

CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL FILM: PROBLEMS, TRENDS, FEATURES

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Historical films have always been in the spotlight of wider filmgoing audiences because they depict historical facts and events or lives (or parts of life) of historical persons, the latter being known as biographical films. For some scholar historical film is a separate genre, for others a sub-genre of adventure films¹. At different times, it was known by different names, being called costume drama in Germany, Jidaigeki in Japan, Peplum in Italy, and so on.

Since the birth of filmmaking, filmmakers focused on historical films because it offered significant commercial opportunities. Of course, at first, when the duration of the films was 2-3 or a few more minutes, the authors of historical films could show only a shortened version of a given historical fact. As the duration of films increased, filmmakers could expand their stories. This circumstance, in turn, boosted the commitment to producing such films.

Historical films were made in the silent era by film studios of the various countries. They depicted past events the history of the given country or the world. Excellent examples are Italian historical films mostly focusing on Ancient Rome and Greece. The crowning achievement in this regard is Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), with its format and plot inspiring many foreign filmmakers to follow suit. One of them was David Griffith, the author of the famous historical film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

The advent of sound enriched film and made it more realistic. Large sums of money were allocated for financing historical film projects, mostly commercially viable ones. The historical films produced in the 1930s in the US, Italy, Germany attracted large audiences. Each film had propagandistic significance based on the specific ideology of a particular country.¹

During World War II, despite understandable financial

difficulties, some fighting countries still managed to make a couple of historical films, such as Italian *The Iron Crown* (1941), German *The Great King* (1942) and *Kolberg* (1945), British *Henry V* (1944), Soviet *Giorgi Saakadze* (1942-1943) and *Kutuzov* (1943), and others designed to raise the patriotic spirit among the population and army.

The second wave of historical cinema began in the 1950s when television appeared as a new competitor to the film industry, and film companies tried to find new technical opportunities to keep the audience. At that time, several types of widescreen were invented, stereo sound and three-dimensional images were developed, and more color films were produced. The number of historical epic films increased every year. They were far more impressive and entertaining in terms of both sound and visuals.

In our modern period, which conditionally includes an era since the 1980s, historical films have had many challenges. Firstly, it is the search of investments for big-budget film projects, which is no easy task because many potential investors steer away fearing possible box-office bombs, as evidenced by numerous films in history, such as the failure of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964, dir. Anthony Mann).²

Besides, only few producers and filmmakers are able to make full historical films with guaranteed commercial success. Everything has to be calculated from casting stars (or film stars) to the most trivial filming details. Naturally, the appearance of film stars in such films has its purposes because their fans, thousands or millions of viewers, will go to the movies at least once and takes others, too. This is an unmistakable precondition for commercial success.

The issues of the themes and geographical areas in

1 Rosenstone, Robert, and Constantine Parvulescu. Introduction. 2013, p. 2.

2 Darby, William. Anthony Mann: The Film Career. 2009, p. 204.

historical films remains problematic. In the last decades, film companies in various countries have tried to make historical reflecting the history of their country because, otherwise, if they tackle films about countries, their ignorance of history, ethnography or geography becomes obvious. In this respect, American cinema is no exception can, though historical accuracy in depicting America's past is not a strong point of American films either, even though the storytelling may be beautiful and enticing.

Notably, American historian and scholar Mark Carnes argues that Hollywood will entice us into its Funhouse version of the past. Their PR managers will continue to proclaim the truth of what lies beyond the door. And skeptical historian will continue to warn that the wonders inside are phony. Doubtless, we shall agree with the skeptics, but we shall buy our tickets and go in anyway, our enjoyment only slightly diminished by our suspicions that it is all a con.³

Hollywood, with its financial and producing resources far exceeding the capabilities of other countries' film productions, has mostly tapped into the same historical subject matter but has rarely done so in recent times. No single Hollywood film company has ever made a film (at least so far) about the fact from the history of a country unknown to the American public. Therefore, the geographical area is somewhat limited to American cinema.

Remakes are a separate issue. In film industry practice there are only a few successful remakes valuable artistically and commercially. It is a fact that most remakes are not good and their authors work in vain. Historical film remakes face the same situation of filmmakers believing that they can better versions of movies made in the past. To illustrate this point, let's take an example of the well-known historical drama *Ben-Hur*. Adapted for screen twice in the silent era, its 1959 version hit it back and garnered 11 Oscars. In 2016 two smaller and two larger (Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer) film companies remade *Ben-Hur* (budget 100 million dollars). Unfortunately, this film failed to covered even production expenses, though Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer distributed it throughout the world and invested enormous advertising efforts.

The question is: Why spend so much on such film projects? After all, in our era of modern technologies, everybody can watch and enjoy the beautiful old version by William Wyler. It is also clear that, in the silent period and the following decades, when any film finished its distribution time in local and worldwide film markets, its production company carefully saved it in the archive and did not distribute it again (though with some exceptions). At that time there was neither television nor the Internet. But now it is a different situation. If contemporary filmgoers dislike a film, they will not go a second time to watch it (unlike in the past when they possibly would watch it two and three times). Accordingly, they will not pay money for it and advise others against it. Spending large sums would be probably good for shooting a new film project which will describe a completely different, previously uncovered historical theme in the film industry.

Historical films often violate historical reality. This situation is explained by the authors (or by their lobbying critics and scholars) by the exacerbation of cinematic adaptations of literary works or original scripts, or by necessary steps made for other purposes. It contradicts historical reality. But it is known that historical novels also distort reality and misleads readers because they think that everything in the book is true.

In this regard, there has been a lot of discussions in the circles of film studies for a long time, but it has not been possible to establish a unified position.⁴ Nevertheless, nothing can justify, not by any stretch, the tendency to change historical reality in literature and art (in this case, film).

One of the clearest examples of distortion of historical reality is Mel Gibson's high-profile film *Braveheart* (1995), which received many prizes, including an Oscar for Best Film. It is a mix of lies and truth and only a person with a good knowledge of English history can understand it. Yet not all filmgoers know the history of England. This film is a cascade of historical discrepancies, which creates a misconception for the audience, forming a false knowledge of history.

The protagonist, William Wallace, was son of a knight, not a peasant, and it is Robert Bruce, not he, to be nicknamed *Braveheart*. The Battle of Stirling took place

3 Carnes, Mark. Shooting (Down) the Past. *Historians vs Hollywood*. 2004, p. 49.

4 Rosenstone, Robert. *History on Film/Film on History*. 2006, p. 7.

on a bridge, not in a field. King Edward I of England did not die at the same time as Wallace but outlived by two years. And the list goes on. Wallace with Queen Isabella are portrayed in the film as a couple engaged in an affair resulting in the birth of a child (future prince). In reality, they did not know each other. At the time of William Wallace's execution, Isabella, ten years of age at the time, lived in France and had never been to England or Scotland before. In short, both the film and history were affected.⁵

This train of thought allows for a historical film with President Abraham Lincoln married to Annie Oakley and Thomas Jefferson as Vice President will be. And would that be justified? Should the audience believe that?

The second important trend is historical series, with part of them being mini-series, and some screened by seasons. They are distributed by television and other multimedia platforms. Of course, this film production is watched by many more viewers because television and the internet are available to millions of people. Such series have no claim to be blockbusters, yet they bring in some commercial profits. They are no different from silver screen movies in that they have many historical falsifications, too.

Contemporary historical films have one peculiarity of

almost all of them building on the same narrative clichés and, unfortunately, no one cares about their diversity, including more original and unexpected plot twists. As you watch them, even if you do not have information about this or that historical fact, event or person, it is as if you know in advance what will follow and, in general, how the film will end. Of course, such works lose the audience at the very beginning.

Currently, film companies boldly entrust historical films to novice filmmakers and hope that they will approach the job with youthful courage and new ideas, yet even these films do not deserve the sympathy of the audience, as evidenced by the film *The King* (2019) based on William Shakespeare's plays about Henry IV and Henry V. This film turned out to be weak, mediocre, and monotonous, with some separate episodes giving an impression of watching unattractively chewing scenes from popular blockbusters, while the plot again violates historical reality.

Historical films impose a great responsibility. They serve as chroniclers of sorts, so it must beautifully show the recent or distant past, so that the viewer, with pleasure, can get the correct and accurate information about the past.

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⁵ McArthur, Colin. *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots. Scotland in Hollywood Cinema*. 2003, p. 178.