

Reviews (Films / Documentaries / TV Shows)

20 Days in Mariupol [documentary film].

Directed by Mstyslav Chernov. 2023.
YouTube. 94 minutes.

This Oscar-winning documentary, presented by the Associated Press (AP) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series Frontline, has been accused of containing staged footage with actors playing the roles of civilian victims as part of a propaganda conspiracy by the Ukrainians to vilify Russia amidst early reports of its invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022. Certainly, we are all entitled to our own opinions, but this is absolutely absurd and baseless. Video footage of doctors using defibrillators on infants or apartment complexes under heavy shellfire and reduced to rubble cannot be staged, at least not without extensive preparation and foresight. How could they have staged those scenes in Mariupol on such short notice while being under siege? Only certain groups of people had any inkling that an invasion was imminent, but no one could have guessed it would happen so rapidly and on the scale that it did, as to overtake the entire city of Mariupol in a matter of weeks. The conflict has since evolved into a full-blown war of attrition spreading through the rest of the country and has lasted until the present-day, with still no resolution reached despite almost four years of bloodshed and casualties reaching at least half a million people on both sides. According to the United Nations, tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been killed, with that number likely to be underreported since cities like Mariupol have remained under Russian occupation and inaccessible to independent investigators.

The AP team of reporters led by Ukrainian journalist and filmmaker Mstyslav Chernov (who directed, wrote, and produced this documentary) traveled to Mariupol, located on the northern shore of the Sea of Azov, on February 24, 2022, because they guessed it would be one of the main strategic targets for a Russian invasion of Ukraine. (00:02:43) Mariupol is an industrial city with a large port; thus it is economically important for the country as well as vital for its war manufacturing sector. (00:04:30) It is also a bridge to Crimea, which Russia had annexed eight years prior in 2014. Russia had also tried to take Mariupol at that time but was ultimately unsuccessful. Only an hour after the AP team arrived in Mariupol, the first Russian bombs hit the outskirts of the city, where a Ukrainian military base housed an anti-aircraft system. (00:03:44) Simultaneously, Putin announced his decision to carry out the attack, characterizing it as an act of self-defense against threats to Russia. (00:03:08) The shells hit a residential area, setting homes ablaze and causing civilians to panic and rush outside. (00:06:00) Soon after, martial law was imposed in Ukraine, and some residents decided to leave the city. (00:07:10) But most opted to stay, hiding in the basements of their apartment buildings, since the city has no real bomb shelters. (00:08:44) By Day 3, a quarter of the residents had fled, as Russian forces started to surround the city, taking towns on its outskirts, and blocking the routes in and out of the city. (00:11:08)

There is a sharp contrast between the Ukrainian soldiers' reactions to the press and the doctors' reactions. Soldiers told the press team to stop filming, to which Chernov replies,

"Understand, this is a historical war. To not document it is impossible." (00:15:47) On the other hand, doctors told them to keep filming and even go out of their way to show the battered and bloodied bodies of civilians, especially children. (00:17:17) That is how we come to know that a four-year-old girl, Evangelina, was unable to be saved after being rushed to the hospital. Nurses were crying as they pronounced her dead. (00:17:40) We are shown scene after scene of parents begging doctors and nurses to save their children, and the grim aftermath of failed attempts. It is truly painful to watch, but as Chernov says, "it must be painful to watch." (00:25:02) A teenage boy, only sixteen years of age, was playing soccer with his friends when they were hit by shell fire, and both of his legs were blown off. (00:23:00) Doctors moved quickly to try and save him, as his father was watching helplessly, but to no avail; he had lost too much blood and died soon after arriving at the hospital. Another boy was also hit while playing soccer and needed to have his leg amputated, but there were almost no antibiotics left to fight infection. The hospital also ran very low on painkillers, so some patients were forced to go without. (00:26:45)

Some of the most distressing scenes are of hospital staff or city workers having to improvise when there was no more space to store bodies in morgues. (00:28:01) Some were placed in the utility rooms or basements of hospitals, while many others were gathered by the truckload and placed in mass graves. (00:56:12) Adding to these difficulties, Russian strikes caused problems with the internet and electricity. There was no running water or heat for the winter weather. (00:19:28) People grew desperate when food and water became scarce. (00:39:16) They began looting and stealing from local stores, smashing glass windows, and breaking down doors to get inside locked businesses. One particularly troubling incident was the bombing of a maternity hospital. (00:49:38) Many people were killed or injured, and entire wards of the hospital were completely destroyed. Viewers witness a heavily pregnant woman being carried to an ambulance on a stretcher. We are later informed that she was barely thirty years old and pregnant with her first child. She and her unborn baby both died shortly after being filmed. (01:04:42) For me, as a first-time mom to a newborn, this part really hit close to home. I cannot imagine the horror of giving birth without pain medication or while injured from a bombing. I was brought to tears learning of her story, as well as of the other young mothers who had to give birth in those conditions.

After two weeks of siege and bombings, the people of Mariupol started to hear heavy machine gun fire, indicating that Russian infantry have entered the city. (00:56:47) The area of the heaviest fighting was the Left Bank, closest to the Russian border. The largest university in the city was destroyed along with entire streets and residential areas. (00:58:29) Russian news claimed these reports as fake or argued that the Ukrainians were somehow staging these scenes. (01:02:09) Why would Ukrainians destroy their largest functioning university, hospitals, or neighborhoods just to smear the Russian name? They could have used abandoned buildings or other unimportant structures if it was all just a calculated ruse. Soon, the last hospital standing, Emergency Hospital 2, was about to be surrounded by Russians who had entered the neighborhood. (01:03:30) A nurse standing outside the front entrance was shot by a Russian sniper and critically injured. (01:09:37) Ukrainian soldiers were standing guard by the entrances, and some even got pinned down by snipers outside, unable to move from behind cover. The situation became dire for those inside the hospital, too; the patients,

doctors, and nurses were scared for their lives as they were watching tanks firing from a distance. There was a grim understanding among those inside the hospital that if reinforcements would not arrive immediately, they would be overtaken by the fast-approaching Russian forces.

A special Ukrainian military task force arrived early the next morning to extract the press team on a rescue mission. (01:16:37) The team was forced to leave everyone else in the hospital behind, and they expressed their feelings of guilt for doing so, but they also acknowledged the need to get out of the city to save themselves and the footage they had recorded. (01:19:09) Hours after their escape, Russian forces took over the hospital and the Left Bank. (01:20:19) After desperately scrambling to catch up, the AP reporters were able to leave the city with a Red Cross envoy. (01:27:10) By Day 86, all of Mariupol had fallen, and it remains under Russian occupation as the war rages on. (01:30:20) According to the documentary, an estimated 25,000 people died during the siege (01:30:25)—though, again, the death toll is likely much higher, as it is usually with warfare in urban areas. The film ends with images of mass graves marked only by numbers and crosses. (01:31:33) We can only pray that the survivors were not killed and allowed to evacuate the city, but we will not be able to account for the missing people as long as Russia holds on to Ukrainian territory.

For those wanting to explore other documentary films on the same or similar subjects, here are some that may be of interest: *Putin's Attack on Ukraine: Documenting War Crimes*, by Frontline and the Associated Press (2022), *Crime Scene: Bucha*, also by Frontline and the Associated Press (2022), and *Ukraine: Life Under Russia's Attack* (2023). These films were produced by teams of Ukrainian journalists who recorded the attacks on Ukraine by Russian forces through the eyes of civilians on the ground. The early stages of the war are documented through these documentaries and reveal the initial sentiments of the Ukrainian people, which is an ideal starting point for those wanting to study the current stage of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

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American Primeval [TV series].

Directed by Peter Berg. 2024.
Netflix. 6 episodes (36–63 minutes each).

The word “primeval” is defined by the *Merriam Webster English Dictionary* as something existing from the earliest times and remaining largely untouched. This reflects the raw and untamed nature of the United States during its western frontier era—a world where survival, belief, and identity were constantly being tested. The Netflix limited series *American Primeval* captures the spirit of these ideas through two intertwined stories. These stories eventually fracture across the chaos of the frontier and are set against the historical backdrop of the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. *American Primeval* was created by Mark L. Smith and directed by Peter Berg. Berg is also recognized for directing *Painkiller* (2023), *Patriots Day* (2016), *Hancock* (2008), and *Friday Night Lights* (2004). Together they skillfully blend elements

of historical reality from the western frontier with powerful dramatic story telling. The cast features strong performances from accomplished actors and actresses such as Taylor Kitsch and Betty Gilpin.

The series opens at Fort Bridger, Wyoming, a frontier trading post founded in 1843 by Mountain man Jim Bridger (Shea Whigham). Sara Rowell (Betty Gilpin) and her son Devin (Preston Mota) arrive, seeking passage west to reunite with Sara's husband in Crooks Springs, Missouri. Almost immediately, their hired escort is killed in a violent dispute, leaving Sara and her son stranded in an unfamiliar and dangerous environment. Desperate, Sara pleads with Jim Bridger to help secure a new escort. Bridger warns her that the journey is too dangerous, and that no one would be willing to take on the risk. Eventually, Bridger directs her to Issac Reed (Taylor Kitsch), a solitary Mountain man living outside of Fort Bridger. Reed refuses to help Sara, claiming he has no business in Crooks Springs and sends her away. Back at Fort Bridger, Sara encounters a group of Mormon settlers preparing to travel west toward Utah. Sara befriends a newlywed Mormon couple, Jacob Pratt (Dane DeHaan) and his wife Abish (Saura Lightfoot-Leon). After some hesitation, Jacob agrees to allow Sara and her son to join their wagon train.

Once at camp, tensions escalate when members from the Nauvoo Legion, a Mormon militia, confront the leader of the campsite, declaring they lack authorization from Brigham Young to settle their camp in the region. Although violence is initially avoided, the settlers at the camp are later attacked by disguised Mormon militiamen, accompanied by members of the Paiute tribe. The resulting massacre, which kills nearly all of the settlers, is historically remembered as the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. The series depicts the massacre with dramatic intensity and is liberal with assigning historical responsibility. Historical accounts, such as *The Mormon Menace: Being the Confession of John Doyle Lee-Danite* (1905), convey that the Mormon militia did not partake in the massacre, but that it did coordinate the attack. It is said that they paid Paiute participants to invade and kill the settlers at the campsite. During the chaos, Sara and her son narrowly escape with the unexpected help of Issac Reed who, to their fortune, was nearby in the woods. Jacob Pratt survives the attack despite being partially scalped; his wife Abish and five other women also survive but are taken hostage and handed over to the Paiute as a gift. (Episode 1)

The purpose of providing this context is not just to establish the historical background of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, but also to illustrate the alignment of the two stories before they separate into the chaotic western frontier. Later on, my review will focus more heavily on the dramatic and action-packed story of Jacob Pratt and his wife Abish; the two find themselves separated from each other and caught between three forces—the U.S. military, the Nauvoo Legion (a Mormon militia), and the Shoshone Indian tribe—all fighting for survival and power in the Utah Territory during the Utah War of 1857–1858. *American Primeval* next introduces Brigham Young (Kim Coates) the first governor of the Utah Territory and leader of the Mormon movement. (Episode 2, 12:05) Young is portrayed as a calculating figure who wields political, military, and economic power. Wild Bill Hickman (Alex Breaux) is subsequently introduced into the fold. Hickman serves as Young's right-hand man and as a tactical commander within the Nauvoo Legion. Together, the two men orchestrate strategies

for territorial expansion, covert operations, and damage control when events do not go as planned, an example being the Mountain Meadows Massacre. While the series captures Young and his determination for power through political influence, it displays him as a power-seeking, violent man, and modern members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have disputed this depiction; as Tamarra Kemsley has noted in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Young—in *American Primeval*—is “egregiously mischaracterized as a villainous, violent fanatic.”

Damage control by Young and Hickman includes cleaning up the loose ends of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. This brings us back to the story of Jacob Pratt and his wife Abish. Pratt awakens badly injured and somehow makes his way back to Fort Bridger, where a local doctor manages to stitch his scalp back together. Historically, this scene stretches plausibility, as frontier medical care in the 1850s would have been seriously limited. However, the moment reinforces a central theme of survival. While being stitched up, U.S. Army Captain Edmund Dellinger (Lucas Neff) questions Pratt about what had happened. (Episode 2, 16:27) Pratt advises Dellinger that he can identify the people who conducted the attack, which worries Hickman who is also in the room with the group. Once the captain departs from the room, Hickman, in an effort to cover things up, offers Pratt assistance with finding his wife and brings him back to the Nauvoo Legion settlement. (Episode 2, 25:35) Meanwhile, Dellinger and his troops move forward with their investigation and arrive at the massacre site. Based on their findings on site, the captain suspects that it had not been done by Indians but, rather, by the Mormon militia, which further escalates tensions between the two groups.

Once the Shoshone settlement is introduced to the series, it is revealed that Isaac Reed had been raised among them by a female chief named Winter Bird (Irene Bedard). Through this connection, the two narratives briefly merge. First, Reed provides Dellinger with information that the attack had not been perpetrated by the Shoshone, but by Mormons. The settlement also brings in Abish who, through her time with the Shoshone, has gradually adapted to their way of life and formed a bond with Winter Bird and her son Red Feather (Derek Hinkey), leader of his own rogue Shoshone tribe. In coordination with the Shoshone tribe, Abish is sent to the settlement of the U.S. Army to meet with Dellinger to testify to the perpetrators of the massacre, placing direct blame on the Nauvoo Legion and confronted them with Dellinger to verify. (Episode 4, 38:19) Tensions could not get any higher with this verification, and it ultimately leads to an epic battle scene, including all three groups, the U.S. Army, the Nauvoo Legion (who ambush the U.S. Army), and the Shoshone tribe. Pratt joins the Nauvoo Legion for this battle, while Abish joins forces with the Shoshone tribe. The newlyweds blindly confront each other in the battle, and Jacob mistakenly kills Abish, who is wearing Shoshone warpaint as a disguise. After realizing what he has done, Pratt takes his own life. (Episode 6, 23:25) The series frames their reunion as a grim spiritual closure, while emphasizing the human cost of frontier violence.

Unlike traditional Western narratives, *American Primeval* resists a simple “cowboys versus Indians” framework. Instead, it presents a morally complex portrayal of the Utah Frontier, blending historical accuracy with dramatized interpretation. The series contributes to a broader conversation about how violent frontier events are remembered and reimagined in

popular culture. From a historical perspective, the series incorporates real locations such as Fort Bridger and documented events like the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. The series briefly disguises its villains but then quickly distinguishes them in both stories: the Nauvoo Legion in one, and the ruthless bounty hunters in the other. From my perspective, and this may be controversial, the series' portrayal of Brigham Young makes sense. *American Primeval* depicts him as a strong leader willing to use violence to maintain control, even when it contradicts the values of his faith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The depiction of the Shoshone tribe offers unexpected depth, allowing them to evolve from perceived antagonists into symbols of resilience and survival. Sara Rowell's parallel journey, fleeing bounty hunters across the frontier, reinforces the series' central theme of endurance in an unforgiving landscape. *American Primeval* stands strong as a modern perspective of the long Hollywood traditions of the tale of life on the American frontier. I recommend it to viewers interested in the historical complexities of the western frontier, particularly, those interested in American history, religious conflict, and frontier violence. It is the type of show that is nearly impossible not to binge-watch in just one night.

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Andor. Seasons 1 and 2 [TV series].

Created by Tony Gilroy. 2022 and 2025.
Lucasfilm /Disney+. 24 episodes (45–55 minutes each).

Unlike most entries in the *Star Wars* franchise, *Andor* (2022–2025) is structured less around mystic heroism than around the historical mechanics of empire: bureaucracy, extraction, propaganda, incarceration, and the slow formation of organized resistance. The series treats rebellion as a contingent, fragile process shaped by material conditions and political calculation. In doing so, *Andor* stands apart from previous *Star Wars* projects, especially on film and television, by grounding its drama in structures recognizable from real historical empires. Created by Tony Gilroy, best known for the *Bourne* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007), and *Michael Clayton*, the series reflects its showrunner's long-standing interest in intelligence systems, institutional power, and moral compromise: Gilroy has described himself as an "amateur historian," and *Andor* consistently approaches revolution as a practical problem, rather than an idealized inevitability. Finance, surveillance, propaganda, and repression are treated as the primary engines of political change. The result is a series that feels unusually historical for a science-fiction property, drawing heavily on patterns visible across centuries of imperial rule.

Set in the five years preceding *Rogue One* (2016) and *A New Hope* (1977), *Andor* traces the emergence of the Rebel Alliance through an ensemble cast. Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) is the series' main protagonist, starting off as a revolution-averse cynic and gradually becoming a selfless revolutionary, willing to sacrifice himself to save the galaxy. Through repeated encounters with loss, exploitation, and exposure to collective struggle, all caused and enabled by the Empire, Cassian is transformed. Across its two seasons, the series has numerous

intersecting storylines: the covert operations of rebel organizer Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård); the financial and political risks taken by Senator Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly); the internal security efforts of Imperial officer Dedra Meero (Denise Gough); and localized resistance movements on planets such as Ferrix, Aldhani, and Ghorman. *Andor* emphasizes preparation and consequences, particularly institutional response for the latter, rather than resolving conflicts episodically. Political pressure builds slowly, and moments of violence are framed as outcomes of long-developing systems, rather than as spontaneous events.

The first season establishes imperial rule as a process of economic and colonial extraction. Ferrix is initially under corporate policing, but is obligated to transition to direct imperial occupation, echoing real-world cases in which private enforcement structures paved the way for centralized state power. Another example is Kenari, revealed through Cassian's childhood flashbacks, which is an abandoned mining world destroyed by resource exploitation. Lastly, Ghorman, a planet targeted for its unique materials integral to the Death Star, the Empire's covert "Hail Mary" superweapon, faces the same trajectory. In all of these settings, the Empire treats planets and populations as expendable inputs, valuable only insofar as they can be controlled and exploited. We see this not only on planets but also with characters, some of whom ultimately come to regret their actions for benefitting the Empire. Anything the Empire touches is chewed up and spat out once its usefulness expires.

Economics are central to *Andor's* depiction of rebellion. The Aldhani arc exemplifies this. Modeled on existing revolutionary seizures, such as bank robberies that financed insurgencies, the Aldhani heist drives home one of Gilroy's premises: revolutions require capital. Ideology is necessary but insufficient in itself for revolutions to gain legitimacy. Senator Mon Mothma's storyline reinforces this point, as she risks her political position and personal life to funnel resources into rebel activity while maintaining her public loyalty to the Empire.

Midway through the first season, *Andor* shifts its attention from colonial administration to industrial incarceration. Cassian is sentenced to the Imperial prison on Narkina 5, which enforces discipline through threats of collective punishment. Cassian's role in organizing a mass prison escape, aided by inmate Kino Loy (Andy Serkis), frames successful resistance as collective rather than individual action. The closest it comes to individual action is Cassian and Kino working synergistically. In season 1's post-credits scene, it is revealed that what Cassian and the other prisoners on Narkina 5 were producing were components for the Death Star, demonstrating how empires rely on routine exploitation to sustain themselves.

Season 2 expands upon these themes through the Ghorman storyline, which depicts imperial violence justified through narrative manipulation. Before deploying lethal force, the Empire launches a sustained propaganda campaign to delegitimize local resistance, anticipating that unrest can be framed as criminal or insurgent behavior. Furthermore, they are counting on local insurgents to be baited into doing the "wrong thing." This results in the Ghorman Massacre, a false flag attack on peaceful protestors. The Ghorman Massacre illustrates a disturbingly familiar historical pattern in which state violence is justified through control of

public perception. The Empire's power not only depends on military force but on its ability to define truth.

Mon Mothma's subsequent denunciation speech before the Galactic Senate represents the shaking of that narrative control. With Mon Mothma declaring the massacre an act of genocide and condemning the "death of truth," the Empire unsuccessfully attempts to shut down her public broadcast and arrest her. Mon Mothma's flight from the capital marks the moment when elite dissent transforms into overt rebellion, reinforced by her abandoning the elegant coat she had been wearing specifically to political meetings and later dressing down while with the Rebel Alliance. The scene emphasizes that authoritarian systems rely heavily on censorship and intimidation to survive as their legitimacy erodes.

The architecture of rebellion in *Andor* operates across class lines. Working-class resistance emerges through direct action, as seen on Ferrix, Aldhani, and Ghorman. Intellectual operatives, such as Luthen Rael, pursue sabotage and acceleration, believing that conditions must worsen before mass resistance becomes possible. Political elites face different challenges. For example, senators Mon Mothma and Bail Organa (Benjamin Bratt) struggle between complicity and conscience, knowing that defection carries symbolic weight precisely because of their privilege, and so they time their defections accordingly.

Mon Mothma and her cousin Vel Sartha (Faye Marsay) embody elite defection within revolutionary movements. Gilroy said it is privilege rather than its deprivation that made the two socially conscious, comparing them to Roman elites who embraced Christianity under polytheistic imperial rule and to affluent twentieth-century radicals who turned against established power structures. Their storylines foreground a recurring paradox of revolution: those with the most to lose are often the ones whose choices most visibly signal systemic collapse. Mon Mothma's financial maneuvering, arranged-marriage subplot, and eventual public break from the Empire all reinforce the personal cost of moral clarity among the ruling class.

Within the *Star Wars* franchise, *Andor* most closely aligns with *Rogue One*, sharing its emphasis on collective sacrifice, moral ambiguity, and institutional struggle rather than mythic destiny. *Andor* reflects Gilroy's earlier works that were primarily political thrillers, particularly the *Bourne* films, which similarly foreground intelligence agencies, bureaucratic paranoia, and the erosion of individual agency within state systems. Unlike stereotypical *Star Wars* narratives, however, *Andor* focuses more on historical causality than the "mysticism" some people associate with *Star Wars*. The mysticism is there if you care about that as a *Star Wars* fan, but it is more peripheral.

Gilroy has described *Andor* as "about the making of a revolution," and its structure reflects his intent. The multi-episode arcs follow a pattern of setup, payoff, and aftermath, with that pattern tying into political change. *Andor* depicts how tyranny maintains itself, especially when under threat. Thanks to Gilroy's fascination with history and revolutions, the series achieves a science-fiction narrative that operates as a recognizable chronicle of empire and resistance. By grounding its drama in history, *Andor* makes its story both timeless and unsettlingly familiar. I highly recommend it.

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Chief of War. Season 1 [TV show].

Created by Thomas Pa'a Sibbett and Jason Momoa. 2025.
Apple TV. 9 episodes (40–59 minutes each).

When most people think about Hawai'i, they think of beaches, resorts, and lū'aus (Hawaiian parties, often with food and hula). Yet Hawai'i was not always a place of peaceful relaxation; there were wars and power struggles. One of the more iconic stories of power struggle in Hawai'i was the war to unify the islands. *Chief of War* (2025), created by Thomas Pa'a Sibbett and Jason Momoa, tells that exact story. It is a historical Hawaiian epic set during the beginning of the unification wars to create a singular kingdom of Hawai'i from 1782 to 1810. Sibbett and Momoa are both Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian), and during casting made the intentional decision to cast mostly Kānaka and Pacific Islander actors. This was done to best portray and honor the history they are sharing. According to a behind-the-scenes interview with Sibbett, they "decided that production should be led by culture." ("Making Of: The Prophecy," 03:27) This meant that they would honor the land, people, and nā Akua (the Gods) throughout the entire production. To give authenticity and respect to the ancestors, whose stories they were telling, Sibbett and Momoa decided that the show should use 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), ("Making Of: The Prophecy," Apple 04:28) so *Chief of War* would be the first mainstream TV show using 'Ōlelo Hawai'i as its main language. Sibbett and Momoa created a love letter to Hawai'i to where they made one-to-one recreations of a few 'Ahu 'ula (capes) and mahiole (helmets). ("Making Of: Building Kingdoms," 01:33) The teams and actors who brought this show to life put considerable effort and care into making sure that this story was told right—in a way that honors Hawaiians instead of exotifying them. Thomas Pa'a Sibbett and Jason Momoa have known each other for decades and worked on *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* (2023) together. Sibbett is best known for his work on *Braven* (2018) and *The Last Manhunt* (2022), having writing credit for both. Momoa is best known for his acting in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and as Aquaman in the DC film universe. Most importantly, and to reiterate, both are Kānaka and have a reverence for Hawaiian culture.

The story of *Chief of War* follows a family who fled from Maui to escape King Kahekili (Temuera Morrison) because he had them fight and plan battles that they deemed to be needless and brutal. Ka'iana (Jason Momoa) played the main character from this family, who was one of the best war ali'i (chiefs/royalty) in Hawai'i. His family, consisting of his two brothers, his wife, and his wife's sister, were able to flee Maui and Kaua'i with Ka'ahumanu (Luciane Buchanan) to the Big Island. (Episode 2, 44:51) Ka'iana was not as lucky, as he fought off some of the Maui soldiers, only to jump off a cliff to get away from them. (Episode 2, 45:17) He was rescued by the group of sailors he had saved previously. Ka'iana spent about a year sailing around the world with them prior to returning to Hawai'i to reunite with his family. Upon his return, he brought key tools to assist with the ongoing war against Kahekili: guns and ammunition. He learned that the previous king of the island had died and separated

the spiritual and political power of the king between his son Keōua (Cliff Curtis) and his nephew Kamehameha (Kaina Makua). This separation of power led to tension between the two factions, but mostly on Keōua's side. Keōua teamed up with Kahekili to take down Kamehameha and Ka'iana. To do so, Kahekili sent his best and most ruthless warriors to aid in this effort. While the war inched closer, Keōua sought Kahekili to get help in taking down Kamehameha and Ka'iana, who grew closer the more they worked together. The warriors showed no mercy. They desecrated sacred areas by cutting down trees in the sacred grove. While doing so, they were discovered by Nāhi (Siuā Ikale'o), Ka'iana's brother, and Heke (Mainei Kinimaka), Ka'iana's sister-in-law. Ultimately, Nāhi was killed, and Heke was sent back with a warning message that war would take place in the "Black Desert." (Episode 8, 23:51) Kamehameha realized that the war he was trying to prevent had already arrived, and that he had to right this injustice. So, Kamehameha's district, Kohala, and Keōua's district, Ka'ū, along with any of the districts that sided with him, went to war. Keōua was killed by what was deemed as an act of Pele, the goddess of fire and volcanoes, who then made Kamehameha the king of Hawai'i.

While *Chief of War* did an exemplary job of sharing the historical context of what led to the unification war of Hawai'i, it is important to note that the story was adapted for entertainment and to suit a wider audience. For example, Sibbett talks about why the women's outfits were more modern than those of their male counterparts. Actresses wore a different version to help them not be sexualized by the viewers and to help the viewers better focus on the storyline. ("Making Of: Building Kingdoms," 2:58) One thing that the show explored briefly was the sexuality of Prince Kūpule (Brandon Finn) of Maui. In the *Chief of War*, they allude to him having a relationship with his father's advisor. While James Cook, the British sailor who was killed in Hawai'i, witnessed same-sex relationships occurring in the region, there is no record of Kūpule taking part in same-sex relationships. (Matthew Link, "When Captain Cook Met Kalanikoa," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 11, no. 3, May–June 2004). Rather, this was more likely a way in which the creators tried to explore māhū (queer) relationships within Hawai'i.

One difference between what happened in the show and the historical record is that Ka'iana sailed not only on one ship but at least two. While he did travel across the world on the *Nootka*, most notably to China and Alaska, that was not the ship that brought him back to Hawai'i. (Dave Roos, "Who Was Chief Ka'iana of Hawaii? The Legendary Warrior Chief Who Was Also the First Hawaiian to Travel the World," *History*, July 30, 2025). The ship that ultimately returned him to Hawai'i was the *Iphigenia Nubiana*. On this ship, Ka'iana brought guns and gunpowder, which he subsequently introduced to Hawai'i. (Roos, 2025) Additionally, the show departs from the historical record in its portrayal of his adventures overseas. During his exploration of the world, Ka'iana ended up in Zamboanga, a Spanish fort in the Philippines. According to the show, he freed slaves, including his friend Tony (James Udom). While the historical figure of Ka'iana did visit Zamboanga, there is no record of him freeing slaves while there. (Jonathan Wright, "Chief of War: the true story behind the creation of the Kingdom of Hawai'i," *History Extra* (BBC History Magazine, 2025)

Another difference in the storyline compared to the historical record is the death of Nāhi. While the character was brutally killed in episode 8, that is not how his death occurred. Rather than being killed by Keōua, he was killed in a battle against Kamehameha on Maui. Sibbett made it clear in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* that this change to the historical narrative was done in an effort to add drama and heighten emotional impact for the final episode. (Max Gao, "Jason Momoa Had a Visceral Reaction to That Brutal 'Chief of War' Death: 'I Was in So Much Pain,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 16, 2025) One of the biggest strengths of this TV show is that anyone who does not mind some gore can watch it and understand the storyline. It is made for a general audience to better understand Hawaiian culture beyond the beaches, lū'aus, and hotels. The history of Hawai'i is widely overlooked. Whether on purpose or not, there is still a silence in the narrative. Hawai'i is a paradise, but it is also a land of war, pain, and struggle for power.

While watching this show, I could not help but commend the care that Sibbett and Momoa had for the stories they were telling. While other available sources on this subject are not nearly as new as *Chief of War*, they still hold their ground for being viable when learning about Hawaiian culture. If you want better insights into Kamehameha I, the KHON2 News channel in Hawai'i covered his legacy in a video, titled "Who Was Kamehameha I?" While there are a few books about the history of Hawai'i, the one that is highly recommended to those wishing to learn more about the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by the U.S. government is *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen* by Queen Lili'uokalani (1898). This book, written by the last queen of Hawai'i, offers a detailed history of Hawai'i and how she was overthrown by a foreign government as the last ruler of Hawai'i. Another popular source is the Merrie Monarch Festival, the "Olympics" of hula, which takes place annually. Prior to a written language for 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, ancient stories were passed down to each generation through hula. Although this is not a typical source for history, hula is Hawai'i, and hula tells the story of Hawai'i. The hula being performed are often dedicated to a God, an ali'i, or used to share an episode from Hawai'i's history. In 2018, National Geographic released a short film about the history of hula, titled, "Hula Is More Than a Dance—It's the 'Heartbeat' of the Hawaiian People." It explores why hula is so important to Kānaka across the globe.

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The Chosen. Seasons 1–5 [TV series].

Directed by Dallas Jenkins. 2017 (pilot), 2019–2015.

The Chosen app, Amazon Prime Video. 40 episodes (50–60 minutes each).

The Chosen, created, directed, and co-written by Dallas Jenkins, represents a groundbreaking achievement in faith-based entertainment. Jenkins, born in 1975 and the son of bestselling author Jerry B. Jenkins (co-author of the *Left Behind* series), began his filmmaking career with independent features such as *Hometown Legend* (2002) and shorts like *Midnight Clear* (2006), which won awards at the Heartland Film Festival. He later directed films including *The*

Resurrection of Gavin Stone (2017) and *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (2024). *The Chosen* marks his most ambitious project: the first multi-season series about the life of Jesus Christ and the highest crowdfunded media project in history, raising millions directly from viewers to maintain creative independence. Unlike many prior depictions of Jesus on screen, *The Chosen* stands out for its multi-season format, deep character development, and high production values. Notable predecessors include the classic miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977, directed by Franco Zeffirelli), which offers a reverent and detailed portrayal but in a single miniseries format; *The Bible* (2013 miniseries, produced by Roma Downey and Mark Burnett), which covers broader biblical events with dramatic flair but less focus on individual backstories; and *A.D. The Bible Continues* (2015), which is a sequel series emphasizing the disciples after the resurrection. While these works prioritize scriptural events, *The Chosen* distinguishes itself by expanding fictional backstories and interpersonal dynamics, making biblical figures feel more relatable and human without compromising core Gospel accounts.

The series opens each season with a disclaimer: “*The Chosen* is based on the true stories of the gospels of Jesus Christ. Some locations and timelines have been combined or condensed. Backstories and some characters or dialogue have been added.” This transparency highlights the show’s balance between scriptural faithfulness and creative storytelling, allowing ancient events to resonate with modern audiences through emotional depth and accessibility. Season 1 introduces four intersecting character arcs set amid Roman occupation and religious tensions in Capernaum. The torments of Mary Magdalene (Elizabeth Tabish) begin in her youth, underscored by the recurring motif from Isaiah 43:1 (“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine”), symbolizing redemption and lost innocence. Her path crosses with Jesus (Jonathan Roumie), transforming her into one of his devoted followers. Parallel arcs follow brothers Simon Peter (Shahar Isaac) and Andrew (Noah James), fishermen burdened by debt and forced into compromising actions; Matthew (Paras Patel), an isolated Jewish tax collector working for the Romans; and Nicodemus (Erick Avari), a Pharisee experiencing a crisis of faith. These threads weave a mosaic of societal yearning for hope, delivering emotional authenticity that draws viewers into the characters’ struggles.

Subsequent seasons build on this foundation. Season 2 follows Jesus’s growing ministry in Galilee (circa 27–28 CE), depicting miracles, teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount, and the disciples’ personal trials (drawing on passages such as Matthew 4:24 and John 1:43–51). Season 3 reaches the ministry’s peak, including the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1–14) and rejection in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), with expanded subplots exploring doubt, sacrifice, and opposition. Season 4 shifts toward Jerusalem (circa 29 CE), covering Peter’s confession (Matthew 16:13–20), John the Baptist’s (David Amito) execution, and rising tensions. Season 5, the most intense yet, focuses on Holy Week (circa 30 CE) and portrays the triumphal entry, Temple cleansing, Last Supper, and betrayal (Matthew 21–27; John 12–19), amplifying themes of humility, sorrow, and sacrifice through intimate character moments. At the time of writing this review, season 6, portraying the Passion, is expected to be released in November 2026, culminating in a theatrical release in the spring of 2027, and the final installment, season 7, is slated for 2028.

The series excels in humanizing biblical figures. Jonathan Roumie's portrayal of Jesus captures both divine love—through miracles and teachings—and human vulnerability, as he grapples with his disciples' misunderstandings. Fictional elements, such as the composite character Gaius (Kirk B. R. Woller), enhance emotional investment. Inspired by the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:5–13 (the healing of the servant, fully depicted in Season 4, Episode 4), Gaius evolves over seasons as a witness to Jesus's works, adding depth and stakes to the biblical encounter. Viewing *The Chosen* with family has sparked meaningful discussions, particularly around familiar passages like the centurion's faith in Matthew 8:5–13 and the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:25–34. These moments have glorified shared Christian faith and turned episodes into conversation starters. Beyond its spiritual impact, the series entertains broadly with strong cinematography, acting, comedy, suspense, and production quality, appealing even to viewers less familiar with the faith.

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Churchill at War [TV documentary series].

Directed by Malcolm Venville, 2024.
Netflix. 4 episodes (59–61 minutes each)

While the rest of the world was willing to comply for the sake of peace, a prominent early voice from Britain emerged against the submission to Adolf Hitler. Using Churchill's own words, Netflix's documentary series *Churchill at War* reveals the man who defined Britain's spirit and carried a nation through its doldrums. The director, Malcolm Venville, known for producing leader-focused historical miniseries such as *Grant* (2020), *Theodore Roosevelt* (2022), and *Abraham Lincoln* (2022), brings a similar narrative approach to *Churchill at War*. His works' consistent focus on political figures' methods of navigation through turmoil shapes this series' portrayal of Churchill as the central force behind Britain's endurance throughout World War II.

To contextualize this series, it is appropriate to first consider and analyze the overall visual and creative production styles used throughout its production. *Churchill at War* takes a unique route with its visual and audio performances: it features colorized wartime footage, which allows for an immersive yet commiserate experience. The colorization of the footage builds bridges between the past and the present, inducing a visceral sense of chaos and resilience throughout the war. Just a few seconds into the opening episode, bold white font, highlighted by the black emptiness of its backdrop, reads "Throughout his life, Churchill published over six million words—more than Shakespeare and Dickens combined—and delivered more than five million words in public speeches." ("The Gathering Storm," 00:17) To put the vocal initiatives and role that Churchill played in the war into perspective, the series employs voice enhancements, using artificial intelligence technology to transport Churchill's written and documented words into an audio narrative in his own voice. While showing real footage and firsthand photos of the war's frontlines, the series also took the imaginative route of creating a production with actors to reenact and dramatize real pivotal moments that occurred during the war—including significant meetings and discussions, like the Tehran

Conference (1943) and the Yalta Conference (1945) between Churchill, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, as interpreted by actors Christian McKay (Churchill), Langley Kirkwood (Roosevelt), and Martin Kluge (Stalin). These reenactments allow for glimpses into Churchill's state of mind during tactical debates and provide an immersive, visual perspective of how significant it was at the time to have such influential leaders all in the same room with the state of their nations in their hands.

Interwoven with these visual creations are interviews with scholars like Allen Packwood, director of the Churchill Archives Centre, and historians like Dan Snow, as well as politicians, biographers, and even Churchill's own granddaughter. Thus, the show's narrative is largely constructed through the perspectives of these featured voices, which ultimately means they are shaping our understanding of Churchill's leadership and legacy. Throughout the series, there is commentary from political figures, including former U.S. President George W. Bush and former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, voicing their admiration and commending Churchill's leadership strategies. The storytelling framework of this series relies heavily on the analytical and revisionist commentaries of its interviewees.

Churchill at War consists of four episodes, each pertaining to a different period in Churchill's leadership and covering his five years as war leader between 1940 and 1945. Episode 1, "The Gathering Storm," is an introduction to Churchill's early military years and his upbringing. The moment Winston Churchill is born into the top echelons of British society huge expectations are placed upon him. His father, Randolph Churchill, is an important Victorian politician, and his mother, Jennie Jerome, is the scion of a wealthy American family. Even with two powerful, influential parents, he receives no notice from them at all. When Churchill is still at a young age, his father passes away. This, however, only strengthens his resolve to vindicate his father's political aspirations. The Second Boer War (1899–1902) then provides Churchill with an opportunity to forge his path into the public's eye. He takes the initiative and sets himself at the front lines of a captured armored train, saving thousands of soldiers' lives. During the war, he is captured and sent to a prisoner camp. This does not alter his convictions, though. He escapes the camp and manages to share his story. With publicity surrounding his name at age 25, Churchill establishes himself as a Member of Parliament for the Conservative party. He plays every card in government to attain power. His dedication exceeds politics: he wants to show the nation that he is not just willing to verbally fight for his country but also physically. The episode then shifts as Nazi Germany expands across Europe, intensifying fear in Britain. Early on, Churchill recognizes Hitler's duplicity and presents his warnings as pivotal in shaping public trust. When Germany invades western Europe in 1940, Churchill emerges as the figure to lead Britain into war and becomes prime minister.

Episode 2, "His Finest Hour," delves into Churchill's trials by fire. In the summer of 1940, Britain stands alone against Nazi Germany. Rather than detailing battlefield developments, the episode emphasizes Churchill's diplomatic struggle to secure American support while Britain's European allies are falling due to German invasions. In an attempt to gain aid, Churchill writes to the president of the United States, but the United States, at this time, are still reeling from the Great Depression, leaving Churchill without additional support. According to Boris Johnson, "his [i.e., Churchill's] strategy was just to hang on, and he had to

somehow inveigle the United States to come in." (21:00) The episode highlights the constant harsh decision-making that Churchill had to face during this time, even having to make the sacrifice of sinking French fleets, which had once been their allies. To assert dominance once more, Churchill makes the decision to bomb Germany's capital, Berlin, thus unleashing a blitz of attacks between German and British forces.

Episode 3, "The Day of Destiny," focuses on Churchill's persistent efforts to secure the United States' entry into the war, delving into the development of what would become Churchill and Roosevelt's tight-knit relationship. It emphasizes Churchill's vocal gravity about the global threat posed by Germany. The episode then takes us to Pearl Harbor, the Japanese empire's attack on the American naval base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, which marks the turning point that drags the United States into what is now considered a world war. Churchill uses the state of uncertainty between nations to level with the American people and strategize with Roosevelt. The focus then shifts to Joseph Stalin's stance in Russia, placing us into a reenactment of the Tehran Conference (1943) between the big three (Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin).

The fourth and last episode, "Out of The Storm," explores the closing years of the war. Having explored Roosevelt and Churchill's strategy-focused relationship, we are then introduced to the beginning of the fray in their relationship, as Stalin enters the picture and FDR begins to take the initiative. As America takes the lead alongside Stalin, Churchill is left with the question, "Who is now calling the shots?" "Is the glory equal?" This episode emphasizes Churchill's feeling of becoming secondary, using his voice to state how "every morning when I wake, my first thought is how I can please President Roosevelt, and my second thought is how I can conciliate Marshal Stalin." (19:41) The Soviet Union eventually decides to join the emerging United Nations, the German capital is surrounded, and Hitler ultimately takes his own life. As the war concludes, the episode takes a turn. Britain now has to deal with what had been postponed due to the war. So, after bringing Britain to victory, Churchill has to face reelection. The nation knows that, despite victory, there is still uncertainty, and the episode quotes Churchill's opponents' slogans, "Cheer Churchill, Vote Labour," (36:02) reflecting the British public's need for unity and a clean slate. Churchill loses the election, but his legacy is far from complete. The series concludes by situating Churchill vis-à-vis the emerging Iron Curtain, portraying his postwar role as a continuation of his instincts and thereby reinforcing his status as a leader defined by foresight.

This documentary series on Churchill's trials and tribulations throughout World War II takes an interesting angle in highlighting his efforts. It includes the voices of various narratives through different scholars, relying heavily on their records. Churchill's immediate placement into a global conflict reflects the rash and strategic decisions he consistently had to make. Meanwhile, the series transports its viewers to various locations during the war, using real, vivid, and colorized footage, while also taking the creative route of reenacting critical conferences, meetings, and decisions through actors' interpretations. Churchill's conviction transcended Britain's expectations, and this series does an excellent job of reflecting that. However, it condenses substantial amounts of information into just four episodes, making it feel too fast-paced at times. Because *Churchill at War* concerns itself primarily with decision-

making and political leadership, it offers limited insights into the lived experiences of British soldiers—thus focusing more on the puppeteer and not the puppets themselves. To counterbalance this perspective, I recommend Christopher Nolan’s epic war film *Dunkirk* (2017), which offers a more personal, first-hand account of soldiers’ lived experiences, revealing the human cost of Churchill’s strategic decisions. Ultimately, *Churchill at War* functions best as a study of leadership rather than a comprehensive account of World War II. It is a compelling and entertaining series, but one that would benefit from being viewed alongside sources that consider the burdens borne by those who fought in war.

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Dead to Rights [film].

Directed by Shen Ao. 2025.
China Film Group, Omnijoi Media Corporation. 137 minutes.

In 1937, the Imperial Japanese Army captured the city of Nanjing and murdered as many as 300,000 civilians, burned and looted the city, and raped tens of thousands of women and children. The numerous graphic photographs of the massacre—often taken by the perpetrators—show the sadism and dehumanization practiced by the Japanese military during their occupation of Nanjing. The Nanjing Massacre, famously referred to as the “Rape of Nanjing,” is one of the most heinous acts of brutality in modern history. Shen Ao’s new film, *Dead to Rights* (2025), attempts to tell a story set during the Nanjing Massacre, a challenging feat for any filmmaker who dares to craft an entertaining narrative out of the very real suffering of thousands of people.

Shen Ao, an innovative and burgeoning Chinese director, known for the crime-thriller film *No More Bets* (2023), portrays the massacre through the eyes of an ordinary postman, Ah Chang (Liu Haoran Liu), also known as Su Liuchang, who finds himself developing propaganda photographs for a Japanese officer. Chang, who lies about his occupation to the Japanese propaganda officer, Hideo Itō (Daichi Harashima), to extend his life, finds himself in a studio tasked with developing photos taken by Itō. Hidden under the studio’s floorboards are Jin Chengzong (Wang Xiao), the studio’s owner, as well as his wife, daughter, and newborn baby. Chengzong trains Chang in photo developing to appease Itō, who promises to provide Chang with a passport out of the city when his work is completed. Chang and Chengzong secretly create duplicates of the graphic photos of the massacre to document and preserve evidence of Japanese war crimes, while still providing the staged propaganda images to Itō. The studio depicted in the film is based on the true story of the Huadong Photo Studio in Nanjing, where Luo Jin was tasked with developing photos for the Japanese. Jin kept a hidden album of the atrocities, which was later discovered and used to prosecute Japanese war criminals during the 1946 Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal. The film does not adhere to the actual history of the Huadong Photo Studio; however, this was a wise choice by Ao because the film offers a wider range of perspectives, including the women in Chengzong’s family, a Chinese soldier hiding in the basement, and a Chinese collaborator with the Japanese military who serves as the translator between Itō and Chang.

The translator who works with the Japanese military, Wang Guanghai (Wang Chuanjun), is arguably the most intriguing character in the film. Guanghai collaborates with the Japanese in exchange for passports for his family and is often shadowing the antagonist Itō throughout the film. He made a promise to his mistress, an opera singer named Lin Yuxiu (Gao Ye), to get her a travel passport out of Nanjing and finds an opportunity to achieve this through Chang. With Itō convinced by Guanghai that Lin Yuxiu is Chang's wife, Itō promises to secure her a passport after the work is concluded. The duo of the Japanese officer Hideo Itō and Wang Guanghai offers a nuanced commentary on the massacre. Guanghai openly helps the Japanese secure Nanjing, and although he is at times visibly shaken by the sheer terror inflicted on his fellow citizens, he is dead set on protecting his family and himself. This perspective, although unheroic and somewhat cowardly, is essential for the portrayal of the massacre. Given the same opportunity, many people would probably take the same position as Guanghai to save their family and themselves from rape, murder, and torture.

Itō, the main antagonist, is often chastised by his fellow Japanese officers for his softer temperament and cowardice when it comes to murdering Chinese civilians. He is portrayed as seemingly kind, and his demeanor and physical prowess are not intimidating. Itō's evil is communicated through his nonchalant attitude toward the atrocities occurring around him, his focus on capturing propaganda images, and his notions of racial superiority. This character encapsulates a key part of how genocides and mass killings occur: seemingly ordinary people get sucked into dehumanizing propaganda and become complicit in horrific violence. Itō progressively becomes more immoral throughout the film, but he remains separated from violence until the close of the film. Overall, Itō is a convincing villain, who comes across as realistic and human, which is more terrifying than if he were brutishly violent and evil, because it is a reminder that ordinary, initially nonviolent people can become monsters under the right circumstances.

Making a film about the mass murder and rape of thousands is not an easy task and raises the question of how one can produce a film that is both entertaining and respectful to the countless lives that were lost. A filmmaker must provide an engaging narrative that pays respect to the victims and history, but must also not turn the suffering of others into a spectacle of exploitation and misery. *Dead to Rights*, for the most part, achieves this balance. The film brilliantly juxtaposes scenes of violence with pop-ups of historical images of the Nanjing Massacre, reminding viewers that what is depicted is, in fact, real. Real images of mass decapitations with smiling Japanese soldiers wielding katanas, mountains of dead bodies, and an annihilated and destroyed city weave throughout the film.

The portrayal of violence in *Dead to Rights* is generally realistic, brutal, and horrifying. Throughout the film, civilians are shown to be rounded up and executed, shot at random, and in one scene, hundreds are lined up along a riverbank and are cut down by machine guns. In the film's final act, one scene is absolutely horrific. Itō decides to have a Japanese photo developer take over the tasks of Chang, and, breaking his promise to Chang and his supposed wife, is ordered to execute both of them because of their direct knowledge of the massacre. Shown earlier to be uncomfortable with murdering people himself, Itō decides to give Chang two passports, but he orders the soldiers at the checkpoint that, once the bearers

of these specific passports attempt to cross, they are to be killed on site. Unaware of this, Chang and Yuxiu decide to give the passports to Chengzong's wife and young daughter so that they can escape the city. One of the most truly horrific and awful scenes transpires when Chengzong's wife and daughter attempt to cross. They are brought into a room by Japanese soldiers, where they are first bayoneted and then raped in front of each other while bleeding to death.

This scene, while very emotionally distressing and extremely hard to watch, helps the film avoid a happy ending trope and stays grounded in history. Thousands of families in Nanjing experienced unimaginable violence and trauma during the Japanese occupation, and our main characters are no exception to that. *Dead to Rights* has been called the "Chinese *Schindler's List*" by Western reviewers for its portrayal of historical violence; however, as a film, it is more flawed than Spielberg's classic. The portrayal of sexual violence in the film is largely hinted at, other than the one aforementioned scene toward the end. There are scenes showing women being dragged away by Japanese soldiers, and there are references to rape, yet viewers who are unfamiliar with the Nanjing Massacre might not understand the massive scale of sexual violence that occurred during the occupation of the city. Japanese soldiers systematically kidnapped, tortured, and raped massive numbers of women and girls. The film fails to convey this essential aspect of the massacre, and instead, sexual violence in the film feels like an afterthought compared to the explicit executions that are prevalent throughout. The director could have found ways to communicate the widespread rape during the Nanjing Massacre, so that audiences would truly understand the horrific experiences of women under Japanese occupation.

At one point, there is a quite jarring and questionable moment of Chinese patriotism that comes off as incredibly awkward. Amid this generally historically authentic film, this scene—with heightened inspirational music and the look of patriotic pride on the characters' faces—feels very bizarre and out of place. It is the only scene that appears forced and, what is more, it is completely unnecessary. By the conclusion of the film, all of the main characters are dead except for Yuxiu and Chengzong's infant son. Yuxiu has smuggled the hidden photos of the massacre in the seams of her clothes and given them to the authorities. The film concludes with Yuxiu watching the executions of the Japanese officers who had perpetrated the massacre. The final shots of the film show the real-life locations of the massacre in modern-day Nanjing.

Aside from a few flaws, *Dead to Rights* is one of the best portrayals of the Nanjing Massacre. In my opinion, it surpasses *City of Life and Death* (2009), another Chinese film set during the massacre. Both are good works, but *Dead to Rights* has more engaging characters and a better narrative. Although problematic in some respects, *Dead to Rights* is, at present, the definitive film about the Nanjing Massacre. I recommend *Dead to Rights* to anyone interested in history or film, especially those unfamiliar with the Nanjing Massacre. Historical films are an excellent entry point for learning about a topic and can spark curiosity to learn more.

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The Gilded Age. 3 seasons [TV series].

Created by Julian Fellowes. Directed by Michael Engler et al. 2022–2025.
HBO. 25 episodes (50–60 minutes each).

Wealth, traditions, and personal dynamics are explored in HBO's series *The Gilded Age*, created by Julian Fellowes, the award-winning writer behind *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015). Fellowes, known for his detailed exploration of class and gender in social contexts, brings different historical periods to life through both drama and meticulous attention to period details. In this series, he examines the tensions between old traditions and new money in post-Civil War America. The focus of this period, known as America's "Gilded Age" (1870s–1890s), was the rapid rise of industrial wealth alongside an entrenched aristocracy that had lived by its old traditions for centuries. Every season has its own drama in the shift from old to new values, emphasizing how family dynamics, social ambitions, and even the role of women and men helped shape the modern world they wanted. The drama, the outfits, the romance, and so much more play a significant role in cinematic photography, helping the writers and directors create a sense of being in that time. Through the different characters' interactions, Fellowes dramatizes the transition from old traditions to modernity, raising questions about how privilege, race, gender, and even the cost of progress were changing.

The series is set in the 1880s of the "Gilded Age," a period Mark Twain described as the nation's explosive industrial growth and the rise of social inequalities through old money traditions. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, New York had become one of the most symbolic places for both the new fortunes that were being made and the old aristocracy with its traditions. There are two primary households in the series: the Russells, who had moved to New York, had become a wealthy railroad family, and are now determined to attain a place in the city's elite. Meanwhile, Marian Brook (Louisa Jacobson) is a young woman who has just lost her father and is traveling from Pennsylvania to move in with her traditional aunts, Agnes van Rhijn (Christine Baranski) and Ada Brook (Cynthia Nixon). Through these characters and many others, the series dramatizes the social conflicts of the rigid codes of female responsibility to maintain the house and care for the children. At the same time, men worked, tensions between old and new money arose, and opportunities for men evolved. Men were beginning to make advances in industry and technology, exemplified by projects like the Brooklyn Bridge and the creation of the light bulb. *The Gilded Age* has a historical backdrop that includes real-life figures like Booker T. Washington (Michael Braugher), helping the series contextualize fictional narratives and highlight the racial progress and tensions growing in a society still struggling with segregation.

Season 1 begins with Marian Brook's journey to her aunts' home in New York after her father's death, where she meets an unexpected person at the train station: Peggy Scott (Denée Benton), a Black woman who has been navigating social barriers throughout her entire life. Traveling by train, Peggy faces segregation and encounters challenges that underscore the racial inequalities of that era. Across the street from Marian's aunts is the Russell family:

George Russell (Morgan Spector), a railroad magnate, and his wife, Bertha (Carrie Coon), with their two children, Larry (Harry Richardson) and Gladys (Taissa Farmiga). Season 1 offers an inside look at the old, traditional New York aristocracy amid the new, wealthier families of industry, known for spectacular inventions and ushering in a new era for America. The narrative centers on social gatherings, the importance of women's participation and roles in society, and the slow introduction of the characters, which creates a sense of the world they inhabit. Throughout this and the subsequent seasons, historical details are embedded in the design of the mansions, in the social codes that distinguish old and new money, and in racially segregated cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Opera and Newport balls. As Aunt Agnes remarks with regard to the new families, "These people. You shut the door; they come in the window. You shut the window; they come down the chimney. They never give up." (Season 1, Episode 6) Aunt Agnes observes and emphasizes how the social pressure from new money is forcing its way into high society. The season ends with the Russells settling into their position, Marian trying to find her place in society, and Peggy charting her path as a writer while working in the home of Agnes van Rhijn as a personal secretary.

Season 2 explores the changes among society's elites, as new money rises and begins to challenge the old hierarchies. It offers an inside look at how industrial wealth begins to challenge the authority of inherited money, reshaping the narrative as it examines how journalism or the economy can influence those areas. The narrative emphasizes the importance of journalism, labor strikes over wealth inequality, and industrial growth, all of which reflect the moral complexities of wealth and capitalism. George Russell—whom historians, if he were not a fictional character, would label as a "robber baron"—expresses his frustration over the progress and social perception of who he is, exclaiming "Why must I be the villain of every story? I employ hundreds of men, I have lifted whole towns out of poverty, and yet I'm the tyrant who crushes the faces of the poor." (Season 2, Episode 4, 10:52) His outburst reflects the tension between industrial ambition and social judgment. Meanwhile, women like Agnes van Rhijn continue to uphold traditions and social expectations, advising Marian with regard to one of her suitors, "You must give me some credit, Marian. I do not think he is suitable because he is well-born and rich, but in addition to those useful qualities, he's also intelligent and very nice. He's even handsome." (Season 2, Episode 6, 50:12) Agnes van Rhijn's comment to Marian reflects the dynamics between upstairs and downstairs, reflecting on the social division of wealthy families being upstairs and their servants being downstairs to do all the household's work. Meanwhile, Oscar van Rhijn's (Blake Ritson) falling prey to money schemes and his sexuality highlight the complexities of personal ambition, social reputation, and the new immersion in modernity.

Season 3 addresses the expansion of railroads across the United States, the changing of society as new money gains in prestige, and the ongoing social tensions. It examines how economic ambitions, such as those of entrepreneurs, and the reputations of elite families are either evolving or falling apart. The fallout from Ward McCallister's (Nathan Lane) horrifying book includes this kind of theme, as Mrs. Astor (Donna Murphy) does not consider the book as positive at all, telling him: "Don't I deserve more than to be made a fool in front of the entire city? You knew what you were doing. And now you must pay." (Season 3, Episode 7, 33:32) Women like Mrs. Astor had maintained personal ambition, social prestige, and a hold

on old money traditions amidst scandals, including her daughter's impending divorce over committing adultery in her marriage. McCallister arrogantly declares, "You can throw me out of society. I am society. I made your society out of a bunch of get-rich-quick merchants and walking jokes." (Season 3, Episode 7, 33:22) As tensions between self-made wealth and inherited status continue to grow, season 3 addresses international marriages, such as Gladys Russel's to a British duke, thereby reflecting some of Henry James's literary themes and the European-American social interplay explored in *Downton Abbey*.

In fact, *The Gilded Age* certainly invites comparisons with Fellowes's *Downton Abbey*, as both series explore class contrasts, domestic servants, and social hierarchies. The *Gilded Age* reflects on industrializing America, labor struggles, immigrant challenges, and the evolving roles of women in elite societies. It integrates historical events with fictional, dramatized narratives, such as the deputizing of Black physicians to treat white patients, thereby mirroring real cases like that of Black physician Dr. Charles Burleigh Purvis, who assisted President Garfield after his assassination, but was pushed aside by a less competent white doctor, resulting in Garfield's death. By contrast, when Mr. Russel is ambushed and shot in his own office, a Black doctor saves his life, but not without facing racism from a white doctor, who takes over once all the essential life-saving work has already been done. Through its diverse use of clothing, behaviors, and occupations, the series conveys the message that race and gender can (and did) play significant roles in historical narratives, which sets it apart from other works that focus on limited, white elite stories.

The Gilded Age is a visually mesmerizing series that captures the history and dynamics of life in the 1880s in a way that pulls viewers in, leaving them wanting more through the drama and families it follows. Individuals who love drama and romance and are interested in specific historical events or figures will enjoy this series, as the depiction of social hierarchies, race, gender, and labor force struggles offers them a mix of drama, romance, and historical education about the Gilded Age. Julian Fellowes skillfully weaves in diverse racial perspectives, historical figures, and "real" events such as the establishment of Tuskegee as an educational institution in the segregated South (1881), the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge (1883) thanks to the ingenuity of the architect's wife, Emily Warren Roebling, the launching of New York's Metropolitan Opera (1883), and the labor movements, all intertwined with fictional narratives that also mirror "real" phenomena such as the struggles of Irish immigrants seeking schooling, which led to conflicts and arguments over equality. Overall, *The Gilded Age* is a visually pleasing and skillful representation of a defining time period in American history. If viewers are interested in social history, fashion, and even the politics surrounding class and gender, they will be thoroughly entertained by the series, especially with season 4 just around the corner and expected to be released in the fall of 2026.

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Killers of the Flower Moon [film].

Directed by Martin Scorsese. 2023.

Paramount Pictures/Apple Original Films. 206 minutes.

In the pursuit of wealth, American progress has often been built on exploitation and erasure. Thus, recent scholarship and film have focused on how colonialism and racial capitalism shaped national growth from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples to the struggles of minority communities. Historical films such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Minari* (2020), and *Women Talking* (2022) have illustrated, through cultural memories, how power operates across gender, race, and class. Building on this tradition of historical storytelling, Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) presents one of the darkest episodes in U.S. history, the so-called "Osage Reign of Terror" in the early 1920s. During this period, dozens of Osage members, an Indigenous nation in Oklahoma, were murdered for their oil wealth. Based on American journalist David Grann's narrative nonfiction book, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (2017), Scorsese's adaptation distinguishes itself through its collaboration with the Osage Nation and its commitment to historical precision. By attending to cultural authenticity and systemic corruption, the film transforms a regional tragedy into a national reckoning, revealing how historical reconstruction can contribute to a more accurate portrayal of Indigenous exploitation in American history.

Scorsese, an Academy Award-winning filmmaker and cultural historian, has previously explored individuals trapped within corrupt systems that reveal broader societal flaws. Having directed numerous such films, including *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Irishman* (2019), Scorsese has, in recent years, shifted from urban narratives to extensive historical reinterpretations, exploring how power operates across time and culture. *Killers of the Flower Moon* represents this evolution in scope and intent by employing realism to reveal how exploitation becomes normalized within institutions and relationships. Using Osage testimonies, archival Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records, and Grann's book, Scorsese offers an understanding of colonial violence by revealing how greed and bureaucracy enable the erasure of Indigenous lives but falls short in giving equal narrative depth to the Osage communities beyond their victimization.

Structured as a chronicle of violence, *Killers of the Flower Moon* builds its historical argument through progression rather than formal division. Each death appears not as an isolated event but as part of a pattern of greed, corruption, and complicity. The film begins with the Osage Nation becoming targets, as white settlers and profiteers manipulate and murder Osage citizens to gain control over their oil wealth. (00:13:54) As the story moves chronologically from one murder to the next, the film traces how white men slowly marry into the Osage families to secure legal and racial control. (00:36:45) Once these relationships are established, the violence intensifies, spreading through acts of poisoning and explosions that devastate one of the main characters—Mollie Kyle's (Lily Gladstone)—entire family. (01:53:34) Scorsese avoids suspense-driven storytelling, allowing the plot to develop through documents and social interactions that reveal the gradual collapse of justice. The deliberate pacing gives the film the rhythm of historical reconstruction, uncovering how truth emerges through layers of testimony and bureaucratic delay. By aligning its structure with the historical process it

depicts, the film presents how the calculated murders of the Osage Nation by Ernest Burkhart (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his uncle, William King Hale (Robert De Niro), embodied the broader systems of exploitation and betrayal that drove the Reign of Terror.

As a significant historical film, *Killers of the Flower Moon* has many strengths that support its historical presentation. One its greatest strengths is its commitment to historical authenticity. From the opening scene of Osage elders performing a mourning ritual to the depiction of Fairfax, Oklahoma, Scorsese transports viewers into the 1920s Osage Nation with remarkable detail. His collaboration with the Osage community shaped every part of the production. The Osage language is spoken throughout the film, and the clothing and jewelry seen throughout the movie were crafted by Osage artisans. Local consultants ensured that cultural practices were accurate. These choices give the film a sense of truth which few Hollywood portrayals of Indigenous history have achieved. The death and funeral of Kyle's mother, Lizzie Kyle (Tantoo Cardinal), are essential and powerful, showing Osage customs of transitioning into an afterlife. (01:28:57) Small details, such as the local authorities' missing documents that the FBI needed, match the gaps in the historical record that kept justice out of reach for decades. (02:12:26) The oil eruption after a ritual captures how spiritual traditions and sudden wealth collided, symbolizing prosperity and tragedy intertwining. (00:01:37) Through this precision, Scorsese turns authenticity into a form of remembrance, restoring a story that the United States has long tried to forget.

Alongside its documentary realism, another strength is the film's honest portrayal of violence. Scorsese does not exaggerate or glorify brutality; instead, he shows how violence unfolded quietly through everyday life. The early montage of victims, an Indigenous man choking to death, followed by others shot or found lifeless in water, sets the tone for what follows. (00:13:36) While more trigger warnings could have been presented, it is essential to remember that the history is indeed horrific. Each murder is shown without restraint, echoing the real accounts of the Reign of Terror. The brutal murders of Kyle's sisters, Anna Brown (Cara Jade Myers) and Reta Smith (JaNae Collins), underscore that violence extends into death itself. Brown's face is left unrecognizable from the severity of her injuries, while the explosion that kills Smith leaves the back of her skull exposed, turning their deaths into spectacles of loss. (00:53:02, 01:53:34) When Burkhart and Hale discuss killing the Osage women for their land rights, their calm tone illustrates how greed became normalized. (00:41:48) Kyle's slowly being poisoned underscores how doctors, bankers, and neighbors became part of a system that turned prejudice into policy. (01:58:42) By keeping the violence quiet and procedural, the film reveals how racism works through law, medicine, and kinship. Scorsese transforms brutality into historical truth, not letting the audience look away from what happened to the innocent Indigenous communities.

In addition to historical realism and truth-telling, Scorsese's other strength is bringing the Osage perspective to life. Scorsese tells this history mainly through the Osage experience, focusing on survival, endurance, and silence; for example, scenes where the elders debate how to protect their people show their collective strength, (00:54:23) while other examples, such as the health inspection, expose how the Osage were reduced to property under these dynamics. (01:24:57) Small moments of casual racism, such as white men bragging about how

"Indian" their wives are, expose the ignorance of possession that continues colonization. (00:18:33) More specifically, when the Osage elders ask the FBI agent whether they have only come because a white man has finally died, or because they paid them, the film lays bare the hypocrisy of delayed justice. (02:09:18) The ending, a 1930s radio reenactment of the murders, reminds viewers how easily atrocities can be turned into entertainment. (03:14:23) Like *12 Years a Slave* (2013), Scorsese's film addresses violence against marginalized communities, letting Indigenous voices frame the story from within. By rejecting the "white savior" narrative and giving voice to Osage memory, *Killers of the Flower Moon* becomes a film that reclaims history.

While *Killers of the Flower Moon* exhibits remarkable strength with its portrayals and authenticity, its narrative does become imbalanced with white males being largely framed. Scorsese's Osage-centeredness also becomes his weakness when much of the final hour centers on the internal conflicts and panic of Burkhart and Hale. Even as Indigenous resistance finally emerges during the FBI investigation, the emotional lens continues to privilege the white men's unraveling over the Osage struggle for justice. (02:48:41) Scenes like John Wren's (Tatanka Means) arrival in town are overshadowed by the anxieties of the killers, and moments of Indigenous women's solidarity are often interrupted or sidelined by their husbands' discussions of manipulation. (02:06:57, 01:46:17) Though historically accurate in reflecting who controls the record, this framing limits the film's ability to respect the Osage and communal resilience fully. By keeping the narrative anchored in the perpetrators' experience, Scorsese unintentionally mirrors the same hierarchy of visibility that once silenced the victims he seeks to honor.

The film's slow pacing enhances its documentary realism, but it also narrows its scope, often leaving broader systemic forces unexplored. Extended scenes of Burkhart's moral hesitation and Hale's manipulation dominate the second half of the film, while political structures like federal negligence and local corruption receive less attention. (01:35:11, 00:58:42) Kyle's perspective of her illness, hallucinations, and partial recovery are overshadowed by the search for her husband and his co-conspirators, which hints at the physical and spiritual toll of colonial violence. (02:42:41) Even moments of Indigenous agency, such as the community's visible upheaval during the investigations, appear only briefly before the final return to the white male narrative. (02:48:41) The pacing reflects Scorsese's detailed style, but it also privileges individual guilt over collective accountability. As a result, the film's historical precision is partially undermined by the imbalance with regard to whose stories receive depth and continuity.

Killers of the Flower Moon succeeds as a historically grounded reconstruction of the Osage Reign of Terror. Scorsese's work with the Osage Nation and his use of documented evidence creates a rare level of cultural authenticity. The film transforms a forgotten crime into a national reflection on how greed and race shaped American progress. With its achievements, its precision limits the story by focusing more on the perpetrators than the victims. This film is especially valuable for students and scholars in American studies, U.S. history, and Indigenous studies, as it examines how race, capitalism, and settler colonialism have shaped America's national development. It is well-suited for undergraduate and graduate courses

on the American empire, cultural representation, and public memory, where it can prompt critical discussions about whose histories are centered and how violence is narrated. *Killers of the Flower Moon* endures as a significant contribution to historical films, becoming a form of justice and decolonizing history.

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Manhunt [TV series/documentary drama].

Directed by Carl Franklin, John Dahl, and Eva Sørhaug. 2024.
Apple TV+. 7 episodes (41–56 minutes each).

What happens when, days after the bloodiest conflict on American soil, a famous actor is able to sneak into U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's theater gallery, assassinate him, and get away? Is the assassination an attempt by the recently defeated Confederacy to topple Union leadership? Perhaps a lone disgruntled perpetrator angry with the outcome of the Civil War? *Manhunt*, a seven-episode docudrama miniseries, aims to tell the story of the search for John Wilkes Booth from the point of view of Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton (Tobias Menzies), based on a 2006 book, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer*, by James L. Swanson. The show's creator, Monica Beletsky, is known for her work on the television series *Fargo* (2014–2024) and *Friday Night Lights* (2006–2011). *Manhunt* follows a general timeline of the twelve days but also jumps between the past and present, as needed, to reveal Lincoln's beliefs and his interactions with those around him, especially Stanton.

The series opens on April 14, 1865, in Washington, D.C., where people can be seen celebrating the end of the Civil War. Above the ruckus from the streets, a man is seen closing a window with the letters "J.W.B." tattooed on the skin between his left thumb and pointer finger. John Wilkes Booth (Anthony Boyle), who is only referred to by his last name, gathers up weapons and is joined by co-conspirator David Herold (Will Harrison) before proclaiming, "Round up everybody, it's a go." (00:03:17) Following the initial title card for the show, the audience is shown the brutal attack by Lewis Powell (Spencer Treat Clark) on Secretary of State William H. Seward (Larry Pine). Stanton is notified of the attack, and we see Booth arrive at the back door of Ford's Theatre, where stagehand Ned Spangler (Walker Babington) watches Booth's horse for him. However, it has never been proven that Spangler was aware of the plot to assassinate the president.

Booth spends time at the Ford's Theatre bar, where he meets Lincoln's bodyguard for that evening, John Frederick Parker (Chip Lane). Although this interaction never occurred, the historical Parker did leave his post, got drunk, and fell asleep at a nearby tavern at the time Lincoln was assassinated. Booth then comes up to the presidential box, shoots Lincoln in the back of the head, and jumps from the balcony, yelling, "Sic semper tyrannis," (00:23:55), a phrase meaning "thus always to tyrants," implying that, eventually, all tyrants are overthrown. Due to the jump from the balcony, Booth breaks his leg but manages to escape on horseback, riding across the Navy Yard bridge out of Washington, using his fame as an actor. Lincoln is taken across the street to the Petersen House, where he ultimately succumbs to his injury,

dying the following morning at 7:22 a.m. Some other key points of this episode are a flashback to April 9, when Lincoln receives word of General Lee's surrender; Booth and Herold arriving at Dr. Samuel Mudd's (Matt Walsh) home, where he sets his broken leg; and some dramatization of accounts to make Stanton the central figure of the story, such as finding the murder weapon in the president's box.

Episode 2 opens with another flashback, a year before the assassination. It shows David Herold being recruited by John Surratt Jr. (Joshua Mikel) as a means of getaway and escorting Booth from Washington to Richmond, Virginia, due to his knowledge of the Maryland woods. The timeline then jumps back to April 15, 1865, when Vice President Andrew Johnson (Glenn Morshower), also the target of an assassination attempt the night before, is sworn in as the seventeenth President of the United States. Johnson is immediately portrayed as having an adversarial relationship with Stanton. As a Democrat, Johnson does not see eye to eye with Stanton on the role and need for Reconstruction. This relationship was all too real, and the attempted firing of Stanton in 1867 is what led to Johnson becoming the first president to be impeached, with only one vote shy of being convicted and removed by the Senate. The show does a fantastic job of styling the wardrobes and costumes to look as they would have in the later nineteenth century. The sets feel lived in, and the treatment of Black people by many individuals is abhorrent. The episode follows Booth's recovery at the Mudd house, where his "servant," Mary Simms (Lovie Simone), waits on him. Historically, Simms had left Mudd in 1864 and therefore would not have been around while Booth was recovering. Stanton and the police raid the Surratt home, discovering a false wall with a coded telegram from Jefferson Davis (Craig Nigh), the president of the Confederacy. The episode sees Stanton recommend Arlington, Lee's former land as the final resting place for Lincoln. However, Mary Todd Lincoln (Lili Taylor) wants him home in Illinois, and Lincoln's body is sent on a viewing tour across the country so the people can mourn their president.

As episode 3 begins, the hunt for Booth and his conspirators reaches Montreal, as Surratt and the well-known Confederate sympathizer George Sanders (Anthony Marble) arrive. Booth and Herold meet Samuel Cox (Thomas Francis Murphy), a member of the Confederate Secret Service (C.S.S.), who states his intention of getting Booth to Richmond. However, the C.S.S. was not as well organized as the show depicts. Cox has never been proven to have been a member of the C.S.S., and the service was not all that united, otherwise the Confederacy might have won the war. The show utilizes historical documents, such as telegrams from the time, relaying information from Montreal to the War Department as new leads emerged. The Confederate Secretary of State, Judah P. Benjamin, is said to have run the spy network, and in the show, they discover the decoder to Davis's encoded telegram in his desk in Richmond.

Episode 4 begins with a headline in the Sanders-owned paper, *Manhattan Weekly*, concerning the Dahlgren affair, an incident in 1864, when Union soldiers were sent to raid the Confederate capital, free Union soldiers, and both capture and kill Jefferson Davis and his cabinet. Sanders's paper claims that Stanton had given the order, although the Union denied that any such order had ever been given, both historically and in the show. The episode also recalls the Manhattan Fire Plot of 1864, with Sanders apparently discussing the

economic costs of Lincoln's "moral agenda." (00:07:04) However, these are all dramatizations. Sanders never had any involvement in trying to get Manhattan to secede, and the rivalry between Sanders and Stanton in the episode did not occur. At this point it becomes apparent that, although the show's budget was substantial and its story well-written, its historical accuracy ended up being severely compromised.

Episode 5 follows Booth and Herold as they attempt to blend in as Confederate soldiers, since Booth is still recovering from his broken leg. There is a fictional scene between Booth, Herold, and some Confederate veterans who are disgusted at the way Booth killed Lincoln. While in line to board the ferry, Willie Jett (Justin Kucsulain) gives them directions to the Garrett Tobacco Farm, where they go to hide out. The audience is then introduced to Boston Corbett (William Mark McCullough), the man who would later kill Booth during his final standoff. Stanton is forced back to Washington as it is revealed that President Johnson is reversing the land grants to recently freed Black men, which General Sherman (Alex Collins) had approved three months prior, since Johnson does not believe that Black people are entitled to that land. This episode, more than any of the others, is truly focused on the manhunt.

The final two episodes cover Booth and Herold at the Garrett Tobacco Farm barn, being surrounded by Union cavalry, and Booth's eventual death. Inside the barn, there are discussions that are not historically known, but the show surmises that Booth discussed his parents. Stanton instructs that Booth's body be dumped in an unmarked grave to prevent him from being venerated, and a trial of his conspirators is planned by a military tribunal. Stanton seeks to charge Jefferson Davis with grand conspiracy, although the evidence is flimsy, and he is shown tearing out and burning pages from Booth's diary. While pages are indeed missing from Booth's diary, there is no evidence to suggest that Stanton was responsible for their removal. The tribunal is convened, with Mary Simms as a star witness, but history tells us she was one of ten Black Americans who testified at the trial. The tribunal finds all the co-conspirators guilty, but the count against Davis remains inconclusive. The show ends with Johnson removing Stanton from his position, which he responds to by holing up inside the War Department for three months.

Overall, the show is a fantastic watch, compelling, and certainly well-made. That said, it certainly takes creative liberties and distorts the historical truth surrounding Lincoln's assassination. For those who are interested in watching a history-influenced show without getting all the specifics right, I would fully recommend this show. Those who want a more accurate representation of the events would be better off turning to comparable documentaries or books. Some materials that would enrich one's knowledge on the topic include the book that the show is based on, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* by James L. Swanson (2006), and the Public Broadcasting Station's (PBS) documentary *American Experience: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (2009). A comparable dramatization, *Lincoln* (2012) by Steven Spielberg, is an excellent watch for those craving more information on the policy and politics of 1864–1865. If you are willing to watch *Manhunt* as a richly produced dramatization rather than a definitive history, stream it, but keep a history reference book nearby.

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Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors [TV documentary].

Directed by James Tovell. 2024.
Netflix. 77 minutes.

One of the twentieth century's greatest archaeological finds is also one of its most silent. Netflix's historical documentary film *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors* (2024) was directed by James Tovell, who is also known for his other works, including *Cradle to Grave* (2017), *The Lizard Boy* (2011), and his more recent film, *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb* (2020), highlighting his experience with historical films. The documentary begins with a beautiful view of the Great Wall of China as the sun rises, and the narrator tells the story of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221–210 BCE), who united the six Chinese kingdoms into what would become modern China. In 1974, farmers digging a well in the country's Shaanxi province unearthed a fragment of a clay man. This accidental discovery turned out to be one of the most astonishing archaeological finds of the twentieth century: the terracotta warriors, a silent legion of thousands, constructed to guard China's first emperor in the afterlife. While the *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors* presents a fascinating and visually stunning narrative, grounded in archaeological and historiographical evidence of that time period, it often blurs the lines between fact and theory, presenting hypothetical reenactments and assumptions as part of the historical record.

The documentary's strength lies in its impressive and engaging presentation of visible archaeological evidence and its use of visual storytelling. It continues with a man named Yuan Zhongyi, an archaeologist known as "the father of the terracotta warriors," realizing that the clay man farmers had unearthed in Shaanxi was actually a terracotta warrior. This led to the discovery of a tomb that encompasses nineteen square miles, filled with around 8,000 terracotta warriors, each one different from the rest. The burial site of China's first emperor is called by some "the eighth wonder of the world." The building of this burial mound began when the (future) emperor was just thirteen years old, involving a vast number of prisoners who were forced to build the mound. The terracotta warriors are not the only artifacts that have been unearthed so far by today's archaeologists; there have been multiple findings of other terracotta figures, such as terracotta servants, acrobats, chariots, horses, swans, and so forth: "It is a world of terracotta built for the emperor for him to rule over for eternity." (00:04:56) Each terracotta warrior wears a different face with a different expression, likely resembling actual people of the original time period. This overwhelming individuality is key evidence for the theory that the army was modeled on the emperor's actual, multi-ethnic forces. The massive number of expert craftsmen who were ordered to create the terracotta warriors paid a lot of attention to the detail and uniqueness of each and every warrior. Furthermore, they were even colored with paint, based off of the very few terracotta warriors with color still left remaining after the 2,000 years of harsh elements on their faces. Each terracotta warrior is shown wearing armor, as seen from the reconstructed warriors, and, of

course, they could not guard the emperor without weapons to defend him. Each warrior was equipped with a full, functional arsenal, not mere ceremonial objects. The documentary describes these reconstructed weapons, including spears, halberds, swords, and crossbows. This broad presentation of the site's findings forms a substantial, evidence-based foundation for the film's retelling of history.

However, while the documentary uses compelling evidence to support its narrative, it frequently resorts to speculation to fill in the gaps in the story. For example, it refers to the *Shiji* by Sima Qian, a record of the first major history of China. Qin historian Dr. Hui Ming Tak Ted says that the *Shiji* "combines history and epic drama. Some of it, we are a little bit more skeptical whether it happened or not. We have no other finding that could back some of the claims up." This is a Qin historian himself revealing they do not know whether what Sima Qian states in the *Shiji* is accurate and that nothing else of that time period supports Sima Qian's record. Can we trust the line of transmission that Sima Qian used to write the *Shiji*, and can he himself be trusted? It is possible that Sima Qian's account may be exaggerated or biased. Throughout the documentary, historians focus on the question of what happened after the first emperor's death that caused the empire to fall within a span of fifteen years. They speculate that there was conspiracy between his youngest son, Hu Hai, and his right-hand men to put the youngest son on the throne instead of the oldest son. They use the *Shiji* to support their theory and even include in the documentary a reenactment of the supposed conspiracy. This reenactment and the use of CGI (computer-generated imagery) causes viewers to feel as if they are watching the scheme happen in front of their very own eyes, making it more realistic and presumably accurate to them. We see another example of such speculation when the documentary discusses the identity of the owner of a tomb that is close to the emperor's tomb mound. The documentary shows another reenactment, but this time it is of one of the first emperor's most highly trusted servants tying loose ends, killing his fellow co-conspirators. Based on the evidence that archaeologists and forensic anthropologists have found in the tomb, they believe it to be that of a high-ranking male individual who was buried three to four years after the first emperor's death, but before the fall of the Qin dynasty, and may therefore have been a part of the conspiracy. The narrator then states, "[i]f the record is correct, we can be sure that Emperor Hu Hai is not the occupant of the mystery tomb. He was buried without ceremony in a commoner's grave." (00:59:00) Again, the documentary uses Sima Qian's *Shiji* as their foundation for this theory. They themselves had acknowledged earlier they are not sure whether Sima Qian's accounts can be trusted for its accuracy, but then they create this dramatic theory based off of it. The film fails to sufficiently warn viewers that these spectacular details are products of the imagination, not proven facts.

To assess *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors*, it is important to compare it with other documentaries that deal with answering questions about unknown history. The Netflix documentary *Unknown: The Lost Pyramid* by Max Salomon (2023), for example, shows a much different approach to factual evidence. *Unknown: The Lost Pyramid* spends more time showing the actual process of archaeology with the careful digging, brushing off dirt, and the high chance of discovering nothing. It also goes into depth about the process of choosing where to dig and which area is more likely to contain what they are looking for. They do tests

like digging straight down to see whether or not there is something there. This technique makes it so they spend less energy, resources, and time on a location that features nothing. This is because, while the Chinese terracotta warriors are about 2,000 years old, the Egyptian artifacts in this documentary are up to 4,000 years old and more susceptible to looting. There are two focus points throughout this documentary, one being the search for the missing pyramid of Huni and the other being the excavation of a tomb. Both are happening not too far from each other and the leaders, Dr. Zahi Hawass and Dr. Mostafa Waziry, are friends. The film does not use any reenactments with CGI about the past to immerse viewers like *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors* does; instead, they find actual evidence that can be supported by known facts. There are multiple potential explanations for these findings, whereas in the *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors* the only potential explanations are drawn from the *Shiji* by Sima Qian, which is questioned for its authenticity. The comparison of these two documentaries highlights that the “mysteries” in Tovell’s film is frequently solved through speculation, whereas the “unknown” in Salomon’s film is solved through an evidence-based process.

That said, *Mysteries of the Terracotta Warriors* is a great and interesting documentary, which is filled with beautiful and immersing cinematics about one of archaeology’s greatest wonders. For those interested in a history of China that uses some speculation, it is highly recommended, as speculation does speak volumes with regard to our imagination, and sometimes all we can do is speculate whether something happened in history. However, for academic historians who are keen on learning factual history, it may be lacking in depth. Ultimately, it is a breathtaking piece of visual storytelling, which invites the viewers to wonder about the past, even if it exaggerates the history of China.

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No Other Land [documentary film].

Directed by Basel Adra, Yuval Abraham, Hamdan Ballal, and Rachel Szor. 2024.
Rakuten TV. 92 minutes.

This documentary produced by a team of Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists is largely inaccessible to the American public. While not officially banned outright, no major platform distributor has been willing to pick it up for streaming, despite the fact that it won an Oscar and also received many other awards and accolades globally. The film shows the ongoing expulsion of the Palestinian community of Masafer Yatta by the Israeli military—a smaller episode within the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has plagued the Middle East for nearly a century. In order to access the hour-and-a-half long film, I used a VPN with my location set to outside the United States (I chose London, England). I purchased and streamed it on Rakuten TV with English subtitles as the film is primarily in Arabic.

From the very beginning, *No Other Land* struck me as more comparable to a personal vlog than a typical documentary. We are first introduced to Basel Adra, a twenty-three-year-old Palestinian activist from Masafer Yatta, a group of twenty small villages in the occupied

southern West Bank, which is known for its ancient cave dwellings. Basel starts by recalling childhood memories of his father getting arrested and a family life marked by activism and protests. (00:03:42) He began filming for the documentary in 2019, when demolitions in his community intensified after an Israeli court had ruled that the area would become a military training ground for Israeli forces. A TV news clip shown in the documentary reports that Masafer Yatta is facing “one of the biggest expulsion decisions since the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories began in 1967.” (00:04:34) When Basel receives word of a demolition in a nearby village, he runs home, grabs his camera, and hurries to the site to film it. This is the first of many instances shown in the film. He captures scenes of soldiers forcibly evicting families, belongings thrown outside, a child crying, and bulldozers destroying homes. (00:05:20) After the homes are leveled and the Israeli soldiers are gone, the villagers sift through rubble, salvaging what they can find, and move to uninhabited caves, their only means of shelter. A child’s question, “Will we live in a cave now?” lingers in the air, unanswered.

In the aftermath of the first demolition, Basel meets Yuval Abraham, an Israeli journalist who wants to document and bring awareness to what is happening in Masafer Yatta. (00:08:10) This first encounter between the two young men is the beginning of an alliance and uneasy friendship built on a mutual, yet unequal, struggle for justice. There is a glaringly evident tension between their two worlds: they live only a short distance from one another but experience two completely different constructed realities. This stark and uncomfortable contrast is one that we are exposed to repeatedly throughout the film, making it one of the most powerful underlying themes. Despite their situation, Basel expresses his hope that if the world can see their suffering, the United States will have to pressure Israel to halt the expulsions. (00:11:01) He explains that the people of Masafer Yatta collectively decided two decades prior that they would welcome anyone who stands with them, regardless of whether they are outsiders. The Israeli military retaliated by raiding villagers’ homes in the dead of night, threatening that if they speak to Israeli or international journalists again, they will face harsh consequences. This reaction is telling of both the power and danger of journalism, particularly in places where free speech is heavily restricted. Despite the known risks, Basel’s family warmly welcomes Yuval and is supportive of Basel working with him.

Throughout the film, scenes of the same cycle are shown—daytime demolitions by Israeli soldiers followed by secret nighttime reconstructions by Palestinian villagers. In one harrowing scene, Israeli soldiers return the following morning to confiscate villagers’ building tools. (00:26:04) The conflict becomes physical when the soldiers attempt to take an electricity generator from the villagers. As they drag it away, some villagers try to grab it back. The tug-of-war ends abruptly with the sound of multiple gunshots, and then, the chaotic aftermath: screaming, running, cries for an ambulance, and a man lying motionless on the ground, missing a shoe. A TV news report is shown, confirming that the man, Harun Abu Aram, is paralyzed from the shoulders down after being shot by an Israeli soldier. (00:27:50) A protest for Harun is attended by many in the community, including young women and children, but ends quickly when soldiers arrive and use stun grenades to disperse the crowd. (00:28:08) Basel is seen leading the march and initiating chants, which gives us the impression that he is one of the main leaders of the protest. Our suspicions are

confirmed when we see him later at home, telling Yuval that he is afraid the Israeli military is coming to arrest him for his involvement. Sure enough, they arrive shortly after and raid the house, looking for Basel and his father. (00:33:16)

The film also touches on the less visible aspects of apartheid state control: economic dependency. Basel has studied law but cannot find legal work anywhere in the West Bank. (00:40:48) For Palestinians, the only steady work available is in the construction of Israeli settlements, ironically building over their people's confiscated land and thus strengthening the occupation inadvertently. Basel's family avoids this by running a small one-pump gas station out of their home, and Basel's father is proud of it, as it gives them some measure of independence.

As their reporting starts to receive international attention, Basel and Yuval appear on news channels, and this halts the demolitions for a time. (00:44:24) Realizing that even a small spotlight has tangible effects, Basel and Yuval become even more determined to keep the world's eyes on Masafer Yatta, despite facing backlash and criticism from Zionists who try to dismiss their work. (00:45:09) Later on, when demolitions inevitably begin again, a struggle takes place over a village's elementary school. (00:49:30) The Israeli military destroys it, and the villagers continuously rebuild it through collective labor. Even women and children get involved in the reconstruction, and this eventually catches the attention of the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. A brief visit by Tony Blair prompts Israel to cancel demolition orders for the school and the neighborhood street he is walking down. (00:50:24) This scene reveals a bitter truth abundantly clear to the villagers: what matters is not justice but who is watching. They realize whose voice really matters, and it is not theirs.

In the last third of the film, there is a concerning shift from military demolitions to settler violence. After Basel's father is arrested, Yuval continues reporting alone and faces threats from settlers. (00:58:48) In later instances captured on camera, large groups of masked settlers start raiding villages, destroying property, and attacking Palestinians. (01:07:12) They are empowered by the fact that they are not held accountable for their crimes, even for serious ones like murder. The pattern continues with Israeli settlers acting with impunity, while Palestinians face overwhelming, disproportionate retaliation for resisting. Basel's cousin is shot by a settler during a raid. One of the documentary's directors, Hamdan Ballal, is attacked by settlers, and then arrested and beaten by soldiers. Another activist involved in the making of the film, Awdah Hathaleen, is shot and killed by a settler. No Israeli has been convicted for any of these crimes.

The film wraps up with on-screen text: "Masafer Yatta's expulsion is ongoing, and the future of the villages unclear." We also learn that Harun Abu Aram died from his gunshot wounds after two years of living paralyzed in a cave without running water or adequate medical care. The contents of a secret Israeli state document are revealed as well, showing that the area of Masafer Yatta has been designated a military training zone to "block Arab villagers from expanding" and to strategically replace them with expanding Israeli settlements instead. We then understand that the expulsions are part of a bigger plan—another step toward annexing the West Bank, a move that Israeli officials have recently begun to speak openly about. The

story of Masafer Yatta exposes the systematic and understated tactics of an apartheid state to dispossess and maintain control of a subjugated people. At the same time, it underscores the quiet strength of perseverance in grassroots activism. As Basel emphasized in his Oscars acceptance speech, the struggle continues. And as with all struggles documented on film, the real change happens in what we do after the cameras stop rolling.

For those wanting to explore other documentary films on the same or similar subjects, here are a couple that may be of interest: *5 Broken Cameras* (2011) follows a Palestinian farmer's resistance against Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank, and *Budrus* (2009) tells the story of another village in the West Bank where villagers worked together to stop the Israeli army from taking their land. It is important that we pay close attention to these kinds of films as they can be suppressed in mainstream media, as we have seen with *No Other Land*.

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The Order [film].

Directed by Justin Kurzel. 2024.

Chasing Epic Pictures, AGC Studios, Riff Raff Entertainment, Arcana Studios. 116 minutes.

Do you remember where you were on January 6, 2021? Maybe you were shopping, possibly sitting at home? Even if you cannot quite place yourself, your eyes were likely on Washington, D.C. Every four years, a new president and vice president of the United States are elected, and on January 6, Congress assembles to count the electoral votes. January 6, 2021, was no different. There is high controversy and a multitude of talking points on what caused the insurrection on January 6, 2021, but one thing is for certain: the mob was motivated by animosity and white supremacist ideas. A mob of President Donald J. Trump's supporters attempted to seize the United States Capitol to stop the count of the electoral votes that would confirm President-Elect Joe Biden, who had won the election. Rioters stormed the building looking to murder elected officials who were on the Senate floor. Watching these events unfold shocked Americans, and it caused people to wonder where these ideas might have come from.

Justin Kurzel is an Australian filmmaker known for directing films like *Snowtown* (2011), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2019), and his latest film *The Order* (2024). *The Order* follows Terry Husk (Jude Law), a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent who has recently moved to a town on the border between Washington state and Idaho. Husk is there to reopen the town's formerly closed FBI office but then, with the assistance of police officer Jamie Bowen (Tye Sheridan), discovers a sinister neo-Nazi organization committing crimes in the area. The film highlights the group's use of *The Turner Diaries*, a piece of literary fiction that gives white supremacist groups a step-by-step guide on how to overthrow the government, published in 1979. *The Turner Diaries* was created by neo-Nazi William Luther Pierce, and it is one of the most significant pieces of white nationalist propaganda ever created. It inspired the events of the January 6 insurrection, the Oklahoma City Bombing (1995), and the "Silent Brotherhood" (September 1983–December 1984), also known as "The Order." This film moves

to highlight the danger of white supremacy organizations in the United States, how they quietly move while people underestimate them, and the relationship and community building that causes people to follow them.

The Order begins with Jewish radio talk show host Alan Berg (Marc Maron) talking to someone over the phone trying to understand why this person hates Jews and other minority groups. The scene cuts to three men, Walter West (Daniel Doheny), Bruce Pierce (Sebastian Pigott), and Gary Yarbrough (George Tchortov), driving into the woods while listening to Alan Berg speak. Pierce and Yarbrough are angry, calling Berg slurs for his inability to understand their struggles as white men. These two scenes set the tone for the contradicting ideologies that are going to be at play for the rest of the film. Terry Husk is first introduced as an FBI agent, who is hot off a case dealing with gangs in New York City. Husk has moved to this small town in order to slow things down and investigate white supremacist groups that are located near the FBI office that have not caused many issues thus far. Husk goes to the local police station in order to speak with the sheriff and establish a possible relationship. There is this hesitation that falls over the sheriff and his deputies when Agent Husk asks about the local white supremacist group located Hayden Lake, Idaho, a small patch of land no more than a forty-five-minute drive from the police station. There is a familiar understanding among all of the people living in this town: if we do not mess with them, they will not mess with us, but something more sinister is brewing.

A group of men sit in their car, anxiously waiting for bombs to go off in a pornography store. They have it all planned out. Once the bombs go off, the police will be distracted, so they can follow through on their bank heist. It takes them five minutes to realize that their plan might not work out as planned, but they confidently decide to follow through and get what they have come for: \$300,000. Deputy Jamie Bowen enters the picture, creating a direct link between different crimes and the new emerging white supremacist organization, and when Agent Husk tells Bowen that there is typically no connection between organized crimes and white supremacist organization, Bowen counters by saying, "What if this time it's different?" (00:14:04)

After the heist, Bob Mathews (Nicholas Hoult) visits a woman who is pregnant with his child. She is overjoyed to see him and excited about how much money has been made on the heist. Mathews kisses her and celebrates, but then he leaves to go home to his wife and adopted son. Once Mathews is home, he puts his son to bed and reads *The Turner Diaries* to his son as a bedtime story. Mathews explains to his son that white people are being replaced, and the hero of *The Turner Diaries* has given them an idea of what they should do to preserve their rights as white men. This type of language is used excessively in the movie, and it is one of the main reasons why *The Turner Diaries* is considered such a powerful piece of propaganda. It is a call to action with step-by-step instructions on how white men can take back what has been stolen from them.

Husk and Bowen go to visit the white supremacy organization at Hayden Lake and its founder Richard Butler (Victor Slezak). Husk and Bowen question Butler about people who have left the group recently, and Husk gives Butler a word of warning. Husk points out that whoever

is leading the new emerging group will come and try to steal Butler's followers. As Husk and Bowen leave, they see *The Turner Diaries* for the first time. Butler describes it as "children's literature," so they put it down and think nothing of it. As Husk and Bowen are leaving, viewers can sense their discomfort at a place where swastikas are being flown, and children playing on the playground are doing the Nazi salute. There is a similar atmosphere in the environment that Mathews and his followers are in. Children are laughing, wives are conversing, and men are discussing their plans of terrorism. There is something interesting about the way both Mathews's and Butler's groups are portrayed on screen. They both have a united front, but Mathews group is shown to be more of a family. When people join "The Order," they are asked to share a story of why they feel the way they do. Mathews is caring and compassionate while hearing their stories, and when new members join, he treats them like family. The men who join blame their misfortunes on everyone but themselves. When you are isolated and refuse to accept responsibility, these ideologies give you someone to blame and a community that reaffirms those ideas.

Bowen is visited by one of Butler's men and given a copy of *The Turner Diaries*. Bowen reads *The Turner Diaries*, and—as it turns out—this so-called "children's literature" directly mirrors what they had seen while out in the field. There is a total of six steps: recruiting, fundraising, assassination, domestic terror, armed revolution, and the "Day of the Rope." They have recruited, fundraised by robbing banks and armored vehicles, committed domestic terror, and now it is time for them to commit an assassination. Mathews is listening to Alan Berg speak on the radio, and he proclaims it is time for Berg to get it, so Berg is assassinated, shot a total of twelve times while arriving home from the radio station. (00:59:50) This murder lights a fire under the FBI and emboldens "The Order" to commit their final heist. They manage to steal \$3.7 million, but Mathews mistakenly leaves a gun at the scene. This one mistake will ultimately cause "The Order's" downfall. Tony Torres (Matias Lucas/Garrido), a Mexican American who had joined "The Order," gives the FBI information on where to find Mathews. Husk, Bowen, and the FBI follow them back to a hotel where a shootout ensues, Mathews gets away, while Bowen is shot and killed. Mathews and two of his followers flee to Whidbey Island, Washington. Special operatives try to enter where Mathews has fled, and after back-and-forth gun fighting, they ultimately decide to set the home on fire. Mathews dies in a fire surrounded by no one.

Kurzel's film is based on the book *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* by Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt (1989). The film is a Hollywood blockbuster; therefore, many things have been dramatized for entertainment purposes. It would be of interest for those who are interested in the history of white nationalist terrorist groups in the United States. In the film, communities are built and sustained through mutual hatred of minorities groups due to conspiracy theories and lies fed to one another. *The Turner Diaries* is still circulated by white supremacy groups across the United States. The film constitutes a warning, looking into the past and offering possible visions of our future. For anyone interested in learning about white supremacist organizations in the United States, documentaries including *Documenting Hate* (2018), produced by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), *God & Country* (2022), produced by Rob Reiner, and *American Insurrection* (2022), produced by *Frontline*, can offer additional insights.

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Shōgun [TV series].

Directed by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks. 2024.
Hulu. 10 episodes (52–69 minutes each).

"We live and we die. We control nothing beyond that." Those words reverberated in my head at 4 a.m., while I was on my third rewatch of this show. The nuances and intricacies of life and death were nothing but fleeting moments to Japanese culture in this era, which seemed astonishing to me. The fascinating culture of early modern Japan is perfectly encapsulated in the 2024 Hulu series *Shōgun*, created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks. Kondo is of Japanese descent and was a finalist for the "O. Henry Award." Her husband, Marks, is an American screenwriter who served as a writer for *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). *Shōgun* is set around 1600 in feudal Japan and follows its protagonist, John Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis), on an expedition to the Japanese Islands, following the account of English pioneers. While *Shōgun* is a piece of historical fiction inspired by James Clavell's eponymous 1975 novel, it is based on factual history, namely, the experiences of William Adams (1564–1620), a navigator who became the first Englishman to reach Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). Adams was seen as one of the most influential foreigners in Japan during the early seventeenth century. *Shōgun* is a bilingual series, with most of the dialogue in Japanese and some in English. Each episode is remarkable, including moving visuals and fight scenes that will have you on the edge of your seat. The show beautifully captures the emotions, customs, and virtues of Japanese culture, leaving foreigners like Blackthorne with a difficult time to adapt. While all this makes the show a work of art, its absolute selling point lies in its politics, with everyone seeking the title of "shōgun."

Episode 1 ("Anjin") introduces viewers to the beginnings of British intervention in Japan. It starts with John Blackthorne and his crew boarding a ship known as the *Erasmus* and heading for the Japanese Islands. The route they take to get there is known as Magellan's Pass, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans at the southern tip of South America; it was first discovered by the Portuguese when they set out on an expedition to Japan. For decades, the Portuguese Catholics have profited from the Japanese trade, keeping the archipelago hidden from the British Protestants—that is until Blackthorne's "discovery" of the Japanese Islands, when he and the surviving crew members of the *Erasmus* end up stranded on the Izu Peninsula. In Japan, Lord Yoshii Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada), along with four other members of the council of regents, is wielding power after the death of the reigning Taikō. This dynamic quickly turns into a power struggle for the regents as they try to have Toranaga removed from the council because of his ambitious actions. On the other side of the country, John Blackthorne and his group of men are now held captive. Only Blackthorne is kept in a house and bathed because of his clear rejection of the Catholic faith, which has come to the attention of Kashigi Yabushige (Tadanobu Asano), the leader of the local town. Soon, a Spanish merchant by the name of Vasco Rodrigues (Néstor Carbonell) comes to take Blackthorne to Osaka, where he is to meet Toranaga for the first time. During their travel,

Rodrigues mentions an important virtue in Japan, “shukumei,” which he explains as “fixed destiny. Part of a whole. Life, death.” (Episode 1, 00:50:59) As expressed in the show, this attitude was prevalent during this time—a concept that everything in your life is connected, and that you have no control over it. When they reach Osaka, the show does an excellent job of conveying the Western misconceptions of Japan, with Blackthorne describing it as “this wretched land.” (Episode 1, 01:05:15) The episode ends with the message that, perhaps, Blackthorne—nicknamed “Anjin” (meaning “pilot”) by the Japanese—has been brought here for a reason, leaving the audience eager to find out why.

Now that I have set the scene for this show, I can delve into its themes and integral relationships. With Catholics and Protestants largely at war against each other during this time in history, Blackthorne—the English Protestant—emphasizes his sole purpose as waging war against the Catholics and not the Japanese. Episode 2 (“Servants of Two Masters”) emphasizes the cultural customs of Japan during this time. The language spoken is an ancient Japanese dialect, which the actors had to learn from coaches, and the cultural customs, clothes, and mannerisms mirror those of seventeenth-century Japan. From the delicate way the women walk to the brutality that the men suffer, *Shōgun* offers an excellent depiction of these early modern customs. Later in the episode, Blackthorne (henceforth “the Anjin”) draws a map of the world as he knows it in front of a grand audience in a sand garden. Toranaga is shocked to learn that England exists, with an even harder truth to follow, namely, that of the Portuguese military base in Macao, which had provided guns for the uprising against the Taikō. The Anjin’s final message is that Portugal and Spain have divided the eastern hemisphere between themselves, causing Toranaga to lose all faith in trading with the Portuguese. Now increasingly viewed as a threat by his enemies at court, the Anjin is attacked that night by assassins, but he escapes successfully with Toranaga’s help.

In episode 3 (“Tomorrow Is Tomorrow”) we learn that the Anjin has been ordered out of Osaka and moved to Ajiro, where his ship and men reside. During this travel, he is attacked by the Catholic regent and his men, illustrating the threat that the historical William Adams would have presented to the Catholic Portuguese at this time. With Toranaga and the Anjin now in Ajiro, episode 4 (“The Eightfold Fence”) focuses on the plan to build an army and lay siege to Osaka castle to claim the title of sole regent or “shōgun.” Quickly rising through the internal ranks of Toranaga’s army, the Anjin eventually becomes a samurai and is put in charge of the cannon regiment during the siege. This depiction is largely based off the actions of Ieyasu Tokugawa, who appointed the historical William Adams to do the same for him, leading the cannon training and eventually claiming the title of samurai.

In episodes 5 (“Broken to the Fist”) and 6 (“Ladies of the Willow World”), Toranaga builds his army, while Lady Ochiba (Fumi Nikaido) gains influence over the counsel of regents. Episodes 7 (“A Stick of Time”) and 8 (“The Abyss of Life”) focus on the unconditional surrender that the council of regents demands of Toranaga, who convinces Ochiba that he has fully given up. However, in the last two installments, episodes 9 (“Crimson Sky”) and 10 (“A Dream of a Dream”), Toranaga prepares and executes a mission—Crimson Sky—in which he delivers a decisive blow to his chief rival, Ishido Kazunari (Takehiro Hira), in Osaka castle. After many sacrifices, internal conflicts, and betrayals, Toranaga meets Ishido on the battlefield. With the

heir's army no longer in the picture due to a betrayal favoring Toranaga, Ishido finds himself outnumbered by Toranaga's men. Even though Toranaga claims that he does not want the title of "shōgun," he becomes the third great unifier of Japan, as was his real-life counterpart, Ieyasu Tokugawa.

Two of the greatest aspects of the show are its spiritual environment and its political setting. For the former, there are a lot of factors that add to the ambiance, which transcend time. The notion that life and death are the same, and that we must welcome both, is something that was integral to those living in seventeenth-century Japan. The "Eightfold Fence" was another prominent virtue, namely, the notion that one can retreat behind a metaphoric impenetrable wall whenever one would like. In addition, the show's setting, camera work, dialogues, and mannerisms make viewers feel as though they are living in this era. In feudal Japan, spirituality and politics went hand in hand. The political scene was complex, leaving little room for mistakes. With alliances and betrayals permeating the show's plot, the notion that "you must trust no one" becomes prominent, which was certainly the case during the Tokugawa shogunate. With regard to its historical and cultural accuracy, *Shōgun* does a phenomenal job in ensuring that viewers are captivated in this time period. From its traditional architecture to the clothing of the civilians, the show leaves no room for error. In each episode, the attention to detail in the way women walk, the way that men carry their swords, and the careful ambience of the gardens is evident. Moreover, several of the show's characters—including Yabushige, Toranaga, and the Taikō—are based on real warriors and historical figures of this time period. The show's setting also accurately depicts the civil war that Japan was heading toward.

Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks's *Shōgun* is a masterpiece of historical fiction. From its carefully planned setting to its intense dialogues and political games, it perfectly depicts the rise of the Tokugawa shogunate during the seventeenth century. Despite its historical grounding, the series should be enjoyable even for those who have never read about Japanese history. Those who appreciate films based on the ancient, medieval, or early modern periods will enjoy the show's historical and cinematographic aspects. Those who are big fans of the history and fantasy aspects of shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Vikings* (2013–2021), and *Barbarians* (2020–2022) will find themselves captivated by *Shōgun*. And now that we have reached the end of this review, I must ask: "Do you believe that we simply live and die, or do we control anything beyond that?"

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Ali Zaki of Laguna Niguel, California, earned his A.A. in History (2023) at Saddleback College, California, and his B.A. in History (2026) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War [TV series].

Directed by Brian Knappenberger. 2024.
Netflix. 9 episodes (60–80 minutes each).

The Netflix series *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War*, directed by Brian Knappenberger (2024), is a nine-episode documentary that dives into the developments, global affairs, and overall timeline of the Cold War. Knappenberger is an award-winning

American filmmaker, who has produced all three seasons (thus far) of Netflix's *Turning Point* series, the others being *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror* (2021) and *Turning Point: The Vietnam War* (2025). Each episode is roughly an hour in length, totaling over nine hours of both video and photography from the hundreds of events that occurred during the Cold War and its final days. Throughout this documentary, images are voiced over by scholars and journalists. In this review, I present a description of all nine episodes, followed by my personal thoughts on the documentary.

Episode 1, "The Sun Came Up Tremendous," highlights the United States' development of the atomic bomb and the subsequent bombing of Japan (August 6 and 9, 1945). It looks at the political and strategic awakening that followed the success of the Manhattan Project. Notably, U.S. President Harry Truman used his country's new and growing nuclear capabilities to his advantage, telling the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin that the United States had a weapon of mass destructive force, and Stalin nodded at him in acceptance. (Episode 1, 00:43:26) Episode 2, "Poisoning the Soil," turns to the spreading of communism in both the Soviet Union (USSR) and China, backed by Stalin. Among growing international tensions, U.S. spies learned that the Soviet Union had begun the process of developing a bomb of their own (September 1949). Thus, while the United States had made the first move in this nuclear game of chess, the Soviet Union did not delay its countermove for very long.

Episode 3, "Institutional Insanity," focuses on the United States preparing for nuclear war against the Soviet Union, specifically by beginning to test new thermonuclear weaponry under the leadership of theoretical physicist and chemical engineer Edward Teller. According to strategic analyst Daniel Ellsberg, when he arrived at the RAND Corporation's facility for the first time in 1958, he immediately began working on a plan to deter a possible Soviet attack that could disarm the United States and allow the Soviets to take over the world. (Episode 3, 00:21:00) Meanwhile, the momentum in the Soviet Union stalled when Stalin died in 1953 and his eventual successor Nikita Khrushchev began softening the spread of communism during a phase of "de-Stalinization." This leads well into episode 4, "The Wall," which happens to be my favorite of the entire documentary. It is an action-packed installment that focuses on the Berlin Wall, the uptick in nuclear tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. We witness U.S. President John F. Kennedy meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna (June 4, 1961), which was initially viewed as a diplomatic success. However, tension soon began to rise again in Soviet-controlled East Germany, and as East Germans began to flee to West Germany for a life without communism, the infamous Berlin Wall was built (August 13, 1961)¹, dividing Germany into two countries for the next almost three decades. Importantly, episode 4 uses much of its time for the emergence and resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 26–28, 1962), "which is the closest the Cold War came to total nuclear war." (Episode 4, 00:40:00)

Episode 5, "War Games," documents the increase in nuclear activity, which came after a false alarm within the U.S. security intelligence system on November 9, 1979. It alerted U.S. officials, specifically National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, that the Soviet Union had launched thousands of nuclear missiles in the direction of America. Fortunately, this turned out to be a false alarm, preventing a counterattack by the United States "that would have been the end

of the world." (Episode 5, 00:03:00) Tensions ultimately led to a summit between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva (November 19–21, 1985), in which both agreed that a decrease in nuclear threat and development was necessary for both nations, putting their political differences aside to achieve the needs of their people. The Soviet economy could not keep up with the nuclear arms race, and Reagan was growing tired of the strain that the constant threats put on the U.S. military. Episode 6, "Empire is Untenable," highlights the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989), which signified the beginning of the Soviet Union's loss of control over Eastern Europe and the downfall of communism. It is filled with personal accounts of those who lived in Germany during this time.

Episode 7, "The End of History," chronicles the dissolution of the Soviet Union (formally achieved on December 26, 1991), often viewed as the end of the Cold War, particularly after the bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (SART), agreed upon by U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Gorbachev (signed on July 31, 1991, in effect 1994–2009). Episode 8, "Moscow Will Not Be Silent," looks at post-Cold War Russia, with Vladimir Putin becoming the country's new president in December 1999, and discusses primarily on the global war on terror. The finale, episode 9, "We Are Not Dead Yet," focuses on the modern-day effects that the Cold War still has across all nations involved. It ties everything together and connects it to the current Russo-Ukrainian War, arguing that the latter is "a much worse place than the Cold War. The Cold War was cold, but this is an unstable, hot war." (Episode 9, 00:01:18) It takes this history all the way up until Volodymyr Zelenskyy became the president of Ukraine (May 20, 2019), commenting on Russia's threats against Ukraine as well as the international nuclear proliferation that we are seeing as a result. It concludes by suggesting that, as the specter of nuclear aggression is being raised in Ukraine and across the globe, we must lean on our knowledge of Cold War history to avoid any conflict that could lead to the end the world as a whole.

I would relate Brian Knappenberger's series *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War* to Christopher Nolan's movie *Oppenheimer* (2023), since the series provides an in-depth look at the development of nuclear weapons. Despite of what one might expect from a popular streaming platform like Netflix, I would not recommend the series to entry-level historians or to those looking for basic information about the Cold War. The series would benefit from an introductory episode that explains the Cold War as a whole and provides an elementary timeline. It would become more accessible if there were considerably less jumping back and forth in time frames as large as sixty years (such as moving between the current Russo-Ukrainian War and the development of the first Soviet nuclear bomb, even though there is an undeniable historical correlation). As an additional critique, the series fails to address the Korean War, which was a major conflict that arose as a result of the Cold War. That said, I would recommend the series to those familiar with the Cold War who are looking to expand their knowledge.

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When Life Gives You Tangerines [TV series].

Directed by Kim Won-seok. 2025.

Netflix. 16 episodes (49–85 minutes each).

When life gives you tangerines, do you make tangerine-ade? Netflix's Korean drama (K-drama) *When Life Gives You Tangerines* (2025), directed by Kim Won-seok (Korean names are written family name first), may be a romantic drama, but once you peel away that surface, it reveals a social commentary on the everyday life and transformations of South Korea. Kim Won-seok is a well-known and acclaimed South Korean television director, having supervised several critically successful drama series, including *Misaeng* (2014), *Signal* (2016), and *My Mister* (2018). He has been celebrated for his realistic storytelling, emotional depth, and narratives that explore everyday struggles, making *When Life Gives You Tangerines* another successful hit in his repertoire.

Taking place primarily in *Jeju-do* (Jeju Island), South Korea, an island off the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, the series follows the lives of Jeju islanders, specifically Oh Ae-sun (Lee Ji-eun, better known by her stage name, IU), a determined girl who dreams of becoming a poet, and Yang Gwan-sik (Park Bo-gum), a soft-hearted but steadfast boy who has only loved Ae-sun since the very beginning. Jeju has its own distinct identity and culture, making it an integral part of the drama and social analysis. They have their own dialect, traditional practices, specific shamanistic beliefs, and folklore. The Korean title of the drama is *Pokssak Sogatsuda*, a phrase in the Jeju dialect meaning "you've worked hard." Rather than using the literal translation as the English title, a play on the proverbial phrase "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" was reinterpreted to "when life gives you tangerines," as tangerines are an iconic symbol of Jeju. While following Ae-sun and Gwan-sik's love story from childhood through adulthood, the audience also witnesses South Korea's transformations.

Primarily taking place from the 1960s to the 1990s, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* offers a rich, layered social history of postwar South Korea, exploring regional identity, cultural nuances, and historic movements of social change. In addition to tangerines, an iconic part of Jeju is the *haenyeo* (singular and plural). The *haenyeo* are women divers who harvest seafood from the ocean without the use of breathing equipment. They are culturally, historically, and economically significant to Jeju's identity and culture. With Ae-sun's mother being a *haenyeo*, the audience gains insights into the occupation's hardships and into Jeju's matrifocal labor system. Episode 1 takes place in the early 1960s, focusing on how Ae-sun's mother, who constantly works, dives in the sea to harvest abalone to support her family. It is a dangerous occupation as *haenyeo* dive in all types of weather and can suffer from hypothermia, and their breath-holding diving technique can cause overexertion and drowning. While the audience does not see Ae-sun's mother die, it is implied that she died from excessive smoking and daily sea diving, leaving Ae-sun an orphan. Because of her mother's death, Gwan-sik's shaman grandmother disapproves of his love for Ae-sun, causing contention throughout multiple episodes.

Gwan-sik's grandmother's disapproval is especially seen in episode 1, when she runs after Ae-sun in the market and yells that Gwan-sik needs to stay away from her. (00:50:55) The

main reason for her disapproval is her belief that Ae-sun's mother's ghost is attached to Ae-sun, and she will follow her mother's fate. Even after Gwan-sik marries Ae-sun and starts a family, she continues to hold this belief. In episode 4, Ae-sun, pregnant with her second child, is walking home from a temple as Gwan-sik's grandmother throws red beans at Ae-sun and her daughter. (00:02:40) This shamanistic practice, which she performs on Ae-sun daily, is intended to ward off evil spirits. While on this walk, Ae-sun's mother-in-law nags about how Ae-sun should have a son rather than another daughter, as traditional Korean families value sons. While walking, they pass by a *Dol hareubang*, an iconic statue native to Jeju and one of its symbols. Jeju's folklore strongly associates such statues with protection and fertility. Superstition says that touching the *hareubang*'s nose is believed to bring a baby boy, while touching the ears is believed to bring a baby girl. Tired of her mother-in-law's nagging, Ae-sun slaps the *hareubang*'s nose in an act of defiance, resulting in the mother-in-law profusely bowing and apologizing to the statue. (00:03:04) These instances of the drama's incorporation of the regional identity, culture, and practices is not just shown for the sake of nostalgia or aesthetics; instead, it indirectly teaches the audience about Jeju's cultural identity, belief structures, and gendered labor systems. While early episodes focus on Jeju's labor traditions, culture, and folklore, later episodes expand on South Korea's broader political and social transformations.

Not every historical event is directly addressed or essential to the storyline; many historical and cultural nods are subtly sprinkled throughout the various episodes. Episode 5 depicts Ae-sun as the chief deputy of her village in 1978 during Park Chung-hee's presidency. Park's authoritarian regime included the *Saemaul Undong* (New Community Movement), a state-led rural modernization campaign aimed to encourage Koreans to adopt a "modern" lifestyle that aligned with the government's ideals. This movement included government censorship of youth culture that was perceived as "decadent" or "Western," including go-go dancing and certain foreign and native songs. Ae-sun participates in the movement by catching people participating in prohibited social dancing (00:42:06), reflecting how rural ordinary women were mobilized for the movement and how social norms were changing in the youth community. Another nod to this 1970s censorship is the opening song of every episode, "Spring" (1973), written by Shin Jung-hyeon and sung by Kim Jung-mi. Jung-hyeon and Jung-mi were part of the psychedelic folk and rock music movement during the 1970s. This type of music drew inspiration from Western music, conflicting with Park's cultural policies, resulting in many songs and artists being censored or banned in the mid-1970s. I interpret the show's use of "Spring" as a cultural nod acknowledging South Korea's history of cultural repression.

Later episodes continue to trace South Korea's transformation beyond cultural control into times of political and economic upheaval. The 1980s and 1990s included key turning points that shaped the lives of ordinary Koreans and thus the drama's characters as well. Discussed in episode 7 through a television broadcast and conversation between Gwan-sik (Park Hae-joon) and his daughter, Geum-myeong (IU), the 1987 election was the first direct election held in South Korea in sixteen years, marking a pivotal turning point in South Korean history, as ordinary citizens were allowed to vote directly after years of authoritarian rule. Additionally, economic instability is woven into the story, as episode 13 showcases the economic struggles

during the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis and its impact on ordinary citizens. Geum-myeong was laid off from work like many others, leading to increased unemployment, economic strain, and hardship throughout the country. This crisis affected large and small businesses, including Ae-sun's (Moon So-ri) restaurant. The struggle of the community is shown through a sign in her store, stating, "IMF crisis, half price for Jeju citizens. Let's eat and survive together." (00:29:54) These examples are only the tip of the iceberg, as the series is filled with subtle historical narrative.

While *When Life Gives You Tangerines* displays South Korea's transformation through the perspective of ordinary Jeju Islanders, other modern dramas have also explored similar contexts. However, they are often more focused on entertainment, with historical context serving as the backdrop. For example, the romance K-drama *Crash Landing on You* (2019) focuses on the unlikely love story between a North Korean officer, Captain Ri Jeong-hyeok, and a South Korean heiress, Yoon Se-ri, who accidentally lands in North Korea after a paragliding accident. Kwak Moon-wan was a screenwriter and consultant for the show, and more importantly, a North Korean defector and former member of North Korea's elite security force. His involvement added some credibility to the series, but its overall depiction is dramatized. While some elements, such as limited infrastructure and black-market smuggling, capture some semblance of North Korean life, the series exaggerates and romanticizes many aspects for the sake of the narrative. For example, Captain Ri and his unit consistently break rules to protect Se-ri, such as crossing the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Yet they receive minimal consequences, even though the Korean People's Army (KPA) enforces rigid obedience, and any deviation would be treated as treason and punished severely. While both are entertaining, they serve different purposes: *When Life Gives You Tangerines* provides a more accurate, historically grounded depiction of everyday life.

It is apparent that *When Life Gives You Tangerines* was made with thoughtful analysis and attention to detail. The points I have addressed in this review are just a few of many in the series' historical and cultural narrative. Although a romantic drama, the show's incorporation of historical elements make it both entertaining and informative. Due to its intended entertainment purpose, the drama is much more accessible, digestible, and enjoyable for a broad audience. For K-drama fans and social historians, anyone can enjoy the series and learn about the rich social history of postwar South Korea, as it touches upon regional identity, cultural nuances, and historic movements of social change. Through the emotional and endearing story of Ae-sun and Gwan-sik's love, the drama weaves together the characters' relationships and collective memory, providing insights into South Korea's transformation through storytelling.

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William Tell [film].

Directed by Nick Hamm. 2024.

Eagle Pictures, Altitude Film Distribution. 133 minutes.

The year is 1307, and Switzerland is under the violent rule of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. Viewers are immediately taken to the momentous point in the film when our main character, William Tell (Claes Bang), turns from being a peaceful huntsman to becoming the leader of the Swiss revolution. Tell's story is shrouded in as much lore as a mythical creature. Rather than being a mere hero, Tell is the embodiment of revolution and the right to stand up against corruption. In this 2024 film, director Nick Hamm utilizes stunning geographical locations, a dialogue that immerses viewers into fourteenth-century Switzerland with its use of an old-timey form of English, and playwright styles of acting throughout its intense scenes. Hamm has been celebrated for his work on *The Journey* (2016) and *Gigi & Nate* (2022) but, due to his generally UK-based activities, his films are not as well known in the United States. However, the lack of Hollywood stars only enhances the appeal of *William Tell's* universe, and Danish actor Claes Bang does a stellar job in bringing Tell to life on the big screen. From the very first minute, viewers can feel the heroism and conflicts that haunts Tell throughout this 133-minute film.

The film opens with black text over what appears to be a bloody background, introducing the production company and the director Nick Hamm. Immediately following, we are greeted by the film title—*William Tell*—alongside a deep voice that proclaims, "Three days ago, my soul was free from thoughts of murder." (00:01:15) As we soon find out, it is the voice of our main character, Tell himself. Viewers then receive important background information by means of on-screen text in a fire red color that states "Switzerland, 1307. Europe is in turmoil and on the brink of war." (00:01:23) After this, viewers are immediately thrown into the climax of the film, namely, Tell getting ready to shoot an arrow off his own son's head, but right as he raises his crossbow, the screen turns back. The film then cuts to three days prior in front of Tell's small home, where Tell and his son Walter (Tobias Jowett) are preparing to go hunting. The subsequent scene introduces the Wolfshot (Billy Postlewaithe), a ruthless tax collector for the Austrian Habsburgs, as he enters a small village and asks for Konrad Baumgarten (Sam Keely), the village leader. The village leader's wife indicates that her husband is away farming and hands the Wolfshot a bag of coins that is lacking in weight, whereupon the Wolfshot orders the locals to prepare housing for his men and the Baumgarten's wife to prepare him a bath. The film cuts back to the top of a hill, where Walter is attempting to shoot a deer with one of his father's crossbows, and Tell states, "Make it clean, son. We are huntsmen, not savages." (00:06:48) This message will resurface once again later in the movie as Walter convinces Tell not to make a choice based on revenge.

Back in the village, Baumgarten returns from his farm work, hears a woman screaming, and sees the Wolfshot's gang of men laughing at the sound, which is coming from inside his own home. As Baumgarten enters his home, he finds his wife stripped half bare and lying lifeless on the ground in front of the bath. In his anger, Baumgarten attempts to drown the Wolfshot in the bath, but the latter stabs him in the chest and pulls him into the bath. As a dramatic soundtrack plays, Baumgarten finds the knife at the bottom of the tub and stabs the Wolfshot

in his genitals until he lies dead in the bath. Then, Baumgarten makes his escape, knowing that if he is captured, he will be killed.

Arriving in a nearby village, Baumgarten begs the men, who are bringing small oar boats ashore, to help him across the lake to the mountain range beyond. After one of them fails to convince him that it is too dangerous, due to a strong storm coming in, Tell decides to help Baumgarten, and with this, Tell's involvement in the fight against the Austrian rule in Switzerland is set in motion. Both are then shown walking across a mountain range, where they are met by Tell's wife Suna (Golshifteh Farahani), who has brought horses to help Baumgarten escape. However, Tell plans to see Baumgarten to safety, and he takes him to a friend, Werner Stauffacher (Rafe Spall), to hide from the Wolfshot's men and the Austrian soldiers. Here, Stauffacher's wife Gertrude (Emily Beecham) is introduced, who states, "Now we must fight for our country," (00:24:05) to which Tell responds by urging caution: the people may fight for the cause, but they will surely die. The Stauffachers then convince Tell to take Baumgarten to Walter Fürst (Amar Chadha-Patel), a priest in Altdorf, who supports starting a rebellion against the Austrian rule.

While Tell and his companions—including Arnold von Melchtal (Solly McLeod), a man they have just saved before entering Altdorf—talk about their plan for rebellion and uniting the Swiss people, the king's bailiff, a man named Albrecht Gessler (Connor Swindells), has a large Austrian helmet placed on a post in the center of town and orders the populace to greet the helmet by bowing every time they pass it, as a sign of respect to the Habsburg king. As Tell's son Walter inspects the helmet, his parents notice him, and Tell begins to walk over to have Walter move away from it. Since neither Tell nor Walter bow before the helmet, Gessler's main enforcer Stussi (Jake Dunn) sends the guards to arrest them. During this interaction, Tell states, "I bend the knee to no man." (01:04:43)

It is at this point that we return to the film's opening scene. To obtain his freedom and to entertain Gessler, Tell is forced to raise his bow and shoot an apple off his son's head. In a tense moment, Tell aims his crossbow and shoots the apple clean off Walter's head without injuring him whatsoever. Gessler then asks why Tell had used a different arrow than the one that had been handed to him, and Tell responds that, if for any reason his shot at the apple had missed and harmed his son, the second arrow would have served to kill Gessler. (01:15:46) Gessler immediately tasks his guards with arresting Tell, which incites a fight between the citizens of Altdorf and the Habsburg knights. Stussi is ordered to take Tell to a nearby castle by boat to be imprisoned, along with the Habsburg king's niece, Princess Bertha (Ellie Bamber), who supports the Swiss uprising against the Austrian rule. During this prisoner transport, Tell and Bertha manage to escape. Meanwhile, Rudenz (Jonah Hauer-King), the heir to the Swiss house of Attinghausen, returns home to proclaim his support for the rebellion. Rudenz arrives at a cave near Rütli—the famous site where the Swiss cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden took an oath of mutual support to each other in 1307—and Suna, Fürst, and a small group of rebels get ready to launch a revolt against the Austrian rule. Meanwhile, Tell and Bertha make their way to a gorge on the way to Küsnacht, where they lie in wait for Gessler, so Tell can make his attempt at a murderous revenge.

This is the main point where the film strays from the original folktale. In the film, Tell misses his shot, and instead of killing Gessler, the arrow blows off two of his fingers. However, according to the folktale, Tell killed Gessler and freed Switzerland from the power-hungry tyrant. In addition to this, the film shows Bertha in a later scene killing the Habsburg king, after which she returns to Küssnacht castle to free the Swiss from Austrian rule. However, according to the folktale, the Austrians were driven away later after a failed attack, which, as many Swiss believe today, led to the establishment of the republic of Switzerland; meanwhile, the Habsburg king (Albert or Albrecht) was actually murdered by his own nephew in 1308. At the end of the film, Tell's rebellion launches a successful attack on Altdorf, and he is given another opportunity to kill Gessler. However, Tell's son Walter, using his father's own words, cautions him: "We are huntsmen, not savages," thus convincing Tell to not kill Gessler and to leave him under his own helmet with a bloody arrow instead.

In a dramatized historical action film, it can be difficult to determine what is true and what is fictional, and in the case of *William Tell*, this challenge becomes even more complex. As the film's story of this alleged ex-crusader integrates historically accurate details and the legendary folktale into one narrative, the line between history and fiction becomes blurred, offering viewers a captivating watch while maintaining a certain degree of historical accuracy. In this, the film is not unlike Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), which tells the story of a thirteenth-century Scottish hero named William Wallace who, after suffering the traumatic loss of his wife, seeks revenge by rallying his countrymen in Scotland against King Edward I of England. Those interested in stories of uprisings and passionate heroes are also sure to enjoy the animated television series *Vinland Saga* (2019), produced by Shūhei Yabuta, which follows Thorfinn, a boy raised by the Vikings, as he seeks revenge for his murdered father. So, if you are in search of a captivating story of revolution and historical drama, Nick Hamm's *William Tell* (2024) is the perfect film for you.

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