

# Historical Accuracy in Movies and Why it Does Not Matter

By Jamie Trapp

*The following is based on a completely “True Story” .....*



## Based on a True Story vs Inspired by a True Story

Movies, especially big budget Hollywood movies, love using the tag line “Based on a True Story” or the not quite as bold “Inspired by a True Story”. The latter obviously gives the movie far more latitude as the meaning of “inspired by” can be stretched much further and can mean many different things to different people. I am guessing that for many movie viewers these two phrases might as well be interchangeable even if you can make an argument that they should not be. For many people it’s the “true story” part of the tagline that is burned into their memory.

Take the Coen Brother’s terrific 1996 film Fargo for instance. The movie starts with the following claim:

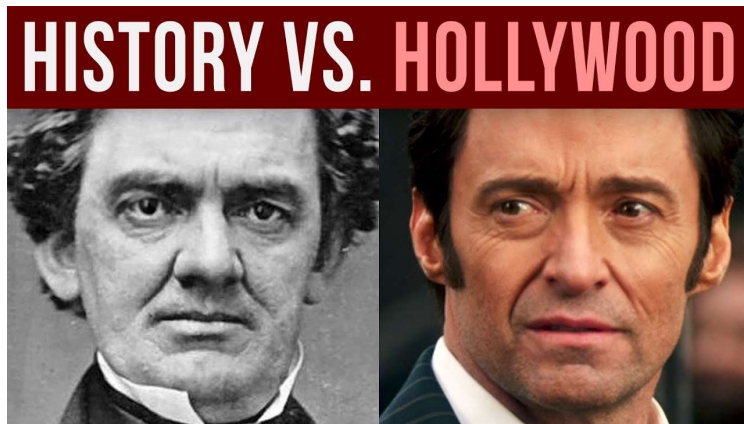
**“This is a true story. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.”**

You may or may not know that no such events occurred in Minnesota in 1987, the story contains about as much truth as the story of Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. Yet Fargo is

widely regarded as an all-time great film for its story, acting, screenplay, use of regional atmosphere, humor, and originality. Even the Coen Brothers admit they used that opening in order to engage the viewers to a greater degree by having them believe that the events of the movie actually had occurred. In other words to the Coen Brothers the use of “true story” was merely a narrative technique to increase the amount of audience intrigue.

When used in this context there is really no limit to what filmmakers can claim is “based on a true story”. After all, so long as there is nothing that literally challenges the laws of physics or science, it is possible to say that the events of a movie could have happened or at the very least are plausible even if far-fetched.

## Who Needs Truth



There are some people who may argue that a film making a false claim of being based on a true story is different when the film involves an event of significant historical value. In the Fargo example above, yes, Fargo is not actually based on a true story, but in that case all the filmmakers are doing is peaking the audience’s interest in the story. They are simply claiming that this story which never actually occurred, did in fact occur. But since it is not based on an actual event what does it matter? What about an event that actually did occur? Do or should the rules change if we are talking about an event of historical significance?

In 1991 controversial filmmaker Oliver Stone released JFK starring Kevin Costner as District Attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison. It was Garrison who led the investigation and who unsuccessfully prosecuted Clay Shaw, the only person who was ever tried in relation to the assassination of former United States president, John F Kennedy. The film as a whole focused on the assassination of JFK and the intense investigation which followed. The film is fittingly complex and like the real-life investigation of JFK’s death involves many people,

governmental agencies, suspects, conspiracies, etc. It was nominated for multiple Academy Awards and received near universal critical acclaim.

In his 4-star review of JFK, legendary film critic Roger Ebert, recounts the time when he ran into famed journalist Walter Cronkite at an event. Cronkite apparently berated Ebert and other critics who lauded Oliver Stones' film. Cronkite took issue with the fact that the film took extreme liberties with the truth and did not come even close to meeting basic journalist standards and ethics.

Ebert's response from his review of JFK is printed below:

"I have no doubt Cronkite was correct, from his point of view. But I am a film critic, and my assignment is different than his. He wants facts. I want moods, tones, fears, imaginings, whims, speculations, nightmares. As a general principle, I believe films are the wrong medium for fact. Fact belongs in print. Films are about emotions. My notion is that "JFK" is no more, or less, factual than Stone's "Nixon" or "Gandhi," "Lawrence of Arabia," "Gladiator," "Amistad," "Out of Africa," "My Dog Skip" or any other movie based on "real life." All we can reasonably ask is that it be skillfully made and seem to approach some kind of emotional truth."

What Ebert is indicating with his response is that film critics consider various components in evaluating the quality of a film and accuracy or truth is not one of them. Generally speaking, film critics do not appear to be overly concerned with the accuracy of films that are supposed to be based on "history". Filmmakers have shown a tendency to play fast and loose with the facts and this rarely effects the evaluation of a films quality or merit. Likewise a historical film that is highly accurate in its presentation of historical facts will not earn acclaim just for being accurate.

Why is that the case?

Ebert is certainly not alone in his opinions. Film critics do not spend a great deal of time evaluating the historical accuracy of films that are based on real events because that is not why people watch films in the first place. Yes, people can learn about real events from watching films but that is rarely their primary motive for watching in the first place. There is a reason film is considered an artform and journalism is not. Art is concerned with individuals expression and emotions while journalism is concerned with truth and accuracy. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with a film that is historically accurate. The point is simply that historical accuracy is more or less irrelevant when it comes to evaluating a films merit. Filmmakers are more concerned with how a story is told than the content of what is told. A film like JFK is brilliant in its editing, screenplay, shifting tones and moods, and structure. That is what matters, not the actual accuracy of the facts.

## Using Film to Avenge Historical Injustices

Yet another example of film and history colliding is a movie genre that is often referred to as “revenge fantasies.” These are films which focus on an Historical era or a specific event in which a grave injustice was committed against a person or group.

Quentin Tarantino in particular is well known for these types of films including the following 3 movies:

Inglorious Basterds (2009)

Django (2012)

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (2019)

With these 3 films Tarantino infuses Historical Events into the narratives of his films.

Revenge fantasies attempt to play to the audiences sense of right and wrong and our sense of justice. These films allow audiences to feel good about avenging historical injustices such as the Holocaust, American Slavery, and murderous cults such as the Manson Family. In rooting for the protagonist to kill or harm Nazi’s, racist slave owners, or murderess cult members the audience gets to feel like they are taking an active role in righting historical wrongs.

Tarantino’s revenge fantasies, like all his films, are as violent and as over the top as you can get. In Django (2012) for example, Jamie Foxx’s character kills 38 people, almost all slave owners or otherwise detestable characters who the audience is happy to cheer for their deaths. In Inglorious Basterds (2009) Tarantino completely re-writes history in the film’s portrayal of how the Nazi’s are defeated in WW2. And what could be more satisfying than watching a Jewish girl whose entire family is slaughtered literally laughing in the face of the Nazi and Nazi sympathizers as they burn to their deaths in her own movie theatre.

Unlike the previous examples above Revenge Fantasies function quite differently. For one thing these films have story lines that are in many cases so clearly farfetched that it could be argued that no person with an IQ over 65 would actually confuse it for reality. Surely most people are well aware Hitler did not die while attending a movie premiere, by a fire set by a Jewish woman who was avenging the murder of her family. In Django (2012) Jamie Foxx’s character kills in a manner that certainly pushes the boundaries of plausibility. It is similar to movies where action stars such as say Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger are one-man armies fighting against and defeating dozens of armed men by themselves. The action sequences in Django seem so implausible that no one is likely to confuse it with actual historical events.

Whether you are watching a “based on a true story” film, a film that is actually supposed to be based on a Historical event, or even a revenge fantasy, a films factual accuracy should not be confused with the films merit.