

BLOOMSBURY FILM GENRES SERIES

# HISTORICAL FILM

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION  
JONATHAN STUBBS



# Historical Film

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# Historical Film

A Critical Introduction

**JONATHAN STUBBS**

B L O O M S B U R Y  
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Academic**

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

175 Fifth Avenue  
New York  
NY 10010  
USA

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

**www.bloomsbury.com**

First published 2013

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stubbs, Jonathan.

Historical film : a critical introduction / by Jonathan Stubbs.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Includes filmography.

ISBN 978-1-84788-497-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)– ISBN 978-1-84788-498-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Historical films–United States–History and criticism. 2. Motion pictures and history. I. Title.

PN1995.9.H5S78 2013

791.43'658–dc23

2012033493

ISBN: 9781472520012

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

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# Acknowledgments

**T**his book has been several years in the making and I've accumulated numerous debts of gratitude in the process. I'd like to thank Mark Jancovich and Charles Acland, the editors of this series, for their kind assistance and their faith in me as the project took shape. My research began while I was working at the University of East Anglia and the bulk of the writing took place in warmer climes at Cyprus International University. I consider myself very fortunate to have worked alongside such helpful and thoughtful academics at both of these institutions. During the writing process I benefitted from the enthusiasm of the editorial staff at Berg and Bloomsbury Academic, particularly Tristan Palmer and Katie Gallof. Finally, I would like to thank my mother for her enduring support, and Asliye, whose love and patience continue to be a revelation.



# Introduction: Film and the invention of history

*[Charlton] Heston then dipped deeply into his historical studies to describe exactly what was known about El Cid. It sounded rather scrappy to a reporter: 'You mean you and the screenwriter had to do a lot of guess-work?' Mr Heston looked rather reproofing. 'I hope we didn't do any guessing,' he said, as if it cast aspersions on what he likes to call the 'historicity' of his epics.<sup>1</sup>*

(THE GUARDIAN, 1961)

**T**he 2009 Hollywood comedy *The Invention of Lying* is set in a parallel universe in which the concept of lying does not exist. There is no dishonesty, no bragging, no tact, no religion, no crime, and no concept of fiction. As a consequence, the dominance of the historical film is uncontested. In the absence of fictional genres, the film industry is based entirely around the production of historical 'lecture films' which are delivered direct to camera by a narrator who sits in an armchair and reads from a teleprompter. Sample titles include 'Napoleon 1812–13,' 'The Industrial Revolution,' and 'The Invention of the Fork.' The film's hero Mark Bellison (played by Ricky Gervais) is employed as a screenplay writer for a 'lecture film' movie studio. Stranded in the '14th Century Department' and apparently powerless to produce screenplays on any topic other than the Black Death, he rapidly falls behind colleagues assigned to apparently more eventful periods. As his personal and professional life disintegrates, Bellison 'invents' lying. He pitches his boss a screenplay based on a 'never before heard event from history' based on a fourteenth-century manuscript which he discovered, personally, in an 'ancient chest.' The story features aliens landing in Babylon, a ninja army, robot dinosaurs, nude Amazonian women, a wedding on Mars, and subsequently the wiping of the memories of all those involved. Still unfamiliar with the concept of fiction, Bellison's colleagues and the viewing public take the

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<sup>1</sup>W. J. Weatherby, "The Character of the Epic," *The Guardian*, November 16, 1961, 8.

story at face value and the film proves to be a huge success, even though it too has presumably taken the form of a lecture.

This counterfactual depiction of the historical film points towards some of the most interesting debates which surround the genre. First, even though historical films have never enjoyed quite the monopoly presented in the parallel world of *The Invention of Lying*, cinema of this type has been a mainstay of American film production for over a hundred years and has consistently delivered a large proportion of Hollywood's profits. From *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Titanic* (1997), via *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Ben-Hur* (1959), filmmakers in America have repeatedly turned to historical material for their grandest, most expensive creations, and audiences around the world have provided handsome returns on their investments. Secondly, although it would be simplistic to accuse historical films of 'lying' about the past, they are characterized by the interplay of fact and fiction. Historical films are often marketed on the basis of their accuracy and their ability to show the past 'as it really was.' But although some filmmakers have gone to extreme lengths in pursuit of authenticity, historical films inevitably incorporate elements of fiction in order to represent eras in which the visual record is incomplete. As Pierre Sorlin has noted, 'even if they are based on records, [historical films] have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show.'<sup>2</sup> Speaking broadly, historical films might be considered an expedient compromise between fact and fiction.

Thirdly, although real-world audiences are much less likely to take historical films at face value than the fictional audiences in *The Invention of Lying*, the genre is often subject to conflicting expectations regarding their accuracy and authenticity. Fidelity to the past is valued in the promotional and critical discourses that historical films generate, but any historical 'lecture film' would be hopelessly uncompetitive in a marketplace populated by film genres which are not restricted to documented facts. Pre-empting criticism of his directorial choices on the set of *Gladiator* (2000), Ridley Scott said, 'I felt the priority was to stay true to the spirit of the period, but not necessarily to adhere to facts. We were, after all, creating fiction, not practicing archaeology.'<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, comments made by some critics and historians imply a preference for films consisting of unadorned historical facts, prepared by experts, and delivered direct to camera, unmediated by any other form of visual representation. Finally, the very absence of visual artifice in 'lecture films' points to what has often been the major selling point of historical films in the real world: spectacle. From Roman chariot races and the burning of Atlanta to the

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<sup>2</sup>Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1980), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Diana Landau (ed.), *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic* (London: Boxtree, 2000), 64.

sinking of the *Titanic* and the beginnings of space travel, historical films have used the past as a grand canvas for the construction of visual excess.

As this book will demonstrate, films based on historical material have been a major mode of production in Hollywood from its earliest period to the present. Historical films also need to be understood as one of the principal ways in which people form relationships with the past. A 1998 study based on interviews with 1,500 Americans found that respondents were significantly more likely to encounter history through films and television than through books or museums.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the cover story from a 2010 issue of *Time* magazine hailed Tom Hanks as 'America's Historian in Chief' due to his involvement in various historical films and TV serials.<sup>5</sup> As Jerome de Groot has suggested, history plays a role in modern culture which greatly exceeds the work of professional, academic historians:

The 'historical' in popular culture and contemporary society is multiple, multiplying and unstable. The variety of discourses that use history; the complexity of interrogations, uses and responses to that history; and the fracturing of formal, technological and generic systems, all contribute to a dynamic and massively important phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

The role played by popular historical cinema in this process should be obvious. But for all its presence in popular culture over the past century, the historical film has posed problems for genre theorists. Although precise definitions have not been agreed on, historical cinema tends to cut across existing genre categories and establishes an intimidatingly large group of films. In recent years, a lively body of work has developed around historical cinema, much of it proposing valuable new ways to consider the relationship between cinematic and historical representation.<sup>7</sup> However, only a small proportion of this writing has paid attention to the issue of genre. In order to counter this omission, this book combines a critical analysis of the Hollywood historical film with an examination of its generic dimensions and a history of its development since the silent period. Of course, Hollywood has never held a monopoly on historical cinema, but for the sake of coherence the scope of this book will be limited as such. I argue that the historical film genre needs to be understood not as a set of shared textual characteristics but rather as a discursive practice centered on an unavoidably diverse body of films. For

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<sup>4</sup>Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 238.

<sup>5</sup>"How Tom Hanks Became America's Historian in Chief," *Time*, March 15, 2010, 1.

<sup>6</sup>Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 4.

<sup>7</sup>See the "Annotated Guide to Further Reading" appended to this volume for more information.

this reason, this book is concerned not simply with the formal properties of the films at hand, but also the ways in which they have been promoted, interpreted, and discussed in relation to their engagement with the past. My main questions are: How do films engage with the past, both textually and beyond the text? How have these engagements developed over time? What role do they play in the promotion and reception of the films in question? And what is at stake in popular and scholarly debates about the accuracy, authenticity, and cultural value of historical films?

The book is organized into three sections. The first surveys and engages with existing critical approaches of historical cinema, in particular its status as a genre and the various criteria that have been used to assess the value of individual films as works of history. Chapter 1 attempts to reconcile historical cinema produced in Hollywood with theoretical approaches to genre. The term 'historical film' has significant currency in both commercial and academic contexts, and yet it lacks the unified textual features which tend to be associated with other Hollywood genres. Previous writers have nevertheless focused on the textual properties of historical cinemas in their attempts to establish a practical definition for the genre, often working backwards to substantiate a predetermined conception of the genre, but this kind of approach has been unable to unite such a highly disparate body of films. Instead, following contemporary developments in genre studies and drawing on recent writing about historical cinema, I propose a broad, cultural definition of the historical film based around the ways in which specific films have been promoted by the film industry and interpreted by viewers. Historical cinema consists of films which engage with the past and construct a relationship with history, either textually or extra-textually. In order to illustrate this definition I examine examples of textual and extra-textual engagements with the past: first the role played by prologues and epilogues in establishing a film's relationship with history, and secondly promotional discourses which emphasize the research effort supposedly underpinning specific historical films.

Chapter 2 examines the ways in which historical films are able to evoke a sense of the past, their ability to represent history effectively, and the expectations which have been brought to bear on them by historians and critics. First, I consider the extent to which historical films depend on the display of material detail in their evocation of history, and the advantages and limitations of this dependency for the broader process of historical representation. Moving from historical *mise en scène* to historical narrative, I examine the inevitable presence of the present in historical films and the critical tendency to interpret the stories they tell on an analogical basis. These discussions lead into an analysis of critical assessments of historical cinema and the ways these debates have privileged concepts of accuracy and authenticity. Such

writing tends to find historical cinema lacking when directly compared with written histories, but recent developments in the study of history provide the means to assess historical cinema on its own terms. Finally, this chapter considers the work of Robert Rosenstone, perhaps the leading scholarly voice in the study of historical cinema and, to some extent, a proponent of its ability to contribute to popular understandings of the past.

The next three chapters provide a historical overview of historical film production in Hollywood, focusing on production trends and cycles, industrial contexts and the impact of 'breakaway' hits produced within the genre. Beginning with very early examples of historical narratives in American cinema, Chapter 3 traces the emergence and consolidation of historical cinema as Hollywood's business model was established. Many of the most extravagant and most profitable productions of the 1910s and 1920s adopted historical settings, and although budgets decreased in the early sound period, the historical film remained at the center of studio activity. During the 1930s the historical film was associated with prestigious subject matter, often based on the lives of great men, and these films generally favored Old World locations over America's history. Nevertheless, a significant number of historical films also looked to the recent past of the New World and, in particular, the history of American business institutions. Finally, this chapter examines the impact of World War II on historical cinema and the extent to which the genre was able to accommodate the ideological demands of the wartime government.

Chapter 4 focuses on the late 1940s and the late 1960s, a time when historical cinema was particularly prominent in the operations of the Hollywood studios. As the industry adjusted to the fragmentation of the post-war film marketplace, a series of extravagant historical films with escalating budgets suggested that the genre was uniquely positioned to respond to changes in filmgoing habits and the erosion of cinema as a mass medium. The extent to which the historical film was transformed in this era is addressed by examining two major films from the 1930s which were remade for new audiences in 1960s: *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) and *Cleopatra* (1963). The chapter proceeds to examine the emergence of the historical epic in more detail, focusing particularly on thematic continuities in its representation of the ancient world and their relationship to the Cold War and Zionist ideology. Discussions of historical cinema in the 1950s and 1960s have tended to marginalize films which fall outside the ancient world epic cycle, so the final section of this chapter examines the other major trends in historical cinema from the era: World War II combat films and historical musicals adapted from Broadway productions.

Concluding the survey section, Chapter 5 examines major themes in the production of the historical film from the 'New Hollywood' period in the late

1960s to the present. Following a series of costly failures during the 1960s, historical cinema no longer played such a prominent role in Hollywood's business activities, but it remained a constant feature in production schedules. The New Hollywood period is frequently seen as a clean break from the past, but I argue that many prominent films from the era can be seen to reconnect with American history. This renewed interest in America's past can also be seen in a cycle of revisionist historical films. In addition, the chapter considers the impact of the American experience in Vietnam on depictions of American military history, first in World War II war films, later in direct representations of the Vietnam War, and later still in a new cycle of World War II combat films from the late 1990s. Finally, this chapter examines the industrial motivations for the apparent re-emergence of the 1950s-style historical epic in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

The three final chapters of the book address some of the specific issues raised by the study of historical cinema: its construction of spectacle, its cultural status, and the involvement of historians in its creation. Chapter 6 considers the role played by spectacle in historical representation and its association with historical eventfulness. Spectacle has often been understood as the means to exhibit the economic and technological prowess of high-budget Hollywood cinema, but it can also be seen as a means to evoke the feeling of being in the past. The chapter proceeds to examine some of the most common tropes which have characterized historical spectacle over time. The role of technology in the creation of spectacle is also considered, particular its relationship with widescreen processes and the promotion of these technologies as a means to immerse the audience in spectacle. Finally, this chapter looks at the impact of digital technologies in shaping the spectacular effects of historical films since the late 1990s.

Chapter 7 considers the cultural value often attributed to historical cinema and examines its apparently privileged status in relation to other Hollywood genres. Historical films have often performed a public relations role for the film industry, particularly during the 1930s as the film industry came under pressure due to concerns over its moral standards, and the cultural achievements of the genre have frequently been acknowledged in Academy Awards ceremonies over the years. Historical cinema is also unusual in its consistent association with educational practice. However, this chapter examines the ways in which the discourses of prestige, moral respectability, and intellectual elevation attached to historical cinema have been disputed, especially in contexts beyond the control of the film industry. In particular, this chapter examines criticisms levelled against historical films by educators and intellectual film critics, and its entanglements with film censorship and patriotic sentiments in foreign countries.

Finally, in my conclusion, I examine the role played by professional historians

in the production and promotion of historical films. It has become relatively common for modern films to foreground the contributions of academic historians in their production, but historians have in fact been involved in the film industry for many decades. In recent years the producers of historical films have also called on historians to provide evaluative commentaries for inclusion in home media packages. Nevertheless, accounts written by historians who have worked as advisors on Hollywood films create an inconclusive picture of their working conditions and the extent of their practical influence. Suspicions have also been raised about the extent to which historians have been used as a means to add legitimacy or to deflect criticism from the films at hand. This conclusion addresses these conflicting accounts in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the relationship articulated between historical film production, history as an academic practice, and the past in general.



# 1

## What is historical cinema?

### Approaches to genre

In the study of film, a genre has conventionally been understood as a group of films unified by a recognizable repertoire of textual practices—plot, setting, character, iconography, music, narrative form, performance style, etc.—around which their production, marketing, and consumption can be efficiently organized.<sup>1</sup> Once this system of conventions has been identified, according to this line of thinking, a critic is better able to understand not only a film's commercial context but also the way it functions within a much larger body of work. For this reason, much writing about cinema has been concerned with placing films in genre categories and with debating the boundaries between these categories. According to Richard Maltby,

Genre criticism usually identifies up to eight genres in Hollywood feature film production. The western, the comedy, the musical and the war movie are four uncontested categories. Different critics will then argue the relative independent merits of at least one of the thriller and the crime or gangster movie, and list the horror movie and science fiction as either one or two additional genres.<sup>2</sup>

As this suggests, the process of identifying genres is much less precise or unanimous than many writers have been prepared to admit. Moreover, much writing on genre has been based on a kind of reasoning which Andrew Tudor describes as the 'empiricist dilemma':

To take a genre such as the western, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body

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<sup>1</sup>Christine Gledhill, "History of Genre Criticism" in Pam Cook (ed.), *The Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1999), 137.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (London: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2003), 85.

of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the 'principal characteristics', which can only be discovered from the films once they have been isolated.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, critics tend to select a group of films which they suppose belong to the same genre, and then work backwards to define the genre based on the characteristics that the films share, possibly overlooking information which does not confirm their preconceptions. In doing so, they simply reproduce the initial assumptions that led them to choose these films in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

These problems become even more acute in the case of films whose textual practices are harder to pin down. It may be difficult to arrive at precise definitions for Maltby's four 'uncontested categories,' but telling them apart is usually straightforward. If a couple break off from their date to sing a duet, for example, you can be reasonably certain you are watching a musical. But what about historical films? Do the textual practices of the genre give it the kind of formal unity which critics have identified in the western? Ginette Vincendeau's comments about the genre status of 'heritage' cinema might also apply to the historical film:

Except for the presence of period costume, they are neither defined by a unified iconography (unlike the thriller and the western), nor a type of narrative (unlike the romance or the musical), nor an affect (unlike horror, melodrama and comedy).<sup>5</sup>

Instead of presenting a broadly cohesive set of textual features, historical films exhibit a massive variance in iconography, narrative style, setting, plot, and character types. Simply being 'in the past' cannot be regarded as a coherent textual characteristic in itself. Moreover, the simple fact that 'the past' refers equally to any point in time between the ancient world and the preceding moment suggests a potential range of iconographies far larger than any other genre. Any common ground occupied by films set in the past is at best tenuous, at least in comparison to more conventional genres.

It is also worth pointing out that the term 'historical film' has barely featured in many of the standard, single-volume surveys of Hollywood genres, including Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (1981), Nick Browne's *Refiguring American Film*

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<sup>3</sup>Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), 135–8.

<sup>4</sup>Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal*, 40/3 (2001): 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ginette Vincendeau, "Introduction" in Vincendeau (ed.), *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001), xviii.

*Genres* (1998), Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999), Steve Neale's *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (2000), and Barry Langford's *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (2005). And yet the term 'historical film' is strongly represented in film scholarship. Many books have been dedicated to the subject in the past ten years alone, including Robert Burgoyne's *The Hollywood Historical Film* (2008), David Eldridge's *Hollywood's History Films* (2006), J. E. Smyth's *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema* (2006), and James Chapman's *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (2005). There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that term 'historical film' has considerable currency outside the academy. The vast online databases operated by commercial companies provide useful examples. LoveFilm, Europe's largest DVD rental company, allows subscribers to browse films and television shows within 20 broad categories which they identify as 'genres.' In an indication of the overlapping nature of such categorization, most titles are listed in more than one genre, and 'historical' films are listed as a sub-category of three separate genres: 'Action/Adventure,' 'Drama,' and 'Romance.' The practices of online retailer Amazon are similar: 'Historical' is a sub-category of both 'Action & Adventure' and 'Drama.' The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is owned by Amazon, but it uses a slightly different structure to organize its 1.6 million entries, listing 'History' as one of their 26 'genre' categories. Unlike LoveFilm and Amazon, this category also features a large number of non-fiction titles, mostly television documentaries. The motives and methods used by academic writers and commercial websites are clearly different, but they underline the strong cultural presence of the historical film. Evidently, a gap exists between conventional theoretical approaches to genre on the one hand, and the operation of genre categories in popular and academic practice on the other. It seems, therefore, that conventional ideas about genre are of limited use in understanding the origins and development of historical film.

However, recent work on the function and meaning of film genres has questioned some of the tenets of conventional genre criticism, in particular the notion that genres are characterized by a historically stable and unified system of textual practices. Steve Neale has suggested that genres need to be seen as 'ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than one-dimensional entities' and that they reside not only in films themselves but also in the expectations which audiences bring with them when they watch films.<sup>6</sup> He also emphasizes the institutional role played by film industries in the creation and perpetuation of these classifications, citing its ability to guide 'the meaning, application, and use of generic terms' in an 'inter-textual relay' of publicity, promotion and reception discourses.<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, Rick Altman

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<sup>6</sup>Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.