



Movies Based on True Stories: Over 400 true story films compared with actual events

Alan Royle

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A look at over 400 of the best historical movies (and some of the worst) purporting to be ‘factual’ or ‘based on actual events’; and how Hollywood has distorted, altered, manipulated, exaggerated, even falsified history under the all-encompassing premise...based on a true story... The art of making movies based on true stories, on actual events involving real people, nearly always requires liberties to be taken with the truth, primarily because of time restraints, but also because dramatic license is essential if the picture is to achieve any semblance of box-office success. Events that may have happened over several decades must be crammed into an intelligent, comprehensible narrative, (complete with real-life, believable characters), usually of 120-150 minutes duration. The most dramatic, soul-stirring moments really need to come at the end of the story, too, even if they may have actually taken place at or near the beginning. The art of building drama and tension that culminates in a stirring, inspirational conclusion is virtually formulaic for a Hollywood movie, so if that means ‘adjusting’ history, then adjusted it must be. Even the best historical movies, the best movies based on true stories, suffer from this. Comparing Hollywood and history can be a most exasperating exercise for historians, but if we all expect entertainment from the cinema, then we should reluctantly accept that this ‘sculpting’ of historical fact is the price we must pay for it. In *Movies Based on True Stories* I look at a great many films that have some basis in actual events; movies premised with such phrases as: ‘based on a true story’, ‘based on actual events’, ‘what you see here actually happened’, and so forth. The degree of license varies enormously from picture to picture and the ‘cross-over’ from truth to half-truth, to complete fabrication, can often appear quite seamless if the director and writer know their stuff. This, of course, can lead to rather biased historical representations, (some even intended) if producers are working to an agenda. Our understanding of great events and great people, therefore, can be seriously compromised in the process. One example is Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), a movie that cleverly weaves actual footage into created dramatization that can easily dupe the average cinema-goer into thinking that everything he or she is watching is historically accurate. *Chariots of Fire* (1981) is another example of the distorting of history; of dramatic license versus historical accuracy. This book comments on these pictures and hundreds more.

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