CHAPTER THREE

Awarding the Harry and the Brooks

Early in 1999, the History Channel presented its first Herodotus award (later nicknamed the "Harry") for the best movie of the previous year that dealt with the past. Timed to correspond closely with Hollywood's announcement of the Academy Award for Best Picture, the History Channel's version of the Oscar honors the Greek writer who is often referred to as the father of history. Competition in the field of cinematic history was keen that year, for all five films nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for Best Picture of 1998 were historical in some respect. Both the History Channel and the Academy selected the same five nominees: *Shakespeare in Love, Saving Private Ryan, The Thin Red Line, Elizabeth,* and *Life Is Beautiful.* Using criteria different from those employed by members of the Academy, the History Channel's judges, led by host Sander Vanocur, chose *Saving Private Ryan* for the Herodotus (members of the Academy selected *Shakespeare in Love* for the Oscar).

Which criteria should be applied in awarding a Harry or any other prize identifying an outstanding work of cinematic history? Do the qualities that make *Saving Private Ryan* impressive apply to other strong examples of the genre? Is there a particular form of achievement that characterizes all great works of cinematic history, or do various movies offer different kinds of contributions? In contrast, what constitutes a terrible example of the genre? In which ways do some movies fail to communicate a thoughtful picture of the past? Which films mishandle history egregiously? Do many works of cinematic history qualify as unmitigated disasters, outrageously fictitious and untruthful interpretations? Might we also award a prize for terrible filmed history? With tongue in cheek, perhaps we should call this award for poor screen history the "Brooks" (recalling Mel Brooks's hilarious 1981 spoof of the historical genre, *The History of the World, Part 1*).

The discussion that follows addresses questions concerning merit by focusing on the achievements and shortcomings of specific motion pictures. It proffers ideas about ways to judge accomplishments in cinematic history through the identification of specific models of success and failure. These judgments are, of course, subjective. Scholars and film artists do not agree on specific standards for rendering history on the silver screen, and reviews of cinematic history in publications and on television reflect diverse opinions. Professional historians themselves are often sharply divided in their judgments. In the case of *Amistad* (1997), for instance, Eric Foner, a distinguished scholar of mid-nineteenth-century American history, criticized Spielberg's movie as a work of "historical fiction."[1] Another highly respected scholar of nineteenth-century American history, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, considered the movie "brilliant, sophisticated, and moving."[2] A student of historical film can find many other examples of contrasting commentaries about Hollywood's treatment of the past. Teachers, scholars, commentators in the mass media, and representatives of the public often disagree sharply about whether a film looks like a candidate for the Herodotus or the Brooks.

Recognition of the subjective quality of these judgments suggests the importance of prefacing this commentary with a caveat. The standards outlined here are personal; they do not represent universally accepted measures of approval or disapproval. Other observers may view the films under study quite differently. Still, our discussions of cinematic history are better advanced through identification of specific examples that give focus to the debates. A consideration of cinematic history is better grounded when it moves from the abstract to the specific. With this precautionary note in mind, the following assessment addresses familiar questions about impressive and regretful Hollywood productions.

THE GROWING PROMINENCE OF "FACTION"

Many who express an interest in film and history imagine that historians have little difficulty identifying truly outrageous examples of history in the movies. Those who are highly suspicious of Hollywood's attempts to present the past as entertainment believe that numerous movies should be lambasted for grossly manipulating and misrepresenting the historical record. When a historian attempts to cite specific examples of such thoroughly wrongheaded interpretations from Hollywood, however, not many productions come to mind. Few movies qualify as comprehensive failures. Most of them, especially those produced in recent decades, contain some redeeming qualities as well as considerable shortcomings.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, cinema that comes under a good deal of public criticism for taking artistic liberties can also be praised for offering some intriguing dramatic perspectives. *Amistad* presented the slave trade in

graphic form, *Mississippi Burning* (1988) gave a memorable portrayal of the dangers that civil rights campaigners faced in Mississippi in the early 1960s, and *The Hurricane* (1999) presented a gripping story of one man's struggle in the face of racial injustice. These and other flawed examples of cinematic history offer intelligent and sensitive portrayals, along with problematic doses of fiction.

The task of directing sharp attacks against Hollywood productions has become more difficult in recent years, because filmmakers have developed strategies to protect their flanks from the arrows shot by history-minded critics. Movie artists have developed narrative strategies that are less vulnerable to assault by the fact checkers. In recent years, they have produced a number of films that represent an art form that can be identified as "faction." Faction-based movies spin highly fictional tales that are loosely based on actualities. Their stories identify some real people, events, or situations from the past but blend these details into invented fables. Often the leading characters in faction are fictional people who represent a composite of several historical figures or who are largely invented to advance the drama. Drawing inspiration from myths and legends as well as traditional practices of cinematic history, the creators of faction employ history in a manner that is less subject to debate over veracity than are the biopics or historical epics of earlier years. From beginning to end, these movies send only a nebulous message about truth claims. Faction references history but does not represent it specifically.

Three popular movies of 2000 dealt with the past through faction: *Gladiator, U-571,* and *The Patriot.* Each film can be assaulted for bending the historical evidence radically in order to design an entertaining story. Yet each motion picture can also be defended as undisguised faction, a highly creative perspective on history that views the past through metaphor rather than through the portrayal of specific situations, events, and people.

Gladiator exhibits tremendous playfulness with the historical evidence, and it is designed as an action-adventure picture rather than a serious commentary on the past. It tells the story of a bold and talented Roman general named Maximus (Russell Crowe) who is betrayed when Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) dies. The new Roman leader, Commodus (Joaquim Phoenix), is jealous of Maximus's popularity and arranges to have this hero-competitor sent into slavery. Maximus trains as a gladiator in a distant Roman province and becomes the leader of a successful fighting band. Eventually, he and a few of his warrior cohorts appear in the Roman Colosseum. When Commodus discovers the identity of the mysterious star gladiator, he arranges to fight him in a public confrontation in the great arena. First, however, he commissions agents to wound Maximus. Not surprisingly (for moviegoers), the

Maximus (Russell Crowe), a great general who is sold into slavery and trained as a gladiator, fights for his life in Gladiator *(2000). Director Ridley Scott exercises plenty of dramatic license in this entertaining work of "faction." (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

hero manages to overcome his physical handicap, and in the film's climactic fight, Maximus kills the emperor, although Maximus, too, dies in the struggle. *Gladiator* suggests that Commodus's defeat will pave the way to republican government and greater freedom in Rome.

Ridley Scott's highly entertaining movie contains some truthful elements and plenty of fiction. *Gladiator* references a number of historical actualities. Somewhat like the events depicted at the beginning of the movie, Roman legions did penetrate the southern reaches of northern Europe, confronting fierce Germanic tribes. There was, of course, an intelligent and respected Roman leader named Marcus Aurelius who died during the Danubian wars. Commodus, who took his place, was a megalomaniac and an exploitative leader, somewhat like the movie's egotistical emperor (the real figure renamed Rome Colonia Commodiana). The emperor's sister Lucilla unsuccessfully conspired with senators to bring about her brother's murder, as did the character in the movie. The historical Commodus did, indeed, enter the ring at the Roman Colosseum to do battle, and eventually, a wrestler sent by his adversaries dispatched him. Maximus is essentially a Hollywood invention, although he somewhat resembles Septimius Severus, who became emperor several months after the death of Commodus. Severus claimed to be Marcus Aurelius's son.[3]

Gladiator cannot be dismissed simply as cinematic mythmaking. Although it is certainly a lively, action-oriented fairy tale in most respects, the story contains enough historical details to qualify it as a work of faction. The movie's connection to the past consists of more than just occasional references to Roman names and events. *Gladiator* also raises authentic questions about life in the days of the Roman Empire. In hokey but nevertheless meaningful ways, the movie suggests that absolute power can corrupt absolutely. Its bad-emperor, good-republican morality tale sends a democratic message about the superiority of representational government over authoritarian rule.[4]

We cannot easily place *Gladiator* on a list of Hollywood's most outrageous history-oriented dramas. By delivering faction, director Ridley Scott protected his movie from serving as a convenient target for the defenders of Clio. Media critics who reviewed *Gladiator* easily recognized the film as a lively form of entertainment that often deals with history through metaphor rather than fact.

U-571 came under greater fire for historical veracity than *Gladiator* did, because some critics thought the movie intended to send a realistic message about an important breakthrough in military intelligence during World War II. Jonathan Mostow's film tells the story of an American submarine crew charged with entering a damaged German U-boat and removing a machine used to send coded messages. Capturing this equipment could prove enormously valuable to the Allies in prosecuting the war, allowing American and British mathematicians to decipher enemy messages and learn the Nazis' attack plans. Mostow's movie shows American navy commandos seizing control of German U-boat number 571. When an enemy attack at sea then destroys the Americans' submarine, the movie's heroes have to escape on the badly damaged U-boat. The Americans eventually succeed in torpedoing enemy vessels and delivering the valuable coding device to U.S. military authorities.

During the brief time *U-571* was the top-grossing film in the United States, the media gave considerable coverage to British criticisms of the picture's treatment of history. Commentators in the British press complained that the film credited American sailors with seizing the tremendously important coding device, playing fast and loose with the historical facts. It was actually a British navy crew that carried out this mission, and it accomplished the task before the Americans formally entered World War II. In typical Hollywood fashion, said these British observers, *U-571* made the Americans look like the true and only heroes.[5]

These complaints from British critics do not amount to much, because the film was clearly marketed as a work of faction. *U-571* references history but never proposes to dramatize it specifically; its story is clearly invented. In general ways, the movie presents conditions that are essentially true. Some

elements of the story relate to the experiences of various submarine crews during World War II, and, as the movie suggests, the Allies were desperate to capture the secret German equipment. Submarine warfare was highly risky, as the movie shows, and sometimes sub commanders dropped their vessels to dangerous levels to avoid depth charges, as seen in *U-571*.[6] Although Mostow's movie contains these elements of realism, it lacks the extraordinary verisimilitude of Wolfgang Petersen's brilliant movie on German submarine warfare, *Das Boot* (The Boat). *U-571* is modeled on Petersen's classic, but it lacks the gritty authenticity of his claustrophobic picture of troubled life under the sea. Furthermore, *U-571* presents its story of sub warfare in Hollywood fashion. Like the westerns that show the hero and the villain facing each other in the street of a frontier town, *U-571* portrays the Americans in combat with a single destroyer and a single German sub. The movie gives no hint of the more typical situation in World War II of surface ships of war operating in convoys and submarine wolf packs working in concert to engage several undersea vessels at once.[7]

As for the specific complaint about *U-571*'s error in giving the Americans credit for capturing the coding device, Mostow comfortably evaded the charge. A trailer at the end of the movie briefly describes three real-life incidents during World War II in which the Allies succeeded in grabbing enigma machines from German vessels. The first two efforts identified in captions pertain to successes of the British navy. The third example, coming much later than the first two, involved the U.S. Navy. By framing *U-571*'s story with this announcement, Mostow is essentially saying to the audience: "This is faction. We have told our tale from the American point of view because both U.S. and international audiences are accustomed to viewing American heroes in Hollywood films. In case you are interested, though, here are a few references to the actual incidents from history that inspired the story. No offense, Brits. As you can see, we are identifying your important contributions in this concluding announcement."

British sensitivities were aroused again a short time later when *The Patriot* made its appearance in movie theaters. Mel Gibson's inspiring tale of a tough Carolina widower, Benjamin Martin, reluctantly choosing to join the fight for American independence upset some British commentators and also drew criticism from Americans who sympathized with the British. The complainers observed correctly that *The Patriot* gives a highly biased account of the people involved in the American Revolution. It presents Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) and other Americans in very positive terms, and virtually all the British characters are portrayed unflatteringly. Colonel William Tavington (Jason Issacs) is a bloodthirsty killer (the characterization exaggerates the ugly deeds of the

Lifting the flag of a new nation, Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) battles the British in The Patriot *(2000). The Martin character resembles historical figures such as Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens, as well as familiar characters typically seen in the Hollywood war genre. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

real-life Banastre Tarleton, leader of England's Green Dragoons), and Lord General Charles Cornwallis (Tom Wilkinson) reluctantly goes along with a campaign of terror against the colonial civilian population. Captain Wilkins (Adam Baldwin), an American who serves the British as a loyalist military leader, comes across as weak and traitorous.

Like *Gladiator* and *U-571*, however, *The Patriot* is a blended work of faction, and it never hints that it presents even a semiauthentic picture of the war between the colonials and the redcoats. The movie refers to some real situations; it shows a large-scale military confrontation that resembles the American actions at Cowpens or at Guilford Courthouse, and in the end it relates the particulars of Cornwallis's defeat at Yorktown.[8] But Robert Rodat's script creates a fictitious hero in Benjamin Martin, although some of his guerrilla warfare resembles the tactics of Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," and his position as colonial-turned-warrior parallels, to a degree, the lives of Thomas Sumter and Andrew Pickens. For the most part, though, Rodat builds his story in the style of his earlier historical drama, *Saving Private Ryan*. *The Patriot* features many imagined characters based loosely on both the historical record and the war movie genre. Rodat's tale about a strong and once-violent figure who is loath to pick up a weapon draws inspiration, too, from the old Hollywood westerns. *The Patriot* is designed as an action-packed story about a heroic man's struggle for honor, revenge, and freedom. From beginning to end, it serves as a work of faction, a concocted story that liberally references historical figures, events, and situations.[9]

Films such as *Gladiator*, *U-571*, and *The Patriot* do not make good targets for protests against the abuses of cinematic history. These works of faction do not place real people or real events at their core. Invented characters and situations dominate the foreground; historical figures and actions appear principally in the background or at the periphery of the story. As such, these films are less vulnerable to the fact checkers than are movies that focus on specific figures from the history books, such as *Patton*, *Gandhi*, *Schindler's List*, or *Nixon*.

IDENTIFYING CANDIDATES FOR THE BROOKS

Movies that directly characterize actual people and events from the past serve as more interesting cases for judging the problems associated with cinematic history. Films that present a number of recognizable names as major characters in a drama or that give detailed attention to specific events and situations from the past are more likely to excite attention and controversy. These stories come under greater scrutiny regarding historical representation than do films that are transparently faction oriented. When their characterizations contrast sharply with the historical record or modern-day interpretations of that record, history-minded observers often register strong protests. Critics express recognition of a filmmaker's need to exercise artistic license, but they maintain that some manipulations are unacceptably egregious. A few films test their tolerance levels to the breaking point, and such movies qualify for the unwelcome Brooks.

Gary Gallagher, an accomplished Civil War historian at the University of Virginia, has identified such a movie in a class he teaches on the war. Gallagher asks his students to evaluate the way a number of popular Hollywood films deal with the Civil War period. His students' analyses of diverse films such as *So Red the Rose*, *Horse Soldiers*, *Gettysburg*, *Shenandoah*, *Friendly Persuasion*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Glory*, *Andersonville*, and *The Undefeated* concluded that all Hollywood productions take liberties with the facts and simplify issues. Many of the films advance interpretations that are no longer popular in academic circles, but much of this cinema stimulates the public's thinking about the past in useful ways. One movie in particular, however, is so cavalier in its

treatment of the facts that it serves as a good example of outrageously poor cinematic history. The Civil War movie that received the strongest criticism in Gallagher's class was *Santa Fe Trail*.[10]

Director Michael Curtiz's 1940 movie makes an interesting case study as one of the worst productions of cinematic history from Hollywood. What are the problems with *Santa Fe Trail*'s historical depictions? Are the distortions outrageous? Does the film contain redeeming qualities? How can we judge the filmmaker's exercise of artistic license?

Whatever this movie's difficulties with history, its entertainment value cannot be denied. *Santa Fe Trail* is fun to watch. Curtiz's fast-paced, action-packed flick is consistently lively, exciting, amusing, and interesting. It features an intriguing story and a notable cast, including luminaries such as Errol Flynn, Ronald Reagan, Van Heflin, and Raymond Massey.

The movie is much less impressive in its handling of history, and gross manipulations of the record appear throughout. *Santa Fe Trail* begins by showing many of the great Civil War generals graduating together in the West Point class of 1854, among them Jeb Stuart, George Armstrong Custer, Philip Sheridan, George Pickett, James Longstreet, and John Hood. Clearly this is Hollywood, not history, for the men attended the academy in widely varying years. Custer (Ronald Reagan), a principal character in the movie, was a fifteen-year-old Ohio farm boy in 1854. He entered West Point in 1857 and did not graduate until the summer of 1861, making him ineligible for many of the U.S. Army activities *Santa Fe Trail* shows him participating in. Jeb Stuart (played by Errol Flynn), the hero of the story, actually graduated in 1854.

The movie then concocts a story about some of these heroes fighting John Brown in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). In one instance, Stuart dons civilian clothes and sneaks into a Kansas town to learn about Brown's plans to commit violence (this is a complete fabrication). Brown's men capture Stuart and take him to their secret hideout. Eventually, Stuart's military buddies free him in an assault, but Brown and some of his supporters escape (another Hollywood fairy tale). Rader, a totally fictional character from the West Point class of 1954 (played by Van Heflin), is a radical abolitionist who joins Brown's guerrillas but eventually loses enthusiasm for the cause because he does not receive the pay he had been promised. Rader turns up again as a participant in Brown's assault on the U.S. armory at Harpers Ferry. This time, he is secretly working against the guerrillas, trying to convince Brown to wait for reinforcements so that Robert E. Lee will have time to arrive with his troops. This action, too, is pure fiction. At least the movie's final scenes bear some resemblance to history; they show Lee commanding a successful assault on Brown's forces at Harpers Ferry. At the end of the story,

In Santa Fe Trail *(1940), U.S. military officers speak with Carl Rader, a devious character played by Van Heflin. At the center-left is Ronald Reagan as George Armstrong Custer, and at the center-right is Errol Flynn as Jeb Stuart. To the far right is Raymond Massey playing the radical abolitionist John Brown.* Santa Fe Trail, *a fast-paced and entertaining film, is so replete with fabrications, misleading messages, and apologies for slavery that it mangles history. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

Brown faces death at the hangman's noose, as he did in real life, and he makes a speech using some of the language that appears in the history books.[11]

Santa Fe Trail's depiction of the controversy over slavery contrasts sharply with the historical record. Some of the most ridiculous statements come from Virginian Jeb Stuart, who announces that his state has been "considering a resolution to abolish slavery for a long time." Perhaps the movie is referring to proposals for gradual emancipation that were presented in Virginia back in the early 1830s and soundly defeated. Stuart also claims that Virginians sense that the institution of slavery is morally wrong. "All they ask is time," he explains. The movie suggests that in the late 1850s, southerners, including slaveholders, were moving in the direction of complete emancipation of the slaves. It claims that white southerners intended to abolish slavery in their own time and in their own way (this was certainly not the position of the state's leading politicians). Furthermore, *Santa Fe Trail* portrays John Brown as the man who wrecked the Virginians' dream of peaceful resolution. In making this case, the

movie shows no evidence of the extremes to which southern pro-slavery arguments had moved by the late 1850s, nor does it reveal that many defenders of slavery were contemplating secession well before Brown's violent actions at Osawatomie, Kansas, and at Harpers Ferry. The film simply makes Brown look like the man most responsible for the start of the Civil War.[12]

Santa Fe Trail's portrayal of African-American attitudes is also outrageous. Blacks in the story seem hesitant about accepting freedom. One African American observes that providing freedom for the blacks is not enough. How are the freedmen to obtain food and shelter? he asks. In this scene, the film promotes a perspective on emancipation similar to the position of many apologists for slavery. Defenders of the institution often warned that blacks were unprepared to handle the complicated responsibilities associated with emancipation and that many of them deeply appreciated the care they received from paternalistic masters. This issue is addressed in another scene when a black woman complains about the difficulties of prospering in Kansas. "If this here's freedom, I want none of it," she declares. A black man then states his aim to achieve an easy life. He says that he hopes to go back to Texas (then a slave state) so that he can "set till kingdom come."

In sum, *Santa Fe Trail* is so replete with fabrications, misleading messages, and apologies for slavery that it mangles history. It does not use fictitious characters at the center of its drama in the manner of modern-day faction. The movie portrays specific individuals from the Civil War era in detail and shows them taking a variety of specific and important actions that never occurred. These actions represent gratuitous flourishes; they do not serve any larger interpretive purpose, nor do they symbolize important truths about the past in a metaphorical way. Instead, these distortions appear in the story simply to enhance its entertainment value. *Santa Fe Trail* looks like a good candidate for the Brooks.

Back in 1940, movie critics gave much less attention to the liberties taken in cinematic history than they do today. *Santa Fe Trail* did not come under much criticism for its historical treatment of people, events, situations, or issues. In the present, such freewheeling manipulation of details would probably create considerable controversy in the media (unless the film was so well advertised as an exercise in comedy or parody that it could easily be associated with cinematic humor). Any Hollywood production that hinted of seriousness and thoughtfulness while morphing evidence in the fashion of *Santa Fe Trail* would serve as grist for the talk-show mills on C-NBC or CNN.

Santa Fe Trail is a good example of Hollywood's loose relationship with history in numerous productions of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The star of *Santa Fe Trail*, Errol Flynn, was the principal actor in many of these films.

Flynn had the right persona for hero-oriented adventure stories. He was an ideal man of action, a handsome, athletic-looking figure who could stand in for American and British men of derring-do. He also exuded a comic quality. Flynn looked like he was having fun playing adventure-loving gentlemen. He appeared to relish a good sword fight or a challenge to win the heart of a beautiful and noble lady. In this respect, Flynn's appearance gave dimension and color to Hollywood's history. His involvement suggested that these tales were highly embellished, that they had been fashioned to give the famous actor the freedom to perform his familiar cinematic tricks of combat and courtship.

Other history-oriented Flynn films of the era feature similar playfulness with the historical facts. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) creates a totally fictional explanation for the suicidal actions of the British brigade. In *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), Essex (Flynn) has a romantic relationship with Queen Elizabeth, even though the real Essex was thirty-four years younger than the Virgin Queen. Another Flynn film, *The Sea Hawk* (1940), takes many liberties with historical interpretation, but the movie is less vulnerable to charges of distortion. There, Michael Curtiz features a fictional character at the center of his story. Flynn plays a dashing privateer who resembles Sir Francis Drake and other English captains who menaced the Spanish fleets in the sixteenth century.

Artistic license is exercised with particular abandon in another Flynn movie, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1942). This entertaining and humorous action-adventure picture rivals *Santa Fe Trail* in its distortions of history. Raoul Walsh's biopic about George Armstrong Custer follows the experiences of the famous general from his time as a cadet at West Point through his actions in the Civil War to his death fighting Indians at Little Big Horn. Flynn is both comic and heroic as Custer. He is an energetic and fun-loving military man who demonstrates impressive leadership skills. Custer is also moralistic. He fights alcohol consumption, struggles against corruption in the army, and attempts to protect the Indians from greedy railroad developers and gold seekers. Errol Flynn's character provided a useful cinematic icon when the United States was on the brink of war and Americans needed military heroes. *They Died with Their Boots On* offered them one from the history books.

Unfortunately, Hollywood's Custer contrasts sharply with the figure that appears in the historical records. Throughout the movie, the man and the important events in his life are grossly manipulated in the interest of entertainment and hero construction. These distortions have a cumulative effect. By the end of the film, they create a picture that seriously misrepresents the man and his times. Shortcomings in the movie's depictions are not simply related to the small details (for instance, Mrs. Custer did not meet her husband at West

George Armstrong Custer (Errol Flynn) fires at Indians during his last stand in They Died with Their Boots On *(1942). Raoul Walsh's characterization of Custer satisfied Americans' need for heroic military images during early U.S. involvement in World War II. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

Point, and General Custer never met the Indian leader Crazy Horse). The difficulties pertain to major distortions.[13]

Most important, George Armstrong Custer was not the great friend of American Indians suggested by the movie. *They Died with Their Boots On* shows Custer's efforts to protect the Sioux Indians of the Black Hills, trying to keep American settlers out of Sioux territory and working to prevent gold prospectors from invading the Indians' land. Custer's efforts are undermined by evil land developers who spread rumors about a gold rush. After Custer's death, his wife, Libbie, convinces General Philip Sheridan and President Ulysses S. Grant to honor her husband's request. The government must "make good its promise to Chief Crazy Horse," says Libbie. "The Indians must be protected in their right to an existence in their own country." Sheridan—the one who supposedly claimed that the only good Indian was a dead one—tells Libbie that he and President Grant will support her husband's cause. "Come my dear," says the general affirmatively. "Your soldier won his last battle after all." This cinematic lie could hardly be more glaring, for the real Custer was certainly not a crusading protector of Native Americans. He led the massacre of

more than a hundred Indian men, women, and children at Washita in 1868, helped instigate the gold rush in the Sioux's sacred Black Hills, encouraged white settlers to come to the region, and marched his troops to the Little Big Horn to crush Indian resistance.[14]

The movie's effort to portray Custer as one of the Native Americans' best friends forces an extraordinary distortion of events in the film's portrayal of the battle at Little Big Horn. To make Custer look good as he leads his men into the terrible disaster, *They Died with Their Boots On* shows the hero *knowingly* facing a massacre. Custer consciously engages in a suicidal mission and tells one of the movie's villains that his soldiers will ride "to hell or to glory; it depends on your point of view." Custer's purpose is not the historic one: to pump bullets into hundreds of surprised Indians. Hollywood's hero appears to go down with his men in a blaze of glory just to make a point with the corrupt and powerful figures in Washington, D.C.

If a movie offered such a playful view of history to twenty-first-century audiences, it would probably suffer relentless attacks from critics in the press and on television talk shows. Movie reviewers in today's mass media are far less tolerant of gross distortions than their counterparts were in the early 1940s. When today's cinema places specific figures from the past at the center of a drama (such as Custer, Sheridan, or Crazy Horse), rather than fictional characters, critics often assault the portrayals. Furthermore, today's reviewers have many more venues to deliver their attacks—cable television channels, radio stations, publications, and the Internet. For Americans of 1941, however, *They Died with Their Boots On* did not excite lively disagreement over historical interpretation. It represented, instead, a delightfully entertaining and inspiring historical epic starring one of Hollywood's favorite action-adventure heroes, Errol Flynn. And like many other Flynn pictures of the era, the movie mangled history.

Filmmakers today take similar liberties with history, but they promote their stories as works of faction rather than the specific representations common in Errol Flynn's adventure pictures. Modern-day cinematic history avoids detailed portraits of noted individuals from the past and offers fewer biographies of famous figures such as the ones depicted in Flynn movies: Queen Elizabeth, Jeb Stuart, George Armstrong Custer. Today's Hollywood often privileges faction, which is less vulnerable to attack on the basis of historical accuracy. In faction, the central characters are fictional, and the actual historical figures are essentially minor or background figures in the story. Biopics continue to appear among the cinematic history entries, such as the British-made *Elizabeth* (1998), directed by Shekhar Kapur. Still, faction seems likely to remain popular as the filmmaker's safer strategy for evading the slings and arrows of media critics and historians.

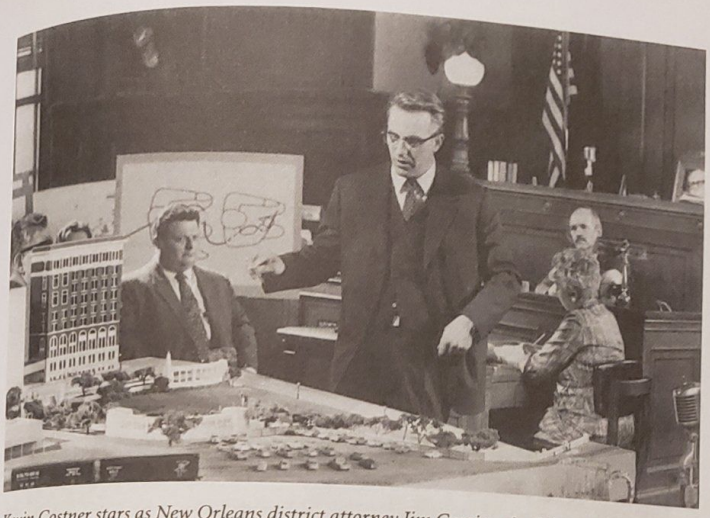
REDEEMING QUALITIES?

If we exclude parody, it is surprisingly difficult to identify cinematic history that consistently lacks integrity in its treatment of the past. As we have observed, many Hollywood films contain abuses of fact that are worthy of objection, but these movies often feature some commendable perspectives on the past as well. There are not many movies like *Santa Fe Trail* or *They Died with Their Boots On*, which can be slammed as outrageous forays into history with real historical figures as their principal characters. And even these two films exude such a comic lightness in their treatments that harsh critics need to exercise a degree of caution. *Santa Fe Trail* and *They Died with Their Boots On* look at history with tongue in cheek, strongly suggesting that the portrayals do not represent serious examinations of the past.

Because of my duties as film commentator for the History Channel, I have become acutely aware of the difficulty of rendering a forcefully negative assessment of history from Hollywood. Each time I received an assignment to evaluate a motion picture for the channel's *Movies in Time* series, I wondered if I would get the opportunity to enjoy some good fun drubbing a film. Sooner or later, I thought, a motion picture would come up for discussion that was so egregious in its treatment of the facts that it deserved unrelenting condemnation. I thought that I could identify such a failed film as dead on arrival or, worse yet, as a "dangerous" cinematic commentary because of its gross distortions. Perhaps I could castigate the filmmakers for "brainwashing" America's youth. In every case, however, I found that the film under consideration had at least some redeeming qualities, even the highly problematic ones. Our on-camera interviews could address a movie's fabrications and failings, but I saw a need to take account of its accomplishments as well.

My review of *Jim Thorpe, All American* (1951), for example, noted that the film presents an old-fashioned, strongly positive view of the way white instructors tried to force assimilation on Indian students at schools such as the one at Carlisle. Current research has raised many questions about the way administrators and teachers tried to wash away Native American cultural traditions in such environments, I observed, and the movie's treatment of the issue would certainly draw criticism from modern-day scholars. Nevertheless, Hollywood's story about Jim Thorpe is a thoughtful consideration of the struggles and personal injustices experienced by a talented young man of minority background. The film gives more serious consideration to the problems faced by Native Americans than many other popular flicks about Indians do.[15]

Probably the worst historical film I evaluated on *Movies in Time* was *Young Dillinger* (1965). As mentioned previously, this quickly and cheaply constructed



Kevin Costner stars as New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison in Oliver Stone's JFK *(1991). Some critics lambasted the movie for its distortion of historical evidence, but others praised it for the bold way it raised questions about recent American political history. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

production gives little attention to historical authenticity in its sets, costuming, or locales. Yet *Young Dillinger* manages to give audiences some perspectives on the notorious criminal that are basically true. It realistically portrays the life of gang members on the run, and it reveals how Dillinger's life became more constricted as law enforcement agents spread their dragnet against him.[16]

In this regard, it is appropriate to mention the Hollywood movie that often excites the most intense condemnation in conversations about Hollywood's abuses. Often, when individuals attempt to name a film that is particularly controversial in its handling of historical evidence, they point to *JFK* (1991). Oliver Stone's movie excited protest for distorting the historical record and for taking interpretive liberties. Critics note that Stone mixed actual and fictional footage in a confusing manner, leaving audiences puzzled about the distinctions between fact and fiction. They complain that many young viewers were not aware of the trickery and, after seeing the movie, concluded that there really had been a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination. These critics are outraged that naïve moviegoers base their judgments on the false "evidence" featured in Stone's mischievous cinema.[17]

To be sure, many of the messages in *JFK* are misleading, and the preponderance of available evidence still suggests that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) at the grave of President John F. Kennedy. Oliver Stone's provocative secondary thesis in JFK *(1991) is that the United States probably would not have become so involved in Vietnam's affairs if Kennedy had lived. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

Stone's thesis about a conspiracy is supported primarily by highly questionable speculation, not fact. Nevertheless, Stone's movie gives expression to many doubts about the Warren Commission's report on the assassination, questions that have motivated research by members of Congress and investigative journalists in the years since the tragic event of November 22, 1963.[18] Stone's movie dramatizes actions that conspiracy theorists imagine could have occurred, including a number of the descriptions in Jim Marrs's lengthy tome on the assassination, *Crossfire*.[19] Some historians praise Stone for his bold, experimental approach to historical investigation. Robert A. Rosenstone has been among *JFK*'s most vociferous supporters. Rosenstone argues that the movie challenges audiences to revision history. "If it is part of the burden of the historical work to make us rethink how we got to where we are and to make us question values that we and our leaders and our nation live by," writes Rosenstone, "then whatever its flaws, *JFK* has to be among the most important works of American history ever to appear on the screen."[20]

JFK is not indisputably wrongheaded in all its propositions. For example, Stone's important secondary thesis is that President John F. Kennedy would not have gotten America as deeply involved in the conflict in Vietnam as Lyndon B. Johnson did. Historians still debate this idea vigorously, and a number of prominent interpreters of the Kennedy years, including some who were close advisers to Kennedy, such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Robert S. McNamara, generally agree with Stone about Kennedy's likely actions in Vietnam, had he lived.[21] Other messages in Stone's movie, such as the director's concern about America's lost innocence in the years after Kennedy's death, address substantive matters that interest many citizens and scholars. We should note, too, that the innovative framework of Stone's movie, with its quickly paced experimental design, draws attention to itself in a unique way. Stone constantly reminds viewers that they are watching a movie, and his film frequently challenges them to question the ways they have come to "know" history.[22]

Most cinematic dramas, especially the productions of recent decades, offer something useful to the viewing public. Few modern films can simply be relegated to the trash heap. The familiar assumption that Hollywood productions often communicate nothing of value regarding history is hard to support on close examination of individual films. In view of the mixed record of productions from Hollywood, it seems that our assessments of cinematic history need to move beyond knee-jerk cynicism. We should face the imposing challenge of identifying both the successes and the failures of specific productions. By fine-tuning our critical faculties, we engage in more realistic discussions of the opportunities and limits of dramatic license.

THE DRAMATIC DOLDRUMS

We can profit, too, from recognizing another kind of failure in cinematic history. Problems with the genre are not confined to factual errors or abuses of artistic liberties. Some films suffer from a different kind of shortcoming: they

disappoint audiences or fail to attract them because they do not deliver exciting drama. This kind of misfire is unfortunate, because Hollywood addresses specific historical subjects on a very limited basis. Rarely does the U.S. motion picture industry release more than one drama in a decade that deals with a specific event or person from the past. If a production about a subject turns out to be a dud, Hollywood is unlikely to support another film on the theme for several decades (indeed, disappointing box office receipts can scare creative talent away from films on related subjects). Thus, bad cinematic history is not confined to messy treatment of the facts. Failure can also appear in the form of boring drama.

Some films drag so heavily in their dramatic development that viewers find themselves glancing at their watches or dozing off. Consider, for instance, the difficulties many viewers faced watching three movies on topics that should have served as the foundation for lively, engaging dramas: ranchers versus settlers in the American West, the making of the atomic bomb, and the struggle to convict the vicious murderer of a civil rights leader. In each case, the viewing experience proved taxing for many moviegoers.

Heaven's Gate (1980) traces class conflict between the powerful Stock Growers' Association in Wyoming and the humble Eastern European immigrants who tried to settle in the region. The movie references the famous Johnson County wars of 1892 and includes characters similar to "Cattle" Kate Watson and her boyfriend, two figures from western history who were hanged for cattle rustling long before the events depicted in the movie.

Director Michael Cimino spent a fortune (by 1980 standards) to give his movie an authentic look. His attention to detail is evident in the opening scenes of a graduation ceremony at Harvard University, with hundreds of extras in nineteenth-century apparel populating the campus. For other scenes, Cimino had trains rebuilt for brief appearances, covered a vast area with sod, and staged huge battles with more than a thousand extras dressed in period costumes.

Despite the attraction of western history providing background for the story and millions of dollars committed to the visual details, *Heaven's Gate* delivers terribly boring entertainment. Over the first two hours of the lengthy movie, almost nothing happens to excite viewer interest. By the time the action picks up in the final hour, the audience hardly cares about the fate of the principals. Many of the characters look like stereotypes rather than real-life figures (among them, the cattlemen's villainous leader, played by Sam Waterston). Not surprisingly, both critics and moviegoers lambasted Cimino for his costly flop. *Heaven's Gate* is now well recognized in Hollywood as one of the most embarrassing examples of directorial hubris. Evidently, Cimino was so

cocky after his Best Picture award for *The Deer Hunter* (1978) that he thought he could fashion a story single-handedly and demand that the film's financial officers satisfy his every whim. Cimino's defeat was unfortunate for cinematic history as well as for Hollywood investors. An intelligently crafted drama about the Johnson County wars could have stimulated the public's thinking about life and times in the American West.[23]

Fat Man and Little Boy (1990) represents another failed attempt to dramatize a significant aspect of history. Roland Jaffe's movie traces the development of the secret Manhattan Project during World War II, in which scientists worked to build the first atomic bombs at Los Alamos, New Mexico, under the direction of General Leslie Groves. Paul Newman plays the general, and Dwight Schultz portrays the top scientist in the group, J. Robert Oppenheimer. *Fat Man and Little Boy* attempts to create dramatic interest in some real-life situations, such as the scientists' disagreements over whether the bomb should be dropped on Japan (it had been developed in response to the Nazis' research on the atom). It also tries to enhance the story with a fictional episode depicting a love affair between a young scientist and a nurse; eventually, the scientist becomes a victim of radiation. The production was costly (between $20 million and $25 million), and it featured a rather authentic-looking $2 million set representing the Los Alamos facilities. However, neither the expensive replica nor Newman's impressive presence in the key role could save the movie. *Fat Man and Little Boy* never developed a compelling story. It failed to create suspense, and it was a notable flop at the box office. The movie's disappointing reception is regrettable, because *Fat Man and Little Boy* could have provided a useful service, exposing audiences to some of the important debates associated with the United States' decision to use atomic bombs in World War II.[24]

Ghosts of Mississippi (1996) also fails to deliver exciting drama, despite its focus on a seemingly fascinating historical topic. Rob Reiner's movie, based a book by journalist Maryanne Vollers, examines the efforts of a Mississippi prosecutor to convict a white racist of the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Nearly thirty years before, the racist had escaped conviction in two trials that led to hung juries. The young prosecutor has difficulty winning the confidence of Evers's widow (Whoopi Goldberg), but he eventually convinces her that he can be trusted, and she produces a copy of the original court transcript that he has been seeking. Armed with this evidence and other information, Bobby DeLaughter (Alec Baldwin) succeeds in his courtroom efforts, sending the villain (James Woods) to prison.

Ghosts of Mississippi is strong in its appeal for racial justice but weak in its delivery of dramatic tension. It is a well-intended morality tale about the kind of bigotry that stained much of twentieth-century southern history.

Unfortunately, Reiner paints the movie's characters with such a heavy brush that he fails to sustain the audience's interest in them. Whoopi Goldberg is a noble, suffering saint in her role as the slain man's widow, and James Woods is almost a caricature as a snarling bigot. Alec Baldwin is transparently guilt ridden as a southern white liberal who seeks to redeem his culture from its hate-infested past; convicting the Ku Klux Klan member is a means of cleansing his conscience. These characterizations come across with such weight that the story lacks subtlety, and the individuals act in stereotypical ways. There is no mystery or suspense to the plot and very little action. After the opening scenes that lead to the assassination of Evers (an important figure whom the audience learns little about), the film turns into a dialogue-driven story featuring numerous conversations while people walk the streets of a southern town. Not surprisingly, *Ghosts of Mississippi* fared poorly at the box office.[25]

We should regret these dramatic failures rather than gloat over them. Each of the three films addresses important issues; each could have stimulated the thinking of many viewers regarding significant historical topics. The movies did not create the expected impact, however. What were the sources of the problems? Why did these films fail to arouse the interest of audiences?

Some of the answers appear obvious. In various ways, they depended too strongly on dialogue, giving inadequate attention to visual, action-oriented forms of communication. Their creators also failed to employ enough generic elements from the conventions of cinematic history. The movies' plots were too predictable, failing to surprise viewers with intriguing twists and turns in narrative development.

Enthusiasts of cinematic history can profit from an examination of the hazards associated with dramatic structure. A study of these difficulties can provide useful ideas for the critique of cinematic history. Observers of the genre need to be aware of the complex challenges filmmakers encounter when they attempt to portray the past on the screen. It is not easy to pull off successful cinematic history. A production can easily become a financial disappointment, as in the cases of *Heaven's Gate, Fat Man and Little Boy,* and *Ghosts of Mississippi.* If artists cannot manage to engage their audiences, they can quickly lose them. Filmmakers who fail to make their stories emotionally appealing are likely to find themselves experiencing artistic and financial Waterloos. It behooves critics of cinematic history to show sensitivity to the risks these artists face. An informed and realistic evaluation of their work calls for an understanding of the pressures to deliver good drama as well as good history.

Awareness of the challenges in delivering powerful drama can also prove useful when judging generally popular films that failed to live up to their potential for exciting audience interest. *Pearl Harbor* (2001) is a good example of

cinematic history that falls short because of dramatic weaknesses. The movie certainly was not a complete fiasco. Its presentation of the famous Japanese air assault employs impressive graphics, and media attention to the movie helped sell many books about the history of the event that brought the United States into World War II. Nevertheless, the film came under some heavy criticism. When the production by Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael Bay failed to generate a great deal of enthusiasm among moviegoers, despite an expensive advertising blitz, some observers attributed this disappointment to the film's shallow treatment of history. They complained that *Pearl Harbor* gives the audience few intriguing details about the horrible "day of infamy." *Tora! Tora! Tora!*'s 1970 portrayal of the historic attack is much more informative and accurate, argued the critics. Bruckheimer and Bay's production does, indeed, lack the sophistication of *Tora! Tora! Tora!*'s history lesson, but that shortcoming is not the primary source of the movie's difficulties.

Pearl Harbor attempts to imitate the narrative and graphic strategy of James Cameron's blockbuster *Titanic* (1997), but it has few of the important dramatic elements that contributed to *Titanic*'s enormous success. Cameron's story proved intriguing from beginning to end as viewers watched the surprising twists and turns in Jack and Rose's romance, their dealings with jealous lover Cal, and their efforts to escape death. Randall Wallace, writer for *Pearl Harbor,* fashioned a story that contains few surprises. The romantic relationship between Rafe (Ben Affleck) and Evelyn (Kate Beckinsale) develops swiftly in the opening minutes of the picture. There is no dramatic tension between the two lovers until late in the story when Rafe is presumed dead and Evelyn establishes a romantic connection with Rafe's best friend, Danny (Josh Hartnett). In contrast, *Titanic* shows Jack and Rose struggling in an on-again, off-again relationship. Denouement comes late in the film when Rose gives up her seat on a lifeboat, signaling a determination to cast her fortunes with the handsome commoner.

In *Pearl Harbor,* the love story appears to be tacked on to an epic tale about the historic disaster. The romance has little connection to the extraordinary events of 1941 (critics in the mass media emphasized this problem frequently in their biting reviews). In *Titanic,* the love story is integrated into the historical presentation. Jack's low socioeconomic status and Rose's background as a representative of the eastern establishment provide a foundation for examining class distinctions throughout the drama. Furthermore, Rose's position in Cameron's story is much more integrated into the historical action than is Evelyn's position in *Pearl Harbor.* Rose interacts with the ship's officers, the crew, the wealthy travelers in first class, the immigrants in steerage, and others on the vessel. Evelyn of *Pearl Harbor* serves primarily as the pilots' love interest

until late in the story when, in evidently manipulated fashion, the screenwriter shows her bravely nursing the wounded sailors.

In creating a story about two talented pilots vying for the affection of one woman, Wallace evidently borrowed a plot structure from a notable film of the 1920s. In many respects, *Pearl Harbor*'s structure resembles that of the movie that won the first Academy Award for Best Picture, William A. Wellman's *Wings* (1927). As in *Pearl Harbor*, the two male stars of *Wings* find themselves caught up in a love triangle. War resolves the conflict in *Wings*, as it does in the 2001 production. In *Wings*, only one pilot returns home alive to claim the girl. Wallace's dramatic design in *Pearl Harbor* is so transparent, however, that his plot device fails to create suspense. The audience readily understands that Ben Affleck's place in the foreground through the first half of the film strongly suggests that Evelyn will fall into his arms at the end of the story.

Pearl Harbor also lacks the familiar nemesis of most cinematic history—a villain whose presence symbolizes important problems faced by the protagonist. In *Titanic*, the sniveling aristocrat Cal Hockley serves this role, as does the White Star Line's J. Bruce Ismay, who insists that the ship maintain a fast course through the iceberg zone. *Pearl Harbor* provides no well-characterized cinematic villains. It does not lambaste the American military authorities who failed to prepare the island defenses adequately. The Japanese military leaders do not serve as the movie's heavies, either. *Pearl Harbor* portrays them critically but not unsympathetically. The Japanese strategists appear thoughtful and, at times, almost regretful about launching the attack. When congratulated for a brilliant war strategy, a Japanese admiral replies, "A brilliant man would find a way not to fight a war." Some of *Pearl Harbor*'s gentleness in portraying the Japanese may be attributed to the producers' marketing plans. Shortly after releasing *Pearl Harbor* in the United States, Bruckheimer and Bay distributed the movie to theaters in Asia. They promoted their film in Japan as a love story and removed the term *Jap* from some places in the dialogue.

The narrative structure created by Bay, Bruckheimer, and Wallace does not connect the audience's emotions to the fate of the victims as effectively as many other modern war stories do. In *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for instance, viewers do not learn a great deal about the individual soldiers seen dying on the beaches of Normandy, but Steven Spielberg's cinematic strategy helps invest the audience's emotions in the fighting. Spielberg follows the attackers as they travel on the landing craft, charge into the water, struggle to secure a position on the beaches, and then attempt to mount an assault on the well-entrenched enemy. Spielberg's method helps the audience sense the soldiers' fear and pain. Viewers of *Pearl Harbor*, in contrast, see only rushed images of American servicemen falling to their deaths. Bay's approach leaves audiences feeling like spectators who are viewing an action-adventure story at a distance rather than like empathetic observers who feel a personal closeness to the tragedy.

Pearl Harbor was certainly not a complete financial and theatrical disaster, for it attracted enough viewers in the United States and abroad to turn a profit. The movie does, nevertheless, serve as a good example of the way a flawed dramatic structure can result in lost opportunities. A more effective storytelling design could have drawn much larger audiences to this exercise in reel history. With a more compelling presentation, the movie could have excited greater interest in the history of Japanese-American enmity and the origins of U.S. involvement in World War II. If *Pearl Harbor* had employed tools of the genre with greater sophistication and intelligence, it might have fueled even greater public interest in books about the tragedy of December 7, 1941. This $135 million movie was disappointing, not just because of its lightweight attention to historical details, but also because it failed to realize the full potential of drama as a powerful enticement to the study of history.

Thus, our answer to the familiar request to identify poor historical cinema can be multilayered but not evasive. Among the premier choices for dramas that present such a grossly distorted view of the past that they are comical in their impact are *Santa Fe Trail* and *They Died with Their Boots On*. They deserve a Brooks award. In many other cases, however, cinematic history mixes shortcomings and achievements within the same production (especially in modern-day films). We can praise Norman Jewison for the superb drama he created in *The Hurricane* and for stimulating the audience's thinking about racial injustice but regret his irresponsible exercise of artistic license, which undermined public confidence in his movie's commentary about the life of a famous figure. In a different but related way, we can applaud Rob Reiner's well-intentioned critique of southern bigotry in *Ghosts of Mississippi* but regret his failure to package the story as an exciting drama that could draw millions to his film. Jewison's movie delivers strong drama but weak treatment of the evidence. Reiner's film is less controversial in its handling of the evidence but more problematic as entertainment. *Pearl Harbor* also delivers mixed results. It presents the attack of December 7, 1941, with extraordinary technological effects, but its disconnected saga about a love triangle fails to engage audiences. In the case of *Pearl Harbor* and other examples of cinematic history, filmmakers rarely miss the history target completely. Even when their aim falls short of the bull's-eye, they often hit the perimeter enough times to excite some admiration.

When history buffs, film enthusiasts, and professional scholars attempt to identify the Hollywood movie that does the finest job portraying history, they may find their task more enlightening if they offer several examples rather than just one. After all, cinema instructs and provokes in different ways. Individual films can make strong contributions to the public's thinking about the past in one respect but be less effective in other ways. No motion picture deserves a mega-Harry because it combines all the desirable qualities of great cinematic history. Several movies do, however, serve as impressive models of specific kinds of achievement. The examples cited here represent a wide variety of cinema types, from big-budget pictures to tightly financed ones, from feature films to TV specials (including one from public television), from stories about politics to epic films about men at war, from American-made productions to a foreign-made example that Hollywood distributors adopted. The four suggested categories do not encompass all the possibilities; other forms of achievement can be identified as well. But these examples constitute some of the most important contributions good cinematic history can make to the public's thinking about the past.

Communicating a Feeling for a Different Time and Place

We have already noted that movies are generally poor communicators of specific historical information and ideas. A student of history is likely to get a much broader understanding of the French Revolution, the American Revolution, or the Russian Revolution by devoting a few hours to reading a book about these events than by watching a movie about them. Motion pictures typically focus tightly on the lives of a few players involved in one or two major events; they do not comment broadly on great social transformations, economic changes, intellectual currents, or other wide-ranging developments. Hollywood dramas sometimes suggest viewpoints on these matters, but only peripherally, referencing them briefly in the course of telling a story. Yet in another respect, a motion picture can deliver a great deal of information to viewers. In specific scenes, a filmmaker may load up the historical stimuli, giving the audience a great deal to see and think about.

A popular war movie by German director Wolfgang Petersen demonstrated this kind of cinematic contribution. *Das Boot* (The Boat) appeared in Europe in 1981 and was an instant hit. The film went Hollywood in 1982, receiving widespread distribution in the United States and the world, and it was re-released in a longer director's cut in 1997. *Das Boot* was the eleventh highest grossing foreign film to reach the U.S. market at the end of the twentieth century. The movie's enormous success helped open Hollywood's doors to its director, and Petersen went on to make a number of action-oriented movies in the United States, including *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Air Force One* (1997), and *The Perfect Storm* (2000).

Das Boot focuses on a German submarine crew during World War II that has many harrowing experiences due to the U-boats' increased vulnerability to Allied military measures. The crew eventually manages to get the damaged vessel back to port in La Rochelle, France, but the submarine is then destroyed in an air attack. The story is based roughly on the real-life experiences of Captain Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock, one of the top German U-boat commanders. Lehmann-Willenbrock ranked sixth in the Third Reich's navy in terms of Allied tonnage destroyed. *Das Boot* gets many of its ideas from a book by Gunther Bucheim, a sketch artist who traveled with Lehmann-Willenbrock on the U-96 during World War II.

Petersen's movie does not present a glamorous picture of good-looking, patriotic, gung-ho underwater heroes, such as the sailors seen in many earlier Hollywood movies about the U.S. Navy. *Das Boot* shows the U-boat crew living in great difficulty and danger. It offers a close-up, realistic picture of the men's cramped quarters. The claustrophobic ship is narrow and 150 feet long, and its compartments contain a maze of pipes and wires. Engine noise is almost constant. Sausages and pumpernickel hang from the pipes. The sailors look shabby; their beards grow longer as the story progresses, and they become dirty and battle-fatigued. They experience periods of boredom punctuated by frightening moments of mortal threat. *Das Boot* communicates the terror the crewmen sense when they hear the "ping-ping" sounds of an enemy's sonic searches. The submariners sweat with fear as the depth charges explode, and at times, their vessel seems about to split at the seams. Through disturbing images of danger and death, *Das Boot* delivers a powerful antiwar message and challenges the glamorous perspective of submarine warfare evident in many war movies. Petersen's drama supports the grim statistical evidence it identifies in a caption: the death toll for the men who went to sea in German U-boats during World War II was approximately 75 percent.[26]

Das Boot's main contribution to historical thinking is not in the realm of providing details about the war, however. It says virtually nothing about the causes of the global conflict or the overall state of Admiral Karl Dönitz's U-boat campaign under the Third Reich. The film is memorable for a specific history lesson rather than a broad one. It packs an emotional punch because of the stimulating way it gives the audience a feeling for the submariners' experience. The information load in Petersen's movie comes not in the form of statistics or other details about the war at sea but in an abundance of evidence about

specific conditions inside one vessel. *Das Boot* has a strong impact on viewers because it gives them a sense that they are being exposed to a realistic historical setting. Audiences leave the theaters feeling that they have witnessed the frightening undersea conditions of World War II combat.

One of the best American-made movies that uniquely communicates a feeling for the wartime experience is Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. The most memorable scenes occur near the beginning, when the movie portrays American soldiers storming the beaches of northern France on D day, 1944. Spielberg's film shows brave soldiers in action, but not in the manner of many earlier combat movies. The men are frightened as they ready themselves to charge into the hail of bullets and exploding shells. One vomits in the landing craft; another cries for his mother while under heavy fire. Several appear terribly frightened when they find themselves pinned down. There is confusion and chaos as the American soldiers are trapped on the beaches, easy prey for well-armed German units holding the high ground. The sea turns red with blood, and the noise on the beaches seems deafening. Through this horrible picture of the blind terror experienced by men in combat, Spielberg challenges the gung-ho war images from movies that made fighting seem exciting and glamorous. His employment of the handheld camera creates an impression that the viewer is present at the battlefront, witness to the making of a documentary created by cinematographers who were on the beach, exposed to bullets and mortars along with the soldiers.

Almost any movie about wartime combat produced in the new era of peace across Western Europe can be called an antiwar film. Certainly *Saving Private Ryan*'s depiction of the frightening and bloody action in the first days of American fighting in northern France makes a critical statement about World War II's impact on its participants. Yet the film suggests in subtle ways that the Americans who risked their lives in that great enterprise are worthy of praise. At the beginning, the movie shows a U.S. flag flapping in the breeze, signaling a patriotic message, and other scenes depict sacrifices made by U.S. soldiers. The portrayal of the beach invasion suggests that the soldiers are heroes, but they seem more vulnerable and hence more realistic than the one-dimensional stereotypes featured in old Hollywood war pictures. Even the soldiers who shake or cry in battle seem deserving of our salute.

After the eye-opening D-day sequences, *Saving Private Ryan* maintains audience interest by turning into a fine modern-day example of the Hollywood combat genre. Jeanine Basinger, author of the best book on Hollywood combat movies, cleverly identifies these components in a review of *Saving Private Ryan* for the American Historical Association. She observes that the combat genre often features a hero (in this case, Tom Hanks) who is forced to make

Sergeant Horvath (Tom Sizemore), Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies), Private Jackson (Barry Pepper), and Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks, right) are pinned down by enemy sniper fire as they try to help a terrified little girl in Saving Private Ryan *(1998). Steven Spielberg's movie challenges the familiar gung-ho images of earlier war movies that made combat seem exciting and glamorous. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

controversial decisions. His military unit invariably includes a variety of stock characters familiar to Hollywood war films, such as a smart aleck from Brooklyn, a religious sharpshooter from the South, and a Jewish soldier. There is some form of tension within the ranks in these combat movies, as one of the tough and talented soldiers challenges the leader. But like the Private Reiben character (Edward Burns) in *Saving Private Ryan,* this rebel shapes up in the end and makes a significant contribution to the fighting. Over the course of the story, action waxes and wanes as the men experience both safety and danger (during some relaxing moments, they joke with one another and tell stories about their girls back home). The combat movie reaches a climax, notes Basinger, through a tremendous Armageddon-like confrontation with the enemy. Often the American heroes find themselves badly outnumbered and outgunned in this concluding battle, and after a difficult struggle that results in the loss of a number of characters the audience has come to respect, the Americans achieve a painful but glorious victory. As Basinger observes, *Saving Private Ryan*'s dramatic structure features all these familiar components of the genre.[27]

Despite the movie's strong conformity to Hollywood storytelling practices following the D-day scenes, *Saving Private Ryan* continues to reference history

in a number of places throughout the movie and communicates a realistic impression of wartime experiences. This sense of verisimilitude is especially evident in the final battle, which shows the men trying to hold a bridge against a substantial German fighting force backed up by tanks. Working with an extraordinarily authentic-looking set representing a wrecked French town with bombed-out buildings and debris-laden streets, Spielberg draws his story to a close with another emotion-packed portrayal of the experience of combat. This segment of the film connects the audience again to the earlier messages about sacrifice and heroism. It also bases its fictional, microcosmic look at the fighting on a factual foundation from history. The Tom Hanks character resembles Major Tom Howie, a mild-mannered teacher of English literature who led his men in a costly but important firefight in the little French town of Saint-Lô a few days after the Allied landings. Howie fought with guns blazing and, like the Hanks character, died in action. A day later, with an American victory secured, soldiers draped his body with the Stars and Stripes and hoisted it on top of a pile of stones. Howie became famous among GIs as "the major of Saint-Lô."[28]

Interpreting Major Historical Developments

We can better distinguish the second category from the first by comparing the attractions of *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Longest Day* (1962), two movies about a related theme. Each offers a perspective on D day, but in very different ways. *Ryan* looks at the situation through the eyes of a few fictitious characters and shows the experience of dangerous combat. Spielberg's movie does not present much information about the actions of major figures in the war, and it provides little detail about the Americans' overall progress during the first days of the Normandy invasion. In contrast, Darryl F. Zanuck's movie about D day delivers a great deal of historical information. It portrays the thoughts and actions of American, British, French, and German military leaders and also depicts the actions of several real-life individuals involved in the fighting. *Ryan* instructs primarily by demonstrating the emotional impact of warfare; *The Longest Day* informs through a study of the strategy of battle. *Ryan* offers almost no information about Allied military plans, the Germans' response to the attack, or the significance of the D-day invasion in the overall struggle against Hitler; *The Longest Day* delivers insights on all these subjects. Neither film is necessarily superior to the other. Each contributes in different ways to the public's thinking about the past. A comparison of the two accentuates the conclusion that good films may view the past in very different ways. There can be no single model of effective cinematic history.

The Longest Day is a superb epic, one of the most authentic-looking Hollywood representations of an important moment in history. Like any cinematic drama, it contains some fictional flourishes and manipulation of evidence, but the movie's overall integrity in the handling of details is highly commendable. Zanuck committed more than $10 million to the production (big bucks back in 1962) and monitored the film's treatment of historical evidence quite carefully.[29] He based many of the movie's portrayals on individuals described in Cornelius Ryan's best-selling book of 1959 by the same title, which relied on interviews with more than 1,000 participants in the engagement and sold 800,000 copies in its first year.[30] Zanuck featured some vignettes about D-day actions that seemed so incredible that critics berated him for mixing too much fiction with fact. For example, they could not believe the movie's portrayal of Lord Lovat (Peter Lawford), who exhibits colorful bravado in the film, and they challenged the authenticity of a scene showing nuns running into shellfire to aid wounded French troops. The producer confidently responded that these and other memorable depictions were well documented.

Zanuck did employ some creative license in telling his story, especially in portraying the military actions. When the facts failed to support good drama, he added touches of fiction. "Anything changed was an asset to the film," he said in defense of the adjustments. "There is nothing duller on the screen than being accurate but not dramatic." For instance, *The Longest Day* depicts efforts to seize the Pagasus bridge before the Germans could blow it up. Real Allied soldiers found no charges planted under the bridge; instead, the charges turned up in a nearby shed. The movie, however, portrays engineers bravely climbing across the bridge's girders to remove the explosives. *The Longest Day* shows American invaders blowing up a large concrete barrier and sending bulldozers and tanks through a gaping hole in the German defenses. That effort was in the invaders' original plan, but German control of the heights forced Allied soldiers to work their way behind the German defenses and attack from the rear. Zanuck opted for the more visually dramatic but fictional crashing of the barricades. Also, his movie shows the men rushing out of their landing craft, charging the beaches, and firing away at the enemy. Actually, these landings looked more like the scenes in *Saving Private Ryan.* Often the attackers dropped into the water awkwardly and had to struggle to shore behind a hail of bullets and bombs, hiding behind beach obstacles. By the time they came to rest at the base of the bluff, they were exhausted.[31]

Despite these and other adjustments of the facts, *The Longest Day* works marvelously as a three-hour epic about one of the most important military operations in world history. It gives audiences a fascinating overview of the extraordinary challenges associated with the massive operation and communicates provocative explanations for the Allies' success and the Germans' defeat in the encounters. (Fundamentally, *The Longest Day* attributes victory to the

superiority of democracy over dictatorship. In one of the movie's memorable lines, a German general says, "We are disillusioned witnesses of a fact that will seem hard to believe to future historians, but it is still the truth: No one must wake up the Führer.")

Schindler's List, another Hollywood production set in the World War II period, also does a superb job of interpreting a major subject from history. Steven Spielberg's 1993 film examines the Holocaust but, like most cinematic history, does not attempt to cover the story comprehensively. Instead, it focuses on the experiences of one individual, a German entrepreneur named Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson). Through his story, the audience encounters many of the significant historical developments related to the Holocaust.

At the beginning of the movie, Schindler is an urbane wheeler-dealer who courts the Nazi military authorities, hoping to gain business influence. A womanizer and a rather corrupt figure in his financial dealings, Schindler demonstrates no particular sympathy for the Jews. He takes over a confiscated enamel factory in Krakow and works out an arrangement with a talented Jewish accountant, Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), to obtain the services of a large group of Jewish workers. Schindler protects these individuals from the Nazi work camps, presumably for his own economic benefit. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Schindler acquires a strong sense of sympathy for the Jews in his charge. This personal transformation seems to come, in part, from what he witnesses of Nazi behavior. The actions of an important Nazi contact, Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), are influential. Goeth is, like Schindler, a hedonist, but with a pathological mean streak. He shoots Jewish victims for sport, showing no remorse. Schindler witnesses the destruction of the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, a horrible sight that seems to affect him deeply. When Hitler's "final solution" threatens to send his Jewish workers to the death camps, Schindler manages to save them from extermination. In one of the movie's most frightening sequences, 300 women and children among Schindler's Jews are mistakenly shipped in boxcars to Auschwitz, but they are eventually returned to Schindler. The story ends with the collapse of the Third Reich and Schindler's extraordinary success in protecting the lives of the 1,100 Jews assigned to him during Hitler's campaign of annihilation. In the final minutes of the movie, Spielberg shows some of the real-life Schindler Jews in the 1990s honoring the hero at his grave site.

The success of *Schindler's List* comes not only from the gripping story but also from the effective filmmaking strategy of the director and his cinematographer, Janusz Kaminski. Except for brief sections at the beginning and end and one small flourish within the story, the movie is shot in black and white. As mentioned earlier in connection with the study of genre, this absence of color gives the film a documentary-like appearance and, as Spielberg notes, resembles the way many people first encountered the Holocaust: in newsreels. The flourish of color comes late in the story when one little girl among the many Jewish victims appears in red clothing. She is one of the youngsters attempting to escape the Nazi pursuers, but some minutes later, the audience sees her again among the dead children. Through this clever device, Spielberg and Kaminski draw the audience's attention to a single victim. Their movie points to a tragedy that destroyed 6 million European Jews, but it also attempts to personalize that extraordinary statistic by directing viewers' emotions to the experiences of one representative little girl.[32]

The movie's scenes are tremendously detailed and often quite authentic. Much of the specific action relates to behavior reported in historical research and interviews. In one scene, for instance, *Schindler's List* shows a train transporting Jews to the death camps. Along the tracks stands a little boy who draws his finger across his throat, signaling to the captives that they are heading to their deaths. In the documentary *Shoah* (1985), an elderly Polish peasant describes how he made this gesture when trains carrying Jewish victims passed through his village.

Schindler's List received tremendous critical acclaim around the world and won the Academy Award for Best Picture, but a minority of commentators registered some harsh criticisms. Their objections are worth considering because they illuminate some of the debates that continue to swirl around Hollywood's representations of the past, even highly sophisticated ones.

One of the most repeated charges was that Spielberg attempted to "trivialize" and "sensationalize" the Holocaust.[33] Some supported a position that Theodor W. Adorno had advanced years before: after Auschwitz, said Adorno, poetry could no longer be written. Israeli writer Tom Segev expressed this sentiment in his criticism of *Schindler's List*. "I don't think there is any need to dramatize the Holocaust," he said. "It is sufficiently dramatic in itself." Segev asserted that "every artistic treatment of the Holocaust is bound to fail."[34] One of the most vehement critics in this respect was Claude Lanzmann, creator of *Shoah*, the influential documentary about the Holocaust. Lanzmann pointed out that his film relied on the memories of witnesses and did not attempt to represent their experiences with music, archival film, or dramatizations.[35] He spoke of the "unrepresentability of Auschwitz," suggesting that Spielberg had commercialized a sacred subject.[36] "Fiction is a transgression," said Lanzmann. "I deeply believe that there are some things that cannot and should not be represented."[37]

Another criticism that appeared frequently related to the way *Schindler's List* characterizes people and groups positively or negatively. Critics complained

Jewish plant manager Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley, left) speaks with his boss and protector Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson, right) in Schindler's List *(1993). Some critics complained that Stern, the movie's only major Jewish character, is a passive wimp. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

that the film puts Jews at the margins of the story, presenting them primarily as faceless victims. The only major Jewish character, Itzhak Stern, seems a passive wimp, they charged. Some maintained that many of the movie's minor Jewish characters are quite unappealing, coming across as money-grubbing, avaricious stereotypes. A disproportionate number of them are small in stature, large-nosed, disheveled, and unkempt, observed Sara R. Horowitz, whereas Schindler has the appearance of towering height, cleanliness, and fashionableness.[38] *Schindler's List* is not a courageous movie, critics argued, because it takes the commercial approach of presenting Jewish victims as sheep saved by a heroic Gentile. A more meaningful movie about the Holocaust would have put Jewish characters at the center of the story. Not surprisingly, representatives of other ethnic groups criticized the depictions, too. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs,* for example, Andrew Nagorski argued that the film's few images of the Polish people seem to suggest "that the only roles Poles played was to applaud Nazi terror." Nagorski also complained that *Schindler's List* leaves viewers "with no idea that the war was aimed at more than the destruction of the Jews or that there were other victims of Nazi atrocities."[39]

Others complained that the story slipped too easily into a hero-villain contrast. They objected especially to the characterization of Nazi villain Amon Goeth. These detractors argued that Goeth's psychopathology and barbarism did not give audiences an authentic, more typical picture of a German fascist. Often, the Nazis were not monstrous products of dysfunctional families, as suggested in *Schindler's List;* many Nazis were frighteningly normal, and these brutal killers might be lawyers, corporate executives, professors, or even clergymen.

None of these criticisms fatally damages the motion picture; indeed, the appearance of these objections in the media suggests that this powerful film on a highly sensitive topic stirred the thinking of viewers, prompting them to imagine a variety of ways in which the tragedy could be depicted on the screen. Each critic projected his or her own vision of the subject. For Claude Lanzmann, the ideal film was evidently an interview-oriented documentary without dramatic representations. Sara R. Horowitz appeared to favor a story that focused on good-looking Jewish heroes and heroines, and Andrew Nagorski's picture of the tragedy would draw attention to the plight of non-Jewish victims. Each perspective would examine the Holocaust in a different manner, and each had the potential to deliver a memorable commentary about a troubling and perplexing chapter of history.

As noted in the chapter on cinematic history as genre, however, movies do not provide comprehensive portraits of a subject. They adopt points of view, focus on just one or two characters, and privilege perspectives that are likely to attract broad audience interest. For Spielberg, that opportunity appeared in the form of a drama about an unusual man who is at first indifferent to the plight of the Jews but is transformed into a heroic savior by the end of the war. Viewing the Holocaust through the perspective of Oskar Schindler's wartime actions was not the only way Spielberg could have addressed the subject, but it certainly was an attractive mechanism for drawing millions of moviegoers, an audience of mostly non-Jews, into the story.

Probing the Past through Biography

Virtually all Hollywood perspectives on history offer biographical approaches to their subject, presenting issues and events in terms of the experiences of one or two principal figures. Movies personalize history by placing these few figures at the center of their dramas, and they trace important developments by viewing the way these individuals experienced them. By following the activities of one or two major characters, Hollywood dramas can suggest broad questions related to their experiences. Motion pictures can leave audiences wondering: Why did the hero or heroine suffer these difficulties? What lessons can be learned from the example of their struggles? By studying a few lives, movies can provoke the audience's thinking about the experiences of many others who found themselves in similar situations.

Of course, many motion pictures fail to present a sophisticated biographical treatment. They portray one-dimensional stereotypes, simplistically heroic figures who exhibit almost no shortcomings in terms of skill, motivation, or moral character. These individuals do not resemble real people; they are dramatic icons. Also, the simplistic biographical perspective often presents the protagonists as fully formed, mature individuals, giving the audience little sense of the important factors that helped shape their personalities and inform their ideas. In addition, cinematic history frequently suggests that great men and great women can change history rather easily. Hollywood productions often show strongly motivated individuals knocking over virtually every obstacle that stands between them and their goals. Such dramas fail to deliver a realistic picture of life's challenges, one that recognizes not only how individuals can influence society but also how society can have a substantial impact on individuals.

The two outstanding examples of biographical cinema under consideration here do not suffer from these familiar shortcomings. They present multidimensional personalities; their heroes and heroines are noble but also flawed. The films throw light on questions about personality formation, providing audiences with a good deal of information about the influential experiences in the characters' youth and young adulthood. The films also recognize the limitations of a single person's influence. They do not simply portray dynamic personalities dominating the people and events around them. These films introduce realistic figures, people who are shaped by history but who also manage to influence the world they live in.

These fine examples of biographical cinema are also notable for their authenticity. Although the creators exercised artistic license in the handling of evidence—as all cinematic historians do—they were generally respectful toward the historical evidence and knowledgeable about current historical interpretations. The filmmakers exhibited seriousness and sophistication in the handling of details and a determination to represent the facts about the historical figure responsibly and intelligently. Often, a fine book serves as the foundation for the portrayal, as in the two examples cited here. The filmmakers benefited from the availability of outstanding publications that dealt with the individuals and the times in a particularly sophisticated manner.

Eleanor and Franklin (1976), a four-hour ABC Television miniseries, bases its drama on an excellent biography of Eleanor Roosevelt by Joseph P. Lash. The author provides a great deal of personal information about the former first lady and builds his story on her letters and papers (as a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt, he was given the first opportunity to work with the documents).

Lash also interviewed many people who knew Eleanor Roosevelt, including some who had been close to the Roosevelt family when Eleanor was a child. Thanks to his privileged situation, his impressive writing skills, and his commitment to creating an honest treatment that recognized Eleanor's flaws as well as her strengths, Lash's 1971 book received an enthusiastic reception from reviewers and won the Pulitzer prize for biography.[40]

James Costigan, writer of the television series, brought additional skills to the presentation of Eleanor Roosevelt's life. Costigan composed a brilliant screenplay that effectively communicates the principal messages of the biography. His dramatic format begins by focusing on the end of the couple's relationship, depicting Eleanor's reaction to the news of Franklin's death in 1945. In the course of mourning, Eleanor recalls many of the most significant events in her life. Occasionally, these flashbacks are punctuated with brief portrayals of her days of mourning—a device that nicely provokes the viewers' thinking. The audience wonders, how did the impressive, self-confident, and admired woman of 1945 emerge from the shy and troubled child depicted in the first hour of the film?

Eleanor and Franklin relates a story of personal growth. It shows Eleanor suffering from low self-esteem in her early years. She senses that her mother does not love her because she lacks the beauty of the many high-society belles in the extended Roosevelt family. Eleanor cares deeply for her father, but her mother and maternal grandmother eventually treat her father like a pariah because of his bouts with alcoholism and other excesses. Later, as a shy but intelligent teenager, Eleanor attends her "coming out" dance, where she encounters her fifth cousin, Franklin, a spirited, self-confident teenager who takes a liking to her. Eventually, Eleanor goes off to a fine private school abroad and excels in her studies. At Allenswood, she quickly emerges as a leader among the young scholars and as a favorite of the woman who runs the institution. Upon returning to the United States, Eleanor meets Franklin again, and an extended period of courtship begins. The future president presses for marriage, despite his mother's insidious efforts to break up the relationship. After much delay, Eleanor and Franklin marry, and Eleanor settles into the traditional role of wife and mother. In this period, she is dominated by her husband and her mother-in-law.

Liberation comes to Eleanor in stages. The two most important developments that emancipate Eleanor from her subservient role are the discovery of Franklin's infidelity and the crisis of his battle with polio. In the first instance, Eleanor recognizes that she can no longer find personal satisfaction in wifely devotion to her husband, because he has broken her trust. In helping her husband in his struggle with polio, Eleanor asserts herself, arguing against her

mother-in-law's plans to place Franklin in retirement at the family estate along the Hudson River. Eleanor encourages her husband to turn away from defeatism and depression, and she convinces him to remain active politically. She aids Franklin's political career by becoming a forceful political operator in her own right. By the end of the film, the shy and ugly duckling has transformed into a lady of great inner beauty and impressive leadership skills. A final caption recalls some of Eleanor Roosevelt's national and international achievements in the years after Franklin's death.

History is always on the periphery of *Eleanor and Franklin* rather than at the center. The TV series delivers compelling drama about personal relationships and an individual's metamorphosis; it offers only limited details about the public role of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt in twentieth-century American politics. Nevertheless, the biographical treatment exposes audiences to a number of important historical subjects over the course of four hours. It introduces them to the social life of the rich and famous at the turn of the century. Viewers meet President Theodore Roosevelt and learn about "reformers" in settlement houses in the early 1900s. They also learn about the political struggles between Democrats and Republicans, particularly through conversations involving the only character who manages to establish emotional closeness with both Eleanor and Franklin: FDR's adviser Louis Howe. Audiences also catch glimpses of American life in earlier times, from conditions in the rural countryside to the streets and parlors of New York City and Washington, D.C. Particularly impressive is the film's depiction of Eleanor's train trip with FDR's casket from Warm Springs, Georgia, to Washington, D.C., in 1945. It reveals a multitude of poor Americans standing along the railroad tracks, paying their last respects to the man credited with pulling their nation out of the Great Depression and leading the country toward victory in World War II. *Eleanor and Franklin* stirs curiosity about these and many other important matters associated with early-twentieth-century American history.

The film also raises significant questions about Eleanor's experiences, queries that are presented subtly rather than directly. Especially important, it exposes viewers to separate gender spheres in the upper-class social environment of turn-of-the-century America. As audiences watch Eleanor beginning her married life largely separated from her husband's professional activities, they are encouraged to ponder how women sought fulfillment under conditions inherited from Victorian times. They may ask: Which developments served to reduce divisions between men's and women's spheres of activity? Did a husband's marital infidelities or temporary removal from a professional career sometimes influence a woman's emotional emancipation, as in the case of Eleanor Roosevelt?

Above all, *Eleanor and Franklin* shows that individuals have histories, much as nations do. Character and personality are not fixed at birth; they are formed in large part from a person's interaction with the physical and social environment. In Eleanor's case, a vibrant woman learned to resist her personal demons and ultimately triumph over them. Unlike many dramas that show a fully developed figure throughout the story, *Eleanor and Franklin* explores the evolution of character and personality over time. It never suggests that it can proffer a confident explanation for all of Eleanor Roosevelt's behavior, relegating some issues to the mystery of human psychology. Yet it certainly speculates about the sources of Eleanor's notable strength and integrity, basing its guesswork on the informed observations presented in Lash's impressive biography.[41]

The Execution of Private Slovik (1974) is another outstanding study of an individual's place in history. Eddie D. Slovik was the only U.S. soldier to be executed for desertion in World War II. This made-for-television film about the decisions that led to his death was produced by Richard Levinson and William Link, two unusually talented and accomplished creators of prime-time programs who did a great deal to develop socially responsible entertainment. When their popular show *Mannix* came under criticism for gratuitous violence, they responded with *Columbo,* a detective show that emphasized the cerebral challenge of catching the killer rather than the physical depiction of the murder. Levinson and Link also produced a dramatic special that raised serious questions about whether television programs can influence violent behavior. Another drama by Levinson and Link dealt with the role of guns in violent crime, and still another took up the then-controversial question of tobacco's responsibility for physical illnesses. In addition to these dramatic specials on sensitive issues, Levinson and Link created popular mystery series for TV, such as *Ellery Queen* and *Murder She Wrote.*

Levinson and Link based *The Execution of Private Slovik* on a fine book by William Bradford Huie. Huie had taken an interest in Slovik's case and tracked down documents that suggested that the troubled young soldier had not been treated very sympathetically by the U.S. Army. A change in the Judge Advocate General's Office had eliminated some of the red tape blocking access to evidence in the case, and Huie studied the newly released papers and interviewed people who had known Slovick. He also talked with Slovik's wife, and she allowed him to read the many letters Slovik had written to her. The revelations in Huie's book were startling, for the Slovik execution had occurred during the last months of the war in Europe, when other war stories easily eclipsed reports about this single soldier's fate. Thus, not many people

knew about the case. In fact, Slovik's wife was surprised to learn the information Huie uncovered about her husband's problems with the army.[42]

Once Huie's book was published, the Slovik case looked like a good topic for docudrama, but political controversies kept the project from reaching the screen for many years. In 1959, Frank Sinatra acquired rights to the story, and he assigned Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood Ten, to write the screenplay. Maltz had served a one-year jail sentence for refusing to identify communists at hearings held by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Walter Winchell and Hedda Hopper brought public attention to Maltz's background, pressuring Sinatra to remove the controversial writer from the project. The American Legion lobbied for Maltz's removal, and Joseph P. Kennedy also warned Sinatra to drop Maltz. (Kennedy's son was running for president in 1960, and the elder Kennedy did not want JFK's candidacy harmed by his public association with Sinatra.) Rather quickly, Sinatra caved in to the pressure and removed Maltz's name from the film project. Sinatra also learned that it would be difficult to produce the movie as long as Dwight D. Eisenhower was alive. Eisenhower, as leader of the Allies' military campaigns in Europe, had given final authorization for Slovik's execution, and release of the film could be viewed as criticism of the famous war hero. Eventually, Sinatra gave up his efforts to produce the Eddie Slovik story, and Levinson and Link obtained the rights to it.

The television drama is extraordinarily faithful to the evidence Huie presents in his book, and it makes a commendable effort to render the details with authenticity. The script incorporates much of the language reported in the official documents, such as the comments made by military authorities during Slovik's court-martial. When the drama portrays Slovik's time in the army, it features a voice-over as Slovik (Martin Sheen) reads from letters to his wife back home. The sound track includes some of the actual music Slovik heard (particularly "Tangerine," a favorite of Slovik and his wife). The end of the movie has no artificial music, however; the audience hears only the soldiers' footsteps as they move away from the execution site. The drama follows the details of Huie's book so closely that it is difficult to find specific examples of cinematic manipulation. One of the few notable adjustments of the facts relates to the film's portrayal of the execution. The movie shows Slovik choking up and sobbing as a soldier places a hood over his head, whereas the documents indicate that Slovik was quiet and courageous. This is hardly an egregious manipulation of the evidence. Levinson and Link's embellishment only helps heighten the emotional impact of the depiction, accentuating the horror.

The Execution of Private Slovik makes a strong case on behalf of the victim, but it does not present the evidence in a one-sided manner. The drama shows why U.S. military leaders made a decision that seems quite wrongheaded to many who have viewed the evidence years after the fact. Levinson and Link's film portrays military authorities speaking of the Slovik case as they addressed it in 1945. Eddie Slovik refused to fight when U.S. forces were pinned down in the Hürtgen Forest and were suffering serious casualties. His case came up for court-martial at a time when American soldiers faced even greater casualties and frustration in the Battle of the Bulge. In both military engagements, a number of U.S. soldiers—including the recent, bottom-of-the-barrel draftees such as Slovik—deserted in the face of enemy fire. In the movie, various officers responsible for making decisions in the case against Slovik express concern that discipline will break down if soldiers think that they can evade military action with impunity. Slovik's case is an attractive example for these individuals, because the young deserter had a criminal record before he went into the military (Slovik was involved in only minor infractions).[43]

The Execution of Private Slovik also reveals that decision makers up the line in the U.S. military chose capital punishment as the sentence because the rules required it. Slovik had clearly taken responsibility for deserting and had written a note spelling out what he had done and that he would run away again if sent to the front. Some (but not all) individuals in the military passed along the recommendation for execution, expecting that such an extraordinary punishment would not actually be meted out. But when the recommendation reached the top, General Eisenhower was busy making important strategic decisions, and he let the order stand.[44]

Although the movie examines the conditions and rationales that led to Eddie Slovik's execution in front of a firing squad, it also presents a great deal of evidence that undermines the case for his execution. After focusing on Slovik's last day as a military prisoner, the movie flashes back and examines his personal background. The story characterizes Slovik much as his friends, family, and fellow soldiers remembered him—as a good-hearted but shy and troubled young man who is distrustful of institutions. As a teenager, he gets into difficulties with the law and spends a lengthy period in reform school. One of the authorities at the school takes a liking to him and urges him to find a good woman when he gets out, someone who will give him direction in his life. Slovik soon finds such a relationship, and as the counselor expected, it transforms him. Newly married and deeply in love, Slovik gets a decent job and moves into small but attractive living quarters with his wife.

This brief, happy interlude comes to an abrupt end when he receives notice to report to the military. The U.S. Army was desperate for manpower in the final, bloody year of the war and was turning to individuals such as Slovik, men with criminal records who would ordinarily be rejected. Slovik attempts

to obtain deferment to care for his epileptic and chronically ill wife, but the army denies his request. Nerve-racked by the army experience, Slovik writes 376 letters to his wife in 372 days, indicating in some correspondence that he is considering desertion. He takes that action in his first combat experiences in France, running away from the firefight and turning himself in to a Canadian unit. Reporting that he was paralyzed with fear when the shelling occurred, he writes the letter to the U.S. Army that puts him on the road to the execution. In this manner, the film explains Slovik's controversial action in terms of his personal background. The biographical treatment attempts to show why this particular individual resisted the army's demands and became the test case for punishing deserters.

The Execution of Private Slovik presents enough heart-wrenching information to convince most viewers that Slovik should not have been shot. The drama shows that the U.S. Army needed to make an example of someone, and Slovik's case suited that purpose. Slovik already had a criminal record, and as Martin Sheen says in the film (and Slovik expressed in real life), "They are shooting me for the bread I stole when I was twelve years old." The movie never slams viewers with a heavy-handed suggestion that they must conclude in Slovik's favor, however. The preponderance of information simply weighs in most impressively on his side. Overall, then, *The Execution of Private Slovik* presents a sophisticated, fair-minded review of the principal details. It exposes the audience to both critical and supporting evidence about its subject and communicates its message with integrity and subtlety.

A ringing endorsement of the movie's softly stated point of view came out thirteen years later in a remarkable essay by one of the men who had made the military judgment regarding guilt and execution. In an article published in *American Heritage,* Benedict B. Kimmelman explained why he regretted his decision to convict Slovik. Kimmelman observed that the deliberations had not been fair; Slovik's defense counsel was not an attorney, only five witnesses spoke at the hearings, and Slovik remained mute during the court-martial. General Eisenhower did not even read Slovik's plea for mercy. Kimmelman had been taken captive by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, so he did not learn of Slovik's execution until after his release. The news of Slovik's death by firing squad upset him. Kimmelman had seen many U.S. soldiers demoralized, emotionally paralyzed, and unwilling to pursue combat during the brutal fighting at the Bulge. He expressed sympathy for young men like Slovik who were unable to deal with the frightening situation. Their failures deserved disciplinary action, Kimmelman acknowledged, but hardly the draconian action taken against Slovik.[45]

Examining Controversy through Conflicting Perspectives

The Execution of Private Slovik came close to presenting a balanced, two-sided perspective of the case, but the evidence associated with Slovik's personal background, the details of the military's decision making, and the distinctive nature of his punishment (as the only GI executed for desertion during the war) tended to push the film's sympathies in the direction of the victim. Do some movies succeed in creating strongly balanced portrayals of their subjects? Can cinematic history challenge audiences to make judgments by confronting them with two or more well-documented arguments? Do some dramas effectively remind audiences that interpreting history often calls for difficult decision making? Can motion pictures succeed in presenting the search for historical understanding in the fashion of a detective story, where the investigator must study evidence (in a manner, clues), weigh its significance, and decide how to employ it? Can movies encourage audiences to make personal judgments about the past and reach decisions about truth and falsehood, right and wrong, praise and criticism?

The two films under consideration are among the few that perform splendidly in suggesting that balance. Each provokes its audience, delivering a good deal of information that leads viewers in several directions as they evaluate the evidence. Each film creates a pendulum effect, swinging the audience back and forth between perspectives. During some moments in the dramas, the characterizations seem to favor one point of view, but then the sympathy shifts. Throughout the films, words and images hint of contradictory conclusions, and in the end, the stories do not bring closure to the debate. These films encourage viewers to render their own judgments.

It is tremendously difficult to fashion a drama that appears impartial, and students of these films may detect slight interpretive biases in one direction or another. Some degree of bias is likely to be evident, for no filmmaker can approach historical evidence with complete objectivity. By choosing to include specific information and to characterize individuals in a particular manner, as well as in other artistic decisions, the dramatist employs subtle but persuasive techniques that skew a film's perspective. Indeed, it is likely that key production personnel (such as the writer, producer, and director) harbor personal opinions on the subject, despite their public claims about seeking an even-handed examination of it. Still, these movies deserve acclaim for exhibiting such judiciousness in portraying controversial subjects. They are not perfect models of objectivity, but they are more effective than most films in introducing audiences to conflicting viewpoints.

One of the most familiar examples of this achievement is *Patton,* which

won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1970. *Patton*'s creators first planned to take a hagiographic stand, aiming to construct a rather one-sided, favorable perspective on a war hero, but political circumstances influenced their decision to make the characterization more complex.

Early plans to create a movie about one of America's most famous World War II generals, George S. Patton, called for a celebratory film that would honor the military figure as a hero and an inspiration for Americans. The screenplay was to praise Patton's gutsy, unconventional approach to leadership. Frank McCarthy, who had been secretary to General George C. Marshall during World War II, guided the project from the beginning and eventually became the movie's producer. He proposed the concept for the film to Darryl Zanuck of Fox and got the go-ahead to begin planning. A variety of obstacles stood in his way, however. McCarthy needed tanks, jeeps, and other equipment to give his film authenticity, but the U.S. Army would not cooperate. Patton's widow would not cooperate either. After she died, two of Patton's three children refused to work with him as well, feeling that their father had received unfair treatment from the media. George S. Patton II, a lieutenant in the army, was particularly resistant, saying that he would "shoot any SOB who makes a movie about my father." By the time McCarthy was ready to move forward with script writing and production planning (by buying rights to biographies of Patton and securing help from the Spanish army), the United States was in the thick of the Vietnam War, which created a very different condition for the movie's reception. Responding to the new political environment, McCarthy worked to create a balanced movie treatment of General Patton.[46]

From 1965 to 1969, the script went through several revisions, and U.S. military actions in Vietnam became increasingly unpopular. Public demonstrations against the war grew, young Americans protested the draft, and antiwar and antimilitary sentiments found frequent expression in the mass media. McCarthy and director Franklin Schaffner now sensed that they would have to portray their story differently and market it differently as well. They attempted to present both a positive and negative side of the general.[47]

On the one hand, the motion picture they released in 1970 gives the general a heroic characterization. Germany's military leaders praise and fear Patton. The American general expects the soldiers under him to maintain high standards of preparation and discipline. He displays a genius for war-making, yet he is also a cultured and refined figure who shows his humanity while visiting a seriously wounded soldier. Above all, the movie depicts Patton as America's most successful leader in the World War II military campaigns, a key figure in the Allies' success against the powerful German war machine. The film suggests

George S. Patton (George C. Scott) is about to deliver a memorable speech in the first minutes of Franklin J. Schaffner's Patton *(1970). The film presents a heroic picture of the famous general, yet it also raises serious questions about his ideas and behavior. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

that the fighting in Europe might have ended earlier if the Allied military planners had given Patton's troops the gasoline and the green light they needed to pursue the enemy deep into Germany.

On the other hand, *Patton* raises questions about the controversial military figure. It shows the general's arrogance and insensitivity (such as when he slaps a soldier who has suffered psychologically from the combat experience). The movie reveals that Patton proposed generous treatment of defeated Nazi military men at the end of the war, and it suggests that he was overly eager to engage the Russian communists in a war. Most important, the film examines

George S. Patton (George C. Scott) prepares to land at a beachhead in Patton *(1970). Public agitation over the Vietnam War led the movie's producer and director to emphasize that their film was not a simple-minded, gung-ho war picture. (Museum of Modern Art Film Archive)*

Patton's enthusiasm for battle, his eagerness to pursue it for personal glory. Speaking of war, Patton says, "I love it. God help me. I do love it so." In other situations, Patton (George C. Scott) worries that the war will end before he has a chance to direct major victories and achieve the destiny he thinks he deserves. At one point in the film, Patton speaks of reincarnation, claiming that he had been present on the ancient battlefields of history. The film leaves audiences guessing: Is this man a brilliant general or a madman?

When the movie was ready for release in the spring of 1970—a volatile period of intense public controversy about America's role in Vietnam—McCarthy and Schaffner told the media that their picture was not simply a gung-ho, pro-war story. "This is not a war film," said McCarthy.[48] The producer believed that viewers would find the battle scenes horrifying and recognize the movie's antiwar qualities. Schaffner maintained that Patton "was misguided and a man after a headline." He said that the general "hated peace and wanted to start trouble with the Russians."[49] In these comments to the press and in other publicity efforts, the producer and director drew attention to the two-sided nature of their characterization. Representatives of the media understood their message, interpreting the film in the way its creators suggested. "Viewing Patton: Pick Your Angle," headlined the *Wall Street Journal;* "Left, Right Hail War Picture," reported *Variety;* "Patton: Reaction Divided," stated the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner.* The *Herald-Examiner*'s reviewer noted that *Patton* made the general look like a monster to some and a genius to others.[50]

Thus, an unpopular war helped establish the basis for an unusually balanced examination of a brilliant but highly controversial military figure from World War II. From the opening moments of the film (when Patton speaks enthusiastically to troops about the glories of combat and America's impressive military record) and throughout the picture, *Patton* challenges audiences to think, to raise questions, and to make personal judgments. More so than most Hollywood docudramas, *Patton* exposes audiences to clashing perspectives on its subject. A reviewer for the *New Yorker* succinctly identified the film's achievement when he said that the movie "appears to be deliberately planned as a Rorschach test." Patton looked like a true hero to those who believed in military values, said the writer, a "red-blooded American who loves to fight and whose crude talk is straight talk." To those who despised militarism, however, *Patton* showed "the worst kind of red-blooded American mystical maniac who *believes* in fighting." In their eyes, the general was "symbolic proof of the madness of the whole military complex."[51] In a unique and highly entertaining way, then, *Patton* manages to accomplish a rare achievement—a well-substantiated presentation of more than one perspective on a famous figure.

Concealed Enemies (1984) is the second outstanding example of a docudrama that brilliantly confronts viewers with conflicting evidence and challenges them to judge its significance. This made-for-TV movie produced by Peter Cook appeared on PBS Television in 1984 and won an Emmy for Best Miniseries. The WGBH-TV film presents an exceptionally balanced investigation of the confrontation between Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers in the 1940s. The Hiss-Chambers affair attracted public interest when Chambers, an editor at *Time* and a former Communist Party member, accused Hiss of being a fellow Communist back in the 1930s. Later, Chambers charged that Hiss had been involved in espionage and had supplied confidential documents to the Soviets. These claims were shocking, for Hiss had a distinguished reputation. He was a Harvard-educated lawyer, an important figure in the New Deal

In the fashion of a detective story, Concealed Enemies *(1984) reveals evidence that, at various points, appears to support the case of either Alger Hiss or Whittaker Chambers. (WGBH-TV, Boston)*

administration, and an officer in the U.S. State Department who had participated in the Yalta negotiations and the creation of the United Nations. At first, Hiss appeared to be innocent of the charges, but evidence began to mount in congressional hearings and grand jury investigations that cast doubt on Hiss's testimony. Eventually, Hiss received a sentence of five years in prison on two counts of perjury (he served forty-four months). When Hiss received his sentence, conservatives and liberals argued vehemently about his guilt or innocence. Debates over Hiss's supposed involvement with communism remained intense through the following decades.[52]

Concealed Enemies straddles the fence in this great debate. It presents a strong case for both Chambers and Hiss, examining much of the conflicting evidence that intrigued and confused Americans back in the 1940s. It challenges viewers with a detective-like investigation into a complex legal case, refusing to favor decisively either of the historic figures under study.

Peter Riegert (playing young Congressman Richard Nixon, who was active in the investigation) concisely states the main question that energizes the drama when he questions whether Hiss or Chambers is telling the truth. "Whoever is lying," says Nixon, "is the greatest actor America has ever produced." *Concealed Enemies* never suggests which character audiences ought to believe. Over the course of the story, the drama drops clues and reveals secrets, leading viewers to favor either Hiss or Chambers from moment to moment. When the film shows Hiss (Edward Hermann) speaking in private with his

wife, lawyer, or friends, he does not act like a guilty man. He displays the indignation of a distinguished American who believes that he is innocent. Indeed, Jeff Bleckner, the director, urged his actors to play their roles in this fashion. When the actors asked him, "Am I telling the truth, or am I lying?" Bleckner responded, "You're all telling the truth, and you should play it absolutely as if you're telling the truth."[53] As the four-hour drama comes to an end, the issue of truthfulness remains in doubt. The movie's verdict remains uncertain, or at least, it is left to the viewer to judge.

Solid research and attention to historical detail enhance the quality of *Concealed Enemies.* Writer Hugh Whitmore read every book on the subject he could find and interviewed more than sixty individuals who knew the principal figures. He and actor Edward Hermann also interviewed Alger Hiss (Chambers was dead). Director Jeff Bleckner, an accomplished veteran of the TV show *Hill Street Blues,* managed to gather a number of vintage props that gave the film a feel of authenticity: 1940s automobiles filled the city streets, newsmen used old photographic equipment with huge flashbulbs of the period. Bleckner filmed the story in a slightly washed-out, brownish tint, giving his production a period look. In these and other examples of the director's attention to verisimilitude, the film strongly communicates a feeling of America in the late 1940s.

Evidence that has come to light since the release of *Concealed Enemies* tends to support the case against Alger Hiss. Documents began to emerge, especially after the end of the Cold War, that seemed to suggest that Hiss had, in fact, lied under oath. These records included files from the U.S. government's Verona Project, KGB documents, and records that had been in the hands of the Hungarian secret police. If dramatists attempted to portray Hiss's story in the twenty-first century, they might find the evidence less conflicting than it appeared to the producer, writer, and director of *Concealed Enemies* in the 1980s.[54]

Patton and *Concealed Enemies* represent impressive achievements, but they are bold exceptions to Hollywood's rules of genre. Usually, cinematic history does not present multiple perspectives; it does not challenge viewers with ambiguous portraits. Partisan portrayals with heroes and villains are much more common among Hollywood's productions, because they constitute safer investments. Audiences respond more readily to films that sharply distinguish good from bad, right from wrong. Cinematic history often weighs in heavily with specific judgments about people and issues. In view of the uniqueness of the balanced treatment in *Patton* and *Concealed Enemies,* the achievements of these two notable motion pictures deserve our attention.

The general thrust of the commentary on the films examined in this section has been complimentary, but the absence of strong criticism does not suggest

that these films are flawless. No entry in the field of cinematic history achieves that extraordinary status. Certainly it is possible to challenge the treatment of history in each of these dramas, to draw attention to ways in which it could have probed the past with greater sensitivity and intelligence. Filmed drama can always be improved on, and our understanding of the medium's ability to both entertain and educate the public evolves as artists experiment with new techniques of presentation. The dramatic approach taken in *The Longest Day*, for instance, looks somewhat dated to the modern-day enthusiast of cinematic history. Nevertheless, all these motion pictures serve as impressive examples of the potential of film to arouse audiences' thinking about the past and connect their emotions to it. These movies and television specials are not perfect models of cinematic history, but they demonstrate some of the medium's potential to address important matters with sophistication.