on a false foundation.

Similarly, objections to police detective Vincent Della Pesca are relevant. This detestable villain, played by Dan Hedaya, is so brutally prejudiced that he is hardly believable. The film clearly reveals that Della Pesca tries to frame the youthful Carter for crimes he did not commit. A more realistic depiction of a

bigoted cop would portray a white detective who lacks the evidence he needs to positively identify Carter as the culprit but who nevertheless makes a strong assumption about his guilt based on race. *The Hurricane* never challenges audiences to imagine the complex origins of prejudice. It presents racial bigotry in the form of a vicious villain who knowingly sends an innocent man to prison. Della Pesca is so outrageously evil that he does not seem real.

A fair assessment of *The Hurricane*'s strengths and weaknesses, however, needs to take greater account of the challenges of designing cinematic drama than Selwyn Raab and Lewis M. Steel did in their stinging articles. Raab's discussion of *The Hurricane*, for example, contained many complaints about the movie's failure to introduce complex details of the murder case. Although Raab did not specifically claim that *The Hurricane* should have included all the diverse information addressed in his article, he certainly implied that a better film would have been sensitive to the many points he discussed. This leads one to ask what the film would have looked like if Jewison had attempted to incorporate all the details Raab presented in his article.<sup>36</sup>

This hypothetical drama would, for example, depict the brawls in pubs that Carter engaged in during his younger days, and the movie would reveal greater evidence of Carter's womanizing. It would show the two trials Carter faced in connection with the murders, each with a different racial composition, rather than the single trial featured in the movie. The Raab drama would trace the work of an investigator in the New Jersey Public Defender's Office (Fred W. Hogan) and a freelance writer (Richard Solomon), as well as the journalistic contributions of Raab himself, showing how their research helped bring new life to the appeals for a different verdict. Evidently, Raab's depiction would go into the complexities of the recantations by the two men who originally identified Carter and Artis as the men who ran from the bar. When dealing with later efforts to free Carter, Raab's drama would portray three principal defense lawyers rather than the two seen briefly in the movie, and it would show relatives and friends supporting Carter long before the Canadians came into the picture. Carter's real-life son and daughter, absent in the movie, would have roles, and the loyalty of Carter's wife's through much of his ordeal would receive greater attention than it did in the movie. Evidently, Raab's version would not end with the upbeat captions telling the audience that Carter now lives in Canada and runs an organization that seeks to correct judicial wrongs. Nor would it inform the audience (as *The Hurricane* does) that the poorly educated teenager in the story, Lesra Martin, obtained a law degree and now works in Canada. Raab would let the audience know that Carter married the female commune member after his release from prison but later ended all relations with her. Furthermore, Raab wants the audience to know that Carter

eventually became disaffected with the commune members who helped him during his ordeal, complaining that they patronized him like a "trophy horse" so that he could help raise money for them and that they escorted him everywhere, censoring his words. Raab wants viewers to be aware that Lesra Martin was eventually expelled from the commune for dating a woman without the group's permission. Such realism, Raab suggests through his critique, would give the film a more honest perspective on Carter's life than the "feel-good screen afterword" offered in Jewison's production.

If studio executives were presented with these recommendations as part of a pitch for funds to support a movie production, they would probably show the presenter to the door. The executives would recognize that a script incorporating so much complex detail, so many principal characters, and such an abundance of critical evidence about the protagonist would result in a confusing and depressing story that would quickly lose its grip on the audience's emotions. Indeed, as *The Hurricane*'s producer observed, giving attention to the many complexities demanded by Raab and other critics would require a film three or four times the length of *The Hurricane*.

*Amistad*, *Mississippi Burning*, and *The Hurricane* are not complete failures as cinematic history. Each contains some impressive dramatic perspectives on the past, and each movie draws attention to significant historical problems associated with racial injustice. The familiar thumbs-down response to these movies' shortcomings is too simplistic, for there is much to applaud in their depictions. Yet the films' overall playfulness with historical evidence taints them sufficiently to destroy their integrity in the eyes of historians and critics in the media. The movies' weaknesses do not relate to one or two outrageous factual mistakes; rather, their problems emerge from an accumulation of troublesome interpretive liberties. These liberties led many reviewers to express distrust and made even enthusiasts of cinematic history uncomfortable. As such, these three movies are excellent models to consider in the assessment of history from Hollywood.