

Editorial

History, Cinema, and Medicine

José Elías García Sánchez, Enrique García Sánchez

Departamento de Medicina Preventiva, Salud Pública y Microbiología Médica. Facultad de Medicina.
Universidad de Salamanca (Spain).

Correspondence: José Elías García Sánchez. Facultad de Medicina. Avda. Alfonso X El Sabio s/n. 37007 Salamanca (Spain).

e-mail:joegas@usal.es

Received 10 February 2009; accepted 21 March 2009

With surprising frequency, history forms part of cinematographic narratives, both in those based on true facts and in those that stem from literary adaptations (biographies, novels, narratives, poetry, theatre...) or from original scripts. This happens whenever the action takes place in the “real” past. It is necessary to emphasise “real” because there are genres -for example, heroic fantasy- that recount stories about events that occurred in an “unreal” past.

The degree to which and the way in which the cinema incorporates history in its content vary. From the practical point of view it is possible to distinguish two types of films addressing event in the past:

-Historical films. These are based on true facts. A good example would be *The Great Escape* (1963), by John Sturges, since it is based on a true event that took place in WWII. In that film, there is a medical issue that is interwoven throughout the plot: namely, myopia.

-Biographic films or “Biopics” (biographical pictures). These are historical films (subgenre) in which the action affects the lives of the protagonists. *Docteur Laennec* (1949), by Maurice Cloche, is an example of the medical “biopic” subgenre in that the plot focuses on the life of this French physician who discovered the stethoscope and died of tuberculosis.

-Historically oriented films are those in which the fictitious facts narrated occur in different

real pasts. Many of them belong to characteristic genres such as westerns or war films. Whereas *The Last Valley* (1970), by James Clavell, belongs to this category, *El Cid* (1962), by Anthony Mann, is a historical and biographic film. In the former, the plague is portrayed as it actually occurred in the Thirty-Years War, while in the latter it is leprosy that is the villain.

-Films as a historical document. Many early films set in the surroundings in which they were made can be considered testimony to those times. *Not as a Stranger* (1955), by Stanley Kramer, shows us not only how people dressed in the 50’s but also how medicine was taught and practised.

In the present issue of the Journal of Medicine and Cinema we offer an analysis of *Braveheart* (1995), by Mel Gibson, which is an historical and biographic film in which leprosy appears from time to time¹. That article sets the action of the film in its historical context and also discusses its limitations. When it was first shown the film aroused criticism because it was historically inexact. Like many other films, *Braveheart* demonstrates that the direct historical value of a film is related to the faithfulness with which it reflects facts and their chronology.

As in other genres, in historical films characterization is very important and must be carefully measured; that is, it must be faithful to scenarios, wardrobe... and diseases. Does leprosy as leprosy and its evolution appear in *Braveheart*?

William Dieterle, in regard of *Dr. Eerlich's magic bullet* (1949), stated words to the effect that: *The [cinematographic] dramatization of a man's life is condensing, and not copying, the historical facts. It is the steam, and not the water, that moves the engine.*"². This is a declaration of principles about the cinema and history and hence the analyses shown in the present issue¹ are not only pertinent but also very useful for reflection about the cinema.

It is clear that the makers of a film do not want the film to be of the category of a history book. These can be found in bookshops or can be obtained

from libraries. Films are made to touch and inspire emotion in spectators, and they only serve collaterally to arouse the interest of some of them. In general, the cinema seems to better approach books about the history of ancient tales in which myth predominates.

References

- 1.- García Garraus M. *Braveheart* (1995). Leprosy: A Stigmatizing Disease. J Med Mov [serial on the Internet]. 2009 [cited 2009 March 17];5(1):3-15: [13 p.]. Available from: http://www.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/Vol_5/5.1/esp.pdf/editorial5_1_ing.pdf
- 2.- The New Pictures. Time Magazine [serial on the Internet]. 1940 Feb 19 [cited 2009 Feb 5]: [about 3 screens]. Available from: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,763547,00.html>