



*Movies in Time.* The History Channel.

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### Make Time for Movies in Time

Several months ago, my local cable company started carrying The History Channel, a channel created solely for those of us who enjoy history on film. Among its variety of programming, The History Channel airs superb documentaries covering an enormous range of topics from Thomas Edison to the Eiffel Tower. One fascinating program, *The Real West*, presents the true West as differentiated from the familiar Hollywood West, inviting noted historians of America's West such as Dee Smith to comment on Western myths versus Western reality. As much as I enjoy and appreciate these programs, I find that I have become addicted to one particular program on the History Channel—*Movies In Time*. I can't resist historical movies, and tempting me even more, *Movies In Time* features guest historians who comment on the films, "sorting fact from fiction," and thereby offering mini-history lessons based on Hollywood films. Veteran newsman Sander Vanocur acts as host to these prominent historians as they critique the strengths and weaknesses of filmed history. This week alone, I have watched three very different and very interesting films on *Movies In Time*. The first film, *The Juggler*, was released in the early 1950s and set in 1948. The movie depicts a concentration camp survivor's struggle to start a new life in Israel after losing his entire family to the Holocaust. Kirk Douglas plays Hans, the immigrant who is having trouble living in the present and letting go of the past, especially his family. This film is interesting and unusual because it deals with Holocaust survivors so soon after the fact. Professor Henry Feingold of City University of New York, an expert in Jewish History, appeared

as the guest historian for the film. Feingold called *The Juggler* "white propaganda," meaning it was intended as favorable propaganda for the recently created state of Israel. Feingold felt *The Juggler* appeared dated because it romanticized the kibbutz. He explained that, early in its history, Israel saw itself as an idealized agrarian country which depended on the kibbutz. Indeed in *The Juggler*, the recent immigrant, played by Douglas, is encouraged to settle down on a kibbutz, his "new home." This film, according to Feingold, depicts an Israel that, if it ever did exist, faded a long time ago and gave way to a more urbanized, industrial society. However, the idea of the Israeli immigrant starting over, remarrying and raising a second family was indeed accurate. I was interested to learn from Professor Feingold that Israel has changed drastically since its creation. He stated that although many of the most important officials of the Israeli government boast nostalgically of a kibbutz background, the Israel of today has definitely put the kibbutz in its past. The second, and by far the best movie, on The History Channel this week was the 1964 film, *Zulu* which was shown in letterbox form doing justice to the expansive African landscape. This film combines good history and good art resulting in an extremely watchable and accurate retelling of this extraordinary historical event in which a handful of British soldiers withstood an attack by 4,000 Zulu warriors. Apparently The History Channel concurred, and *Zulu* received special attention. Preceding the screening of the film, a specially produced, hour-long program was aired, "Rorke's Drift: Against All Odds." Newsman Roger Mudd introduced this production which attempted to clarify the in-

cidents portrayed in *Zulu*. He was aided by British author and historian, Ian Knight, who provided background information on such issues as the prevailing attitudes in 1879 of the Victorians toward their outposts in Africa. "Rorke's Drift" also quoted from military records and dispatches concerned with the entire campaign. In addition, this auxiliary to *Zulu* provided "eye witnesses"—present-day actors dressed in Red Coats who recounted their experiences and occasionally offered motives and explanations pertaining to the Rorke's Drift incident. By the end of "Rorke's Drift: Against All Odds," The History Channel's audience was definitely primed for *Zulu*. During breaks in the film, *Movies In Time* dispensed information about the film. For example, the audience learns that the Zulu warriors in the movie are played by real-life Zulu tribesmen, and the Zulu king depicted in the movie is a direct descendent of the Zulu king he portrays in the film. In addition to all of its historical accuracy, *Zulu* "introduced" a very young, very handsome Michael Caine who plays a thick-headed, upper-class, snobbish, dandy, prig, the result of several generations of British army officers. After the bloody siege at Rorke's Drift, this young British officer (Caine) surveys the myriads of Zulu warrior corpses and tells the commanding officer that he "feels ashamed." At the end of the film, narration by Richard Burton informs the audience of the disproportionate number of British soldiers who were awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions at Rorke's Drift, the young officer was one of the recipients. After the movie, Sander Vanocur queried his guest historians, Professor Richard Hull of New York University and Peter Marsh, Professor of International Relations at Syracuse, who explained that the victory at Rorke's Drift was stressed by the British government in order to offset devastating British military defeats suffered in Africa. At the time of Rorke's Drift (1879), the British populace was questioning the naked imperialism practiced by their government in Africa, and a year after the incident, this government was turned out in a general election which was seen as a repudiation of its imperialist policy. Professor Marsh added that when *Zulu* was produced in 1964, the British were scuttling their empire and questioning why so many British soldiers had been wasted in the defense of an empire. Hull praised *Zulu* as well-researched and singled out the scenes which demonstrated the Zulu's military might explaining that the tribe had been the dominant force in Africa until the British introduced the ri-

fle, no match for their spears. Interestingly enough, according to the historians, the Zulus at Rorke's drift initially were undaunted by bullets but intimidated by bayonets. *Zulu* is an excellent historical film, and The History Channel treated it accordingly. The few hours spent watching "Rorke's Drift: Against All Odds" and *Zulu* is time well spent. Immediately following *Zulu* on The History Channel was *The Flying Tigers*. Those of us who enjoy old war movies have no doubt seen this John Wayne film, but, on this occasion, *Movies In Time* invited real-life Flying Tiger David "Tex" Hill (the person John Wayne's character is modeled on) and real-life nurse, "Red" Petak Hanks who had served with the *Flying Tigers* to comment on this 1942 war propaganda film. Hill called the film "pure fiction," and Ms. Hanks agreed. However, she did validate as accurate one scene where the nurse counts the returning planes. She met, fell in love with, and married a Flying Tiger; sadly, his plane did not return from a mission. Despite his assessment of the film as pure fiction, Hill was obviously proud of the men with whom he flew and recounted their many acts of bravery. *Flying Tigers* is not great history, nor is it great film, but *Movies In Time* did succeed in putting a human face on this historical footnote. The History Channel is doing a great service for those of us who fancy history on film but require knowing if what we are watching is real history or Hollywood's version of history. Thanks to the guest historians on *Movies In Time* who offer their expertise assessments of the events portrayed on film, viewers need not worry about being misinformed by Hollywood's (often inept) "historians." When Eric Foner critiqued Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, I knew that this prominent historian would expose any scenes or details that were added to *Lincoln* merely to enhance the film's dramatic quality. Similarly, when *Movies In Time* presented *Dieppe*, Brian Villa, the Canadian historian and author of *Unauthorized Action*, the book on which the film is based, commented on the film. And when *The Winds of War* was aired, Vanocur discussed the World War II drama with Charles Sydnor, historian of the Third Reich, and David Kaahn, author of *Code Breakers*. By presenting historical films coupled with such highly qualified commentators, *Movies In Time* is providing its audience with lessons in history which are not only dramatic and interesting but expertly corrected and critiqued.

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