TEACH[R]

Dealing with historical movies in the History and English classroom

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Abstract

Movies based on historical events can be of value to the teacher of History and English. Unlike documentaries however, they are not used as much as they might be in the History classroom, because as essentially fictional texts, they pose problems of interpretation for the historian. Given a correct understanding of how history and cinema interact, and how the cinema differs as a historical source from conventional records, the History teacher can make the most of movies as texts that reveal not so much what happened in history, but rather the importance of the event to later generations. Senior English teachers, who face the challenge of teaching the nature of representation in various texts, could also find a better understanding of history and cinema useful. Movies are sources that allow the student to explore issues of bias, representation and interpretation, and they have the added potential advantage of being texts that are intrinsically interesting to students.

Introduction

"Historical movies offer a compelling narrative which can engage the interest of students in ways that written texts might not"

While the use of documentaries is common in the History classroom, an under-used potential resource is movies based on historical events. Senior English teachers have a slightly different challenge in meeting syllabus needs on the nature of texts in different genres and media, especially in the Advanced course, section C, Representation and Text. Historical movies have the advantage of offering a compelling narrative which can engage the interest of young History and English students in ways that written texts or conventional pedagogic methods might not. However, historical movies present a number of issues which must be understood and addressed before their benefit can be maximised in the classroom. The primary concern of movie makers is the box-office; their films must work as cinematic entertainment first, to which the demands of history must be subjected, or run the risk of producing a worthy but dull movie. Cinema itself has particular codes and generic limitations which shape the nature of its historical dialectic. Despite the problems, historical movies can be a very rich resource for History and English teachers who know how to use them. To make the most of historical films, we need to consider the relationships between three areas: history, fiction, and film.

History and fiction

David Lowenthal's book *The past is a foreign country*[1] contains the best concise coverage of the issues of history and fiction. In the chapter *Knowing the past*, he argues that the past is alien—the foreign country of his metaphor. Both the historian and the fiction writer give us access to the past by making its foreignness familiar, by explaining it in terms of the present, and by giving it structure and shape. Contrary to the claims of some historians, who set themselves up as telling *the* truth, their work can never simply record the past; it always provides a construct of the significance of the past. This involves a process of selection of evidence and a weighing of value. As such it always involves interpretation, which inevitably brings into play the writer's own perspectives, ideology and inherent biases. Historians undertake a selective shaping, clarifying, tidying and elucidating in order to provide a coherent knowledge of the past. This is always done through hindsight, through giving the past a structure and significance which was not there when the events were happening. Inevitably, the historian orders the past according to the framework of the present. Thus each age writes history according to its own concerns. This of course removes the notion that history is an absolutely true record of the past. It does, however, give some light on the past, and approximates the truth.[2]

The debate between historians over the nature of history has continued, especially as post-modern approaches have shaken the certainty that perhaps influenced older writers. Some scholars have emphasised how the boundaries between history and fiction have been far less distinct than historians might have acknowledged in the past. Hayden White, for example, argues that history is essentially the same as fiction through history's use of genre types

and narrative frames which impose on history a fictive orderliness and purposefulness absent in the events themselves. Others, like Noel Carroll, have countered White by insisting that while historians select and shape using literary conventions, their work is still distinct from that of fiction writers because of the need for historians to remain faithful to standards of external and (relatively) objective evidence that do not apply to writers of fiction.[3] However, the dilemma is most evident in the genre of historical fiction, which owes something to the traditions of both history and fiction.

Historical fiction, like history, strives for verisimilitude to give readers a feel for the period. But where the historian is forbidden either to invent or to overlook relevant material, historical novelists are free to invent or ignore characters, motives, and events as best suits their purpose. Novelists may recreate the past without the obligation to be fair or objective. This subjectivity allows fiction to explore elements of the past that a historian cannot properly contemplate—the hidden and unrecorded, particularly of motive and character. Arguably, the historical novelist offers more in some respects than the historian, because the novel brings the past to life. Historians may dispute the implication that they do not bring the past to life, but they must concede that they work within tighter constraints than novelists, for whom invention is a legitimate resource.

Like history, written and cinematic historical fiction speaks to the present, but uses the past to address contemporary issues. There are four motives for moving present issues into the past. The first is to use the past to authenticate authority in the present, in much the same way as successive recent Australian Prime Ministers Paul Keating and John Howard have evoked the Anzac Legend to legitimise their actions or policies. The second is more subversive, exposing unpalatable present truths through the safety valve of a setting in the past. The third is an escape into nostalgia, seeking a lost golden age, again in the manner of Howard evoking Australian values that he feared new generations might be losing, and the fourth is the search for origins to discover the foundations of a civilisation or culture, as with many of the brashly nationalistic Australian period films of the 1980s.[4] These motives imply an engagement between the novel or the movie and national myths, with the text acting either to affirm or deny the validity of the myths.

As documents addressed to the present, historical films are indicators of what a nation's filmmakers consider to be important historical events and values for their own times. Hence a study of historical fiction film offers useful insights into the mythic significance of those events for the culture that upholds them.

As we have seen, the relationship between history and fiction is often problematic. Many works of historical fiction and film inhabit a grey area between the discipline of history and the freedom of expression of fiction, a territory that Lowenthal terms "faction". He describes it as "a compromise that claims the virtues of both while accepting the limitations of neither". He notes the tendency for television history to indulge in this, claiming adherence to the facts while freely inventing, adding perceptively that "visual images are more convincing than written accounts". The power of faction lies particularly in the popular belief that history is the facts, the objective truth, the reality of the past. By imitating history's fidelity to detail and authenticity, faction is able to pass off its inventions and ideological stances as truth.[5]

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Truth, realism and film

Film and television present a particular difficulty in this area, because of cinema's habitual imitation of reality. In the first instance, the camera mimics human eyesight by recording events in a way that is similar to how we see them in real life. The camera does this by its very nature, as opposed to painting for instance, where the artist is not bound to record a literal image of the subject. The authenticity of film is further heightened by the use of realist cinema codes such as realistic sets and costumes, chronological time, and editing techniques, which cloak the constructed nature of film in a naturalistic disguise. This reality is so persuasive that some war journalists, for example, have measured the reality of actual combat by how closely it corresponded to what they had seen in movies. Further, film may appear real because it offers an emotional world that viewers can relate to. Even melodramatic soap operas or non-naturalistic cartoons may be rated realistic by viewers who recognise their own personal conflicts in the heightened drama of television. The problem is that films often appear as unmediated reflections of the truth, whereas in fact they always construct a truth. Contrary to popular belief, the camera always lies. It always takes a point of view, and influences through what it reveals or leaves out of the frame. Lighting, camera angle, shot size, film stock and other technical aspects further add bias to the apparently objective image. To make the most of historical movies, we need to identify what version of reality they construct, and by what means filmmakers authenticate that reality.

Historical films go one step further in identifying themselves as truthful. Fiction films characteristically anchor themselves to some referent, some cultural

code such as genre which allows us quick access to its meanings. The genre characteristics of the western, for example its incredible sharp-shooting heroes, are widely recognised, regardless of their lack of correlation with reality, but few, if any, confuse these codes with reality.

The history film, however, uses a referent of a different nature. By borrowing the trappings of events generally known to have happened in the past, historical films use as their referent something external to the creative processes, something that existed before the movie. Therefore audiences tend to give it an objectivity and actuality that genre codes cannot match. The existence of genre codes depends entirely on the literary and cinematic fictions of writers and filmmakers, but the past exists as cultural and historical capital, regardless of and independent of the arts (although it survives in popular consciousness through the mediation of historians and artists), and this independence lends considerable authenticity and realism to the historical film.

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The nature of documentary films helps us understand the issue of referents more clearly. Bill Nichols argues that the external referent separates fiction from documentary, saying that the fiction film bears a metaphoric resemblance to reality, whereas the documentary is perceived more as a replica than a likeness. "Instead of *a* world, we are offered access to *the* world."[6] He states that the filming of a death in a documentary means that an actual death took place; in fact not just *a* death, but *the* death that was portrayed. A death in a fiction film, however, indicates an event that has only occurred within the discourse of the film. In making a distinction between the metaphor of fiction and the indexical nature of documentary, Nichols quotes Jerry Kuehl as saying:

> At the heart of documentaries lie truth claims, and these claims are based on arguments and evidence. Did Khrushchev ever lose his temper in public? Film of him banging his shoe on the desk at the U.N. may not convince everyone; film of Telly Savalas wearing the Order of Lenin and banging a desk on the set at Universal City will convince no-one.[7]

This is only partly true, for what needs to be remembered is that Telly Savalas, while not the index of truth, still bears a closer relationship to the historical world than another fiction film which might have invented an event by a Soviet President that never occurred. Because Khrushchev actually banged his shoe, Savalas' performance has greater potency. Thus the metaphor of the historical film is a much stronger signifier of the actual than the metaphors of most fiction films, which is what makes historical films so powerful and persuasive as history. So, in using movies in the classroom, we need to identify the external referents used to authenticate their view of history.

Hence, historical fiction films blur the distinction between fact and metaphor to varying degrees, but the apparent truthfulness of a film will depend to a large extent on the relationship it constructs between the historical world and its story. Historical dramas range across a spectrum from fictions to factions. The latter adopt various strategies to authenticate their truthfulness. The classic American film, *The birth of a nation* (1915), has moments of re-enactment which aim to recapture on film historical events which preceded the camera, and takes them very seriously, giving them elaborate footnotes in the inter-titles. D. W. Griffiths, the director, felt that in the future films like his would replace history books, and people would be able to see objective history as it was, without the confusion of differing historical opinions. While historians and film scholars take issue with the simplistic view of that era, people today can still confuse historical movies with history. At the other end of the spectrum, some films merely adopt a historic setting in which to enact their acknowledged fictions, while other films position themselves at various points in between. But regardless of where films position themselves, the best that historical movies can do is to give an image, an interpretation, rather than a definitive view.

Cinema as historical text

Fiction film presents additional problems for the historian generally unaccustomed to working with moving images. Historians typically expect more from film than it can deliver. One hazard is the sequential nature of the medium, where event follows event, without time for the viewer to stop and reflect. Hence film gravitates towards narrative rather than analysis, and atmosphere rather than fact. It is very poor at abstract ideas. This does not mean that historical drama is free of interpretation; indeed it tends to be more expansive and explicit in its interpretations than does history because it is less obligated to correspond to the known evidence. But it does so through the force of emotional rather than rational persuasion.

Characteristically films are more cryptic and simplistic in dealing with historical complexities; written histories, which allow for variable-paced reading, re-reading and reflection, are more likely to represent the complexity of reality. Alternate possibilities are usually ignored in films, where cause and effect are usually simply and directly linked, giving history a certain air of inevitability. This is generally forced on film-makers because of the limited time they have to present their subject

(usually around two hours and rarely more than three), and because greater complexity has the potential to confuse the viewer, who is forced to watch usually at a single pace and without pause. Historians are rarely allowed such simplicity, having to juggle a multitude of contributing factors with a host of possible outcomes. Historical film rarely questions its sources, usually offering a superficial view of events. At best, film can offer multiple readings of a single event by showing it through the eyes of various witnesses, a technique which is growing in popularity in fictional film, but is yet to have a big impact on historical movie making. Perhaps its best recent incarnation is in the two films of Clint Eastwood, *Flags of our fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), which offer empathetic American and Japanese perspectives on the battle for the island in 1945.

Some historians are annoyed at the simplifications of film history, but this overlooks the fact that the various media have different strengths and weaknesses in communication. The moving image is relatively weak in conveying abstract ideas, such as class conflict, but can express with great emotional power a particular instance of that conflict through a narrative revolving around individual characters. Hence film's tendency is always towards the particular, rather than the general. The manner in which films generalise is through the portrayal of individuals who act as representative types already familiar to the audience, usually drawn from well-known genres or national mythology. These particular characters, through their mythic associations, implicitly embody a generalisation. So, when using historical movies, we need to identify the use of types, and their mythological origin, and what generalisations they stand for.

Another problem for historians is what is perceived as the errors that films perpetrate. As we have observed, the very nature of film means that history must be simplified, and this is where some 'errors' occur. In a fifty minute documentary, a commentary must be no longer than 1500 words or else the audience:

> Will be repelled, not informed. The consequences of this may be quite sobering to an academician: it is that whatever the writer wishes to say ought to be said in the equivalent of … a *fifteen-minute* lecture. There is no way around this. If he tries to say more his audiences will understand less.[8]

Film's principal mode of communication is through its images; historians trained in the written word constantly evaluate what is said and are unfairly critical.

Furthermore, the high cost of film production means that filmmakers must ensure that their product will reach the largest possible audience. Filmmakers make what they think will sell, and often draw their subject matter and their perspectives from popular literature. If this is at the expense of thorough research and historical accuracy, then so be it. In the end it is the producer who bears responsibility for the failure of the film; historians rarely have to face up to the commercial realities of film and television. It is true that historians often have to accommodate the financial considerations of book publishers, but historical works can be published economically, often with grants of a few thousand dollars, to specialised audiences in a way that is virtually impossible for the cinema. Even fiction can be published relatively cheaply in comparison to the multi-million dollar budgets of the average movie.

Besides, cinematic histories are not about conveying information but about sharing some of the passion and enthusiasm of the producer for the subject. Movies are not intended as precise historical documents, and for historians to worry about 'mistakes' is a mistake itself. Often a factual error is deliberately used to create an appropriate mood, as happened in the 1969 movie *The Battle of Britain*, where a Luftwaffe officer gives a Nazi salute instead of a military one. The effect transformed an otherwise dull scene by highlighting conflicting ideologies, but famed German ace and historical advisor General Adolf Galland stormed off the set in protest at the travesty of the facts.[9] In any case historical films should not be watched for the history they purport to show, but for what they can tell us about the values of the society that made and watched them.

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The problem of historical accuracy still exists, however, for while teachers may recognise the tenuous relationships between history, film, and truth, students are often not so discriminating. As we have seen, filmmakers adopt many strategies to make their films more credible, and when these are overtly or implicitly given the label of 'truth' or "true story", they are often read as being true in every respect. A university tutor commented to the author about how difficult it was to get her first year students to read about the Gallipoli campaign—they felt they already knew the facts because they had seen Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*.

Similarly, distinguished journalist Sir Simon Jenkins took issue with four popular historical films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Shadowlands*, *In the name of the Father*, *JFK*, and *Schindler's list*, for deliberately dressing fiction as fact. He admired the films as films, and acknowledged the right of filmmakers to invent, and the power of "falsity [to] tell [its] own sort of truth", but deplored the way

in which "the film business should no longer be able to tell a lie from a truth". His argument was with filmmakers who say, as the director of *In the name of the Father*, Jim Sheridan, did, "I can't draw conclusions, I can only put the facts as I know them". Jenkins added: "But he puts facts that he knows to be untrue", then listed the distortions the film made.[10] His opposition was not to filmmakers distorting, but to those who then insisted that their films were still the truth, rather than acknowledging them to be fictional re-presentations of historical events. His argument was that, by passing off distortions and outright inventions as reality, these filmmakers used the same techniques they so often deplored in the villains of their films—using lies for political and personal advantage. This is a valid point. Films that deal with factual topics are dishonest if they adopt strategies that conceal their constructed nature and fictitious elements. It is no point arguing the right of literary constructs to manipulate and invent if they have passed themselves off in the guise, not of fiction, but of truth, reality and fact. There is, of course, no problem with films taking an ideological stance; in fact not only is it virtually unavoidable, it is one of the key functions of fiction to raise moral, ethical and philosophical issues. The problem is when filmmakers and promoters insist on the objectivity of their portrayal, that their philosophy and morals are the only truth on the subject. In using historical films in a teaching context, we need to ask what claims to truthfulness they make, and how those claims are received by their audiences.

> ***"The most valuable use of historical movies is not so much as documents about the events, but as documents about the significance of the events for the culture that made the films"***

Conclusion

In effect, the most valuable use of historical movies is not so much as documents about the events, but as documents about the significance of the events for the culture that made the films. American movies about the Civil War or the Vietnam War may be poor sources of fact and chronology, but they are fascinating testimonies to the attitudes of Americans towards those conflicts at the time the films were made. Similarly, films about the convict era or Gallipoli reveal more about why these events are important to Australians than they may tell us about the actual period. The teacher of History or English will ask students to consider the attitude of a movie to its subject. What interpretation does it offer of the event? How does it connect the issues of the past with current concerns? Older historical movies often reveal shifts in social attitudes. Compare for example the representations of gender roles and ethnic minorities in older films. They offer revealing evidence about historical change. Movies also offer interpretations about the emotional significance of events, which history frequently lacks the evidence to discuss. Films invite us to ask: How did this event affect people emotionally? Most of all, discerning teachers can use movies to motivate students to interrogate the evidence, to question why a particular representation emerged. As part of the syllabus requires students to investigate issues of bias and representation, and question the nature of evidence, films can be a stimulating way of studying potentially dull historiography and textuality. Oh, and one last word: as documents, movies can also be a lot of fun.

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Daniel Reynaud lectures in, and has published books and articles on, the interaction of history, fiction and film. His most recent book is *Celluloid Anzacs: The Great War through Australian cinema* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007).

Endnotes

[1] David Lowenthal. (1985). *The past is a foreign country.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Lowenthal, 235-237.

[3] Hayden White, "The historical text as literary artifact," Noel Carroll, "Interpretation, history, and narrative," in Brian Fay et al. (1998). *History and theory: Contemporary readings*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

[4] Leger Grindon. (1994). *Shadow on the past: Studies in the historical fiction film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1-3.

[5] Lowenthal, 229-231.

[6] Bill Nichols. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 109. Italics in original.

[7] Nichols, 115-116.

[8] Jerry Kuehl, "History on the public screen II," in Paul Smith (ed). (1978). *The historian and film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177. Italics in original.

[9] Leonard Mosley. (1969). *Battle of Britain: The making of a film*. London: Pan Books, 102-105.

[10] Simon Jenkins, "Picture the false impression," *Australian*. 22 April 1994.

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