

the movie.⁶³ In this way, by a combination of rigorous attention to the historical record and creative imagination, *Gladiator* could have been much more historically valid and still have remained dramatically as exciting as it is.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant

Kathleen M. Coleman

The job of the historian is to try to uncover the truth about the past.¹ This may sound straightforward, but in practice it is not. The historian has first to assemble the available sources; at this stage his enemy is the accident of transmission, since the survival of evidence is either distressingly random, as in the field of ancient history, or overwhelmingly inclusive, as in contemporary affairs. The next stage is to analyze this evidence in a manner so sophisticated as to present a coherent and compelling interpretation that takes account of gaps, bias, inconsistencies, falsifications, and all the other distortions attendant upon any event in which humans are involved. Part of the historian's method is akin to science, as in the painstaking reconstruction of a damaged inscription or the calculation of the time it would take an army of a certain size to march a certain distance under a variety of weather conditions. But another part of the historian's job is much closer to the creative arts than to science. This is the imaginative leap involved in any act of historical interpretation, however modest or limited.

What I have called the "imaginative leap" is usually closer to a series of cautious steps through a morass of uncertainty than to a bold jump

63 The historical Narcissus strangled Commodus in his bath while the latter was trying to shake off the effects of poison administered by Marcia on the eve of his appearing again as a gladiator (Dio 72/73.22, Herodian 1.16.1–17.11). Subsequently, Narcissus was killed by beasts in the arena on the orders of Septimius Severus (Dio 74.16.5, HA Sev. 13.9).

1 This essay is an expansion of an article that originally appeared in Swedish: "Pedanten åker till Hollywood: En rådgivande akademikers roll," *Filmhäftet*, 29.2 (2001), 4–6. I am grateful to Michael Tapper, the journal's editor, for having generously encouraged me to republish my essay in English.

across it onto the dry land of confident interpretation. Recently, however, the gulf between history and imaginative writing has been narrowed, most sensationally by the publication of a biography of Ronald Reagan in which the author claims the status of a first-hand witness by adopting the persona of an entirely fictitious character.² Ancient history, too, has seen the blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction. Keith Hopkins has recently published an analysis of the origins of Christianity which opens with the experiences of a pair of time-travelers transported from modern England to the Mediterranean world of the first century A. D.³ In a work like this, history is intermittently cloaked as fiction, but the reverse is also perfectly respectable and familiar to all of us: fiction cloaked as history. The great historical novels of such authors as Mary Renault, bringing ancient Greece to life, or Rosemary Sutcliff, recreating Roman, Viking, and Saxon Britain for an audience of young adults, are so exhaustively researched that they weave rich period detail into an atmosphere of seductive authenticity.⁴ The convention that permits a work of fiction to be created around historical characters legitimizes and authenticates the historical novel as a proper literary pursuit. Do the same conventions apply to the historical film? Or, to put it another way, does the same responsibility for creating a historically authentic artifact apply to filmmakers as to novelists?

The factors that impinge upon historical authenticity on the screen are legion. Authenticity itself does not depend upon strict adherence to historical fact; a feature film is not a documentary. A fictitious plot involving historical characters can create a thoroughly authentic atmosphere,

2 Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999).

3 Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Roman Empire* (1999; rpt. London: Phoenix, 2000), published in the United States as *A World Full of Gods: The Strange Triumph of Christianity* (2000; rpt. New York: Plume, 2001).

4 Mary Renault wrote eight novels set in ancient Greece: *The King Must Die* (1958) and *The Bull from the Sea* (1962) recount the adventures of Theseus; *The Praise Singer* (1978) is about the Greek lyric poet Simonides; *The Last of the Wine* (1956) is set in Athens during the Peloponnesian War; *The Mask of Apollo* (1966) deals with theatrical life in fourth-century Syracuse; *Fire from Heaven* (1969), *The Persian Boy* (1972), and *Funeral Games* (1981) comprise a trilogy about Alexander the Great. Renault also wrote *The Nature of Alexander* (1976), a biography. Rosemary Sutcliff's most famous novel set in the Roman period, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1965), displays her special command of military detail. She also writes evocatively of the period of the Roman withdrawal from Britain in, for example, *The Lantern Bearers* (1959) and *Frontier Wolf* (1981). She is renowned for her Arthurian trilogy *The Sword and the Circle* (1981), *The Light Beyond the Forest* (1980), and *The Road to Camlann* (1981).

but it is very hard to achieve. In part, authenticity depends upon visual details such as artifacts, architecture, costumes, and the like. But in part it depends upon the ideology, outlook, and deportment of the characters. Hence the demands of the storyline will be incompatible with the goal of authenticity if the plot itself does not grow out of the historical context in which it purports to be placed. Grafting the plot onto a historical background is fraught with difficulty. Ideally, the scriptwriter who conceives the plot should be saturated in the study of the period. Even if this is so, however, the script itself remains only the skeleton; it is the acting, the sets, and the cinematography that put flesh on its bones. So the historical consultant should be a person who is intimately involved with the entire process of making the film, from its initial conception on the scriptwriter's keyboard to ultimate realization on the screen. To do the job thoroughly, such a person must be the close confidant of the director, a trusted and respected member of the creative team for the entire duration of the actual filming process. It is an utter fallacy to suppose that the consultant's role can be limited to a certain phase, such as the finalizing of the script prior to filming, not least because the script is never final until the last snippet of film has dropped onto the cutting-room floor.

It would be equally fallacious to treat the consultant's advice like a buffet supper from which one guest might select five dishes and someone else three entirely different confections. In responding to queries from different members of the production team, a consultant offers advice that is internally consistent. But if all of the consultant's responses and suggestions are not made available to the entire team, then nobody else sees these suggestions as a coherent whole, with the result that there is no coherence in the use to which they are put. In any case, the sheer range of issues that can impinge upon historical authenticity makes it almost inevitable that no single scholar could claim equal competence in them all. Consultants with specialized historical knowledge will certainly need to be involved, such as military historians for battle scenes. A chief consultant should be in an excellent position to recommend such specialists, and to coordinate their suggestions in the event that different specialists offer incompatible suggestions as a result of differing perspectives. But, as in any team endeavor, it is crucial for all the people involved to understand how the process is meant to work. A consultant who does not know whether specialized information is being sought from others runs the risk of expending enormous amounts of time and energy researching an area that may turn out to have been dealt with by somebody else. Alter-

natively, a consultant who has recommended a particular specialist is likely to refrain from commenting on any matter pertaining to the specialist's field, under the impression that the true expert is dealing with it, whereas no such person may in fact have been approached. As a result of such failures of communication, crucial items may escape scrutiny.

The issue of managing the consultant's role effectively is, of course, predicated upon the assumption that the director and the producers recognize historical authenticity as one of their top priorities. If it were their sole priority, they would presumably be making a documentary rather than a feature film. And so the consultant in turn has to recognize that historical authenticity must be made to harmonize with aesthetic and dramatic considerations, as well as much else. The more frankly producers and their director articulate their competing concerns, the more likely it is that a consultant will be able to suggest ways to accommodate them while remaining faithful to the overall historical context. Irreconcilable conflicts may ensue if authenticity is competing with a different intention that is both powerful and unstated, such as the desire to engage in intertextual dialogue with previous cinematic treatments of a similar theme. If the standard for authenticity is determined by what has already been monumentalized on screen, the consultant really has no role to play at all. Maybe there is a residual notion in the film industry that the hiring of a consultant is in itself sufficient to give a film a veneer of respectability. If that attitude exists, it is, to say the least, unethical, and it is predicated upon the assumption, undoubtedly correct, that the vast majority of cinemagoers have no way of judging the authenticity of a historical film and do not care at all whether it is authentic or not. The consultant, however, cares extremely, not only because concern for the past is what presumably got him (or her) into the professional study of history in the first place, but because inevitably he (or she) feels invested in the final product. What produces this sense of investment?

A scholar is used to taking authorial responsibility for his or her work, be it as sole author, co-author, or editor of a multi-authored volume or a series. In short, anyone who is named as part of the creation of a work of scholarship is implicated in responsibility for it. This is why authors who thank their mentors in fulsome prefaces take care to dissociate those mentors from any shortcomings in the work. It is common to see expressions of thanks to "X, who read the whole book in typescript and offered many useful suggestions, but who should not be held responsible for my obstinacy in ignoring some of his recommendations." No such disclaimer should of course be necessary in a film, since a consultant

cannot be held responsible for the use that is made of his or her advice, least of all when there is no guarantee that the advice has got further than an assistant producer's IN tray. But a consultant's investment in a project is not just a matter of professional association, nor even of investment of time and expertise. It requires a unique effort of what might best be termed "lateral thinking." A consultant who simply castigates one error after another is not playing a constructive role and is liable to appear intellectually arrogant. It is obviously a help to the scriptwriter and producers to know why something flouts the conventions of authenticity. But equally the consultant needs to understand what the scriptwriter, director, and producer are trying to do; understanding the motivation for an error is the first step toward finding a solution to the problem. Then the consultant will be in a position to suggest alternative strategies. I use the plural "strategies" advisedly, since a choice of remedy is a luxury that preserves the defaulter's sense of self-respect. And this is a key concept: Respect on the part of consultant and production must be mutual, otherwise the relationship is not partnership but exploitation.

Scholars are, of course, notorious for being obsessed with detail. It could be argued that a consultant preoccupied with minutiae will inevitably fail to see "the big picture." But detail is the repository of authenticity. Much of the detail in a film is incidental to the plot, and so there is nothing to be gained by distorting it. But precisely because detail is incidental, a filmmaker may not see the necessity to submit it to review by a consultant – hence the manifold inaccuracies in, for example, the sword-and-sandals genre that has bred a snobbish contempt in educated cinemagoers. But if scholars are obsessed with detail, they are also relatively oblivious of the budgetary necessity of haste, the "time is money" imperative. Painstaking scholarship does not count the cost of days or weeks, let alone months or years. This is one area in which the principles of the academy and the film studio are likely to differ. A responsible consultant has to be aware of deadlines and the necessity of responding quickly to queries, so that there are no grounds for the objection "There wasn't time" to consult the consultant. If, as in my ideal scenario, a team of consultants is present throughout the entire process, every detail, at least in theory, will be smoothly integrated into the whole without hold-ups. Degrees of compromise, however, are inevitably involved, prompting the question: Can the end justify the means? When an individual detail is false but the overall atmosphere in a scene is authentic, is the falsification justified? How, indeed, does one define "authentic atmosphere"?

Consultancy is not a job for a doctrinaire purist, but it is a job for a rigorous scholar who is prepared to subject each element to a critical test. The test question is not "Did this happen?" but "Could this have happened?" Historians may instinctively shy away from hypothetical questions. Scholarship aspires to scientific objectivity, yet the act of imaginative re-creation involved in framing hypotheses is unmistakably subjective. This element of subjectivity is unsettling for anyone who has been trained to strive for certainty where it can be realized and to admit uncertainty where it cannot. The role of consultant can shake a scholar out of professional complacency because it reveals the limits of our historical knowledge. But there is also an ethical dimension that is more troubling still: Is it proper to let the cinema-going public think that the past looked like our cinematic conception of it? In a film that involves a fictitious plot employing real characters, is it legitimate to dispense with an epigraph or postscript stating the bald historical facts? Is such an omission justifiable simply for the sake of preserving dramatic illusion? Will generations to come persist in believing that the cinematic fiction is what "really happened"? If so – and this is the really worrying question, especially on the lips of those whose bank balances are swelled by the takings at the box office – does it matter?

Undeniably, the public appetite for history is vastly stimulated by historical cinema, and once people have become interested in the past they are at liberty to acquaint themselves with the facts via the appropriate authorities. Cinematic versions of history, however, generate their own momentum. The self-referential aspect of historical cinema may be conditioned not so much by narcissism as by the perception that the past has to be presented in a recognizable package. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, for instance, conceived of the Romans in Pre-Raphaelite mode; his legacy as "the painter who inspired Hollywood" determines the look that makes the Romans familiar even today.⁵ The wardrobe department on the set of

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* could just as easily have modeled their costumes on Roman statuary in the Metropolitan Museum or the Louvre. But the bared shoulders and revealing garments sported by Lucilla and her entourage come ultimately from the canvases of Alma-Tadema, whose rendering of Roman luxury and decadence was bequeathed to the cinema in the silent era by Italian and American directors of epics set in ancient Rome. If the producers of *Gladiator* consulted an expert in Roman clothing, that process has left no trace; the costumes are simultaneously a tribute to the Rome created by Hollywood and an acknowledgment that the Rome that Hollywood created is now the only Rome that is universally familiar. But those who see clothing as the outer manifestation of the principles that inform a society will uncompromisingly reject such license. The Roman upper classes kept up appearances that are utterly at variance with Alma-Tadema's seductive portrayal. Yet for those viewers whose reception of history begins and ends with the version presented on screen, Hollywood's Rome is not a palimpsest but an original and ineradicable document.

The power of the Hollywood stereotype would be of scant concern if we did not look to the past for guidance. One of the many virtues of studying history is that it trains us to recognize human failings and the strategies that Man has adopted to cope with perennial problems in the human condition. It is natural and valuable for us to hold up the mirror of history and see ourselves in it. But here we are on the edge of another moral quagmire: Is it legitimate to make a film that is ostensibly about historical events but is fundamentally conceived as a critique of contemporary society? Does that falsify the past? Historians are, of course, fooling themselves if they imagine that they are free from the preconceptions imposed by their own time and culture. But frank awareness of this tendency is not the same as tacit exploitation of it. A respect for historical authenticity is a type of scholarly humility, just as a cavalier disregard for it arises from a combination of ignorance and intellectual arrogance. But most of the historical distortions in cinema are probably not the result of such ignorance or arrogance. They are much more likely to be conscious decisions based upon esthetics, pragmatism, or an estimation of the public appetite. Meanwhile the academy, too skittish (or too circumspect) to admit to re-creating the past, snorts and stamps at

5 Lawrence (born Laurens) Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) was an Anglo-Dutch painter who left Holland for England in 1873, acquiring a knighthood in 1899. His soubriquet "the painter who inspired Hollywood" was the title of an article about him by Mario Amaya in the London *Sunday Times* of February 18, 1968. In the words of Russell Ash in the unpaginated introduction to his book, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (New York: Abrams, 1990), Alma-Tadema's sweeping canvases depicting crowd scenes from the ancient world anticipated "the grandeur of the wide-screen Hollywood epic." Reproductions of his paintings, specifically *Spring* and *The Finding of Moses*, influenced the set decorators and costume designers of such pioneering classics as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), and Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934) and *The Ten*

Commandments (1956). See also Vern G. Swanson, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Painter of the Victorian Vision of the Ancient World* (London: Ash and Grant, 1977), 43. R. J. Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2001), reproduces and discusses the painter's entire body of work.

the falsification. The academy's outrage may be fueled by a territorial imperative. But the real reason for the skirmish is ideological: Is the responsibility of relaying history compatible with an act of imaginative reconstruction? Sophisticated collaboration between film director and historical consultant could provide a positive answer to that question.

CHAPTER FIVE

Commodus and the Limits of the Roman Empire

Arthur M. Eckstein

Why did the Roman Empire stop expanding? For 500 years informal Roman influence over foreign peoples and states and direct Roman administration and rule over others consistently increased. The Romans' growing ambition to exert international control kept pace with their equally growing military and diplomatic capabilities to effect that control. The period from the mid-fourth century B.C. to the reign of Augustus, the first emperor (31 B.C. to A.D. 14), is marked by continuous and spectacular military success and territorial expansion. The city-states of Latium had been subjected and gradually assimilated, as had the Etruscans, Samnites, Greeks, and many other peoples who inhabited Italy from the Apennines to the straits of Messina. Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica had been taken from the Greeks and Carthaginians. The Po Valley in northern Italy had been wrested from wild Celtic tribes. The powerful states of the Hellenistic east had come under Roman sway and in some cases under direct Roman administration; the last of those subjected was Cleopatra's Egypt. Control of Spain had been taken from Carthage and Spain's indigenous Celtiberian inhabitants, a conquest of many campaigns but complete by 20 B.C. The frontiers of Roman power had expanded especially quickly in the first century B.C., driven by the energies of a series of great generals. Pompey had pushed Roman power as far east as the Euphrates, Caesar as far north as the Rhine, Augustus all the way to the Danube.

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