

**Paul Halsall:  
Thinking about Historical Film: Is it Worth the Trouble? (2002)**

Film is perhaps the most common way the modern American public is exposed to history, but many people still think that it is a waste of time to think seriously about "movies," since, after all, movies are just entertainment. One Internet poster put it this way:

..the idea of the movie is to let the people who go to the cinema have a good time and (if possible) learn something without being too serious.

This position -- that film is primarily entertainment -- is often made by students. The position is wrong.

Some films, it is true, are simply a matter of entertainment (*American Pie II* for instance), but many others use a particular artistic form to take part in a cultural discussion while also being *entertaining*. A large number of successful *entertaining* films have involved a good deal of political commentary, and entire genres are concerned with how we, as human beings, deal with pain and suffering.

There is no reason that a film cannot be both entertaining and participate in the "cultural conversation about the past that we call history."

More than this, the dichotomy between "entertainment" and "a good time movie" really involves a denial that film is a legitimate art form. By now, after a century of cinema, it is clear to most thinking people that film can be an art form, and is quite often a "high art."

It is true that unlike a number of arts -- poetry, drawing -- film is heavily dependent of both technology and truly enormous amounts of funding, and also true that film is a collaborative to an extraordinary degree. But so is a play, and no one would assert that plays are "just for fun."

It is perhaps worth noting that academic history itself is a form of intellectual entertainment. It is true that many historians write badly, or at least do not prioritize writing, but in its presentation of ideas to the mind for consideration, its effort to engage its consumers in thought about things apart from the mundane details of life, I think there is more in common between history and other arts than many people realize.

The important thing is not to mistake "amusement" for "entertainment." Amusement means nothing but passing satiation, but some of the greatest achievements of human beings have been "entertainments." Good films can be great "entertainments" also: the sadness is when they are only amusements. For all its faults, *Braveheart* was an entertainment, while *A Knight's Tale* was merely amusing.

[Let's not be too hard on "entertainment"! There are many ways of being "entertained" by a historical movie. One of my students who had never really heard of Scotland was inspired the film to start reading biographies of Wallace, and then to enroll in multiple classes in order to expand an interest that began in his imagination and made him want to care about the people he imagined. Another viewer, say someone with a wide knowledge of Scottish history and the genealogy of its myths, could be "entertained" by the movie simply by contemplating the

his or her knowledge of the multiple deflections to bring a myth to its current state. And yet another person could just enjoy men in woad slicing heads off.]

### **Could A Historical Film be Better than A Book?**

It might be possible to mount not just a defense of film, but a real challenge to those who claim that film cannot, by its nature, do history. Perhaps historical film can be better than historical books? Let's try a small thought-experiment.

Both a film and a book are imperfect ways of presenting an understanding of the past. The problems that film faces in doing so is that, at least in the case of feature films, a single narrative is usually imposed on complex events, dramatic needs force compression of events and personalities, and cinematographic needs require that all the blanks in the record (what people were wearing, who was standing in the background, how someone's voice sounded) be filled in. The problems that books face in doing history include a complete lack of a three dimensional vision, the requirement that readers be able to read in a particular way, very often the imposition of a single point of view, the imposition of analytic simplifying on an actually infinitely complex reality, and finally the presentation of inaccurate information to readers whose first contact with that period is through a particular book.

Just then as it is impossible for film to do accurate history, so also is it impossible for a book to do accurate history. Both forms, however, have advantages and disadvantages. Just as it is absurd to criticize a scholarly book for its failures in cinematography, so it is absurd to criticize a film for its failures in detail, etc.

A parallel might lie in the rival claims of stage drama and opera. I think a claim could be made that great opera is a more "realistic" form than spoken drama. It is true that in spoken drama, there can be more scenes and more detail, and it is also true that most people do not go through life singing out their emotions. However, the norm in drama is for person A to speak, then person B. While person A is speaking, we have no real idea what person B is thinking. Occasionally a dramatist might have two speaking at once, but any more than that and it becomes a hubbub. Famously in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart is able to construct a scene in which the emotional states of six characters are presented to the audience simultaneously. In that scene, since in real life multiple people are present at a given event, Mozart is *more realistic* than Beaumarchais could ever be.

The point is of course that spoken drama and opera are two different ways to present a dramatic event (a novel is yet another), and each has its advantages. Academic history is an important way to present the past, but all too often the past that is presented is drained of human vividness. Good film, and even Hollywood feature films, can present a humanly vivid past that is true in its own way.

Let me give an example. Gladiatorial games and staged chariot races have been of interest to both academic historians and filmmakers. Academic historians are excellent at getting the details right, documenting the social and class structure of mounting the games, and so forth. Equally, if you want to understand the political implications of the hippodrome, you need to read academic historians on Circus factions.

But in the case of the gladiatorial games, academic historians are simply unable to present the horror of human beings deliberately going to watch other human beings die as well as Cecil

B. DeMille did in *Sign of the Cross*. One might claim that DeMille was being ahistorical, and that the games were normal to the Roman viewers, but we have ample sources documenting contemporary horror -- think of the *Passion of Perpetua* or Tertullian's *On the Spectacles*. In this case, DeMille is in some respects a better historian than an academic writer can be.

In the case of chariot races, little can be understood until one understands the thrill -- and in that respect Fred Niblo's 1927 *Ben Hur*, and even the 1959 version, are better or at least equally as good as any academic history.

## **The Problem with the History vs. Hollywood Approach**

In 2001, the *History Channel* initiated a series called **History vs. Hollywood**. Although the show turned out to be remarkably uncritical about historical inaccuracies in Hollywood movies, its title encapsulated the dominant model in professional historian's thinking about historical film -- that they are to be judged by how "accurate" they are.

Since I first taught a class on medieval history and film in the summer of 2001, I have become increasingly unhappy with judgments on historical or period films that are based entirely on "accuracy."

I am not the first to reject the model. Robert Rosenstone's work is always cited as crucial, and he has long argued that film is a potentially better way to relate history than text. For me, however, his work is singularly unconvincing, or at least irrelevant, since he ends up endorsing not history films as they are actually produced, but specialist documentaries hewing to a programmatic formula.

I want to argue, instead, that there are ways to think about historical movies as they actually are that might make sense to a professional historian, and perhaps more importantly to anyone who enjoys a movie but wants also to be able to think about film critically.

Here are my suggestions about how to view historical movies.

### **1. Realize that the past is not owned by historians.**

All sorts of other valuable cultural producers also make claims on the past -- poets, visual artists, theologians, novelists, and politicians. The assumption that "we" as historians own the past is simply not admitted by all others who use the past, and there is no intrinsic reason why film makers should credit historians claims more than others.

The usual assumption is that Academic Historians own the past because they have *more accurate information* and *better skills of interpretation*. In the field of academic publishing, this is certainly true, but standing besides the past as determined by academic historians are "other pasts" that actually matter to people. These other pasts are constructed through a series of filters and distortions, amplifications and deletions, censorships and romanticizations.

Given that academic history is, more or less, only 200-300 years old, it was these "other pasts" that were almost exclusively the way that people in the period we study (i.e. the "middle ages") actually conceived of their own past. Charlemagne, for example, was in pretty much the same legendary position in thirteenth century France that Wallace was in eighteenth century Scotland.

I would insist that academic historians who insist on sweeping away all the "later myths" are missing the richness of the past, rather like "archeologists" who to get to Periclean ruins used to sweep away the later Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Serb, and Ottoman accretions.

There are many ways of looking at the past. I am in no way suggesting that academic history is deficient, but the way some academic historians talk about historical films reminds me of the Catholics who, upon arriving in heaven, have to be sneaked past the areas holding those of other faiths because they just won't believe its heaven if anyone else is there.

## **2. Use a multiplicity of ways in which to view the connection of a film and history:**

A: A historical film is usually made using *topoi* (literary or cinematic conventions) established within *the history of cinema*.

*Gladiator* for example owes a lot to previous films such as *Ben Hur* (1927), *The Sign of the Cross*, *Ben Hur* (1959), *El Cid*, and so forth. It is also an expression of a particular director's outlook. Compare the sweep over Los Angeles in *Blade Runner*, for example, with the sweep over Rome in *Gladiator*, and the role of director Ridley Scott's own art becomes clear.

Medieval historians who comment on movies are often painfully unaware for both the importance of conventions in the history of cinema, not to mention the significance of understanding that particular directors may manifest a distinct *auteur* style. One of the many films made about St. Francis -- *Francesco* -- features Mickey Rourke as the saint, a casting choice that caused much hilarity. That hilarity illustrates what I have come to see as a major flaw in the way medievalists typically view movies. Counter type casting is in fact a very common technique, and we should not make too much of the fact that Mickey Rourke plays Francis. We might indeed celebrate how such casting forces a break with overly pious representations of the saint. (Keanu Reeves, for instance, has performed well in two of the most successful Buddhist movies ever made: as the Buddha in *Little Buddha* and as the Buddha-to-be in *The Matrix*). For any serious historical critic of *Francesco*, however, the really important thing is that it is the product of one of the most important female "auteur" directors, Liliana Cavani. If historians are going to use the film for more than classroom clips, they need to consider the film in relation to Cavani's other interests. Her film on the Tibetan religious figure *Milarepa*, for instance, must be taken into account when considering her view of Francis.

B: A historical film, like other films, often *reflects the period in which it was made*.

Sticking with previous examples, it is interesting just how normative an "early Christian" connection was in almost all Hollywood Roman movies (even *Spartacus*), whereas Ridley Scott, part of a largely secularized international elite, seems deliberately to avoid that particular *topos*.

The contemporary reception of movie might also be an interesting area for historian's consideration. *Braveheart*, for example, boosted the polls for the Scottish Nationalist Party, and was extensive used in its advertising

C: A historical film can be considered as the *product of a cinematic historian*.

This is the category where straightforward considerations of accuracy and intent do come in.

Historians need to be careful, though. In the case of **Braveheart**, the star and director Mel Gibson was asked in one interview how he had learned about Wallace, and he responded that the "script had a lot of information." In this case, the "historian" was the scriptwriter rather than the director.

A film such as *Gladiator*, which caught a lot of flak from historians, in fact contained a good deal of accurate information, mixed in with inaccuracies, while *The Seventh Seal*, almost universally praised, has no relationship to its supposed period whatsoever (on the other hand, it is a pretty good way to consider Swedish existentialism in the 1950s).

When evaluating a film as "cinematic history," it cannot be just a matter of checking off points on an accuracy list.

Many historical films concern war and warfare. Military realism has little to do with wider historical accuracy. Taking the example of Mel Gibson's *The Patriot*, it may have had quite a lot right in terms of uniforms and buttons, but was wildly off target and full of simply atrocious lies in its presentation of race relations and British military actions against civilians. Still, so is the Declaration of Independence in its description of George III and two-timing assertion of human equality in slave-owning society, so perhaps Gibson was being more subtle than I give him credit for in celebrating a revolution that was supported at the time by myths with a film that was entirely fallacious. But I doubt it.

In regard to Joan of Arc films we have a figure who, after Jesus, perhaps the most celebrated historical personage in cinema.. Almost everyone's favorite Joan film is Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), which with the current addition of Einhorn's cantata can reduce a class of students to whimpering pieces of jelly/jello. It is true that *Passion of Joan of Arc* did stick entirely to trial transcripts. No one, however, could claim that *Passion* is historically accurate, but almost everyone understands that Dreyer did capture an aspect of Joan's importance.

D: A historical film can be considered in terms of its *way of presenting the past*.

This approach directly challenges the primacy of the "historical accuracy" school. Instead of viewing a historical film as a product of "cinematic history," let us consider that a given film might manifest quite different genres of historically-oriented literature - myth, epic, romance, gossip, and inspiration. Indeed an awareness of the multiplicity of historical genres in film brings us closer to how "the past" was thought about *in the past*. Ancient and medieval historical literatures in particular consisted not only of "rational history" (e.g. Thucydides, various medieval writers), but also myth and epic (Beowulf, The Iliad, Anna Comnena in one light), gossip (Suetonius, Michael Psellus), chronicle, miracle story, moralizing (Plutarch, Tacitus) and even nationalist evocation.

Thinking about historical film in this way gives us an opportunity to think about the ways that people in the past understood their own history. The modern study of history is a scientific enterprise to understand things "as they really were." The various approaches of modern historians -- political history, women's history, social history, or even cultural studies -- all fall into this "let's get to the truth" paradigm. But the "past" that was important to medieval audiences was not the "past as it was" but the "past" as a series of somewhat disconnected explanatory myths, epic stories, legendary figures, and entertaining romances. In some respects, then, just the sort of "past" that enthralls modern filmmakers and audiences.

In the case of **Braveheart**, our opinion of the film's "inaccuracies" becomes more complex when we realize that the "sources" for the screenwriters were not "the historical records of the early fourteenth century" but the writings about Wallace by "Blind Hary" at the end of the 15th century, writings intended to arouse patriotic passions against English penetration. Faulty as it might have been as early fourteenth century history, as a reproduction of a late medieval "nationalist" use of history, it is hard to think of a better "historical movie" than *Braveheart*!

I do not propose that any one of these ways of thinking about film and history is better than another. Rather I suggest that by using all of them, we can think more clearly about advantages and disadvantages of film as a way to present pre-modern history; assess more critically the different approaches taken by directors; and come away from a historical movie with understanding rather than nit-picking concerns about accuracy.