

Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Culture America)



History has been fodder for cinema from the silent era to the blockbuster present, a fact that has seldom pleased historians themselves. As pundits increasingly ponder how Hollywood fails history, Robert Toplin counters with a provocative alternative approach to this enduring debate over the portrayal of history in film. Toplin focuses on movies released over the past sixteen years-during which twelve historical films won the Oscar for Best Picture-and argues that critics often fail to recognize the unique ways that fictional films communicate important ideas about the past. A trenchant extension of his highly regarded *History by Hollywood*, Toplin's new work establishes commonsense ground rules for improving critical analysis in this area. Citing films like *Gladiator* and *Braveheart*, *Gandhi* and *Nixon*, he underscores the pressures placed on filmmakers to simplify and alter historical fact to conform to the demands of an extraordinarily expensive mass medium. Toplin demonstrates how a historical epic like *Glory* may contain creative adjustments that worry historians but shows how its distortions communicate broader and deeper truths about the Civil War experiences of African Americans-just as *Saving Private Ryan* presented little factual detail about World War II and yet effectively conveyed the experience of combat. He also shows how other films-such as *Mississippi Burning*, *Amistad*, and *The Hurricane*-contain so many elements of fictional excess and oversimplification that they deserve the criticism they receive. Toplin deliberately steers a middle course between tradition-minded critics who castigate films for artistic liberties and cinema scholars wedded to pure aesthetics. He also draws upon his own experiences in film production and takes direct aim at recent writing about film dominated by jargonistic theory and empty rhetoric. He urges film

studies scholars to move beyond their preoccupation with formal aesthetics and recognize that, in historical films, content does matter. In engaging prose that will appeal to any moviegoer, Reel History helps build bridges between defenders and detractors of history-by-Hollywood and enlarges our understanding of film as a communicator of truths about the human condition.

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