

Movies Are Not History

Movies Are NOT History: And They'll Never Be

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In December, [a group of US Senators](#), as well as the [acting director of the CIA](#), became film critics. They saw “Zero Dark Thirty”—a film about the mission that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden. And when they left the theatre, they did not like what they saw, so they took to the media to criticize it.

By now, you’ve heard their criticisms: the portrayal of torture as the means to learning the whereabouts of the elusive terrorist was misleading. A statement from the senators said in part: “We believe the film is grossly inaccurate and misleading in its suggestion that torture resulted in information that led to the location of Osama bin Laden.”

The filmmakers even responded to the criticism saying: “We depicted a variety of controversial practices and intelligence methods that were used in the name of finding bin Laden.”

But wait, this film is not a documentary (a true, factual account of an event)...it’s a docu-drama. Perhaps you’re unfamiliar with this genre.

Perhaps you don’t know what happens when a film-maker takes an historical event and adapts it for the big screen. Film-makers hire scriptwriters whose job entails telling the story in the time allotted. Because most films fall into the 90 minute category, screenwriters know they must make crucial decisions about the plot, characters, and more. Often times that means merging two real people into one, changing the action and the story—all for the sake of cinema. If you’re not aware of the

film adaptation process, you will believe what you see on the screen is history, when it is not.

I can think of many recent releases whose portrayal of historical events made news. "Titanic", "Pearl Harbor", "JFK" and "Good Night and Good Luck" all come to mind.

Is it the obligation of the film-makers to put a disclaimer on each and every docu-drama to advise the audience or is it our responsibility to realize and acknowledge that history on the screen will always be altered?

2012 was the season of docu-dramas and there has been no shortage of writers ready to pounce on and identify the factual errors. Steven Spielberg's LINCOLN has received raved reviews, but there are [those who have already picked apart its inaccuracies](#). (I am sure many US senators saw this one too, but I didn't read where they criticized it.) ARGO portrays the attempts to smuggle Americans out of Iran in the 1970s. There is plenty in this film to question [as this reviewer did recently](#). HITCHCOCK, based on the Stephen Rebello book, "Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of PSYCHO," follows the film-maker in the process of making his famous thriller. [One Hitchcock biographer](#) finds plenty to fault in this film.

Docudramas have been with us for decades and many books have been written about the way film-makers portray and/or misrepresent history on screen.

I'd like to suggest that instead of watching film at theatres with the thinking parts of our brains turned OFF, we watch critically by getting into the habit of starting to ask the quintessential "media literacy" questions: did this really happen this way and if not, where can I locate an accurate portrayal?

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