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Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood

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transformation. She lauds the staff and administration of Memphis's Orpheum Theatre for their success in pursuing these goals. This volume, however, insufficiently recognizes that the challenge of creating more complex representations of the past comprised of a broader range of Americans has been a goal of historic site administrators since at least the 1970s. New York City's Tenement Museum is presented here as an anomalous single model of an institution that successfully presents diverse histories. Moreover, without engaging the complexities of the interpretation of domestic life, Jones repeatedly and simplistically insults historic site administrators who, seemingly inextricably, present "shellacked cuisine" (p. 119) and keep visitors "behind ropes" (p. 120).

Jones's book is the product of an interested outsider. It will give public historians insights into what articulate and educated members of the general public may think about our work. On the whole, however, professionally trained public historians will find few novel perspectives and little new and useful data.

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Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood by ROBERT BRENT TOPLIN. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002; viii + 232 pp., photographs, notes, index; clothbound, \$35.00; paperbound, \$17.95.

"It's like writing history with lightning," exclaimed President Woodrow Wilson after a special White House screening of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Wilson's oft-quoted remark suggested the electrifying potential of the movies to tell history. From today's vantage point Griffith's prejudicial portrait of the Civil War and Reconstruction is easily exposed. Wilson's excitement over the way in which movies convey history has proven prophetic, however, in our increasingly visual age. For better or for worse, Americans now learn most of their history from motion pictures, whether in the local theater or via the growing quantity of history-related programming on cable television. Although many historians have traditionally looked askance at Hollywood's renditions of the past, Robert Brent Toplin's new book calls for historians and the public alike to assess historical movies on their own terms.

Since the 1970s, Toplin, along with John E. O'Connor, Robert A. Rosenstone, and Peter Rollins, among others, has been a pioneer in the scholarly study of historical films. A professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Toplin has written or edited three previous books related to motion picture versions of the past, most notably *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (1996). He has also earned his stripes behind the camera as a developer of several historical docudramas for public television. The genesis of *Reel History* stems from the questions Toplin has grappled with during many years of personal involvement in rendering "history" in both book and motion picture form. At heart, he asks, how

are historical films different from history books? And how much dramatic license should filmmakers be allowed to take with the past?

To address these questions, Toplin begins by reminding readers that historical movies are first and foremost movies. Whereas books can impart a vast array of information and delve into detailed analysis of the causes and consequences of a particular event, historical movies, Toplin argues, must conform to time-tested dramatic conventions in order to attract large audiences. Like nearly all commercial movies, historical films tell three-act stories of clearly identifiable heroes and villains. Grafting “real” history, with all of its inherent complexities and contradictions, into such narrative structures invariably forces filmmakers to exercise dramatic license. Film producers simplify historical events by condensing time, conflating locales, omitting details, and inventing composite, representative characters. Given that filmmakers necessarily take artistic liberties with their depictions of the past, how are we to judge history-oriented movies?

Toplin presents a pragmatic approach to assessing Hollywood’s history. Just as no historical film warrants unqualified praise, he contends, even the most egregious filmic depictions of the past may effectively dramatize some aspect of history. No single criterion will do. Instead, historical movies must be judged on a case-by-case basis, acknowledging the demands of dramatic storytelling while also recognizing the problematic nature of excessive artistic license. Toplin provides numerous short analyses to illustrate his method. For example, the author views *Glory* as a film that employs justifiable levels of dramatic liberty to convey “larger truths.” By depicting the soldiers of the all-black Massachusetts Fifty-fourth regiment as fugitive slaves, when in fact the unit was comprised of free blacks, the film represents a larger symbolic truth—most African Americans who fought for the Union during the Civil War had indeed been slaves shortly before enlisting. Thus, the film distorts the make-up of the historical Fifty-fourth to depict “typical” black Union soldiers more accurately. Conversely, Toplin maintains that *Mississippi Burning* misrepresented the larger history of the Civil Rights Movement by implying that the FBI, rather than thousands of unsung black civil rights activists, led the struggle to combat racism in the South. Moreover, the film so grossly misconstrued the tactics employed by the FBI that it deserved to be roundly criticized by historians.

Besides touting a balanced approach to evaluating historical films, Toplin stresses that at their best, historical movies have the ability to communicate the “feel” of the past much more powerfully than books. The 1981 German film *Das Boot*, for instance, grippingly conveyed the claustrophobic and decidedly unglamorous environment of a U-boat crew during World War II. Similarly, the D-Day landing of American troops at Omaha Beach will forever be etched in the minds of millions of moviegoers who saw the first twenty minutes of Stephen Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*.

Toplin wrote *Reel History* for both scholars and general audiences. Except for his chapter criticizing the professional cinema studies literature for being

too politicized and jargon-laden, the book should garner widespread appeal among both groups. Although generally well-written and crisply argued, by the end, the book feels somewhat redundant. A final chapter on the societal impact of movies would have been more effective at the beginning of the book, and his editor should have pruned the ponderous series of rhetorical questions that pepper the text. The book also suffers from some awkward terminology. Throughout, Toplin refers to makers of historical films as “cinematic historians,” a moniker that most commercial filmmakers would reject. Even more dubious is the author’s attempt to distinguish “cinematic history” as a unique film genre. Unfortunately, the elements he presents as ostensibly defining such a genre (stories of heroes and villains, uplifting endings, etc.) could just as easily apply to any Hollywood movie. These quibbles aside, *Reel History* is a timely and richly provocative book which provides public historians much food for thought in an age when movies are rapidly becoming the dominant medium by which we talk to ourselves about our present and our past.

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Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design by VIRGINIA TUTTLE CLAYTON, ELIZABETH STILLINGER, ERIKA DOSS, and DEBORAH CHOTNER. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; 256 pp., photographs, illustrations; paper-bound, \$45.00.

The search for American identity was a common theme in 1930s culture, as a nation wracked by depression sought to revisit its past and to affirm enduring sources of value. *Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* suggests how that commitment was shared and advanced by the Index of American Design, part of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP), a documentary effort aimed at identifying the legacy of American folk art. The book is the catalogue for a National Gallery of Art exhibition (November 2002–March 2003) commemorating the museum’s sixty years of stewardship of the Index. Virginia Tuttle Clayton, associate curator of Old Master Prints, was curator for the exhibition, which displayed eighty-two original watercolors along with many of the original artifacts they depicted.

The Index commissioned over a thousand artists to make more than 18,000 renderings of artifacts of American material culture, including furniture, ceramics, carousel animals, toys, ship figureheads, quilts, and weather vanes. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia contributed to the effort, led by Ruth Reeves and Adolph Cook Glassgold. Constance Rourke, best known for her now classic *American Humor* (1931), served as editor of the Index and shaped its decisions about which objects to document.

Three scholarly essays explore different facets of the project. In “Pictur-