

Silver Screens and Silver Hair: Writing Movie Reviews like a Historian

Movie reviews are some of the most widely read examples of critical writing that exists. Writing for a popular audience, however, is different from writing for an academic one. When crafting a historically informed movie review, evaluating the performances, directing, or special effects counts for less than assessing what the film has to say about the past, explicitly or implicitly. In this, movies fall into two broad categories for historians: primary and secondary sources.

As a Primary Source

Just like newspaper articles, political speeches, or personal diaries, movies—though not Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* (2004)—can be great primary sources. A historian interested in assessing how Soviet artists portrayed the Russian Revolutions might watch Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), for instance. When assessing a movie as a primary source, consider questions such as the following:

- In what ways is the movie a product of its time?
- What does the film reveal about the broader context?
- Who made the movie and why? Who was the intended audience?
- What kind of reception and influence did the movie have?

As a Secondary Source

Often movies hope to say something explicit about the past. Some even succeed at doing this. Documentaries, such as Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* (1990) or Leon Gast’s *When We Were Kings* (1996), are paradigmatic here. But non-documentary movies can also attempt to do this. Again, a few even succeed. Think along the lines of Mohandas Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) or Ava DuVernay’s *Selma* (2014). Others films, such Stone’s *Alexander*, just fail. When viewing movies as secondary sources, consider issues like:

- How does the movie portray its subject? How are non-protagonists portrayed?
- What are the film’s biases?
- When was the movie made and how might it be made differently today?
- Does this film dispel or create myths about the subject?

Whether the movie is a primary or secondary source, make sure you provide the reader with a clear sense of what it is about. Do this succinctly, however. (Unless your chosen movie is Stone’s *Alexander*. In that case, don’t do it at all.) Use your descriptions of the plot, characters, and themes to answer the types of questions listed above. Also, as with any good review—be it of a movie, book, or play—clearly identify for the reader what you think the film’s significance is. In other words, your review should have a thesis statement. And above all, follow the advice that the reviewer Robert Ebert gave young critics: “Just write, damn it.”