

# The French Revolution on Film: American and French Perspectives

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IT IS NOT HARD TO LOCATE negative or condescending images of the French Revolution in aspects of popular American culture, including film. Despite a handful of instances where nuanced or ambiguous “messages” may be identified, the number of American film interpretations of the French Revolution that might be judged historically “valid” is miniscule. Over the years, directors and producers in the movie industry have shown little inclination to explore in much depth the complex historical issues posed by the Revolution or to offer a genuinely balanced “take” on the events. Instead the work of film-makers, like most popular American assessments of the events of 1789-1794, has tended to conflate the entirety of the Revolution with the Terror of 1793-1794. Scholars from Europe and North America have long been fascinated by the intellectual and research vistas opened up by the events of the French Revolution, but the approach of American movie makers to this period, with one or two exceptions, has been mostly one-dimensional.

The discomfort with which Americans have viewed the French Revolution will not come as a surprise to historians. Yet in a number of ways this attitude is difficult to explain, since from an historical perspective the American and French Revolutions and the republics that emerged from them were, in the opinion of many scholars, “sister” events.<sup>1</sup> The affini-

ties, one might think, would lead to sympathetic popular portrayals of the other nation's revolution. But in the case of film this has happened in only incomplete ways. This paper considers one manner in which popular impressions of the French Revolution have taken shape in the United States by examining interpretations found in four American films, and then comparing these depictions with other, mostly French, movies. The question of why it has proved such a challenge for American movie makers to offer a historically balanced approach to France's revolution may also offer some insight into the difficulties into which Franco-American relations periodically seem to slip.

It goes almost without saying that film has assumed a significant role in the shaping of popular opinion about the past.<sup>2</sup> Film scholar Leger Grindon, who has written considerably on representations of the French Revolution in film, explains this by noting that historical movies offer "an appeal to authority, a veiling of intention, an escape into nostalgia, and a search for origins"—qualities that, rightly or wrongly, can serve as pillars of popular understanding about the past.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, historical movies may even be said to play a role in shaping a nation's "master narrative." Film has become a vital and virtually omni-present device for representing history, and one which historians ignore at the peril of losing touch with their audiences of students and readers.

Despite film's potential impact as a vehicle for molding views about the past, historians have been, for a long time, reluctant to look closely at film interpretations or to accept the insights of film scholars. This hesitation has begun to dissolve in the last decade or so as prominent professional journals like the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History* now regularly incorporate film reviews into their coverage, and as it becomes more common to see history instructors offering courses on "history and film" or endeavoring in a variety of ways to tackle the pedagogy of teaching with movies.<sup>4</sup> As a conceptual device for making sense of the past, too, movies are showing signs, here and there, of maturing. The historian Natalie Zemon Davis has argued that despite the criticisms frequently leveled (often, properly so) at it by scholars, film has demonstrated some promise in developing a methodology to draw out the historical truth. Accordingly, Davis challenges professional historians to "take film seriously as a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision."<sup>5</sup> Noting that the film industry has now been with us for nearly a century, and considering the impact that movies have upon culture and popular opinion, this advice seems well founded. However it obviously remains important to distinguish the reasonable and historically valid film depictions of the past from those movies that offer outlandish or wrong-headed interpretations.

## **The French Revolution**

As the subject of scholarly interest and research, the French Revolution has been with us almost since it took place. As early as the first decades of the 1800s, the Revolution began to appear to scholars, commentators and writers as a kind of prescient moment, as a historical blueprint, as it were, for the course of action that a modern society in transition should, or should not follow. In this sense, the history of the Revolution could be approached as the “script” par excellence of modernity, so that in the nineteenth century persons with even a little education might be expected to be familiar with its major personalities and the outlines of its political history. By the 1820s, liberal political economists in France and elsewhere were casting the French (and American) Revolution as the first clearly identifiable, successful bourgeois revolution, a view later absorbed by Karl Marx.<sup>6</sup> By the second half of the century, the French Revolution was being fitted decisively into a revised history of Europe and of the world that gave the event a central role, a schematizing that remains influential to this day. At the same time, mostly French scholars specializing in the history of the period began to speculate, and sometimes to argue, about whether the authoritarian qualities apparent in some aspects of the last period of the Revolution were inherent in it even in the comparatively moderate early days of 1789-1791. Later, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the emergence of the Soviet Union partly displaced the French Revolution as a model of modern political and social upheaval. Still, well into the twentieth century, scholars continued to dig deep into the archives of the period and persisted in debating the Revolution’s “meaning”—for France, for Europe and for the world. Even today, as the Soviet experiment has ended and the era of great revolutions apparently faded, the French Revolution, and particularly the question of whether or not the violence and dictatorship of the Terror of 1793-1794 was intrinsic in the words and ideas of the “project” from the start, continues to provoke a bounty of dissertations, journal articles and books. Despite the many interpretive developments that have occurred in the field in the last century or more, scholars continue to rate the French Revolution as one of “the decisive event(s) of modern history.”<sup>7</sup>

## **The French Revolution on Film**

Despite all of the work done by scholars over the years, however, only a handful of the Revolution’s controversies and issues that have gripped the imagination of historians have made it into the movies. Instead, as film industries developed across western European and the United States

in the first half of the twentieth century, movie makers settled upon aspects of the Revolution's history that they believed could draw audiences to the cinema, though these were not always the topics or interpretations that were of most interest to historians. Through the 1930s, filmmakers especially relied upon scripts derived from nineteenth-century stage plays and melodramatic novels about the Revolution. Typically these stories dwelt upon heroic and un-heroic characters, many of them fictional (such as *Scaramouche*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Anthony Adverse*), who were shown being caught up in court intrigues and near-escapes. By the end of the Second World War, however, it appeared that such screen fare had become hackneyed and overly familiar to the movie-going audience, so that this early genre of film about the French Revolution appeared, for the time being, played out. Still, the imagery and messages that had been fostered went virtually unchallenged in later screen versions of the Revolution.

The first movie to deal in whole or part with the Revolution was an 1897 French production by the Lumière brothers: *The Assassination of Marat* (*Assassinat du Marat*).<sup>8</sup> Since then and through the late 1980s, there have been approximately 300 films on the topic.<sup>9</sup> Almost half (138) of these were French, while 52 were American films.<sup>10</sup> The first American production was *Marie-Antoinette*, released by the Biograph studio in 1904. By decade, the most American films about the French Revolution was 1910-19 with twelve; then in the 1930s ten were made, seven in the 1940s, and six each in the 1920s and 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Only one movie dealing with the Revolution was made in the 1970s and only one in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Notable American films about the Revolution, aside from those addressed in this article, include *Du Barry* (1917; dir. J. Gordon Edwards); *Scaramouche* (1923; dir. Rex Ingram); *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935; dir. Jack Conway); and *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1938; dir. Hans Schwartz). Clearly, since the early decades of the American film industry, the French Revolution as screen topic has faded.

This paper focuses on four American films involving the era of the French Revolution: *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), directed by D.W. Griffith; *Marie Antoinette* (1938), directed by W.S. Van Dyke; *The Black Book* (1949), directed by Anthony Mann; and *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), directed by James Ivory. These movies have been selected because they span the century and because they fit into relatively distinct creative eras. The only one of them that might be labeled a "blockbuster" in its day was Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm*. *Marie Antoinette*, though it came close in popular appeal to *Orphans of the Storm*, was a disappointment creatively. *The Black Book* was by all estimates a "B movie," and *Jefferson in Paris*, though widely released, appealed to a fairly limited audience. Each

film may be said to offer a snapshot of the contemporary American film “take” on the French Revolution.

### Film Synopses

D.W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm*, probably the best known of the four movies among film scholars, is a silent, 250-minute spectacle, with a script drawn from a nineteenth-century French stage play.<sup>13</sup> The story revolves around two “sisters” (played by the acting sisters Lillian and Dorothy Gish) brought up in a French aristocratic family: “Louise” (Dorothy Gish), the blind, natural daughter of her parents, and “Henriette” (Lillian Gish), born to peasants but adopted into the noble family. Louise and Henriette are loving siblings whose attachment drives the plot. The story depicts the kidnapping of the blind Louise and Henriette's relentless search for her sister amidst the turmoil of the Revolution. There are numerous improbable, sometimes outlandish, encounters with famous figures of the period, including the popular revolutionary leader Georges Danton, who is cast as one of the film's heroes. Social typecasting abounds: the sisters themselves, united by filial love despite their different social origins, serve as an obvious metaphor for divisions in French society; a handsome, kind-hearted aristocrat who falls in love with Henriette along with the well-meaning but beleaguered aristocratic parents who represent the products of a doomed culture; and a conniving, streetwise “Mother Frochard” who holds Louise against her will. The film offers other familiar landmarks for the audience to grasp on to: anarchic crowds (variously labeled “the mob,” “riff-raff” or “hoodlums”); the “dread (Revolutionary) Tribunal” where political victims were judged; and, inevitably, “Madame Guillotine.” At the end of the movie, and just in the nick of time, Henriette is saved from the guillotine's blade by Danton, the sisters are reunited, Robespierre's “Reign of Terror” is over and “real democracy” returns to France.

*Marie Antoinette*, a 1938 MGM production directed by W.S. Van Dyke, was projected as “Hollywood's most important and ambitious treatment of the period” to that date; in the end, it also turned out to be the most “pretentious.”<sup>14</sup> Here the story starts not with the Revolution, but years earlier with the marriage of the title character (played by Norma Shearer) and the Dauphin of France, the future King Louis XVI (Robert Morley). The Duke of Orléans, a cousin of the king and central player at court, is cast as an opportunist who later in the movie, adopts a new moniker—“Philippe Egalité”—an act which signals to the audience the inherent cynicism of revolutionary leaders. He is also a cruel conniver who takes advantage of the queen's innocent fondness for expensive

goods. The Parisian “mob” is abruptly introduced in the second half of the film and plays an important role thereafter. Here, the “people” appear grim and unkempt, offering a startling contrast to the overdone sumptuousness of the queen and her court. The start of the Revolution, of which growing popular hatred of the Queen is one critical ingredient, is partly viewed as the product of the machinations of Orléans. The story ends tragically as first the king is executed, his son is made to testify against his mother and, finally, Marie Antoinette herself is brought to the guillotine. Through much of the movie, the audience is alternately titillated by hints of the queen’s infidelity and moved by a romantic affair with the honorable aristocrat Axel Fersen (played by Tyrone Power). The MGM studio spent lavishly to produce the movie, with the result that the sets and wardrobe were of exceeding “opulence.”<sup>15</sup> However, so much liberty is taken with the history of the period that the Revolution is virtually incomprehensible in this film.

*The Black Book* (titled *The Reign of Terror* at its debut in 1949) is set during the period of *Thermidor*, which was the end of the Terror in 1794. The “black book” of the title is a list of “enemies” produced by Maximilien Robespierre (played by Richard Basehart) the members of which are sought by a cast of characters, both fictional and non-fictional. The movie’s protagonist is the fictional “Duval/Charles” (Robert Cummings) a double agent dispatched by the exiled Lafayette to work with friends in France to bring down Robespierre and the “Reign of Terror.” “Madeleine” (Arlene Dahl) is Duval’s romantic interest and a co-conspirator. Historical figures (though their characters are much altered for the screen) include Joseph Fouché, Paul Barras, Jean-Lambert Tallien, Louis Saint-Just and (for good measure!) Napoléon Bonaparte. Here as in *Orphans of the Storm* the demarcation between what is “good” for France and what is “bad” is made obvious to the filmgoer, so that when Robespierre meets the fate—the guillotine—he had designed for the others listed in his “black book,” the happy future of France is assured. A distinguishing feature of the movie that places it squarely within its genre is its film noir style: the production is mostly shadowy, atmospheric and dark; the characters have an ambiguous manner; and the theme of conspiracy is present everywhere in the narrative.<sup>16</sup>

*Jefferson in Paris* was released in 1995 by the filmmaking team of producer Ismail Merchant and director James Ivory. The story occurs during Thomas Jefferson’s tenure as American representative to France (1785 to 1789) and so the French Revolution serves mostly as dramatic backdrop. The focus is Jefferson (Nick Nolte) himself and his relations with a daughter who has accompanied him (played by Gwyneth Paltrow). There is romantic interest provided by both the visiting English aristocrat

Maria Cosway (played by Greta Scaachi); and Sally Hemmings (Thandie Newton), the young slave from Virginia woven into the second half of the film who, by the end, is pregnant with Jefferson's child. The main part of the story starts with Jefferson's formal introduction to the court of Louis XVI and ends with his departure for home in 1789, just as the Revolution has reached an early climax. In between, and aside from the subplots involving the other characters, Jefferson is portrayed as a sincere, high-minded, but abstemious and somewhat naïve figure for whom the political and social disturbances in France are the false dawn of another "glorious revolution."

Despite the many years separating the four productions, similar depictions of the French Revolution are present in each. Not surprisingly, all are mostly character-driven, projecting a popularized version of events as background to the vicissitudes of individual life stories. This is obviously the case for *Jefferson* and *Marie Antoinette*. In *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Black Book*, the main actors, though fictionalized, possess essential traits that turn them into composites of literary and theatrical types that would have been familiar to the audience. Historical personalities appear, but here, too, patterns prevail. Lafayette—by far, the most familiar French figure to American audiences—is depicted in three of the films (the character is absent in *Marie Antoinette*) as the heroic and friendly aristocrat who through his experience of the American Revolution has, so to speak, "seen the light" of a republican and democratic future. Danton, probably the favorite revolutionary leader of ordinary French people, becomes "the Abraham Lincoln of France" in *Orphans* (presumably because he helps to free the "slaves" of the Old Regime) and near the conclusion races on a white charger (in a scene recalling the ride of the Ku Klux Klan in Griffiths' 1915 production of *Birth of A Nation*) to save the heroine from the guillotine. In *The Black Book*, just before his early and unjust execution by the Revolutionary Tribunal, Danton is described in narration as "the soldier, the savior of France." France's ruling family, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, have been executed by the time the narrative of *The Black Book* gets underway, and indeed the country's long monarchical past receives virtually no mention in this movie. In *Orphans of the Storm* the king appears very briefly; otherwise, when reference is made to him it is to label his reign as one of "tyranny" and selfishness. Marie Antoinette, often the subject of sympathy in popular American histories of the French Revolution, is not mentioned at all in this movie. *Orphans* thus reveals a notable anti-monarchical and anti-aristocratic strain that certainly reflected the populist sentiments of the director, Griffiths.<sup>17</sup>

Virtually the opposite is true of the costume drama *Marie Antoinette*,

where the royal couple are central figures and the audience is persuaded mostly to sympathize with the queen, despite the travails she (innocently) brings upon herself, the monarchy and all of France. The king and queen have a significant role to play in *Jefferson in Paris*, where they come across in formulaic fashion as friendly, but also as foppish, aloof and utterly out-of-touch—clearly unprepared to handle the “storm” that is about to sweep them away. Robespierre, the preeminent personality on the Committee of Public Safety during the Terror, is not in *Jefferson*, which takes place during the period of the “Pre-Revolution,” but Robespierre does have a small part in *Marie Antoinette*, in *Orphans of the Storm* and a major role in *The Black Book*. In the latter two, Robespierre is a malevolent figure. Particularly in *The Black Book*, Robespierre’s machinations are draped in the shadowy film noir style that, at moments, renders his character virtually that of a monster.<sup>18</sup> Aside from *Jefferson in Paris*, it is particularly the events and imagery of the Terror of 1793–1794—the Paris crowd, the guillotine, the figures of Robespierre and Marat—that overshadow all other aspects and accomplishments of the period, dominating representations in these silver screen interpretations as they have also dominated in popular books and theater.<sup>19</sup>

Along with character constructions, there are other broad similarities in the four films. A negative iconography of the French Revolution, common in Anglo-American culture by the early twentieth century, shows up frequently: severed heads perched on pikes and murdered “aristos” in *Orphans of the Storm*; a torture chamber and secret police in *The Black Book*; out-of-control mobs in *Marie Antoinette*. The guillotine as ominous backdrop is perhaps the single most foreboding image in all four movies. The stirring climax of *Orphans* is set at the scaffold, while *The Black Box* begins and ends with frightening images of a descending blade. Likewise *Marie Antoinette* concludes at the guillotine, though in this case predictably so and with the execution alluded to rather than shown on screen. Even *Jefferson in Paris*, which occurs before the Revolution had gone beyond its initial moderate phase, has a scene where the title character shares a dining table with Dr. Guillotin, who displays a model of his new invention while explaining its “humane” application to an aristocratic audience whose fate, unbeknownst to the assembled group, will be closely tied to the terrible machine—an irony the viewing audience is meant to feel immediately.

“The mob,” another easily graspable image from the Revolution, comes across strongly in the films, where events are cast as prey to its impetuous and anarchic desires. This is certainly the case in *Marie Antoinette*, where despite the errors of judgment she has sometimes made, the audience is made to sympathize with the queen and to despise

and fear “the people.” In *Orphans of the Storm*, however, the crowd appears as the product of “natural” instincts that can turn it in a moment from a riotous “riff-raff” into “the people,” innately virtuous and sensible. But in *The Black Book*, the crowd shows up both in the streets and in the legislative assembly, contributing to “anarchy, murder, arson, fear.” By its implicit licentiousness the mob sets the stage for “dictatorship.” Especially at the beginning of the movie as the director Anthony Mann establishes the context of the story, there are lurid images of distorted faces in the crowd. The message here seems to be that pretensions to citizenship have been perverted to create monsters. In *Jefferson in Paris*, there is a hint of incipient anarchy as the crowd makes an early appearance, burning an effigy of the finance minister Charles Alexandre de Calonne as Jefferson coolly watches. Thereafter, the crowd appears periodically as a premonition of disorder.

### **Are These American Films “Valid Historical Inventions?”**

Historians and film studies scholars have been keenly aware of the stereotypes that show up time and again in American movies about the French Revolution. Probably few would disagree that “valid (historical) inventions” are rare to find in the filmography of the Revolution.<sup>20</sup> But scholars have also recognized the occasional earnest effort by a filmmaker to slip into a production a sophisticated or at least empathetic interpretation of the events. For their part, French scholars generally note that American and other foreign films about the French Revolution tend to neglect salient issues, even deliberately so, with the historical setting chosen mostly as “a pretext to produce a costume drama, and with a reservoir of subjects often already codified in theater.”<sup>21</sup> French film scholars have been struck by the prominent place of the guillotine in American movies, with the machine seemingly inserted into the story as a signpost to tell the audience that the Revolution has gone astray from its initial democratic path. As one French scholar writes, the guillotine as “a place of unwholesome (*malsaine*) fascination (is) more extensive in the Anglo-Saxon nations than in France.”<sup>22</sup> From the French point of view, nearly all American films about the Revolution adopt a tragic or negative tone, employing film scripts that are apparently uninterested in the long-term origins or results of the event.<sup>23</sup> Rather it is the political extremes of the era—king, queen and Royalists on one side, Jacobins and Montagnards (the latter, two of the political factions of the period) that typically draw the attention of screenwriters and directors.

Similarly, American and British scholars have been struck by recurrent images and themes in American films about the French Revolution,

and indeed by the “historiographical flaw,” as one writes, “which only a non-French production could tolerate. This flaw is that the whole of the Revolution, from the moment of the Bastille, is equated with the Terror.”<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, the two most “uniquely Anglo-Saxon” movies about the Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, have been rendered over and over again on film.<sup>25</sup> Such interpretive approaches were not inevitable, of course, for filmmakers, arguably more so than historians, have the opportunity to make choices about ways to depict the past. Moreover, it is not only what filmmakers choose to portray on the screen that is important but what they omit. As Leger writes, “The meaning of historical films grows not simply from the episodes they choose to portray; their silences also speak.”<sup>26</sup>

From the historians’ point of view, can the depictions in the movies surveyed here be said to offer “valid inventions” of the French Revolution?<sup>27</sup> *Marie Antoinette* is certainly the least sympathetic from the historians’ perspective, since the film is hardly more than a sustained costume drama, with the historical setting and story having little purpose save as vehicles for the display of gowns and elaborate interior design. Neither can *Orphans of the Storm* nor *The Black Book* be described as providing “valid inventions,” since both are too much plagued by outlandish scenarios. In these two movies, the temptation to make characters either fully good or fully bad robs the personalities, historical or otherwise, of shading and nuance. *Orphans of the Storm*, in which Georges Danton rides to the rescue to save the aristocratic heroine from the guillotine, simply cannot be judged a credible representation of the past; nor can *The Black Book*, where the momentous political decisions of the day are made prey to a predictable Hollywood screen romance.

Still, this is not to say that these latter two films are entirely without historical merit, for they do “hit the mark” in sometimes surprising, and for the historian, even gratifying ways. The production values of *Orphans* are ambitious, with an epic scope mostly lacking in the other films: Griffith’s crowds are large and boisterous, leaving the viewer to feel that, once in motion, they truly could change the course of events. This is in contrast to the crowds in *The Black Book* and, especially, *Jefferson* where they appear too small to pose a threat to the political order. Many of the scenes in *Orphans of the Storm* are open and spacious, properly giving the sense that the events of the story were played out in popular venues in one of the eighteenth-century’s great cities. In contrast, the stories of *The Black Book* and *Jefferson in Paris* are mostly set in drawing rooms and offices, where the feel is cloistered and private. In addition, and despite other drawbacks, *Orphans* and *The Black Book* introduce an aspect that is rare in popular American depictions of the French Revolution: a some-

what positive, or at least nuanced, assessment of the Revolution's larger meaning and effect. At the end of *Orphans of the Storm* all is well: the heroine is saved from the guillotine, as crowds—only moments earlier egging on the executioner—applaud Danton's last-minute heroics; the sisters are reunited, the blind Louise somehow regaining her sight (!) and betrothed to her love interest. Meantime, gardens bloom, the French national anthem (the "Marseillaise") is cued and the audience is told that France has been placed on the road to "real democracy." *The Black Book*, whose opening scenes show misshapen images of revolutionary leaders, ends with the guillotine being put to "better use": Robespierre himself executed and the "Reign of Terror" over. Despite the grotesqueness of some of the imagery and the preposterous plot, there are elements of the history that this movie remarkably gets right and which are hardly to be found in other film depictions of the Revolution: Lafayette's exile, the inclusion of historical personalities unfamiliar to most American moviegoers (Barras, Fouché, Tallien, Saint-Just), Robespierre's wounding in the jaw just before his execution (a detail worked imaginatively into the script), and the overall tone of conspiracy, which lent itself to the film noir styling of the day, but which also captures the mood of this period of the Revolution.<sup>28</sup> At the end of both films (though of course *Orphans* was produced during the silent era), the "Marseillaise" is played as a stirring *dénouement* and as a reminder that the Revolution did also produce things of worth. By the time the viewer leaves the theater in these two films, and even if the history has been thoroughly muddled, the Revolution is not such a bad thing, after all.

On the other hand, *Jefferson in Paris*, which through its attention to detail and personality more carefully adheres to the historical record than the other films, can perhaps be called a "valid invention." Nonetheless, the film probably left moviegoers with a skeptical and in this sense a traditional Anglo-American take on the French Revolution. The production sees the Revolution through the eyes of Jefferson as an inevitable if not wholly reasonable response to the injustices heaped upon "the people." The French household servants who appear in the film seem "freer" in their outlook and habits than do the increasingly resentful slaves who have accompanied Jefferson to France. Yet even as the French servants demonstrate to the American slaves their (the French servants') contempt for the upper-class society around them, it is not clear that the rebellion bubbling up amongst them will be the right course of action. Meantime, the filmmakers conjure up stereotypes to set the historical stage for the viewing audience: the anarchic crowd; a premonition of the guillotine; and the view of Old Regime society as decadent and on the verge of collapse. Jefferson himself is shown as sympathetic to the French people,

but also as a little naïve in believing that their aspirations, lacking the wholesome good sense of his own countrymen, will bring about change without violent and disastrous results.

Considering the underlying financial motives at play in producing films, it is certainly not helpful to over-interpret the implications of the films reviewed here for an understanding of the French Revolution, nor the impact of these movies upon the historical literacy of their intended audiences. No doubt, the pre-eminent goal of the makers of these movies was to entertain and to generate profits for the production company. The creative energies that directors, screenwriters and actors bring to bear on their films are obviously different from the skills and resources that historians bring to their work. About *The Black Book*, for example, the historian Mark Ferro writes that it is really “more than a historical film” because it is noteworthy for what it has to say about film making styles and the mannerisms of the film noir era than for what it has to offer as an interpretation of the French Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Still, historical films can have a real impact on how an audience understands the past. If films, like other cultural objects, can be said to be products of their times, it is not difficult to find ways in which particular movies do, or do not, fit with the tenor of the era in which they are produced. In this regard, there are several explanations that help account for the approach of American filmmakers to the French Revolution.

The emphasis on personalities and narrative is of course not surprising. Audiences have long been accustomed to this approach, and filmmakers have had few incentives to deviate from formula. Nevertheless, film producers, directors and screenwriters, even when they are pressed by many interests, including the need to turn a profit, have the opportunity to make crucial choices about the direction a movie takes and the messages it conveys. In the case of the French Revolution, scripts more often than not recite a gloomy tale in which the “failures” of the period are more pronounced than its “successes.” Plausible alternative interpretations of the Revolution, of the sort, for instance, which have been explored for decades by academic historians, apparently are not the stuff of a good film storyline. Having seen any of these movies, an American audience almost certainly would have been likely to “read” the Revolution as a period of unfathomable chaos and not as an attempt to negotiate the difficult transition from subject to citizen made in very difficult circumstances, or as an attempt to attain what would later be termed “human rights.”

No doubt, some of the emphasis upon individual stories and the simplified moral universe embedded in the scripts has to do with aspects of American education and religious instruction (though this article does

not explore that avenue of analysis). In addition, Americans have for a long time often been treated to condescending views of the French Revolution through schooling, literature, newspapers and theater. Such views conformed to stereotypes about France and the French that took shape in the United States as early as the mid-nineteenth century. These views were accompanied by the supposition that the American Revolution was somehow situated on a higher moral plane than the French Revolution.<sup>30</sup> The differences between the seemingly consensual American Revolution and the seemingly divisive French Revolution could hardly help but influence perceptions over the long-term.<sup>31</sup> In each of the films described here, it is not hard to find implicit or explicit comparisons between the American and French Revolutions in which the former comes off as the clear superior of the two. In this regard, film producers almost certainly desired to give audiences what they expected to see. At the same time, the events and trajectory of the French Revolution have sometimes served as a device for American commentators to draw attention away from the difficulties and divisions that in fact marked the history of the American Revolution. Thus Ferro, a French historian who has written on a variety of topics, asks rhetorically why it is that “Americans are more interested in the French Revolution than in their own revolution, a choice which allows them not to approach a taboo stage of their history.”<sup>32</sup>

American treatments of the French Revolution have also been influenced by an Anglo-American “black legend” about the Revolution which began with Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and the subsequent genre of historical writing about the Revolution, of which Thomas Carlyle’s *History of the French Revolution* (1837) and Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) became the most representative and the most influential accounts in English.<sup>33</sup> The influence of both Carlyle and Dickens are strong in *Orphans of the Storm*, where director D.W. Griffiths relied heavily upon Carlyle’s descriptions of Danton and Robespierre for his (Griffiths’) screen characterizations.<sup>34</sup> No doubt, Griffiths and other American directors could count upon playing to audiences that were familiar with the critical Anglo-American view of the French Revolution rather than empathetic French accounts. For their part, French commentators have noted the prevalence of the “black legend” in the English-speaking world and the stereotypes it has generated. These latter include a chronology of the Revolution in which things go well at the start and then move inexorably toward the Terror, with the figures of Marat and Robespierre, along with the guillotine, the Paris “mob” and war becoming the “symbolic archetypes” of the era.<sup>35</sup> Though less prominent in American productions, English film versions

of the French Revolution have tended to side with the royal family and even to equate “Jacobinism with totalitarianism.”<sup>36</sup> An alternative approach to making sense of the French Revolution would have been to emphasize the transformation of subjects into citizens, the centralizing and unifying power of the Revolution, and its universalist implications, even amidst the terrible strains of domestic division and the threat of foreign war. These alternative themes are evident, for instance, in the French production of Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* (1938) but hardly draw the attention of American film makers.

Accordingly, it is not hard to find politicized, anti-revolutionary perspectives and “statements” in the films surveyed here.<sup>37</sup> In the case of *Orphans of the Storm*, the political element in the story reflects the “Red Scare” that was part of the reaction to the Russian Revolution in the United States. Though an anti-monarchist thread is woven into the movie’s script, the film’s purpose, as observers have often noted, was frankly “anti-bolshevist.”<sup>38</sup> Thus at least twice in the movie, and despite the obvious anachronism, the character of Maximilien Robespierre is linked to “Bolshevism.”<sup>39</sup> The effect of contemporary attitudes about the Cold War seems quite strong in *The Black Book*, where the story becomes the struggle of the individual against “dictatorship,” “conspiracy,” “secret police” and “terror.” At the time, audiences almost certainly would have seen these as allusions to the Stalinist Soviet Union, though a case can be made that the fears expressed in the film are those about the effects of war and oppression in general. In hindsight, Robespierre’s “black book” seems just as easily a hint of the “list” of communists and state enemies alluded to by Joseph McCarthy a year later.<sup>40</sup>

### Film and “Master Narrative”

Curiously, though perhaps not surprisingly, in the movies on the French Revolution surveyed here, it is the *American*, not the French, national “master narrative” that seems to play out.<sup>41</sup> If film as “national cinema” can both convey and contribute to a country’s “master narrative,” then what better topic for film makers to seize upon than revolution—the moment of “birth” for so many modern nations.<sup>42</sup> *Orphans of the Storm*, though its populist themes accord well with some elements of Parisian and French history in the revolutionary era, really speaks more to American sensibilities about social class and gender relations set within the epic story of national “rebirth and renewal.”<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, the implicit attacks against aristocracy in *Orphans* come across as a populist-inspired critique of American monopolistic capitalism. In this sense, the movie belongs to the corpus of Griffiths’ films like

*A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and *Birth of a Nation*. At the beginning of *Marie Antoinette*, and before the story becomes completely muddled, this movie fits into that genre of American film in which the high-spirited and innocent ingénue makes her way in the “big city,” in this case Paris “before the deluge” of the Revolution. Anthony Mann’s *The Black Book* adopts character constructions of independent-minded and self-assured males who battle bureaucrats and central government for leading characters in his film. These constructions more closely resemble the rugged individualists who would later populate the film westerns Mann would become well-known for than, for instance, they do the distinctly late eighteenth-century European personalities which emerge from the telling mini-biographies of Robespierre, Saint-Just and others on the Committee of Public Safety in R.R. Palmer’s classic *Twelve Who Ruled*, published just eight years before the release of the movie. And *Jefferson in Paris* is really about the failed promise of the American Revolution and the blind hypocrisy of slave-owning Thomas Jefferson more than it is about pre-Revolution Paris. French characters show up in *Jefferson in Paris* and the other films, but not France’s national “narrative.”

But perhaps this approach to film is to be expected. To this point, Peter Burley writes that when

looking at (film) interpretations of (the French Revolution) on a national basis there is a straight division between France and the rest of the world. In every country except France audiences have wanted a consistent interpretation of the Revolution not varying over the decades. In France, by contrast, there are very distinct phases of film making which follow changes in the political climate.<sup>44</sup>

The point of our discussion of master narrative becomes clearer when one considers films made by French producers and directors about their country’s revolution. While it is impossible to review the 300 or more French movies on the topic, five examples of well-known French films about the Revolution may help illustrate the point.

*La Marseillaise*, directed by Jean Renoir and released in 1938, is probably the most famous French movie about the revolution.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the majority of American films cited here, *La Marseillaise* refuses to be obsessed by the political violence of the period. Rather, it adopts a different line of analysis, asserting that the developments of this tumultuous era initially divide, but then ultimately centralize and unite France. A French master narrative, reminiscent and perhaps drawn from the “stories” of modern France by nineteenth-century historians Jules Michelet and Ernst Renan, runs confidently through the movie.<sup>46</sup> The story follows the personal evolution of three main characters—volunteer soldiers from

Marseilles—as they put aside regional and political differences in a slow but steady process of assimilating into the broader national and, as the film clarifies at the end, universal goals of the Revolution. Initially resistant to the modernizing process, the characters finally come around and avail themselves of the promises and principles of the age. The result is a personal and collective triumph over the baggage of the old regime—provincialism, egotism and political passivism. Unlike most movies about the Revolution, not all of the action here is set in Paris. Perhaps most noticeably, the guillotine does not even appear! In contrast to the somber tone and intrigue found in so many American-made French Revolution films, the mood in *La Marseillaise* is mostly light-hearted and carefree. Still, produced as it was in the late 1930s at a moment when France and Germany appeared headed for war, the story is also thoroughly patriotic because at the end, the playfulness of the volunteers has been put aside as they set off determinedly, but also with a little foreboding, against the Prussian invaders of France.

It must be said, however, that for all its verve *La Marseillaise* does not do full justice to the history of the Revolution. The portrayal of the Austrian-born queen, Marie Antoinette, for instance, is almost xenophobic, and there's no hint of the anarchic "September Massacres," which were very close in time to the events that conclude the film. But overall *La Marseillaise* does "adhere to the spirit" of the historical evidence of the Revolution, and in the end imparts to the viewer "a credible historical tale."<sup>47</sup> More to the point, the film offers the sort of interpretive take on France's master narrative that is all but totally absent in American movies, while also demonstrating or reminding the viewer that alternative, comparatively upbeat, film interpretations of the Revolution are possible.

Four other French films set during the era of the Revolution—one produced before *La Marseillaise* and the other three some decades after—also present historical "tales" that seem alien compared to the standard American fare. Director Abel Gance's celebrated *Napoléon* (1927) is a film biography of the early career of the famous general who later became emperor of France. The film, originally conceived as the first installment of a six-part biographical film series, concludes in 1796, just as the young general is ready to embark on his first important military campaign (the first Italian expedition), a campaign that brings him fame and also serves to spread the ideals of the Revolution beyond France. Because the film is about the young Napoléon, a good portion of the story is set during the Revolution. Here events are presented from a more-or-less "Bonapartist" point-of-view, meaning that there is agreement with the ideals of the period, but discomfort with the disorderliness of their

implementation. Still it is not the Revolution itself, but the decadence of the *Thermidorean* period (the post-Revolution years of 1795-1799) that comes off badly in this film interpretation. It is not hard to see here that the director, Gance, hoped to invoke one version of the French “master narrative”: Napoléon as an adherent to the promises of the Revolution, but also as an antidote to its “extremism.” His personal career is thus analogous to the history of modern France and symbolizes another stage in the emergence of the unified, centralized, egalitarian promise of the Revolution embodied for Gance, perhaps, by the Third Republic, during which the movie was produced.<sup>48</sup>

*La Nuit de Varennes* (1982) is a French and Italian co-production directed by Ettore Scola. The movie takes place in June, 1791, and revolves around the meeting of several historical personalities, including Giovanni Casanova, Tom Paine and the French writer Nicolas Rétif de la Bretonne (who has the central role as the story’s narrator), all of whom are caught up in one of the better-known episodes of the Revolution: the King’s “Flight to Varennes.” The story has these characters thrown together, quite implausibly, in a carriage that is on the same road, but just behind the conveyance of King Louis XVI and his family, who are in the process of abandoning France and the Revolution. Like Renoir’s *La Marseillaise*, the tone of *La Nuit* is earthy and a little whimsical. “*Le peuple*” here are mostly friendly. They are interested in politics, but not to the point of becoming *disinterested* in other spheres of human activity: food, drink, conversation and love. A historical reconstruction such as this, even if a rendezvous of Rétif de la Bretonne, Casanova and Paine seems ludicrous, feels much more like a “valid invention” than the remarkably different mindsets that went into the production of *Marie Antoinette* or *The Black Book*. If *La Nuit de Varenne* can be fitted into a French master narrative, then it is, like *La Marseillaise* and Gance’s *Napoléon*, the story of how the old France—the *ancien régime*, personified especially by the king and his entourage—has outlived its day and is, grudgingly being pushed aside by the future, represented by the Revolution. The characters of Rétif and Tom Paine are more-or-less conscious of the watershed of history they are participating in. This is made clear at the end of the movie when Rétif promenades away from the France of the 1790s and into the bustling Paris of the 1980s. Even Casanova—whose character still indulges in all of the foibles of the fading aristocracy—is nonetheless psychically prepared to accept the inevitable. All of this is conveyed with humor and empathy, and without the guillotine.

Another production of 1982, Polish film director Andrzej Wajda’s *Danton*, a French-Polish co-production, shows that a movie about the Revolution produced in France certainly can cater to the iconography so

prevalent in American films, though in this case it is not altogether clear that the “master narrative” at play is a French one. *Danton*’s script was drawn from a Polish stage play of the 1920s, and the production feels very much like the product of the world-view and real life experiences of Wajda himself. The somber tone of the movie is arguably a reflection of the director’s recent experiences with the Solidarity movement in Poland and the declaration of martial law in that country late in 1981 as the film was in production.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps no depiction of the Revolution places the guillotine so squarely and ominously before the viewer, as the movie begins and ends with agonizing images of the blade. Not surprisingly, many critics saw Wajda’s approach as too heavy-handed, too politicized, and too much a transference of East European animosity against the Soviet Union to France of the 1790s.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, and most recently, Eric Rohmer’s *L’Anglaise et le Duc* of 2001 (released in the United States as *The Lady and the Duke*) is set in the midst of the French Revolution, though the title character is not French but the wealthy Scottish expatriate Grace Dalrymple Elliot (whose memoir, *Journal of My Life during the French Revolution*, provides text for the screenplay).<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the most striking and memorable features of the film are its sets, which consist of painted tableaux. These tableaux create the impression that even as the characters are caught up in some of the momentous questions of the Revolution they are also operating in a storybook setting. Because the directors of most period films consciously try to re-create the material setting and culture of the past, the result here is a kind of “disconnect” for the moviegoer. Nonetheless, the unique and stylish approach is very hard to look away from. The content of the story, however, is not terribly innovative. The script reflects Rohmer’s well-known conservative values and so is basically opposed to the directions being taken by the Revolution. The movie is, as one American reviewer wrote, “So lovely but so reactionary.”<sup>52</sup> In this regard, Rohmer’s movie seems attuned to the revisionist turn among historians of the last two decades about the Revolution.<sup>53</sup> But does *L’Anglaise et le Duc* offer a take on the French “master narrative?” Indeed it does, for alongside well-known French film interpretations like *La Marseillaise* and *Napoléon* that portray the Revolution as the engine of modernization, there is an alternative view that condemns the Revolution for its authoritarian manner and for its seeming attempt to wipe out France’s monarchical and religious past. This is a counter-revolutionary view which holds that France could have modernized under a king, perhaps in the manner of English political history. In *L’Anglaise et le Duc*, Lady Elliott seems to stand as a protest against this French alternative to the English model of progress.

## Conclusion

There have been scattered signs in recent years that modified interpretations of the French Revolution have found some acceptance at the popular level across the United States, for instance, in college and high school “Western Civ” and world history classes and texts, where the event continues to be cast as an historical watershed.<sup>54</sup> Some of the films cited here could be employed as teaching tools in college or high school classrooms in courses on American, European or even world history (see Appendix for detailed film information). A teacher might, for instance, use all or part of *Marie Antoinette* and *La Nuit de Varennes* to compare and contrast different film representations of the French monarchy. “Valid” or “invalid” views of the Parisian crowd might be drawn from *Orphans of the Storm*, *La Marseillaise* and *Jefferson in Paris*. The political machinations and some of the personal rivalries of the period are amply illustrated in *Danton*, *The Black Book* and *L'Anglaise et le Duc*. A class might examine how the figure of Lafayette is presented in American film by reviewing scenes in *Jefferson in Paris* and *The Black Book*. Broader historical issues, like the development of modern variants of nationalism and revolutionary messianism, might be explored by screening *La Marseillaise* and portions of *Napoléon*. Finally, and to introduce yet another film title to this survey, students could be introduced to British actor Peter Ustinov’s 1962 film interpretation of Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*. Though this movie is not directly about the French Revolution, it is set in the era and, moreover, is notable for the literacy of its script and for its refusal to go along with the usual stereotypes. It could thus serve as a bit of an antidote to the mostly deleterious images of the French Revolution that have so often been projected in Anglo-American movies.

There are also interesting trends for teachers to watch. These include a relatively recent television revival of, and plans for a new film rendition of, those two products of the “black legend” of the Revolution, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Scaramouche*. Mention of these may come up in a classroom. Both will no doubt serve to reinforce the old imagery of the Revolution.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, as was the case during the Cold War, Hollywood of late appears to be returning to that genre of epical, pseudo-historical drama that seems designed to stir up an “us-versus-them” mentality to correspond with the now popular view of France. For example, in November, 2003, a film reviewer for the *New York Times* could begin laudatory coverage of a fictionalized naval epic set during the Napoleonic Wars, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (directed by Peter Weir), by quoting the film’s main character whose peroration perpetuates the old stereotypes: “Do you want to see a guillotine in

Piccadilly? Do you want your children to grow up singing the ‘Marseillaise’?”<sup>56</sup> These words may indicate that a return to the older popular Anglo-American assessment of the era of the French Revolution is in the making.

It is important for Americans to remember that in France in early September, 1792, universal suffrage was decreed for the first time anywhere in national elections. The vote and the subsequent declaration of a republic, though carried out imperfectly under trying conditions, was a real manifestation of the important series of “human rights” created in France at this time.<sup>57</sup> It has long been accepted that the process of democratization introduced during the French Revolution constitutes one of the defining moments in modern history. And yet it is not this singular and fundamental historical development—or others of a similar import that occurred between 1789 and 1794—that finds a place in American films about the Revolution but, inevitably, the Terror and the guillotine. Considering the range of American movies made about the French Revolution over the decades, one is almost tempted to conclude that it is all but impossible to translate the historical origins and meaning of revolutions into good film scripts. On the other hand, as Natalie Zemon Davis has noted, perhaps we should not be too hard on historical movies because film as a medium for representing the past has not been around all that long, and is still working out rules of evidence and representation in a fashion perhaps analogous in its own way to the early decades of the development of history as a discipline.<sup>58</sup>

Historians have time and again noted that the United States and France are joined by a unique transatlantic history that saw the two nations emerge as the world’s first modern republics. Since the eighteenth century, the revolutions that produced these “sister republics” have often served as inspiration and sometime as models for other revolutions. And yet, despite the history that ties them together, relations between the United States and France have often been testy—certainly since the Cold War and perhaps never so much as in the last year. Some of the issues that divide the two countries have to do with genuine policy differences, but in other ways the division may be the product of perceptions and habits of “looking” at the other. Over the years, American films about the French Revolution have contributed to this division. Sections of the films described here offer intriguing views of the French Revolution, and for this reason all could be useful in sparking discussion in the classroom. But a nuanced and even-handed American film about the French Revolution, willing to engage the event at some level of complexity and beyond the usual stereotypes—an American equivalent of Renoir’s *La Marseillaise*—still awaits being made.

## Notes

1. On the well-established notion of “sister republics,” see for instance Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Susan Dunn, *Sister Revolutions: French Enlightenment, American Light* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999); and C. Bradley Thompson, “The American Founding and the French Revolution,” in Ralph C. Hancock and L. Gary Lambert, eds., *The Legacy of the French Revolution* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 109-50. A recent comparison of republicanism in France and the United States is Mark Hulliung, *Citizens and Citoyens: Republicans and Liberals in America and France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). I have written on coverage of the French Revolution in American history textbooks: Harison, “Teaching the French Revolution: Lessons and Imagery from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Textbooks,” *The History Teacher* 35 (Feb. 2002), 137-62. A version of this article, for which Melani McAlister and Nancy Rhoden offered helpful comments, was presented at the 2004 meeting of the Organization of American Historians.

2. The point is widely made. For a relatively early, but still cogent introduction to the meaning and method of viewing historical film, see Pierre Sorlin, “How to Look at an ‘Historical’ Film,” in Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 25-49.

3. Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

4. On film and history in the classroom, see for instance Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project,” *The History Teacher* 35 (2001), 27-49; Mona L. Siegel, “*Germinal*: Teaching about Class and Industrial Capitalism through Film,” *Radical History Review* 83 (2002), 180-85; and the several articles in the Organization of American Historians’ *Magazine of History* 16 (2002).

5. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15.

6. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two Centuries Look Back on the French Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 16.

7. The quote is from Geoffrey Best, ed., *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4. See also Eugene Kamenka, “Revolutionary Ideology and ‘The Great French Revolution of 1789-?’”; *ibid.*, 81; Ferenc Féher, ed., *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Isser Woloch, ed., *Revolution and the Meanings of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996), 5.

8. Peter Burley, “A Farrago of Nonsense? The French Revolution in Cinema,” *History Today* (May 1989), 51.

9. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, “Notes sur la typologie du cinéma révolutionnariste,” *Positif* 341-42 (juillet-août 1989), 12.

10. This latter is probably an over-generous count, since the list includes *Singin’ in the Rain*, which has a musical segment apparently set during the Terror; similarly, among the American film of the 1980s is the 1982 Mel Brooks comedy, *History of the World, Part I*, only one of whose episodes takes place during the Revolution; *ibid.* On depictions of the American and French Revolutions, film sources include: Grindon, “Hollywood History and the French Revolution: From *The Bastille* to *The Black Book*,” *Velvet Light Trap* 28 (Fall 1991) and “History and the Historians in ‘La Marseillaise,’” *Film History* 4 (1990); Burley, “A Farrago of Nonsense?”; Antoine de Baecque, “La Révolution impos-

sible," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 422 (juillet-août 1989); Stephane Brisset, "La Révolution à Hollywood," *Cinéma* 72- 451 (nov. 1988); Pascal Dupuy, "Les Deux orphelines ou l'histoire manquée," *Cahiers d'histoire de l'Institut de Recherches Marxistes* 90 (1995); Marc Ferro, ed., *Révoltes, Révolutions, Cinéma* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989); Roger Icart, "La Révolution française vue par le cinéma," *Revue de la Cinémathèque* 3 (oct.-nov. 1989); Jeancolas, "Notes sur la typologie"; J.-N. Jeannenney, et al., "Regards sur la Révolution," *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 53 (déc. 1989); Landy, *Historical Film*; Gerard Legrand, "La Marseillaise," *Positif* 341-42 (juillet-août 1989); Hervé Le Roux, "Nous sommes tous des sans-culottes," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 415 (jan. 1989), III; and Annette Michelson "La Marseillaise, A Jacobin Text?," *Persistence of Vision* 12-13 (1996).

11. Sylvie Dallet and Francis Grindon, *Filmographie mondiale de la Révolution française* (Montreuil: Centre d'Action Culturelle de Montreuil, 1989), 228.

12. These were two comedies: *Start the Revolution without Me* (1970) and *History of the World, Part I* (1982). There were two other film versions of *Orphans of the Storm* before Griffiths'.

13. The play was "The Two Orphans" (1874), by Adolphe Philippe d'Ennery and Eugène Comman; see William M. Drew, "D.W. Griffith's Orphans of the Storm," *Literature Film Quarterly* 18 (1990), 77.

14. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 53. D.W. Griffiths' *Orphans of the Storm* was also an extravagant production, though it was filmed on the East Coast rather than in Hollywood.

15. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 53.

16. Grindon, "Hollywood and the French Revolution," 42.

17. Drew, "Orphans of the Storm," 84.

18. *Orphans* refers to Robespierre as "Tyrant" and as "...the original pussyfooter."

Tom Paine, who played an important part in both American and French Revolutions and who almost certainly would have been familiar to an American audience, is not depicted at all in the four movies. On Paine's ambiguous legacy in the United States, see Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 263-70.

19. Grindon, *Shadows on the Past*, 5; Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise*, 68; and Lynn Hunt, "Forgetting and Remembering: The French Revolution Then and Now," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995), 1119-35.

20. The phrase is from Sarah Hanley, "European History in Text and Film: Community and Identity in France, 1550-1945," *French Historical Studies* 25 (2002), 10.

21. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, "Notes sur la typologie du cinéma révolutionnariste," *Positif* 341-42 (juillet-août 1989), 13. Early German films about the Revolution (there were several produced in the 1920s) were especially interested in portraying sexual intrigue and political violence, while English and American film interpretations have "...emphasized...(the Revolution's) authoritarianism, violence, irrationality, bloodthirstiness, and unprovoked aggression"; Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 52.

22. Jeancolas, "Notes sur la typologie," 13. Leger Grindon concludes succinctly that in American films about the French Revolution "The guillotine...regularly held the attention of the camera"; "History and the Historians," 228. Grindon notes that this approach has political roots and implications: "Though the revolutionary period spans a decade, it is the crisis of 1793 that holds the popular imagination. From Griffith's 'Orphans of the Storm' (1921) to 'Danton' (1982), filmmakers have condensed the screen Revolution into a rivalry between Robespierre and Danton, an iconography of the guillotine, and a 'Reign of Terror.' The transformation of revolutionary ideas into

bloodthirsty monsters that pervades popular culture is a triumph for conservative ideologues"; *Shadows on the Past*, 5.

23. Dallet and Grindon, *Filmographie mondiale*, 228. On a related note, French critics and some French politicians have reacted strongly to the influx of American films over the decades into the French market. "France," writes one scholar, "is the country that, more than any other, has resented the encroachments" of American film and culture"; Jans Ulf-Møller, *Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film—Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), xvi.

24. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 53.

25. *Ibid.*, 52.

26. Grindon, "History and the Historians," 233.

27. Hanley, "European History in Text and Film," 5, 10; see also, Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, especially 1-15.

28. On the Terror, a classic account is R.R. Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)—originally published in 1941, just eight years before the release of *The Black Book*, though it seems the book was not used as background for the film. On the development of the screenplay for *The Black Book*, see Grindon, "Hollywood and the French Revolution," 34, 36, 38, 40; Grindon notes that when it was released the film's historical setting was obscured by its distributors because of the producer's "discomfort with the (topic of the) French Revolution"; *ibid.*, 40.

29. Ferro, *Révoltes, Révolutions, Cinéma*, 267.

30. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 231; see also Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 134-35, 143.

31. Roger G. Kennedy, *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 103, 117, 311, 314; see also Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 204.

32. Ferro, *Révoltes, Révolutions, Cinéma*, 267.

33. Harison, "Teaching the French Revolution," 149; Thierry, "De la Révolution américaine," in Elise Marienstras, *Les Mythes fondateurs de la nation américaine* (Paris: Maspero, 1977); and Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise*, 5. On the French Counter-Revolution, see Jean-Clement Martin, *Contre-Révolution, Révolution et nation en France, 1789-1799* (Paris: Seuil, 1998) and Jacques Godechot, *The Counter-Revolution: Doctrine and Action, 1789-1804*, tr. Salvador Attanasio (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), especially ch. 4 for the influence of Burke.

34. Drew, "Orphans of the Storm," 77, 83, 85.

35. Pascal Dupuy, "La Diffusion des stéréotypes révolutionnaires dans la littérature et le cinéma anglo-saxons (1789-1889)," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 3 (1996), 520.

36. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 52.

37. Dupuy, "La Diffusion des stéréotypes," 527-28.

38. Jeancolas, "Notes sur la typologie," 13.

39. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 53; Jeancolas, "Notes sur la typologie," 13; and Drew, "Orphans of the Storm," 83.

40. Grindon, "Hollywood and the French Revolution," 44-47.

41. For a discussion of the French "master narrative," see Paul M. Cohen, *Freedom's Moment: An Essay on the French Idea of Liberty from Rousseau to Foucault* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1997), esp. ch. 2. For a broadly-defined examination of the use of the concept of "master narrative" for historians, see Jeffrey Cox and Shelton Stromquist, eds., *Contesting the Master Narrative: Essays in Social History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998).

42. Marcia Landy, *The Historical Film*, 7, writes that film scholars have sought to "understand the historical preoccupation with nation formation (and) the academic study of cinema has focused on relations between cinema and nation as attempts have been made to describe and analyze what is meant by 'national cinema.'"

43. Drew, "Orphans of the Storm," 78.

44. Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 52.

45. Grindon, "History and the Historians."

46. *Ibid.*, 229-30, who also notes that the film incorporates a positive view of Louis XVI that could have been drawn from the work of another nineteenth-century French historian, Hippolyte Taine; *ibid.*, 230.

47. Hanley, "European History in Text and Film," 5. On French dislike of Marie Antoinette, see Thomas E. Kaiser, "From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia, and the Terror," *French Historical Studies* 26 (fall 2003), 579-617.

48. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 305-08, notes that Gance's *Napoléon* is really more notable for the multitude of innovative cinematographic techniques it brought to the screen than for its approach to the history of the period. In this sense and unlike, by contrast, Renoir's *La Marseillaise*, it (*Napoléon*) is really "a critic's film"; Burley, "A Farrago of Nonsense?," 54; see also Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915-1924* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 428 ff. One of the strongest influences for Gance's view of the Revolution was Victor Hugo's historical novel *Ninety-Three*, though one film scholar writes that Gance "was no more a historian than D.W. Griffith." Gance himself portrayed the character of Saint-Just (one of the most energetic members of the Committee of Public Safety) in the film; Kevin Brownlow, "*Napoléon*": *Abel Gance's Classic Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 35, 148.

49. Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 615-20.

50. Sarah Hanley writes of the movie that most of the female characters in *Danton* are "cipher(s)"; "European History in Text and Film," 13-14; see also, M. Szpoerer, "Andrzej Wajda's Reign of Terror," *Film Quarterly* 37 (winter 1983-84), 27-33; David Hunt, "Andrzej Wajda and the 'Reign of the People,'" *Radical History Review* 28-20 (1984), 141-50. Neither French nor Polish governments were particularly thrilled with the political messages in the film; Melissa E. Biggs, *French Films, 1945-1993* (London: McFarland and Co., 1996), 84. In a short memoir that is mostly a manual for making movies, Wajda writes virtually nothing about the politics of the movie, other than to hint that, for him, the character of Danton represented the "West" and Robespierre "the East." Wajda had directed the stage play upon which the film is based before doing the movie; Wajda, *Double Vision: My Life in Film* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1989), 32.

51. The "Duke" is the Duc d'Orléans, the wealthy aristocrat and relative of Louis XVI who cast his lot with the Revolution and, as a sign of this, changed his name to "Philippe Egalité." In contrast with *Marie Antoinette*, where the Duke is cast as conniving and duplicitous, in this film the Duke comes across sympathetically as a friend and family man who mostly wants to navigate the troubled political waters of the day, but who has no special ambitions of his own.

52. J. Hoberman, "Viva Revolution," *The Village Voice* (May 2002); see also Tobias Grey, "The French Revolutionary," *The Observer*, 2 Sept. 2001.

53. For recent trends in the historiography of the French Revolution, see Suzanne Desan, "What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 23 (2000) and Jack Censer, "Amalgamating the Social in the French Revolution," *Journal of Social History* 1 (2003), 145-50.

54. Harison, "Teaching the French Revolution," 150-54; Keith M. Baker and Joseph Zizek, "The American Historiography of the French Revolution," in Anthony Mohlo and Gordon S. Woods, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 355; see also John D. Garrigus, "White Jacobins/Black Jacobins: Bringing the Haitian and French Revolutions Together in the Classroom," *French Historical Studies* 23 (Spring 2000), 259-76 and Rainer Riemenschneider, ed., *Images d'une Révolution: La Révolution française dans les manuels scolaires d'histoire du monde* (Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1994).

55. The A&E television network broadcast a version in spring 2000; as of this writing, film director Terry Gilliam is reported to be producing a new version of *Scaramouche*.

56. A.O. Scott, review of *Master and Commander*, *New York Times* (14 Nov. 2003).

57. Lynn Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996).

58. Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 4-5.

## Appendix

### FILMOGRAPHY OF MOVIE TITLES CITED IN THIS PAPER

#### *Orphans of the Storm*

1921; produced and directed by D.W. Griffiths for D.W. Griffith Productions  
running time: 150 min.

silent

available from Kino Video

#### *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*

1927; produced and directed by Abel Gance for Société générale des films  
running time: 235 min. (1981 restored version)

silent with English subtitles

available from MCA Home Video

#### *Marie Antoinette*

1938; directed by W.S. Van Dyke; produced by Hunt Stromberg for MGM  
running time: approx. 150 min.

available from MGM/UA Home Video

#### *La Marseillaise: chronique de quelques faits ayant contribué à la chute de la monarchie*

1938; directed by Jean Renoir; produced by Andre Zwobada for Société d'exploitation et de production cinématographique

running time: 132 min.  
available from Interama Video Classics  
dialogue in French with English subtitles

*The Black Book*

1949; directed by Anthony Mann and produced by Walter Wanger for Eagle-Lion Films, Inc.  
running time: approx. 90 min.  
available from Hollywood's Attic

*Billy Budd*

1962; produced and directed by Peter Ustinov for Anglo-Allied Pictures, Ltd.  
running time: 120 min.  
available from Allied Artists Classics

*Danton*

1982; directed by Andrzej Wajda; produced by Margaret Menegoz for Gaumont  
running time: 136 min.  
available from Columbia TriStar  
dialogue in French with English subtitles

*La Nuit de Varennes*

1982; directed by Ettore Scola; produced by Renzo Rossellini for Triumph Films  
running time: 130 min.  
available from RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video  
dialogue in French with English subtitles

*Jefferson in Paris*

1995; directed by James Ivory; produced by Ismail Merchant for Touchstone Pictures  
running time: 139 min.  
available from Touchstone Pictures Home Video

*L'Anglaise et le Duc*; released in the U.S. as *The Lady and the Duke*

2001; directed by Eric Rohmer; produced by Françoise Etchegaray for Studio Canal Plus  
running time: approx. 129 min.  
available from Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment  
dialogue in French with English subtitles

*Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*

2003; directed by Peter Weir; produced by Alan B. Curtiss for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Miramax  
Films Universal Pictures  
running time: 138 min.  
available from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Video