

Academe vs. Hollywood: *Sweet Liberty*, or the Dilemmas of Historical Representation on Film

Guy Spielmann

Volume 40, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083172ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083172ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (imprimé)

1927-8284 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Spielmann, G. (2021). Academe vs. Hollywood: *Sweet Liberty*, or the Dilemmas of Historical Representation on Film. *Lumen*, 40, 165–181.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083172ar>

Résumé de l'article

In *Sweet Liberty*, writer and director Alan Alda dramatizes the process of turning a scholarly study about the American Revolutionary War into a Hollywood film; he does so in ways that bring out the ethical complexities of adaptation, and eventually takes them to a meta-filmic level rarely seen in non-experimental cinema. While *Sweet Liberty* initially comes off as a light comedy with a predictable plot and ending, on closer inspection it compels us to reflect on the relationship between historical research and the popular entertainment industry. Although Alda appears to chastise the makers of period films who seek to capitalize on “history” without paying heed to historical facts, his professorial hero is not particularly critically minded either. Intentionally or not, Alda demonstrates that evaluating a mainstream history film cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between truth and fiction, and that research-based knowledge should also be viewed with a healthy skepticism.

Academe vs. Hollywood: *Sweet Liberty*, or the Dilemmas of Historical Representation on Film

GUY SPIELMANN
Georgetown University

The vision that non-specialists (e.g., people outside academe and the general public) have of the eighteenth century is not primarily dictated by scholarship as we know it. Rather, it is mostly based on representations of the period in popular culture forms—in films, TV shows, video games, and comics—and only partially on whatever research findings might percolate through mass-distributed visual media. As Robert A. Rosenstone notes, “[a] century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture.”¹ Each of the visual media mentioned above, for reasons sometimes obvious and sometimes obscure, focuses on aspects that usually differ from what professional historians would deem important or central. The conviction of some historians that “the visual media are a legitimate way of doing history—of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning from the traces of the past”²—remains controversial. Be that as it may, we cannot simply dismiss such representations as irrelevant; we must deal with them if we are to relate to non-specialist audiences, including students, who are much more exposed to popular culture than to academic teachings.

1. Robert A. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.

2. *Ibid.*

Despite their misgivings about using film to do history, whether they admit it or not, many academic historians aspire to the wide recognition that media exposure brings to their work; typically, research in its original form seldom reaches audiences beyond professional circles. Although sometimes still considered marginal as a professional activity, historians' involvement with mainstream entertainment is far from negligible, given the immense popularity of period series like *Rome*, *The Tudors*, *Versailles*, or *The Medici*, all of which rely to some degree on academic consultants. Of all forms of media exposure, having a book adapted for the screen stands perhaps as the ultimate personal accolade for a historian. Yet, one can easily imagine that turning a monograph into a Hollywood film is fraught with myriad pitfalls. These are seldom explored, though, in the considerable literature devoted to the relationship between history and cinema,³ which is mostly concerned with assessing the "authenticity" of films, regardless of the role played by historians in the process.⁴ It should be pointed out that such issues are quite separate from the technical and aesthetic difficulties of turning *any* text into a screenplay and a film, a process minutely explored in Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002),⁵ and which constitutes the main focus of Adaptation Studies.⁶

3. See for instance *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, cited above, and *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum, 1997); and Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; rev. ed., 2010).

4. See Dominic Lees, "Cinema and Authenticity: Anxieties in the Making of Historical Film," *Journal of Media Practice* 17, nos. 2–3 (2016): 199–212.

5. *Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze, screenplay by Charlie Kaufman, based on *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean (USA, Beverly Detroit / Clinica Estetico / Good Machine / Intermedia / Magnet Productions / Propaganda Films, 2002).

6. Adaptation studies has become a vast field of its own. For recent general surveys, see especially the following: *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, ed. Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins (Madison N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010); *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); *Adaptation in Visual Culture: Images, Texts, and Their Multiple Worlds*, ed. Julie Grossman and R. Barton Palmer (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (London and

The inherent limitations of mainstream filmmaking present a serious ethical issue for scholars whose work has caught Hollywood's attention, and who must decide how much they are ready to compromise in exchange for the kind of visibility that academic publishing could never afford them. In his 1986 comedy *Sweet Liberty*,⁷ writer and director Alan Alda took the unusual step of dramatizing the process of turning a scholarly study into a Hollywood film in a way that—perhaps unwittingly—brings out its complexities, and eventually takes them to a meta level rarely seen in non-experimental cinema.

Although a traditional distinction separates “history films” (which claim to pursue authenticity) from “costume dramas” (in which the chosen historical period is largely a mere backdrop), there is no consensus among scholars as to how to define a cinematic genre that somehow encompasses a historical vision. Rosenstone has proposed a tripartite model revolving around the “New History Film,” which is “far different from the Hollywood ‘historical,’ a costume drama that uses the past solely as a setting for romance and adventure, and far different, too, from the typical documentary, a mixture of old images and recent talking heads.”⁸ Robert Burgoyne, heeding Natalie Zemon Davis’ definition of the historical film—as a dramatic feature in which the primary plot is based on actual historical events, or in which an imagined plot unfolds in such a way that actual historical events are central to the story shown on the screen⁹—identifies six sub-categories: “The War Film,” “The Epic Film,” “The Biographical Film,” “The Metahistorical Film,” and “The Topical Historical Film.”¹⁰

In terms of the mediation between what appears on screen and the period depicted, I build on Burgoyne’s categories and posit that the

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also the articles that have appeared in *Adaptation: The Journal of Literature on Screen Studies*, published by Oxford University Press (2008–), and the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, published by Intellect in Bristol, UK (2007–).

7. *Sweet Liberty*, written and directed by Alan Alda [Alphonso Joseph D’Abruzzo] (USA, Universal, 1986).

8. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History*, 4.

9. See especially Chapter 1, “Film as Historical Narrative,” in Natalie Zemon Davis’ *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

10. Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008),

genre encompasses four distinct types when applied to the eighteenth century:

- films set in the eighteenth century based on an original screenplay that makes no claim to historical representation (such as *Casanova's Big Night*¹¹ or the “Merrie Melody” cartoon *Bunker Hill Bunny*¹²);
- films adapted from eighteenth-century fiction (such as *Dangerous Liaisons*¹³ or *A Cock and Bull Story*¹⁴);
- films adapted from fiction about the eighteenth century published in a later period (such as *Barry Lyndon*¹⁵ or *A Tale of Two Cities*¹⁶);
- films based on an original screenplay that dramatizes historical events from the eighteenth century (such as *The Patriot*¹⁷—more about it later—or *Rob Roy: The Highland Rogue*¹⁸).

None of the above groupings, however, can account for *Sweet Liberty*, which belongs to a category of its own: it is a film about making a film adapted from a (fictitious) twentieth-century research book about the eighteenth century.¹⁹

11. *Casanova's Big Night*, directed by Norman Z. McLeod, screenplay by Hal Canter and Edmund L. Hartman, based on a story by Aubrey Wisberg (USA, Paramount Pictures, 1954).

12. *Bunker Hill Bunny*, directed by Friz Freleng, screenplay by Tedd Pierce (USA, Warner Bros. 1949).

13. *Dangerous Liaisons*, directed by Stephen Frears, screenplay by Christopher Hampton, based on his play of the same name, a dramatic reworking of Laclou's 1782 novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (UK / USA, Warner Bros. / Lorimar, 1988).

14. *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, directed by Michael Winterbottom, screenplay by Winterbottom and Frank Cottrell Boyce (UK, BBC / Picturehouse, 2005).

15. *Barry Lyndon*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, screenplay by Kubrick, based on the 1844 novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* by William Makepeace Thackeray (USA, Peregrine / Hawk Films / Warner Bros., 1975).

16. *A Tale of Two Cities*, directed by Ralph Thomas, screenplay by Thomas Ernest Bennett Clarke, based on the 1859 novel by Charles Dickens (UK, Rank Films, 1958).

17. *The Patriot* directed by Roland Emmerich, screenplay by Robert Rodat (USA / Germany, Columbia Pictures / Centropolis Entertainment / Mutual Film Company / Global Entertainment Productions GmbH & Company Medien KG, 2000).

18. *Rob Roy: The Highland Rogue*, directed by Harold French, screenplay by Lawrence Edward Watkin (USA, Walt Disney Productions, 1953).

19. I am paraphrasing Roger Ebert's description of Winterbottom's *A Cock and Bull Story* as “a film about the making of a film based on a novel about the writing of a novel.” (Review originally published in the *Chicago Sun Times*, February 17, 2006; www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tristram-shandy-a-cock-and-bull-story-2006, accessed April 15, 2021.) For a more detailed discussion of this type of film, see my article

The film's premise can be summed up as follows: how could a serious work of history be appropriated successfully by commercial cinema, an industry whose products must abide by its own idiosyncratic criteria—including the need, in the words of fictional director Bo Hodges (played by actor Saul Rubinek), to “defy authority, destroy property, and take people’s clothes off”? Before the question of authenticity can be meaningfully addressed, Alda suggests in his screenplay, one needs to reckon with “studio executive arguments that such films reflect the real world, and that the studios just make the movies that audiences want to see.”²⁰ Superficially, *Sweet Liberty* comes off as a comedy revolving on a classic [Tinsel]town-and-gown dichotomy. But while the unfolding of the plot and the eventual outcome are both fairly predictable, Alda’s film, mostly derided by critics as a rather shallow “light comedy,” turns out to be unexpectedly complex as it compels us to reflect upon the relationship between historical research and the popular entertainment industry. Historians, because of the academic nature of their discipline, are generally presumed to abide by a strict scientific protocol, whereas filmmakers are considered to be bound only by legal and financial constraints. Behind its somewhat formulaic facade, *Sweet Liberty* challenges such a simple opposition between these two ways of envisioning history and encourages the viewer to ponder who ultimately shows more integrity.

The action begins as a boisterous Hollywood crew invades Sayeville, a small South Carolina college town, in order to shoot a screen version of a Pulitzer-prizewinning book by Professor Michael Burgess (played by Alda himself) about the decisive battle of Cowpens (that took place on January 17, 1781 and during which Insurgent forces under Brigadier General Daniel Morgan routed British troops led by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton).²¹ *Sweet Liberty* tells that story from the

“L’Infilmable’ dix-huitième siècle de *Tristram Shandy* à *Münchhausen*: adaptation, transposition, inspirations,” in *L’Écran des Lumières: regards cinématographiques sur le XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Martial Poirson et Laurence Schifano (SVEC 2009:07; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 159–82.

20. John W. Cones, *Motion Picture Biographies: The Hollywood Spin on Historical Figures* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2015), 1.

21. This battle was a turning point in the war. The Cowpens National Battlefield is located in Cherokee Co. near Chesnee, SC. See Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Thomas J. Fleming, *Downright Fighting: The Story of Cowpens* –

point of view of Mary Slocumb, on whose plantation Tarleton took up residence. When discovering the script penned by Stanley Gould (Bob Hoskins), Burgess quickly grasps that very little of his work may actually end up in the film: “I put ten years of my life into that book, you just threw it away!” he blurts out ruefully. He is initially enthralled, however, by the eerily compelling portrayal of its protagonist by a beguiling actress, Faith Healy (Michelle Pfeifer). The sub-genre of movies that scrutinize or satirize moviemaking has its own peculiar clichés: one of them dictates that, when shooting on location, actors (and often crew members as well) will get involved with the locals in romantic relationships that end when the production wraps. Alda’s script for *Sweet Liberty* adheres to this tradition several times over; yet the professor’s infatuation with the actress, beyond its formulaic nature, provides the viewer with an early sign of his lack of objectivity and distance, which progressively comes into focus.

While Professor Burgess (the academic) keeps complaining about the director’s disregard for historical accuracy, Michael (the man) seems to believe that Faith (the actress) actively channels an eighteenth-century woman. In fact, he is so taken in by her performance that he does not immediately realize to what extent it *is* a performance. He is therefore quite shocked when Faith breaks out of character and turns back into a contemporary woman who smokes and liberally spews profanity while talking on the phone to her agent. Clearly, the professor is enamoured not with the actress but with the historical character that she portrays, a character that had remained relatively abstract to him until he could see and hear her in the flesh. As it happens early in the film, this infatuation is the first clue that the professor’s position is hardly that of the impartial recorder of facts he claims to be.

On the other hand, Michael also develops a relationship of sorts with Sir Banastre Tarleton as portrayed by Elliott James (Michael Caine). Echoing the way in which “bloody Tarleton” appears as a kind of boogeyman in the chronicles of the American Revolutionary War, Elliott emerges as Michael’s nemesis in *Sweet Liberty*. On the romantic front, he is a serious contender for the affections—or at least the sexual favours—of both Faith and Gretchen Carlsen (Lise Hilboldt),

Michael's long-time girlfriend. Overall, he easily upstages the professor—who fancies himself as a “cool guy on campus”—on all counts: as a bon vivant, as a seducer, and last but not least, as a fencing expert. Through his rakish cockiness, Elliott James also comes to channel the historical character he is portraying: a rather conceited wonder boy—Tarleton was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the British Legion at twenty-three—who reaped great honours as a result of his war record, his defeat at Cowpens notwithstanding. In his portrait in action by Sir Joshua Reynolds, he is depicted paused in military action: “momentarily dismounted on a battlefield, with gun-smoke swirling behind him . . . he props one leg up on a cannon to re-fix his sword to his belt before changing horses.”²² To us, he may appear as a young cad perhaps a little too concerned with his looks in this combat situation; not exactly a macaroni (Reynolds no doubt meant the portrait to be complimentary), he is still something of a beau. Elliott James seems to embody that very character, even when cameras are not rolling.

These slippery connections are an aspect of *Sweet Liberty* that alerts us to complex implications in terms of how we relate to history. Professor Burgess proves unable to maintain a dispassionate relationship with the historical figures he has studied, when they come to life, as it were, under the guise of professional actors. We can see that the film being shot will proceed from several, potentially conflicting viewpoints: that of a scholar who has produced an academic study on the Cowpens episode; that of a Hollywood hack who purports to have based his script on this study but plays fast and loose with historical evidence in favour of a sexier and more exciting story; that of a director who makes no mystery of his intent to shoot a commercial film pitched at a mostly teenage audience; and even that of the actors and the crew, whose work habits also influence how the film is made. Another viewpoint emerges unexpectedly as local reenactors, who insist on the absolute accuracy of details pertaining to dress and weaponry, have a run-in with the technicians and stunt men, who bring their own professional expertise and experience in staging fights. Although they are not credentialed historians benefitting from the professional standing

22. *Colonel Tarleton*, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, National Gallery of Art, London, UK, available online at www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sir-joshua-reynolds-colonel-tarleton, accessed April 15, 2021.

of a college professor with a PhD, these reenactors also claim to be defending a historically correct vision,²³ whereas the stunt crew follows its own, pragmatic guidelines for effectively representing history targeted at a contemporary audience. Nevertheless, Alda's plot firmly rests on the premise that only the scholar holds the absolute truth; and it is Professor Burgess who naturally assumes the mantle of leadership in a rebellion against the Hollywood baddies (the director and stunt men), rallying the reenactors to his cause.

Yet because this is a light comedy rather than a serious drama, diverging points of view make for disputes and clashes that are predominantly funny and that do not lead to any serious consequences, so that when the film crew leaves, everyone has become friends, putting the conflicts, the arguments, and the fights behind them. In typical carnivalesque fashion, all disruptions, however violent, are forgiven and forgotten as the established order is reinstated. Gretchen resumes her role as Michael's steady girlfriend, and even proposes that they marry; at the premiere of the film, she appears visibly pregnant. All is well that ends well—but does the film itself do justice to Professor Burgess' book after all?

In order to tease out the significance of *Sweet Liberty* as a commentary on film as a vehicle for history, we need to compare it with a motion picture released fourteen years later, *The Patriot*, which focuses on the same historical events and sets in motion a villain closely modelled on Banastre Tarleton, “Colonel William Tavington” (Jason Isaacs). Screenwriter Robert Rodat laboured through seventeen drafts of the script and read extensively from journals and letters of the period—which is essentially what Professor Michael Burgess is supposed to have done in writing his *Sweet Liberty*. The producers of the later film made efforts towards historical accuracy that included a fact-checking visit to the Smithsonian and hiring specialists on the Revolutionary War era, who were credited as consultants—all efforts reflective of the “fidelity model” that dominated Hollywood in the early twenty-first century.²⁴ In

23. This is not a figment of Alda's imagination: each year in January, numerous reenactment activities do take place at the National Cowpens Battlefield Park (see www.nps.gov/cowps/specialevents.htm, accessed April 15, 2021), in conjunction with presentations by historians.

24. See Lees, “Cinema and Authenticity: Anxieties in the Making of Historical Film,” 201.

many ways, then, *The Patriot* seems like the kind of film that Professor Burgess would have liked Hodges and Gould to make, a film for a general audience that still heeds the teachings of academic history. On the other hand, its merits as a history film were debated among film reviewers. *New York Times* critic Jamie Malanowski damned it with faint praise, writing:

Why, some may think it's the best Revolutionary War movie ever made. Which brings us to our point: it is also one of the very few Revolutionary War movies ever made, most of which are not all that good.²⁵

In fact, *The Patriot* proved intensely controversial for framing Tarleton as a cold-blooded killer who orders the massacre of unarmed civilians, while extolling his opponent, “Benjamin Martin” (played by Mel Gibson), a character based on Francis Marion, an American militia commander who had committed atrocities of his own during the French and Indian War. The director and the screenwriter were also criticized for mixing reasonably accurate depictions with completely fanciful scenes (notably the burning of a church with civilians inside),²⁶ which essentially show the British as Nazi-like war criminals, and for glossing over the subject of slavery.

In sum, disputes over *The Patriot* played out in real life those very issues that *Sweet Liberty* had fictionalized on screen: a film showing the Revolutionary War “as it really happened” requires more than good intentions, serious research, and a large enough budget to afford historically accurate uniforms and weapons. Such a film would need to reflect a clear stance regarding the relationship between history and artistic representation. Filmmakers must thus ask what exactly is the avowed purpose of making this kind of feature, beyond financial revenue (which, after all, is a production company’s main concern)? In a study of the biopic genre, Cones denounced “consistent patterns of bias ... in the choices Hollywood studio executives make with respect to the movies they produce and release, as well as in the

25. Jamie Malanowski, “The Revolutionary War is Lost on Hollywood,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2000, Section 2, 9.

26. See Jonathan Foreman, “The Nazis, er, the Redcoats are coming!” digital publication, July 3, 2000, www.salon.com, accessed April 15, 2021. The fact that director Roland Emmerich is German suggests that this framing may have been quite deliberate.

specific content of those movies.”²⁷ Is this bias reprehensible, though? Unlike a university or a scholarly society, the film industry is in no way beholden to historical accuracy (however one wants to define it) or to a balanced representation of past events, peoples, and individuals. Therefore, whatever efforts a director makes to pay heed to academically sanctioned history are driven purely by self-assigned pragmatic concerns; we may certainly praise filmmakers for having principles, but we cannot expect all of them to act according to the principles of another profession’s code of research ethics.

Moreover, as Malanowski points out in his review of the film’s reception among academics, evaluating historical accuracy is also a matter of recognizing variation in what kind of celluloid representations of the past audiences are ready to accept:

Mogul psychology notwithstanding, some people—historians—who would love to see more Revolutionary War movies are nonetheless sympathetic to the view that the Revolutionary era is not easy for modern audiences to understand.

“A lot of us have trouble at first perceiving those people as real,” said the historian David McCullough.... “Because of their clothing, and the wigs, and their mannered way of speaking, they are like characters in a costume pageant. Also, we’re handicapped because they don’t appear in photographs.”

Joseph J. Ellis ... said: “The lack of realistic images means that all we see are paintings and iconographic renderings that all have a celebratory, patriotic, posed quality. Because the movies are realistic, they have a hard time measuring up.”²⁸

Such observations point to the considerable hurdles that historians face in successfully bringing their discipline to the general public, hurdles that incidentally are not felt as much by those working in visual media. Yet, the reception of *The Patriot* seems to accept the premise that historians alone hold a monopoly on historical truth. *Sweet Liberty*, however, demonstrates that this is also a problematic assumption.

27. Cones, *Motion Picture Biographies*, 1.

28. Malanowski, “The Revolutionary War is Lost on Hollywood,” review cited above. Pulitzer-Prize laureate David McCullough is the author of *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Joseph Ellis received a National Book Award for *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), and the Pulitzer Prize for *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

While Professor Burgess is incensed that the director chose to dress Tarleton, famously known as the “green dragoon,” in a red uniform (just because the general American public identifies British soldiers as the “redcoats”) and that he insists on staging a love affair between the colonel and Mary Slocumb (a historically nonsensical plot twist, in his estimation), the academic seems completely unaware that his own version of the colonial era may not be as objective as he thinks. When he confronts the director over the shooting script, his reasoning is based on an absolute certitude of knowing the past:

“Burgess—The script is, er... very... interesting. There’s just a couple of things I have a problem with in the script: ... the story and the dialogue.... None of that ever happened.”

“Hodges—Well, who really knows what happened a couple hundred years ago, Michael?”

“Burgess—I do—I read their diaries and their letters.”

Determined to change the scene of the first encounter between Mary Slocumb and Tarleton, Michael slips the actors a new script based on her diary—in which she comes off as defiantly proud in the face of the invader.²⁹ Later on, he brings the actual diary to the actress, treating it with the kind of deference usually lavished on the Scriptures; but are we certain that Slocumb recorded events in an accurate and unbiased fashion? Could she not have made herself sound more stoic and brave than she really was? Wouldn’t a professional historian also take into account Tarleton’s own memoirs, which may provide a different perspective?³⁰ Instead of raising such questions, the real film director, Alan Alda, perhaps unwittingly, portrays historians as zealots who put their faith in authentic documents whose main virtues are originating from the period these academics study and supporting their own preconceptions, a phenomenon now identified as “confirmation bias.” Of course, it is easy to claim “none of it ever happened” about a script put together by a self-described hack screenwriter; however, this does not imply that the diaries and letters of the period necessarily represent the absolute truth, as Professor Burgess seems to believe.

29. It is in fact based on a second-hand account published in 1849; see below note 35.

30. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: T. Cadell, 1787).

Another of the professor's foibles is exposed when he blames Hodges and Gould for turning Tarleton into a positive, even likeable character. This critique reveals an American bias: in British history, the dashing colonel *does* stand as a bona fide hero and any legitimate scholarly study would at least attempt to provide a somewhat balanced view.³¹ Similarly, Alda as director and screenwriter proves equally partial to the American view: while he purports to satirize Hollywood's disregard for historical accuracy on the basis of what ultimately appears as details, *Sweet Liberty* endorses an us-and-them vision of the Revolutionary War that conveniently simplifies a tangled web of conflicting loyalties. The "rebels" were former British subjects, many of whom—notably George Washington—had fought for the Crown in the French and Indian War; they were now facing not only troops sent from Europe (which included French and German regiments fighting on each side), but other colonials who supported the monarchy.³² In this context, fraternization between nominal enemies does not appear as a ludicrously ahistorical possibility—much less so, in fact, than the notion that the war pitched two essentially different peoples against one another. Moreover, Alda, like *The Patriot's* director Emmerich, skirts the problematic issue of slavery, which does not seem to have a place in his vision of colonial South Carolina.

In the end, the film gets completed in spite of Michael's persistent interference and his efforts to sabotage the climactic battle scene. When he later apologizes for having possibly ruined the film, the director retorts cheerfully that very little harm has in fact been done, and we realize that the professor has nurtured all along an inflated sense of his own importance, mostly because he does not know how a film gets made. He has failed to understand the limitations of his influence as author of the book and authority on the Revolutionary War; he cannot account for, nor accept, the gap in charisma between himself and Elliott James; and he cannot fathom why actors care more about their performance on screen than about the historical characters they portray. As Faith unabashedly admits to a sexual relationship with James, which has greatly enhanced the chemistry between them in

31. See, for instance, Michael Pearson, *Those Damned Rebels: The American Revolution as Seen through British Eyes* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972).

32. See, for instance, George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1957).

their love scenes, Michael exclaims “You’re not *at all* like her!” as if he were genuinely surprised that the actress remains distinct from Mary Slocumb—and thoroughly convinced that *his* Mary Slocumb would have never cozied up to the enemy. “Where have you been the last ten weeks?” Faith quips back, revealing a firmer grasp on reality than has the academic.

It is interesting to note that we only get to see the closing scene of the film-within-the-film, a passionate embrace between the British officer and his supposedly reluctant lodger suggesting that Michael’s attempts to steer the script back towards what he considers to be historical veracity have utterly failed indeed. Yet a journalist congratulates him warmly: “Well it’s a *great* movie, Professor Burgess: American history at its best!”—a statement to which he can only respond with an ambivalent shrug. Who is he to argue with success? The professor must be content with the glamour that rubs off on him by association with Hollywood, even if he believes his work has been altered beyond recognition.

In this context, the legal disclaimer about all characters and events being fictitious that appears on screen in the very last frame takes on a double meaning that should give us pause. Natalie Zemon Davis points out several examples of films that include this mention, even though the characters portrayed are manifestly based on real people, whose names are sometimes used—long-dead historical characters being the most obvious example. She cites the 1934 landmark court case about MGM’s *Rasputin and the Empress* as prompting production companies to show a disclaimer as a simple way to avert lawsuits.³³ In *Sweet Liberty*, many fictional elements are manifestly situated outside the scope of history: Alan Alda was never a college professor and did not write a historical monograph; his film was mostly shot in New York, not South Carolina—there is no Sayeville in that state, and thus no college there. On the other hand, Tarleton and Mary *did* exist and meet one another. As to Michael Caine and Michelle Pfeiffer, they *are* actors, who essentially play themselves under assumed names. *Sweet Liberty* demonstrates that similarity to actual people, both living and

33. For details, see Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead’: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1988): 269–83.

dead, is definitely not coincidental; nor are fact and fiction mutually exclusive. Rosenstone insists on the need to relativize the truth value of films that we would qualify as historically accurate. As he sees it, “[b]y academic standards, all historical films are, in fact, laced with fiction” and “even documentable ‘historical’ characters become fictional when re-created by an actor on the screen.”³⁴

Moreover, if large portions of the feature film scripted by Gould and directed by Hodges are definite fabrications, it does not follow that the “historical truth” of the Slocumb–Tarleton episode according to Professor Burgess should be taken at face value. Instead, we should be skeptical of scholarly certitude, especially since the historian’s vision of the encounter between the two main protagonists seems to derive entirely from Mary’s own account, widely disseminated in hagiographical publications such as Elizabeth F. Ellet’s 1849 *Women of The American Revolution*. In her preface, Ellet readily underscored the precariousness of information in this field but also professed blind faith in whatever documents she was able to muster, writing:

In offering this work to the public, it is due to the reader no less than the writer, to say something of the extreme difficulty which has been found in obtaining materials sufficiently reliable for a record designed to be strictly authentic. ... It need scarcely be said that the deficiency of material has in no case been supplied by fanciful embellishment. These memoirs are a simple and homely narrative of real occurrences. Wherever details were wanting to fill out the picture, it has been left in outline for some more fortunate limner. No labor of research, no pains in investigation—and none but those who have been similarly engaged can estimate the labor—have been spared in establishing the truth of the statements. It can hardly be expected that inaccuracies have been altogether avoided in a work where the facts have to be drawn from numerous and sometimes conflicting authorities; but errors, if discovered, may be hereafter corrected.³⁵

In spite of her self-serving claims to exhaustivity, Ellet—a poet, translator, and all around *femme de lettres*, but hardly a professional historian—proves as naive as Michael Burgess in her belief that period memoirs provide straightforward, reliable accounts of “real occur-

34. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History*, 6–7.

35. Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), vol. 1, ix–xii. The sketch of Mary Slocumb is on pages 304–30.

rences.” Although two strongly antagonistic points of view are manifestly at play in the Slocumb–Tarleton episode, Ellet opts to take as incontrovertible fact a second-hand account from one of the parties involved:

The scene of the occupation of her house, and Tarleton’s residence with her, remained through life indelibly impressed on her memory, and were described by her to one who enjoyed the honor of her intimate friendship. I am permitted to give his account, copied almost verbatim from notes taken at the time the occurrences were related by Mrs. Slocumb.³⁶

The incidents of January 1781, as recounted by a friend of Mary Slocumb from her oral testimony, may certainly be used as a source, but as a source among others—to be treated with all necessary caution, and triangulated with other sources and evidence. Unfortunately, Alda’s Professor Burgess takes this particular version of the facts as the only correct version, even though Ellet’s *Women of The American Revolution* hardly qualifies as anything close to a factual report: not only does it reflect an obvious nationalistic agenda, but it belongs to a genre of female *exempla* that can be traced back to Ancient Rome. Clearly partial in her views, the author presents to the reading public a gallery of strong, virtuous women who contributed to the establishment of the nation.³⁷ Indeed, in Ellet’s vignette, Mary Slocumb faces Tarleton in a manner both remarkably gracious and sarcastically defiant that slots her conveniently into the *exemplum* category. “Her characteristic fortitude in the endurance of bodily pain so great that it seemed absolute stoicism should be noticed,”³⁸ Ellet adds, lest the reader miss the point. By letting his professorial hero uncritically embrace such a representation, Alda undermines his own premise of pitching history produced by supposedly objective scholars against sensational fiction peddled by Hollywood. *Sweet Liberty* deconstructs

36. *Ibid.*, 305–06.

37. See Wendy Martin, “Women and the American Revolution,” *Early American Literature* 11, no. 3 (1976): 322–35. The prototype for this genre is found in Titus Livius’ *Ab Urbe Condita*, a treatise conflating history and legend composed under the reign of Augustus, between 27 and 9 BCE. See Tom Stevenson, “Women of Early Rome as *Exempla* in Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Book 1,” *The Classical World* 104, no. 2 (2011): 175–89.

38. Ellet, *The Women of The American Revolution*, 330.

this opposition by accumulating evidence that the fictional historian Michael Burgess is just as biased as everyone else.

The real problem, however, is not that Professor Burgess is biased, but that Alda insists on portraying him as the undisputed bearer of an objective historical truth. Only in a traditional understanding of history, now commonly challenged even within the profession, would objectivity be taken as an absolute, and assumed subjectivity as a methodological flaw. Rosenstone, for instance, has repeatedly articulated how films provide “another kind of contribution to our understanding of the past, one that depends less upon data than upon what we might call vision.”³⁹

Data and vision need not be taken, however, as irreconcilable opposites; film, as a kind of fiction, may well appear as a vector for bringing them together in a manner that cannot be achieved in a scholarly monograph. In his 2003 study *Feelings in History, Ancient and Modern*, Ramsey McMullen put forth “a suggestion”: “the very simple one, that we can apply to our reading of history the same powers of mind that we bring to novels. Those are the powers, beyond reasoned analysis, that give us so rich an understanding of human motives and action.”⁴⁰ McMullen has gone so far as to argue that a fictional treatment of history can sometimes be more compelling than a scholarly one, and does not have to necessarily betray the facts:

We know, too, that something better than the ordinary historical account is possible because we have read historical fiction, or fiction without any pretense of touching on matters of historical significance—still, narratives that may read like history: *August 1914*, *The Duke’s Children*, *Henry Esmond*, *Waverley*. Or like social history: *Eugénie Grandet*, *Buddenbrooks*, *The Forsyte Saga*. These offer an account that *can* satisfy, with the whole truth. For fiction is free to supply the colors that characterize and more properly explain people’s acts, meaning, those feelings for which historians can generally find no place.⁴¹

Here again, we face an assumption that needs to be challenged: McMullen, in praising novels as “something better than the ordinary historical account” implies an opposition between fact and fiction that

39. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History*, 6.

40. Ramsey McMullen, *Feelings in History, Ancient and Modern* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 2003), back cover.

41. *Ibid.*, ii–iii.

may only exist as a side effect of the drive to make history more scientific. Indeed, according to the *vox populi* expressed by the interviewer at the end of *Sweet Liberty*, “American history at its best” turns out to be the screen version—because it appears livelier and more entertaining than its discursive counterpart, but also perhaps because the director and his screenwriter, unlike the professor, make no pretense to holding or presenting the only, absolute truth.

Although on the surface Alda appears to chastise period films that seek to capitalize on “history” without paying attention to historical facts, his Professor Burgess turns out to be little more than Hollywood’s stereotypical idea of a scholar—erudite and passionate but also blinkered and lacking in critical perspective. His response to the director’s challenge—“who really knows what happened a couple hundred years ago, Michael?”—is little more than an *argumentum ad verecundiam*: “I do—I read their diaries and their letters.” While diaries and letters are some of the documents historians bring to bear on their reconstructions of the past, they provide only one person’s vision of events; no creditable historian would mistake that account for some sort of an “objective” record.

While it was probably not Alda’s intention, *Sweet Liberty* serves as an illustration that the complex issues involved in making a mainstream history film cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between truth and fiction. This is because in a continuum between two extremes, between the factual (that which we hold to be certainly true) and the fictitious (that which we hold to be certainly false), actual history and fiction both lie somewhere in the middle, and historians must continue to work at collectively and responsibly staking their claim to an authoritative reconstruction of the past.