



Based on a True Story



INTRODUCTION

"Based on a true story" is an expression seen frequently in advertisements for films and television programs that deliberately blend fact and fiction. At the same time that it makes a claim of authenticity, it contains a caution that changes have been made. The two messages are not communicated at the same volume. "Based on a true story" proclaims a promise of veracity while whispering a discreet warning that mere "facts" alone are not sufficient.

In 1915 one of filmmaking's most innovative pioneers, D. W. Griffith, predicted that "moving pictures" would quickly replace book writing as the principal way to communicate knowledge about the past. In the first essay in this volume, Donald F. Stevens looks at the promise, problems, parallels, and paradoxes of visual presentation of the past both in the movies and in professional history. Each of the remaining chapters examines one or two of the best available feature films on Latin America from a historian's perspective.

The essays are arranged in rough chronological order, beginning with Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala's illuminating view of Christopher Columbus in Ridley Scott's *1492: The Conquest of Paradise*. Thomas H. Holloway digs into the elusive

story of the sixteenth-century conquistador Lope de Aguirre in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Maria Luisa Bemberg's film *Yo, la Peor de Todas (I, the Worst of All)* evokes Mexico's celebrated seventeenth-century poet, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Susan E. Ramirez traces what we know about her life and her thoughts through Octavio Paz's biography, other historical works, and, ultimately, Sor Juana's own writing. James Schofield Saeger exposes the common cultural preconceptions in both written history and in Roland Joffe's spectacular film, *The Mission*, about Jesuit missionaries' attempts to transform Guarani Indian lives and beliefs in eighteenth-century Paraguay.

Nineteenth-century Argentina provides the setting for Bemberg's *Camila*, which Stevens describes as a brilliant critique of romantic passion and patriarchal terror. John Mraz compares divergent viewpoints in two Cuban films on slavery: Sergio Giral's *The Other Francisco* and Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper*. Barbara Weinstein examines how Cuban women's history has changed since Humberto Solas made *Lucia*, a film divided into three segments, one in the 1890s, one in the 1930s, and one in the 1960s, each focusing on a different woman named Lucia. Bruno Barreto's *Gabriela*, based on the novel by the celebrated Brazilian author Jorge Amado, provides a contrasting perspective on the modernization of sexual relationships in Brazil. James D.

Henderson considers it "the best feature-length film depicting elite culture and mentality in early twentieth-century Latin America."

Barbara A. Tenenbaum explains what foreigners find confusing about Mexican culture when they read Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* or see Alfonso Arau's cinematic version of the novel. Mark D. Szuchman examines how historical debates on the family and politics are addressed in Argentine films, especially Bemberg's *Miss Mary* (set in the late 1930s and early 1940s) and Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story* (which takes place during the collapse of the military dictatorship in 1983). In this volume's final chapter, Robert M. Levine exposes the elusive interplay of fiction and reality in Hector Babenco's *Pixote*, which tells the prescient story of a child living on the streets of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Each of these essays addresses the past, both as we see it at the movies and as we imagine it in traditional historical research. *Based on a True Story* is not a complete, panoramic view of Latin American history but rather a series of windows through which we can catch glimpses of men, women, and children from the late fifteenth century to the present, as well as watch the historians and filmmakers whose work behind the scenes makes these visions possible.

CHAPTER ONE

NEVER READ HISTORY AGAIN?

THE POSSIBILITIES AND PERILS OF CINEMA AS HISTORICAL DEPICTION

DONALD F. STEVENS

The time will come, and in less than ten years, when the children in the public schools will be taught practically everything by moving pictures. Certainly they will never be obliged to read history again.

—D. W. Griffith, March 28, 1915

The nineteenth century was profoundly optimistic about the possibilities of recording objective reality in both words and images. The invention of photography in the 1820s, and its improvement by Louis Daguerre and George Eastman later in the century, coincided with the development of the profession of historian. Both history and photography promised accurate descriptions of objective reality. As photographers recorded images of places, objects, and people unmediated (it was thought)

by the artist's style, scholars believed that they could write history, in Leopold von Ranke's essential phrase, "as it really was."²

Both history and photography became more methodologically and technically sophisticated. Further mechanical improvements made sequential photography possible, then kinetoscopes and peep shows. Finally, in 1895, the first true motion picture flashed on a theater screen. As the movies, television, and videotape reached ever-larger audiences, the written products of the historical profession became increasingly specialized. Visual images became more attractive and pervasive; history became more disciplined, compartmentalized, and marginalized from the broader culture.

These technological innovations and market conditions were the basis for D. W. Griffith's optimism that filmmaking would quickly replace book writing as the basis for presenting the past to mass audiences. He continued:

Imagine a public library of the near future, for instance. There will be long rows of boxes or pillars, properly classified and indexed, of course. At each box a push button and before each box a seat. Suppose you wish to "read up" on a certain episode in Napoleon's life. Instead of consulting all the authorities, wading laboriously through a host of books, and ending bewildered, without a

clear idea of exactly what did happen and confused at every point by conflicting opinions about what did happen, you will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button, and actually see what happened.

There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression.³

Today, many historians would consider Griffith's (and Ranke's) idea of "what did happen" to be an antiquated and naive notion, a quaint vestige of outmoded positivism. Griffith did hold some simple ideas about the past. He assumed that history was shaped by the lives of great men and that knowledge of the past was encapsulated in "episodes" in the lives of the powerful. Few professional historians today would share those assumptions. The days of heroic history are past. Movies, though, still lend themselves to action and heroes. Griffith believed that history was important and interesting but he thought that professional historians were not. He assumed without question both an interest in the past and the value of teaching and learning history. But

Griffith also was certain that "wading laboriously through a host of books" and "consulting all the authorities" would only result in conflict, frustration, and confusion.

Griffith's vision of a future video library of historical episodes neatly avoids those problems because all of the difficult work is performed by unseen forces. His inquiring mind encounters passive constructions that, at the push of a button, miraculously provide the desired historical commodity ready to be consumed uncritically. The construction of the past is carried on out of sight; it is implied but not explained. Who is it who locates and frames that window into the past? Who "scientifically prepared" the room? Who determines when the window is "properly adjusted"? Even if we could frame and locate an accurate and unobtrusive window on the past, will this single, fixed point of view suffice for every occasion? What happens when the scene changes? If time moves as slowly in these re-creations as it does in real life, the process of observing the past from this fixed perspective could become exceedingly tedious. Do we really have time to watch three hundred years of Spanish colonial administration or even five and one-half years to spend sitting in front of the window to see the Cuban Revolution from Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks to the fall of Batista? Stories of wars and battles remain among the most popular subjects of interest in the past, if one judges by the

number of texts offered for sale by the History Book Club or national bookstore chains. Yet even warfare has been described as endless tedium "punctuated with moments of sheer terror and exhilaration."⁴ Perhaps Griffith's window is equipped with another button as well, a fast-forward to skip through the monotony.

Once we begin to hit the fast-forward button, we have taken another crucial step away from the notion of objective reality. We have begun to edit what we see through the window. We can no longer avoid noticing the heroic efforts that are necessary to make the past presentable. Who is doing all that traditional labor of "writing, revising, collating, and reproducing"? Just who are those "recognized experts," how were they trained, and who accredited them? What power assures us that no opinions are ever expressed? What technical wizardry has transformed the bewildering chaos of conflicting historical interpretations into "a vivid and complete expression"?

It is, of course, ironic (in at least three distinct ways) that Griffith himself should portray the future of the past in this way. The content, the technique, and the reception of his most famous film ensured that we could never see the past through a perfect window. First, look at his own great contribution to putting the past on movie screens. Griffith's *The Clansman* opened in February 1915 (just before the interview I have quoted from appeared). Later

retitled *The Birth of a Nation*, the film was not so much a window on the past as it was a mirror of particular stereotypes and prejudices.⁵ Second, it demonstrated tremendous innovations in filmmaking technique. *The Birth of a Nation* first unlocked the motion picture camera from its previously fixed position. Griffith put the window on the past in motion, panning from a mother comforting her children amid the devastation of war, to Sherman's troops passing in the distance, and back to the pathetic, huddled figures again, and later cutting dramatically back and forth between scenes of a distraught young white woman menaced by a mulatto suitor and the Ku Klux Klan galloping to save her. Griffith's innovations in cinematography and editing ensured that cinematic art would never again be as static as his metaphorical view through a window implied.⁶ Third, even the view through Griffith's window did not remain unchallenged or unchanged. *The Birth of a Nation* was reedited many times over the years both by Griffith himself and by others who contested his version of the Civil War and Reconstruction. History is not obvious and inert but challenged and ever changing.

For all a professional historian may balk at the intellectual weaknesses of his vision of history's future, Griffith was probably more accurate than we might like to think. More people today get their history in movie theaters, from broadcast and cable

television, and on prerecorded videocassette tapes than from reading print.⁷ During the nineteenth century, historical narratives by William H. Prescott, George Bancroft, and Thomas Carlyle were widely read. Today, history is more likely to be interpreted by Roland Joffe, Bernardo Bertolucci, or Oliver Stone. Carl Sandburg is said to have remarked that Hollywood was a more effective educational institution than Harvard.⁸ The products of Hollywood, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, and Churrubusco are more economical and popular as well.

Despite, and perhaps in part because of, the evident popularity of motion pictures, most historians have been slow to take film and television seriously as a way of depicting the past.⁹ Justification abounds for intellectual suspicion and emotional resentment. Movies are relatively short. They can deal with only a relatively small amount of information. Even a full-length feature film is seldom more than two hours long and may contain only about as much information as a chapter or an article. Hence, films seem superficial to professionals who spend years immersed in the details of a particular subject and time. Filmmaking appears to be nothing like book writing. Movie making is a gregarious activity; it seems glamorous, expensive, and lucrative. Historians generally work on their own, in relative solitude, on restricted budgets for

small audiences. But many of these ideas and attitudes will not stand up to scrutiny. As Robert Rosenstone has pointed out, a short work is not inherently less historical than a long one any more than an article is worse than a book or a 200-page book less historical than five heavy volumes.¹⁰ Brevity can be a virtue, and film has other merits of immediacy and emotional impact that make it more accessible to the wide audiences that somehow are not attracted to professional historical writing. Most period movies nevertheless rely on historians' labor of one sort or another. Robert Brent Toplin has noted that filmmakers generally do not have a complete grasp of the appropriate scholarly literature, but they do "frequently operate under the influence of specific works in print." Historians have, for the most part, repaid this attention by neglecting films, leaving the analysis of visual media to scholars trained in cinema studies, literature, and communications.¹²

Even as film and television are increasingly important as interpreters of history, most professional historians have seen filmmakers as outsiders who need not be addressed." A small minority began using films in class nearly thirty years ago. Those scholars who broke ranks undoubtedly paid a price. There was little to protect the ones who first brought films into the history classroom from the suspicion of their older, tenured colleagues

that they were involved in some dubious experiment to attract more of the visually oriented (and therefore, by definition, less literate) students. They appeared to be risking their professional integrity through some untoward pact with the purveyors of slick, seductive, and misleading images. Many of these historians, such as Robert Sklar, gravitated toward the new field of cinema studies.¹⁴

Recently, the availability of videotape seems to have increased the use of films in history classes, but the intellectual obstacles to films in the classroom may well have been greater than the technological ones.¹⁵ As Rosenstone has written, "Let's face the facts and admit it: historical films trouble and disturb (most) professional historians. Why? We all know the obvious answers. Because, historians will say, films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize important people, events, and movements. They falsify history."¹⁶ And some filmmakers are relatively immature, unreflective, disingenuous, even callous about the past. Joffe's *The Mission*, for example, ignores the conventional, institutional racism of the Jesuit missionaries in eighteenth-century Paraguay and turns centuries of historical certainty upside down to provide a dramatic and heroic ending for favored characters, as James Schofield Saeger demonstrates in his essay in this volume. Such distortions are even

more disturbing when the movie begins with a conspicuous appeal to authenticity. *The Mission* claims that "the historical events represented in this story are true and happened in Paraguay and Argentina in 1758 and 1759."¹⁷

Even the films that are most congruent with professional history require certain liberties that historians find troubling.¹⁸ They may complain that filmmakers concretize what is not known, that too much imagination is involved in making historical texts into visual representations and reenactments. But many of the same objections could be made to written history. Do we not do the same thing in our own minds (that is, visualize an imagined past based on the evidence) when we read traditional historical documents or narratives? Is there a clear distinction between trying to imagine what seventeenth-century peasant households looked like from reading inventories postmortem and assembling words or images to convey that knowledge?¹⁹ Hayden White argues that the process is the same: "Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced."²⁰ E. Bradford Burns goes even further, considering the clear communication of visual images

a potential advantage of filmmaking over traditional historical writing. In his words, "thus, the historian should note that in at least this respect the film could be less subjective than the written word since it transfers the image directly to the mind rather than requiring, as the written description does, the mind to create an image, one that naturally varies with each person. Thus, the film leaves less to the imagination, requiring perhaps less interpretation than other forms of communication."²¹

While the public hungers for something beyond a diet of dry facts, historians have a voracious appetite for scraps of paper hidden away in previously unexplored places. One of the wonders of historical research and writing is the way the sources both discipline and delight us. The past is a strange land, far more peculiar than we can imagine on our own.²² Yet, even the most traditional approach to "facts" and "what really happened" cannot proceed without inspiration, assumptions, and questions. Imagination shapes the questions we ask about the past and helps us guess where appropriate sources might be found.²³ Films and filmmaking can encourage historical imagination. Natalie Zemon Davis found that the process of putting the story of Martin Guerre's disappearance and reappearance on film provoked questions that would not have occurred to her if she had only tried

to tell the story in words. Making the movie led her to ask new questions not only about appearances but also about motivations: "I felt I had my own historical laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities."²⁴

Films can serve as an introduction to the past and an incentive to study history. Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* is a cinematic marvel with striking visuals of actors portraying sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors descending from the mists of the Andes into the steamy jungles of the Amazon. Yet, those who know something of the historical Lope de Aguirre will find the cinematic version disappointing. Aguirre's own story is stranger and more compelling than fiction, as Thomas H. Holloway demonstrates in Chapter Three.

Here is the crucial point: Where filmmakers and their mass audiences may be looking for the present and the familiar in the past, historians are attracted to its distinctiveness, its "otherness," and its peculiarities. As Davis puts it, "I wanted to shake people up, because I feel that is what history is about. It is not about confirming what you already know, but about stretching it and turning it upside down and then reaffirming some values, or putting some into question."²⁵ The best history allows the past to speak to us in its own strange way.

Because historians refuse to give imagination and invention free

rein, they may perceive that what are called documentaries are closer to their stylistic preconceptions of how history should be portrayed on film. Even the term itself is reassuring and almost tranquilizing. "Documentary" sounds very much like the documents and manuscripts we usually study. The documentary style flatters historians while it relies on their authority as arbiters of the past; historians regularly appear as "talking heads" in this sort of movie. Constructed out of "actuality footage" to distinguish them from re-creations, these films have the advantage of showing students actual people, places, and sounds from the past.²⁶

Documentary films, though, are also mediated by our imaginations and can suffer from falsification through juxtaposition and problems of connecting images with texts.²⁷ Most of these difficulties are inherent even in the use of simple photographs. Were the photos spontaneous or posed? For most of the nineteenth century, subjects had to remain motionless for long periods. Even the minimum time under exceptional circumstances, about five seconds, was probably too long for spontaneous or candid photography. As late as the 1870s, studio portraiture required the subject to remain motionless from fifteen seconds to more than a minute.²⁸ Long exposure times made it nearly impossible not only to capture action but also even to record

unaffected poses on film. Thus, Matthew Brady's Civil War battlefield views show the ideal photographic subjects of his time, corpses. Dead bodies did not move and blur the image. Even when faster film speeds made stop-action photography possible, anticipation, preparation, and even rehearsal were essential to successful images. The famous, dramatic photograph of Pancho Villa galloping on horseback at the head of his cavalry during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 could only have been carefully staged after the filmmaker was sent out ahead to a suitable location and given ample time to prepare.²⁹ Robert M. Levine has also pointed out that, as much as early photographers thought of themselves as scientists rather than artists, they "were first and foremost businessmen and could not afford to take [unflattering or bluntly realistic] pictures which could not be sold."³⁰

Photographs do not speak for themselves; they must be spoken for.³¹ Connecting text to image is not a self-evident process. Portraits of individuals used in traditional documentary films seldom show how they looked when the words, actions, or ideas attributed to them in the narration occurred. Even a photograph of someone seated at a desk, pen in hand, apparently in the act of writing, may bear no connection to the words read in the voice-over narration. We are inclined simply to accept the filmmaker's

juxtaposition as accurate. Even when that narration contains the actual words, another fiction is created. The letters written by real Civil War soldiers to loved ones and family were some of the most emotionally evocative moments in Ken Burns's *The Civil War*. In listening to them, we imagine a voice from the past, but we are listening to the intonations and enunciations of professional actors hired to read lines.

The boundary between dramatic re-creation and documentary can be clouded. In some of the best historical feature films, dialogue comes from the same sort of documentary sources. In Maria Luisa Bemberg's *Camila*, a cinematic melodrama set in midnineteenth-century Argentina, the actor playing the family patriarch reads chilling words actually written by Camila's father nearly a century and a half ago.³² The blurred boundary between documentary and feature or fictional film can also be a matter of interpretation as filmmakers attempt to tell the truth in spite of political interference. Babenco began to make a documentary about Brazil's juvenile detention system. When official obstruction made that project impossible, he told the story through fiction, writing and directing *Pixote*, a haunting and realistic vision of a child's life on the streets of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. As Levine documents in Chapter Twelve of this volume, the film was not only a powerful condemnation of Brazil's social

crisis but also an international financial and critical success and a foretelling of the tragic death of the film's own star, Fernando Ramos da Silva,

Certainly those who know Latin American and postmodern culture are familiar with the juxtaposition of what Julianne Burton has called "art and actuality, fabrication and found objects, the fictional and the factual."³³ Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) mixed historical fiction with documentary footage in a complex and contradictory visual structure.³⁴ Burton herself has pointed out that, even earlier in the century, after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, "feature filmmakers, motivated by economy rather than by any will to authenticity, inserted actual documentary battle footage from the great unassembled 'archive' of the revolution into their fictional films."³⁵

Privileging the empirical, however, is what historians have to do. One of the historian's fundamental propositions is that "the past does exist and that, contrary to some notion that the past is only in our minds, it has an existence independent of our knowledge of it."³⁶ What would we be if we stopped trying to distinguish the factual from the purely imaginative? I do not know, but surely we would cease to be historians.

Nevertheless, the idea that "fact" and "fiction" are clearly distinguishable categories creates another dichotomy redolent of nineteenth-century polarities, one that smells a bit stale to our postmodern noses. If it seems that the boundaries are not as clear as they once were, perhaps they were never all that distinct to begin with.³⁷ E. Bradford Burns reminds us of the words of Louis Gottschalk, first published in 1950:

It might be well to point out again that what is meant by calling a particular credible is not that it is actually what happened, but that it is as close to what actually happened as we can learn from a critical examination of the best available sources. This means verisimilar at a high level. It connotes something more than merely not being preposterous in itself or even than plausible and yet is short of meaning accurately descriptive of past actuality. In other words, the historian establishes verisimilitude rather than objective truth."

The subtitle to this chapter also partakes of this nineteenth-century rhetorical technique of polarizing. Just as fact and imagination are not always clearly separable, the advantages and disadvantages of using film to study history are not necessarily distinguishable either. Films have an emotional impact and a

popular appeal that is usually missing from professional scholarship. Is this a disadvantage and reason to exclude them from classrooms and professional discussion, or an opportunity to reduce the marginalization that has accompanied the professionalization of historical research? The possibilities and the perils are not discrete items; they are valuations attributed to the same conditions. It is not a case of either/or, but of both and more at once. Neither book writing nor filmmaking provides a perfect window on the past. Neither is "true" and complete in itself. Both are "based on a true story," and their efforts to make the past presentable, for all their apparent differences, are rather similar. People are interested in the past, and historians, plodding empiricists though we may be, have something important to say to a postmodern culture.

Suggested Readings

- Burns, E. Bradford. *Latin American Cinema: Film and History*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, University of California, 1975. A classic work by one of the first Latin Americanists to use films in teaching history.
- Levine, Robert M. *Images of History: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Latin American Photographs as Documents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989. Not only a guide to

the current literature on photography in Latin America but an essential discussion of images as documents.

Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity" Question and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988. A fascinating look at the professionalization of history and the debate on the ideal of "what really happened."

O'Connor, John E., ed. *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*. Malabar, FL: R. E. Krieger, 1990. Essays analyzing film and television as a series of "frameworks" including: representations of history; evidence of facts, events, and culture; and the development of the motion picture industry.

Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Understanding of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. Promotes the idea of film as a distinct way of expressing ideas about the past but discusses films that are mostly obscure.

Rosenstone, Robert A., ed. *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. A collection of essays that includes John Mraz on *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) and Rosenstone on *Walker* (1987).

Sklar, Robert, and Charles Musser, eds. *Resisting Images: Essays*

on Cinema and History. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. All of the contributors to this volume are associated with film studies or communications rather than traditional history departments.