

From Titanic to American Sniper: the biggest lies in fact-based movies

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions.

- Which of the following types of films do you enjoy most?
 - films about the lives of real people (biopics)
 - documentaries
 - adaptations of historical events
 - films based on memoirs
 - films based on true crime
 - films based on war stories
 - films based on recent events
- When you watch a film based on a true story, how much of it do you expect to be true?
- Do you know of any fact-based films that contain inaccuracies?

2 Key words

a. Complete the gaps with the words below. In some example sentences, you will need to change the form of the word.

activism alleged aristocracy besmirch claim crewmember
debunk depict petition righteous sniper verdict

- an adjective meaning *being or believing that you are morally correct*

Thousands of people thought of him as a _____ and holy man.
- a verb meaning *to show or represent something in a story or film* _____
All the events and characters _____ in this film are entirely fictitious.
- a verb meaning *to make a formal request in a court of law* _____
The real-life heroine _____ that the film director issue a statement to clarify that some of the events in the film were not accurate.

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4. an adjective meaning *thought or stated to be wrong or illegal, but no proof has been provided yet*

Her jewellery went missing after an _____ burglary last night.

5. a verb meaning *to say that something is true although other people might not believe it, or you cannot prove it* _____

The actors _____ to have been forced to eat gone-off food in the feast scene.

6. a verb meaning *show that something is less accurate than it was made to appear*

This documentary _____ three myths about life in the Middle Ages.

7. a noun meaning *a member of a team of people who work together on a ship*

One of her _____ saw her on the deck before the storm.

8. a noun meaning *a class of people who have a high social rank* _____

Mozart was not afraid of important people and criticised the European

_____.

9. a noun meaning *the use of public methods to try and make social and political changes*

He was very involved in political _____ in his youth and attended many protests.

10. a noun meaning *someone who shoots at people from a hiding place*

The film shows the psychological effects of serving time as a _____ in the war.

11. a verb meaning *to say bad things about someone to make others think less of them*

We are not going to allow them to _____ our reputation in the newspapers.

12. a noun meaning *a decision made at the end of a trial after all the facts are given*

A _____ was reached after several days: he was found not guilty.

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Stuart Heritage

17 August, 2023

- 1 In 2009, *The Blind Side*, a film about the righteous bravery of a real-life wealthy white family who dared to adopt a troubled black teenager, was a sensation. It made its money back ten times over. It won Sandra Bullock an Oscar, and people loved it.
- 2 And yet you're unlikely to find another film that has aged quite so badly. Some people think it gives the impression that white people need to 'save' black people, and also, it now seems that most of the film might have been untrue.
- 3 In August 2023, Michael Oher, the former NFL star whose adolescence was depicted in *The Blind Side*, petitioned a Tennessee court to legally end his relationship with the family that adopted him. He alleged that they prevented him from receiving any money from *The Blind Side*, while they earned millions. He also alleged that the Tuohys had never formally adopted him, even though that is what they claimed.
- 4 *The Blind Side* isn't the only film to be debunked. Plenty of popular films got it wrong. Here are some examples.

5 Captain Phillips

This 2013 drama tells the story of the 2009 Maersk Alabama hijacking, in which Somali pirates seized control of an American cargo ship. In the film, Captain Richard Phillips saves the day with his quick thinking and courage. The film was based on Phillips's memoir. In 2013, one crewmember claimed that Phillips had ignored seven emails warning him of the presence of pirates. Other crewmembers sued Maersk for \$50m after the hijacking, claiming that they had knowingly been sent into pirate-infested waters. Maersk settled out of court.

6 Braveheart

Braveheart took liberties with the story of William Wallace. It showed him growing up in poverty (he was actually a member of the aristocracy). It showed him in kilts (hundreds of years before kilts were invented). Still, good for Scotland for playing along, by commissioning a statue of William Wallace and making it just as inaccurate as the film by getting it to look exactly like Mel Gibson.

7 Titanic

Obviously, much of *Titanic's* plot was historically accurate – there was a boat, and it sank – but James Cameron still ran into trouble. In the film, First Officer William Murdoch is shown as the corrupt officer who panics near the lifeboats, shoots a passenger in the chest, and then kills himself. While some survivors claimed to have seen an officer kill himself, others have claimed that Murdoch was swept out to sea. Murdoch's family took issue with the film's portrayal of their relative, saying it negated his reputation as a hero who launched several lifeboats. The Vice-President of Fox travelled to Murdoch's hometown to apologise and donate £5,000 to a local school.

8 Patch Adams

Meanwhile, the actual Patch Adams told Roger Ebert: "I hate that movie." Adams says it is oversimplified and reduces him to an annoyingly funny figure while ignoring his medical work and activism. Adams now carries around business cards containing the titles of 50 books so that when someone asks him for an autograph, he gives them one together with a talk on how pop culture has dumbed us down.

9 American Sniper

In this film, Bradley Cooper's Chris Kyle's arch enemy is an Iraqi sniper called Mustafa, but the pair barely met each other (if, indeed, he actually existed). Actually, Kyle himself might not have been the most trustworthy storyteller. He falsely reported the number of medals he won in service and said that he punched Jesse Ventura for besmirching the Iraq war. Ventura sued him for this, but no verdict was reached.

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First published in *The Guardian*, 17/08/2023

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3 Comprehension check

a. Select all the historically accurate facts.

1. Michael Oher, from the film *The Blind Side*, was formally adopted by the Tuohys.
2. Michael Oher gets on well with the Tuohys.
3. Richard Phillips was a hero who bravely dealt with an unexpected pirate attack.
4. Richard Phillips ignored several emails he received about the dangers of pirates.
5. William Wallace was a kilt-wearing Scot from a poor family.
6. The Fox VP apologised for the inaccurate portrayal of First Officer William Murdoch.
7. Patch Adams felt that he was more than just a comedian and wished the film had shown more of his medical work and activism.
8. Mustafa and Chris Kyle were enemies who constantly met each other during the war.
9. Chris Kyle didn't receive any medals in service.

4 Key language

a. Complete the phrases with the correct prepositions from the article.

1. make (one's) money _____ X times _____
2. based _____ a memoir
3. warn someone _____ danger
4. be sent _____ ... waters / danger
5. play _____ _____ someone else's idea
6. be swept _____ _____ sea
7. take issue _____ something
8. carry _____ business cards

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b. Rewrite the sentences using the phrases from the previous article.

1. He pretended to believe our lies.
2. The film shows the story of Nelen Moon, which first came out as a book.
3. The show got a 100% return on investment.
4. What do you take with you in your bag?
5. What did Bailey disagree about so fiercely?
6. She felt out of her depth, like a duckling in the open sea.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Films should entertain, not educate.”
- “A film based on a ‘true story’ does not need to be 100% accurate.”
- “Film directors should act more responsibly with the truth.”

6 In your own words

a. Choose a film that you like that is based on facts. Research the actual events that the film is based on and investigate to see if any parts of the film are not historically accurate.

b. Report your findings to the class.

Useful language

In real life, the protagonist/events is/are portrayed ...

The film shows ...

It is (not) quite true that ...

The film is (not) accurate when it shows ...

Another inaccuracy is ...