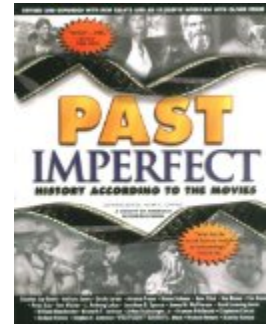


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark C. Carnes. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (A Henry Holt Reference Book). New York: H. Holt, 1995. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-3759-3; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8050-3760-9.

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The idea behind this volume is terrific: to ask 62 prominent historians, journalists, and other authorities to comment on historical films that touch upon their area of expertise. Convinced that historical films have become “a great repository of historical consciousness in these United States of Amnesia,” the contributors assess the films’ historical accuracy and examine how their depictions of past events and figures contrasts with contemporary historiography. Beginning with a conversation between director John Sayles and historian Eric Foner about the difficulties of making historical films in Hollywood and concluding with an “interview” of Napoleon by Simon Schama about the emperor’s cinematic portrayal, the heart of the book are analyses of nearly a hundred films, arranged in chronological order, from Stephen Jay Gould’s critical assessment of the portrayal of science in *Jurassic Park* to William E. Leuchtenberg’s pointed critique of the treatment of the Watergate scandal in *All the President’s Men*.

The contributors consist of a veritable who’s who of distinguished scholars. But while the essays are extremely readable, they are afflicted with one of the curses of popular film criticism: excessive brevity, with each review averaging around 1,500 words. The very best, I found, make a point of introducing the reader to the broader historiographical issues raised by the film; the weakest simply pinpoint a particular film’s historical errors and distortions. The first essay—Stephen Jay Gould’s assessment of *Jurassic Park*—is one of the volume’s most impressive (and not surprisingly also one of the longest), showing how the discussion of chaos theory in the original novel was bastardized in the film screenplay to fit the classic Hollywood stereotype of the hubris of scientists who transgress nature’s laws.

This essay is followed by Alan F. Segal’s analysis of *The Ten Commandments*, which offers a fascinating assessment of the confidence with which contemporary biblical scholars regard events treated in the film. W.V. Harris then analyzes *Spartacus* both as a critique of McCarthyism and as a portrayal of Roman slavery, leaving viewers with the misleading impression that Roman slavery was disintegrating and that the triumph of Christianity would soon create a society without slavery (in fact slavery would continue to survive around the Mediterranean). Next, Michael Grant looks at how accurately the 1953 film *Julius Caesar* portrays the historical Caesar and the broader story of the collapse of the Roman Republic.

The *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis follows with a comparison and contrast of two versions of *Henry V*, by Lorraine Olivier and Kenneth Branagh—portraying one as a celebration of heroic Britain standing against the Nazis, the other a view of the nobility of war soured by the impact of Margaret Thatcher’s adventure in the Falklands. Gerda Lerner then contrasts three cinematic portrayals of Joan of Arc—from the celebratory to the debunking.

Next Carla Rahn Phillips and William D. Phillips, Jr., examine two recent failed attempts to transform the life of Christopher Columbus into popular cinematic entertainment, and argue that the 1949 Frederic March film came much closer to the historical figure—“brilliant, pious, cranky, self-assured, single-minded, irascible, rigid, and thoroughly irritating.” Antonio Fraser then examines how the prominence of the love story in the 1969 film *Anne of a Thousand Days* has the side effect of diverting attention from the broader political issues of the

story of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn and strips Boleyn of her independence and originality.

In his analysis of *A Man for All Seasons*, Richard Marius explores errors and distortions in the film's portrayal of Thomas More as a "Catholic Abraham Lincoln, an icon of purity and principle," while failing to inform viewers of his conscience's content and depicting common people as "incapable of thought, self-righteous, and transfixed by appearances." Somewhat similar themes run through Stephen Minta's analysis of *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*. He is struck by the film's "highly distorted, unhistorical view of the Spanish Church," as well as the way that the film ignores the political significance of Aguirre's rebellion against Spain's king, which Werner Herzog treats as essentially a theatrical event.

The eminent ethnohistorian James Axtell offers a detailed assessment of the French Jesuit efforts to understand and transform Huron culture in the film *Black Robe*, congratulating the film on its "evenhanded depiction of the baffling otherness of both native and French cultures." The MacArthur fellow Richard White, in contrast, likens the recent film version of *Last of the Mohicans* to tourists moving through Colonial Williamsburg "in an artfully recreated simulation of the past," showing how the film's history is a "junkyard of motifs and incidents" that have been "combined and paired" arbitrarily.

Carolly Erickson contrasts the "kittenish, pouting, vamping heroine played by Marlene Dietrich" in *The Scarlet Empress* with the historical Catherine II and characterizes the film as "a gross distortion of the times in which Catherine lived," filled with absurdities and historical gaffes. She contrasts Hollywood mythmaking with the historical actuality that is much more compelling and complicated than Hollywood fiction, which reveals a strong character who artfully gained the loyalty of the regiments that staged the coup that made her empress.

Past Imperfect raises a number of important questions of film interpretation that invite further discussion. One question is how best to evaluate a historical film: In terms of accuracy of historical detail? Success in conveying a particular interpretation of the past? Transcendence of generic formulas and caricatures? Here one wants to ask: can a film be true to the spirit of the past even if it distorts or fabricates detail?

A second broad issue involves films' role in the construction of cultural memory: How does the public relations apparatus of film studios transform a film into a "cultural event"? Why do certain films succeed in

transforming legend and myth into a compelling historical memory? The essays described below address these broad issues in contrasting ways.

According to Thomas Fleming, the musical *1776* artfully conveys "the confusion, hesitation, and conflict that raged among the Founding Fathers as they wrestled with the question of whether to declare...independence" and starkly dramatizes the quarrel over slavery. While the film contains jarring historical lapses—ignoring the military optimism of mid-1776 and downgrading and caricaturing of many of the more minor figures—Fleming suggests that the film does manage "to convey the peculiar mixture of bravado [and] wily politicking" of the moment.

The distinguished anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace contrasts the book on which the film *Drums along the Mohawk* was based—which he considers "a serious effort to show the sufferings and fortitude of ordinary people," the yeoman settlers of the Mohawk Valley west of Albany, New York—with the movie, which narrows the book's focus to the summer of 1777 and the "homey details of life on the frontier, and trivializes the events that the film portrays. He pinpoints a series of problems in the film, notably its depiction of Native Americans as figures of fun or savage killers and the failure to convey the strategic importance of the Mohawk Valley in the American Revolution.

Greg Dening treats *Mutiny on the Bounty* both as a cultural artifact (expressing the values of Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg) and as a recounting of actual historical episodes. As artifact, Dening shows how Thalberg transforms a film about mutiny into something quite different—a celebration of the British admiralty; as history, Dening seeks to understand why Capt. Bligh provoked resistance from his men; it was not so much his brutality (which was actually less, he notes, than that inflicted by other captains) than his failure properly to exercise "the theater of his command."

Princeton's Robert Darnton examines why Andrzej Wajda's 1983 film *Danton* outraged the French left-wing intellectuals, even though the film's portrayal of Danton's efforts to stop the Reign of Terror could have been seen as a foreshadowing of resistance to Stalinism. His explanation stresses the uneasy alliance between Socialists and Communists, in which Socialists had "to prove their ideological purity," and therefore "rushed to defend the orthodox view of the French Revolution." The film was criticized on many of the same grounds as Simon Schama's *Citizens*: for making revolutionary terror seem

gratuitous by deleting references to the large social and political context.

Darton's colleague Sean Wilentz contrasts two versions of *The Buccaneer* (1938 and 1958), which focus on Andrew Jackson, privateer Jean Lafitte, and the battle of New Orleans, arguing that the films "are actually more trustworthy than many history textbooks" since they suggest the political significance of the battle. Wilentz maintains that the British government was prepared, following victory, to "declare the Louisiana Purchase a dead letter." He also suggests that the films illustrate shifts in sex symbolism, arguing that the 1958 version reflects "some of the troubled, rebellious sexual spirit that had been simmering beneath the bland stereotypes of the Eisenhower years."

Why was the Hollywood studio system particularly attracted to historical films? In discussing Warner Bros. 1936 film *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Richard Slotkin suggests that the answer lies not simply in the fact that historical subjects provided a premise, a guarantee of an "important" subject, and "authentic" period details; more important, he argues, history fit into the studios' "presentist" agenda: "The themes of Hollywood's history films usually have some obviously timely aspect, and...a contemporary subtext." Historical films, he continues, are significantly shaped by "the star system and by the narrative formulas of film genres." Thus, in his analysis of *Light Brigade*, Slotkin shows how racial and sexual imagery is employed in developing the film's political theme—"that a Great Power must take a strong stance against colonial 'savages' and their European sponsors"—which Slotkin relates to the contemporary political context, German rearmament, Italy's Ethiopian invasion, Japanese advances in China, Stalin's purges, the Spanish Civil War.

Past Imperfect contains essays on so many films that it is difficult to do each author justice. The volume deals with topics as diverse as the process of assimilation (*Hester Street*), the difficulty of simultaneously meeting the standards of cinematic art and the exacting historian (*Young Winston*), the difficulty of dramatizing the life of the mind (*Freud: The Secret Passion*), the treatment of war (*Gallipoli*, *The Human Condition*) and imperialism (*Khartoum*), and the distinction between factual accuracy and historical truth (five films on World War I). In a number of instances (especially impressively in Jonathan Spence's analysis of *Shanghai Express*), authors suggest that historical reality is even stranger and more adventurous than the cinematic representation. Many of the analy-

ses of biopics (such as John F. Kasson's essay on the 1953 *Houdini* or Geoffrey C. Ward's on *Gandhi*) suggest that Hollywood's handling of biography has tended to be even less scrupulous than its treatment of history. Many authors (including Nancy F. Cott in her analysis of *Bonnie and Clyde*) suggest that historical films often transplant contemporary themes into the past.

Not all the essays bemoan Hollywood's depiction of the past. James M. McPherson suggests that the film *Glory* demonstrates that movies can teach history. While carefully identifying the film's deviations from the historical record, he suggests that the film effectively conveys larger historical truths that had previously been obscured in popular culture. (Jacqueline Jones's essay on *The Long Walk Home*, a film about the Montgomery bus boycott, also gives a 'hooray' for Hollywood). McPherson's positive view of Hollywood as historian is balanced by Leon F. Litwack's analysis of *Birth of a Nation*, which, he writes, revealed film's power to "teach" history and to reflect and shape popular attitudes and stereotypes."

J. Anthony Lukas shows that while the 1970 film *The Molly Maguires* washes away many historical complexities in its analysis of late 19th century western Pennsylvania coal miners (notably the ethnic resentments, workplace quarrels, and class grievances that gave rise to violence in the coal fields) it does offer an interesting tale of two contrasting versions of the Irish immigrant experience: "fierce loyalty to blood and clan versus relentless assimilation to the values of the larger society."

One of the collections most fascinating essays, by Yale's western historian John Mack Faragher, focuses on the portrayal of the western lawman and gambler Wyatt Earp in seven films. After tracing the creation of the Earp legend, he shows the contrasting ways that he has been depicted—from mythic portrayal of a lone marshal single-handedly cleaning up frontier hell-holes to a preoccupation with debunking, expose, and mythbusting. Faragher suggests that westerns are most successful when they "inspire audiences with their breadth of vision about the meaning of the American past."

One issue that the collection raises is whether the demise of the studio system marked an abrupt shift in the nature of historical films. In his commentary on John Sayles's 1987 film *Matewan*, Eric Foner seems to suggest that a distinctive feature of this film is its meditations on broad philosophic issues: "the possibility of interracial cooperation, the merits of violence and nonviolence in combating injustice, and the threat posed by concentrated economic power to American notions of political

democracy and social justice.”

The Grapes of Wrath, Alan Brinkley observes, is not a historical film; it is a historical document: a powerful portrait of dispossessed farmers during the Great Depression and of the New Deal political sensibility. He suggests that the film’s celebration of a transcendent vision of community offers a more compelling explanation for the muted radicalism of the ’30s than the individualistic ethos that is often cited.

Akira Iriye shows how the 1970’s *Tora! Tora! Tora!* reflected a desire to solidify Japanese-American relations through a binational understanding of World War II’s causes, which conveys the Japanese side of the story.

Films dealing with recent history face particularly close scrutiny. Clayborne Carson argues that the fac-

tual inaccuracies, simplifications, anachronisms, and invented characters and dialogue in *Malcolm X* are ultimately less damaging than its misrepresentation of Malcolm X’s “hard-won political understanding.” Frances FitzGerald criticizes *Apocalypse Now* for treating Vietnam as an abstraction, not as a place. William E. Leuchtenburg argues that *All the President’s Men* distorts the relationship between political power and the press, inflating the role of journalists while marginalizing “the special prosecutors, the congressional committees, the courts” which drove Nixon from office.

Paul Fussell, in his assessment of *Patton*, observes that Aristotle’s *Poetics* maintained that art is more real than life. Historians who are critical of cinematic history should always remember that for most Americans, history is essentially an abstraction. Film, for better and worse, gives history life.

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