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Writing History with Lightning: Cinematic Representations of Nineteenth-Century America

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Review

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Hulbert, Matthew Christopher and John C. Inscoe, eds. *Writing History with Lightning: Cinematic Representations of Nineteenth-Century America*. Louisiana State University Press, $55.00 ISBN 9780807170465

Matthew Christopher Hulbert's and John C. Inscoe's edited volume, *Writing History with Lightning: Cinematic Representations of Nineteenth-Century America*, aptly gets its title from Wilson's notorious response upon viewing *Birth of a Nation*. Wilson's apocryphal statement, alluding to the undeniable lure of history played out on the big screen, arguably still holds true to this day. But as Hulbert notes in his introduction, Wilson purportedly added, "My only regret is that it is all so terribly true," a claim not only fraught with historical error, but with devastating implications for Jim Crow America. As these twenty-six contributors deftly illustrate, cinematic power has rarely featured historical precision. Their errors, however, can be deeply instructive.

Writing History with Lightning is organized both thematically and chronologically. Starting with films depicting the Age of Jackson and the era of manifest destiny, the book moves us through the topics of slavery and the Antebellum South, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and concludes with late nineteenth-century economics and immigration. The edited volume contains a wide variety of essays, but the most successful contributions are the pieces that ask more complicated questions about the different, yet potentially complementary roles historians and filmmakers play. Herein lies the book's greatest achievement – instead of seeing historical scholarship and filmmaking as combative and forever at odds with one another, it appears much more fruitful to reflect upon what these two mediums can gain from the other.

While a film's errors can simplify, or even genuinely mislead audiences about the American past, they also afford opportunities to discuss the continual impact of white supremacy and patriarchy, for example. As Donna J. Barbie's essay on *The Far Horizons* (1955) argues, Hollywood filmmakers have consistently engaged in stereotyping Native American female characters, such as Sacagawea, as "heroic but hapless" Indian princesses, rather than complex

human beings (p. 14). Jacob F. Lee explains how women are practically rendered invisible in *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) and *The Revenant* (2015), despite the indispensable role they played in fur-trapping and social networking out west (p. 43). Graham Russell Gao Hodges examines how Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* reduces Chinese and black characters into mere "human scenery," making the film ultimately less relevant for audiences today (188-189). Is it the expectation of films to immerse viewers in a different world (i.e. the nineteenth century) that they tend to neglect what we have in common with that world?

Cinematic (mis)interpretations prove profoundly useful in assessing and understanding a filmmakers' contemporary social milieu. For Brian Roleau, the Herman Melville-inspired, *In The Heart of the Sea* (2015), emerges as a modern-day commentary on climate change (p. 31). For Roleau, even though characters' sensibilities are at times ahistorical, the film still helps to create meaningful dialogue between the past and the present with regard to environmental issues. Kevin Waite's assessment of two films depicting Custer's Last Stand, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941) and *Little Big Man* (1970), also illustrate what can be gleaned from cinematic history. While the former celebrates Custer's self-sacrificing militarism as at once ennobling and democratizing, the latter shows Custer's personality and actions reeking of vanity. For Waite, this contrast is instructive, with World War II and the Vietnam War, particularly the My Lai Massacre, serving as respective contexts. Neither film is altogether historically accurate, but how they fall short of the mark is illustrative of their times and allows for a broader historical discussion.

There are other rare examples where films can actually challenge existing conventional wisdom of popular and scholarly audiences alike. John C. Inscoe demonstrates how *The Journey of August King* (1995) refutes the common misperception that slavery was nonexistent in Appalachia. Inscoe points readers to the census of 1820, citing how 15 percent of the population was in fact enslaved (p. 75). The film complicates widely accepted beliefs of the region, while also bringing us closer to understanding Appalachians' anti-slavery stance, which often had as much to do with class resentment as it did with moral opposition (p. 77-78).

In one of the most challenging analyses offered here, Kenneth Greenberg esteems the corrective mission of Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), while scrutinizing what the film omits. Most notably, the film fails to show how many of Nat Turner's victims were in fact women and children. Greenberg points to Turner's Biblical inspirations (homicidal imperatives

from the Old Testament, such as the killing of first-born children in Egypt) as well as the sheer incessant brutality of slavery for us to begin to understand this murderous scene. A dehumanizing system compelled vicious reprisals. But does the filmmaker's exclusion of such horrifying details justify the means, even when trying to compensate for D.W. Griffith's original cinematic sin, *Birth of a Nation*? Greenberg seems to imply that one can *better* understand the brutality of slavery *as a direct result* of considering horrific reprisals in their raw form. You cannot sanitize one and not the other, in other words. But should audiences be meant to recoil at the system of slavery *and* the ways in which enslaved persons had to fight it? Is this requiring simply too much of a film and of popular audience? Are filmmakers limited by cinema's misdeeds even when they are trying to correct them?

To its great merit, the questions *Writing History with Lightning* makes readers sit with are undeniably challenging. For this reason, the collection is particularly well-suited to seminars and upper-level courses on history and film studies, but will undoubtedly prove intriguing from general interest readers to established scholars of film. The editors acknowledge that their choice of films will prove controversial to some, but filmmakers and historians will forever share one thing in common – painful editing decisions.

David J. Brokaw currently serves as a professor in U.S. history at The University of Advancing Technology in Tempe, AZ. He has previously published, "The Purchasing Powerless: Postwar Consumption in The Twilight Zone," in The History of Retailing and Consumption*, and is currently working on his project, Televising the American Nightmare: The Twilight Zone and Postwar Social Criticism, a cultural history that explores a range of Cold War anxieties through the prism of Rod Serling's television series, The Twilight Zone(1959-64).*