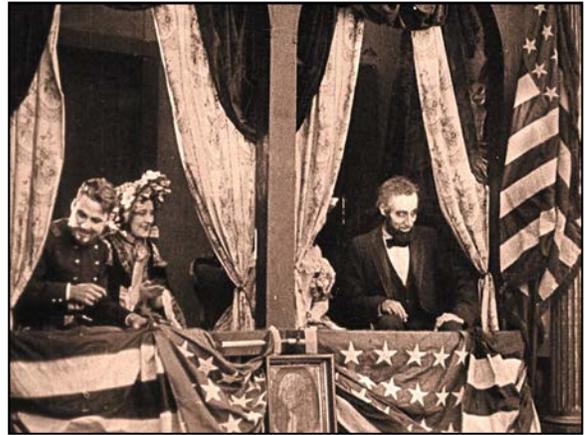


Historical Films

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The primary author is the individual who drafted the first version of this section; a section that could have been modified since it was originally published.

Historical films are the culmination of the art of storytelling; edifying us, inspiring us, and shaping our sense of ourselves. The definition of a historical film has both a narrow and broad meaning as even films not intended to offer a definitive history, nevertheless capture a time and place.



Historical films encompass those films which are created to re-visit long ago events and those films which cover events in relatively contemporary times—recent events. Historical films may include aspects of the historical record, but the narrative may also be enhanced with fictional detail in order to provide context. In addition, historical films are distinct from documentaries. Entertainment and emotional engagement, in balance with factual accuracy, are also the objectives of the historical filmmaker.

History is defined as simply being a record of past or current events. Yet, what we choose to include in our telling, especially in a cinematic format, is always influenced by the subjectivity of our human perspectives. The Greek historian Thucydides, author of *History of the Peloponesian War* declared an obligation to strive toward a telling of the facts, in order to pass on truth that would benefit future generations. Thucydides is credited with developing a science of history; he insisted on high standards of evidence-gathering and analysis in his historical research. Unusual for his time, he pointedly made no reference to the influence of the gods in his recordings of history. He was among the first to realize that history was explained from more than one vantage point and he sought to include the voices of eye-witnesses to events in his writing.

Filmmaking began in the 1890s with the invention of the moving picture camera and grew at a furious pace with the incorporation of the first film production companies and theater venues. The earliest films were just seconds long and without sound; they were just glimpses of life, yet today we can view them as mini-histories for what they show us. We can now see how people styled their dress and hair, for instance, as well as what the filmmaking artists of over one hundred years ago considered to be content important enough to preserve on film. By the 1920s, approximately 800 films were being produced each year.



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Photo Credit: Screen capture of Abraham Lincoln from *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Historical films have been made of the events of virtually every time period and by utilizing virtually every genre from Westerns to film noir (e.g. [The Black Dahlia](#) (2006)). Today, we can view films which purport to tell us of the lives and histories of the ancient Greeks and Romans, European history, American history — and so on. Some films such as *Custer's Last Stand* (1936) today appear comically devoid of any actual historically verified facts. The film *All the President's Men* (1976), about the events leading to the resignation of President Richard Nixon told from the perspective of the principles, the reporters Woodward and Bernstein, actually was vetted by lawyers for the facts. The film narrative, therefore, achieved an unusually high level of historical accuracy.

If we accept the premise that the stories we choose to tell create the history we pass on, is it then hard to imagine that this ability has become even more powerful as we create new story-telling technologies? We first shared histories through oral tradition, and then through the development of dramatic plays, and then on to black and white films, each time expanding the numbers of the audience and also (potentially) the emotional impact. Today, we have action-filled, panoramic spectacles, recreating the look and drama of historical events on an incredible scale and with the most minute details.

An early master of film spectacle, D. W. Griffith, is considered to be not only one of the founders of the American film industry, but also uniquely positioned as among the first to attempt to tell the story of our nation's history through film. Griffith's early silent film, [Birth of a Nation](#) (1915) told the story of two families during the Civil War and it's aftermath. It was originally titled, *The Clansman*, and was an adaptation of a book of the same title. As might be expected, in little more than fifty years after the events of the Civil War and in an era in which African-Americans may no longer have been enslaved, yet were still far from free, Griffith's history depicted black people with the prejudice of the times.

Birth of a Nation was also the first major film to dramatize the assassination of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth. The film was incredibly popular and filled theaters even as it incited people to protest virtually everywhere the film was shown. Fifteen years later, still years away from the enactment of our nation's Civil Rights Act, Griffith created and directed the first film, [Abraham Lincoln](#) (1930) which attempted to tell the full story of the life of Abraham Lincoln from his birth through his Presidency.

The life of our 16th President Abraham Lincoln as well as the causes, events, and the aftermath of the US Civil War are subjects on which most Americans believe themselves to be knowledgeable. However, our knowledge and our opinions have changed over the passage of time, as has the way films have told these stories. The recent Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln* (2012), based on the Pulitzer Prize winner Doris Kearns Goodwin book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (2005), is a recent example of state of the art film-making, historical accuracy and of good narrative story-telling. Reviewers and audiences have marveled at the quality of the storytelling; it might easily be conflated for a documentary if not for the ultimate realization that one is seeing actors in roles. The film benefits, too, from extraordinary acting which brings extra dimension to the individuals portrayed and by the thorough, multi-faceted research by Doris Kearns Goodwin and others which brings a naturalistic context to the story on screen.



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There have been other films on the life of Abraham Lincoln, which focused on his life and periods of his presidency. The aforementioned *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), directed by D. W. Griffith and starring Walter Huston, was the first major film. [Young Mr. Lincoln](#), starring Henry Fonda as Lincoln and directed by the great Western filmmaker, John Ford, was made in 1939. *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940) starring Raymond Massey as Lincoln and Ruth Gordon as Mary Lincoln is another.

The films starring Fonda and Massey were both based on stage plays and were heavy on formal monologues and dialogues which sound stilted to modern ears. The films were released in the years leading up to US involvement in World War II during a time when Americans were again concerned with the state of the Union and debating the extent of US leadership in human rights and world affairs. Fonda and Massey portray Lincoln as a less than nuanced character and their performances are much in keeping in line with their respective films origins as stage plays. Lincoln is a country boy and self-taught, smarter than he first appears and an entirely admirable, if somewhat two-dimensional personality. Whether intentional or not, the films use Lincoln's story as a stand-in for the American spirit; he's on the side of right and while reluctant to enter the fray, willing to do the work of patriotism and democracy and assure the survival of his nation.

D. W. Griffith's film was first released to an audience which presumably still included people who had experienced if not the actual Civil War, then certainly the years of Reconstruction. Each of the Lincoln films is a product of the filmmaker's skill and social awareness, the demands of a particular audience, and the limits of available technology.

Today, filmmaking and informational technologies shape the understanding both of historical events and of the way history is told. Innovations such as computer generated imaging have had a tremendous impact on what can be shown on screen and for the writer/historian the ability to gather information through digital access has had an equally monumental impact on the integrity and scope of historical research and writing. Modern film makers have access to an unprecedented amount of facts, yet films still remain the product of the artist's imagination.

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Photo Credit: Screen capture of Abraham Lincoln from *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

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