**Historical Films** filmreference.com

Beginning in 1915 with *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith (1875–1948), the historical film has been one of the most celebrated forms of cinematic expression as well as one of the most controversial. As a genre, it has maintained a high degree of cultural prominence for nearly a century, and it has established itself as a major category in nearly every nation that produces films. But it has also consistently provoked controversy and widespread public debate about the meaning of the past, about the limits of dramatic interpretation, and about the power of film to influence popular understanding and to promote particular national myths.

The historical film has often served as a vehicle of studio prestige and artistic ambition, and many distinguished directors have made major contributions to the genre. Steven Spielberg (b. 1946), Martin Scorsese (b. 1942), Oliver Stone (b. 1946), John Sayles (b. 1950), Edward Zwick (b. 1952), Bernardo Bertolucci (b. 1941), and Roman Polanski (b. 1933) have made important and powerful historical films that have reawakened interest in aspects of the past that were not previously well-represented or understood. For many societies, the historical film now serves as the dominant source of popular knowledge about the historical past, a fact that has made some professional historians anxious. Other historians, however, see these films as valuable for the discussions and debate they generate. Films such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List*(1993), and Stone's *JFK*(1991), for example, have fostered a widespread and substantial public discussion that has contributed to historical appreciation and understanding.

Although several types of film can be grouped under the historical film category, Natalie Zemon Davis usefully defines the historical genre as being composed of dramatic feature films in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events, or in which an imagined plot unfolds in such a way that actual historical events are central and intrinsic to the story. This broad, plot-based characterization of the genre captures the specific and unique character of the historical film, which depends for its meaning and significance on an order of events—historical events—that exist outside the imaginative world of the film itself. Within this somewhat narrowed framework, however, there are still large variations in the types of films that can be considered historical films.

The Ten Commandments

Enjoying a life of ease in the court of Egypt's pharaoh, Moses (Charlton Heston) discovers his Hebrew heritage and, later, God's expectations of him. He dedicates himself to liberating his people from captivity and -- with the aid of plagues and divine intervention -- manages to lead them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. A greater challenge comes in the form of the golden calf idol, however, and it takes an unforgettable visitation by God on Mount Sinai for Moses' mission to prevail.

Apocalpyto

The Mayan kingdom is at the height of its opulence and power but the foundations of the empire are beginning to crumble. The leaders believe they must build more temples and sacrifice more people or their crops and citizens will die. Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood), a peaceful hunter in a remote tribe, is captured along with his entire village in a raid. He is scheduled for a ritual sacrifice until he makes a daring escape and tries to make it back to his pregnant wife and son.

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