CHAPTER 3

HISTORY THROUGH DOCUMENTARIES AND FILMS

Documentary has been variously defined throughout the years: as “a dramatized presentation of man's relation to his institutional life;” as “film with a message;” as “the communication, not of imagined things, but of real things only;” and as films which give up control of the events being filmed. The most famous definition, and still one of the most serviceable, is John Grierson’s: “the creative treatment of actuality” (8). None of these definitions is completely satisfactory. The first includes character studies and city symphonies, the second includes allegorical fiction films like Spike Lee’s School Daze (1988), the third brings the difficult question of what part of a complex documentary like Fred Wiseman’s High School (1968) is “real” and what part “imagined,” and so on.

The toughest problem for common-sense definitions of documentary, like Grierson’s “the creative treatment of actuality,” is determining just what constitutes “actuality.” Every representation of reality is no more than a fiction in the sense that it is an artificial construct. It is a highly contrived and selective view of the world, produced for some purpose and, therefore, inevitably reflecting a given subjectivity or point of view. Even our “brute” perceptions of the world are inescapably tainted by our beliefs, assumptions, goals and desires. So, even if there is a concrete, material reality on which our existence depends, we can only apprehend it through mental representations
that at best resemble reality and that are in large part socially created. Some film theorists have responded to this dilemma by claiming that documentary is actually no more than a kind of fiction that is constituted to cover over or “disavow” its own fictionality. The term ‘documentary’ is coined by the British documentary filmmaker John Grierson in 1926, which he defines as the “creative treatment of reality” (8). He says that a documentary filmmaker must creatively fashion the “fragments of reality” into a documentary with a social concern. The documentary must be aesthetically satisfying while having a clearly defined social purpose. But The Oxford English Reference Dictionary states: “Documentaries are films, tv or radio programmes concerned with facts: they depict real people, events or landscapes” (415). Thus the documentary is about “facts” and it represents “real” people.

Both the above definitions mention facts as the heart of a documentary film. But since the facts have to be presented in a narrative form comprehensible to the audience, it requires selection and rearrangement of the fragments of reality captured by the camera. Indeed many of the modern documentaries, (like those telecast through channels such as the Discovery, National Geographic or the Animal Planet) are structured in much the same way as fiction films. Moreover, since such selections and rearrangements invariably represent the filmmaker’s point of view, the facts represented in a documentary film do not remain “neutral.” They are no longer “reality” in its absolute sense. They represent only those facts that suit or strengthen
particular points of view. Particularly, reconstructions and reenactments are entirely done in terms of a filmmaker’s vision of an event. The limitations of the technology further restrict an unlimited access to facts belonging to a particular subject matter. We thus see that the facts the documentaries are purported to be representing are actually mediated by at least three factors: narrative requirement, producer/filmmaker’s point of view, and technological mediation. Documentary facts are thus at least twice removed from the actual facts. Naturally, questions have been raised on the documentary’s claim to realism. It is, therefore, more appropriate to say that documentaries actually represent a particular kind or mode of realism.

Depending on the innovations in the techniques of narration and film technology as well as the changes in the political ideology of the filmmakers concerned, the modes in which documentary films present their cases vary. Some of the more dominant modes are: (1) the Expository/Exploratory Mode, (2) the Observational Mode, (3) the Interactive Mode and (4) the Reflexive Mode.

The Exploratory/Expository kind of documentary films address the audience through a narrator who interprets what the audience see, in effect, telling them what they should think of the audio-visual images before their eyes. On account of the all-knowing or omniscient nature of the narration, it is also called the “voice-of-God” narration. These films either explore new territories and people, bringing hitherto unknown facts to the audience
or expose a subject matter in an all-knowing manner. The exploratory films of
the American filmmaker Robert Flaherty, the expository films of the British
filmmaker John Grierson, who initiated the documentaries of social concern
in the 1930s with an emphasis on the ordinary people of the society, and the
films of the British Free Cinema movement of the 1950s that sought to
portray, in a more personal and poetic manner, the undramatic lives of the
real, everyday people trapped by the limitations of the society, fall in this
category. For example, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a
documentary that explores the lifestyle of the Eskimos. John Grierson’s
*Nightmail* (1934) is an exposition of how the British General Post Office
operates its nightmails.

The Observational Mode is often referred to as a product of the new
technology of late 1950s and early 1960s that introduced light weight cameras
with large magazines and synchronous sound recording devices. Without
these facilities, it would not be possible to get extended footages of ordinary
people going about their routine day-to-day jobs. In this mode, the directorial
non-intervention is sought to be eliminated by making observations without in
any way intruding on or influencing events or people’s opinions and
behaviours. Strictly speaking only the documentary films belonging to the
American Direct Cinema of the 1960s fall under this category. Frederick
Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (1967) and *High School* (1968) or Maysles
Brothers’ work on a concert by the Rolling Stones, *Gimme Shelter* (1970),
are examples of this mode of documentary. However, critics have noted that even these films, with their claims of simply observing reality as it unfolds, are not free from ideology or institutional pressures and opportunities.

The Interactive Mode was also dependent on the new equipment of late 1950s and early 1960s. Since it also uses long takes in the field, it is sometimes confused with the observational mode, like that of the American Direct Cinema. However, it is a different mode as the film crew extensively interacts with the people in front of the lens. Generally this occurs through an on-camera interview, but sometimes it is achieved in the editing process, for example, by constructing the facsimile of a dialogue from fragments of recorded statements by people who have not even met. This mode resembles the journalistic interview: that is why interactive documentary has become routine television practice. On account of its extensive use by the television, this mode has been rendered as “natural” to the viewers, including the view that it is giving us the “truth” rather than a biased view of the filmmakers concerned. The French Cinema Verite falls under this mode. Examples of this mode of documentary are Jean Rouch’s Chronicle of a Summer (1960) and Max Ophul’s The Sorrow and the Pity (1970).

In the Reflexive Mode, not only the subjects but also the way the subjects are being captured in the film, including the representation of film equipment on screen, are laid bare in front of the audience. It does not also hide the questions and doubts that the filmmaker may have on certain issues
raised in the film. In this way, it seeks to eliminate, as far as possible, the stereotypical ideas and opinions of people and filmmakers. Through such deconstructive practices, it discourages spectators from accepting that a single point of view represents the whole truth. This mode thus has a marked political dimension by practicing what Brecht or Godard advocate. The Soviet Kino Eye film movement squarely falls under this category: for example: DzigaVertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929).

Many people think that documentary is a representation of reality, simply because they assume that this type of film is recording factual events or regarding factual subjects. Moreover, they often think that documentary is identical with objectivity, and therefore it should be objective. Documentary is not a representation of reality, but it is the film maker’s representation of our historical world. What is conveyed in the film is the film maker’s point of view or arguments, and what makes it a documentary is the representation of social matters or issues.

The relation between reality and realism is a much debated topic. Realism is often understood as a modified or mediated representation of reality, especially in the context of the realist fiction of the nineteenth century. In the case of films realism constructs a fake reality. In this regard, Godard comments: “Realism, anyway, is never exactly the same as reality, and in the cinema it is of necessity faked” (185). Only recently has the documentary film become a subject for serious scrutiny by film theorists, critics and historians.
Although the Lumiere Brothers, Vertov and Grierson are a few examples of a varying documentary tradition rooted in the earliest days of the cinema, it is in the last few decades that the genre has entered a new realm for theoretical debate. This is illustrated in part by its being defined as “a fiction (un)like any other.” From Grierson’s insistence for a “creative treatment of actuality” largely for didactic purposes to the more recent variations of the documentary tradition – the cinemaverite movement, the string-of-interview documentary, the self-reflexive documentary – lie a number of concerns once primarily reserved for the cinema in general and now being applied specifically to the practice of documentary filmmaking. One consequence of this application is an expanded awareness of the less-than-clear distinction between fiction and documentary films. This must be viewed in the context of the knowledge that in any form of cinema, there is necessarily a mediation between what is being filmed and its referent. The medium always comes between the world and the world depicted on screen. The viewer is (with possible exception) absent from the filming process and present only in the process of the viewing. So it is apparent that it is not at the level of the image that one can distinguish between fiction and documentary. That means, there is arguably nothing about the image that allows one to determine whether it has been drawn from life as such or drawn from a life created specifically for the screen. Any film, be it fiction or documentary, is necessarily constructed. It is inherent in the filmmaking process the need to shape, select and to create the finished film.
The inevitable subjectivity involved in the creating and viewing experience becomes a factor in light of the current shift in attention from the dangers of illusionism inherent in the cinema toward the need to recognize the importance of the areas of cognition and perception. In calling attention to the inability of the image to “speak for itself” as a statement of “reality” and the problems inherent in trying to differentiate between fictive and documentary films (between a world and the world), it comes down to a matter of context. Despite the documentary conventions we have grown used to, prior knowledge that this is a documentary is the only way needed to recognize it as such.

Jameson calls attention to the matter of history, and of the inevitable consequences (primarily being distortion) of the retelling of events that have once occurred. As documentary film is widely thought of as a discourse drawn from the historical world, theories on historical discourse must be considered and applied to the practice of documentary filmmaking. One of the most celebrated theorists on history, Hayden White, has insisted that the recording of history is naturally re-writing, or re-thinking of history, to the detriment of attaining a “real” look at past events: “... the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand ‘the present’, however this ‘present’ is defined” (Metahistory 21). White, like Jameson, is
of the belief that history is not a text, but must be delivered through one. History cannot therefore come to the reader or viewer of a discourse without being mediated by a text that is necessarily narrativized, and hence shaped by any given contemporary mode of textualization (or trope, as White has labelled these modes of narrative discourse). To phrase it differently, by another realist sceptic, “... nonfiction contains any number of ‘fictive’ elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention” (Renov 2). This meeting point between the fictive film and its documentary counterpart is precisely where the analysis of a viable documentary tradition should begin. Instead of submitting to the somewhat morbid outlooks of postmodernist sceptics on the inability of film to represent reality, and instead of rejecting these outlooks completely, as several more recent writings on documentary have done, it would be worthwhile to examine where the two ends of the theoretical spectrum meet and what common contacts can be found. One series of thoughts can never be completely replaced by another in a convenient chronology. Renov, in fact, remains sceptical about the viability of recording actual truth in the cinematic medium. At the same time he acknowledges the advances made in the field of documentary theory as worthy of pursuing:

It may well be that the marginalization of the documentary film a subject of serious inquiry is at an end. After all, the key
questions which arise in the study of nonfiction film and video -
the ontological status of the image, the epistemological states of
representation, the potentialities of historical discourse on film -
are just as pressing for an understanding of fictional
representation. (1)

He points to serious ontological and epistemological questions
related to history, representation and discourse.

Renov draws on White to compound his argument that the
documentary tradition, due to its inevitability of being a fictive work, is little
more than a compilation of constructed and therefore biased interpretations:
“As Hayden White has so brilliantly described, ‘every mimesis can be shown
to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another
description of the same phenomenon’” (7). What Renov and White fail to see
are the fascinating possibilities that arise, and with important implications for
the notion of bias, when “another description of the same phenomenon”, and
yet another, become available in the general body of documentary works.
This leads to another question, how documentary and fictive works can
be distinguished. In this regard, Renov adds: “... there is nothing inherently
less creative about nonfictional representations, both may create a ‘truth’ of a
text” (7). He means that film and documentary are identical as texts
constituting reality of truth. They serve identical functions in discourses or
narratives. The difference in meaning constructed when using a documentary
and a film on the same subject/content is largely due to the contexts. As Jameson remarks, documentary is a way “to escape from the image by means of the image?” (162). The difference in meaning as related to “fact” or “fiction” is the result of reading the text on the basis of different contexts.

There is nothing in the image that contextualizes it to either a world or the world. In this regard, Brian Winston observes: “… the documentary image now represents a reality no more and no less ‘real’ than the reality presented by the photographic image of, say, Michelle Pfeiffer or Gerard Depardieu” (254). In other words, the “lies” of fiction can be easily confused with the “truths” of documentary subjects. Winston explains: “What then is left for documentary is a relation to actuality which acknowledges the normal circumstances of image production but is at the same time consonant with our everyday experience of the real” (254). The very success of fiction films is, at least in part, dependent on the “consonance” between people’s life experiences and those portrayed on the screen: without this identification, people would be more than reluctant to keep “going to the movies.” Furthermore, Winston’s call for a documentary, which “acknowledges the normal circumstances of image production” (the self-reflexive documentary), cannot possibly be consonant with our everyday reality. This is because reality does not involve the presence of cinematic machinery. It would seem that Winston is trying to guarantee a future for documentary while fundamentally believing that the genre is inherently incapable of being
anything other than a fictive work. He makes some fascinating comments on the future role of subjectivity in documentary filmmaking.

Bill Nichols, in an essay published in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, has traced the evolution of documentary practice, explaining why one given mode of discourse has been replaced by another over the history of documentary filmmaking. He has noted that the early, Griersonian style of direct-address, employing the voice-of-God narration, was blatantly didactic and fell out of favour during the World War II era to be replaced by the cinema verite movement. The movement, largely characterized by a sense of immediacy of capturing “untampered” events as well as by the transparency of the filming process, lacked any kind of context in the historical world. The movement was followed by a return to direct address in the form of the interview. The series-of-interview style of documentary raises questions about the credibility of the interviewees, and of differentiating between “real life” subjects and fictive characters; however, this style is still largely used today. The fourth and most recent style, the self-reflexive documentary, foregrounds the filmmaking process. According to Bill Nichols, “... [It] makes patently clear what has been implicit all along: documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’” (MacDougall 260). Although he acknowledges that no one style of documentary will ever be the definitive, and hence the ideal discourse based on actuality, he asserts that the self-reflexive documentary is an alternative and less problematic genre.
He observes: “... [It] is, however, in the process of evolving alternatives that seem, in our present historical context, less obviously problematic than the strategies of commentary, vérité, or the interview” (MacDougall 260). Nichols asserts that it is a better alternative than the early genres.

In his more comprehensive work on documentary, *Representing Reality*, Nichols puts forth the idea that documentary is necessarily a fiction and is a construct. But it is an inherently biased and ideological fictional construct that can be distinguished from other fictive works: its material is drawn from the historical world, and a shared historical world at that (160). Nichols underlines the shared historicity of documentary. But Winston validly points out: “It is not the sharing that is critical here. After all, we ‘share’ the world depicted in any Western but that does not make it a representation of the world, the historical reality. It is not even that there are a multiplicity of fictional worlds but only one documentary one” (252). He emphasises that the historical reality is more important than the shared fictional worlds. Nichols also asserts the resemblance or likeness of the world in the documentary: “It is a likeness rather than a replica to which we attend” (*Representing Reality* 109). A natural question follows this comment: how the viewer perceives a “likeness” differently from s/he does a “replica.” It is also not certain whether a prior knowledge that one is viewing a documentary and not a fiction film is necessary to appreciate the likeness as such. Nichols seems to be laying out the characteristics that are supposed to mark the documentary
as distinguishable from fiction without touching the issue of whether what is suggested as theoretical characteristics of documentary can possibly be what viewers perceive in the act of viewing.

The central distinction between documentary and film is related to the prior knowledge of the text that influences the viewers in the process of viewing. This is the context of the problematic claim made by Nichols concerning the content of both documentary and fiction films:

Documentaries usually invite us to take as true what subjects recount about something that happened even if we also see how more than one perspective is possible...Fiction, though, often invites us to take what characters say about what happened as suspect, more tightly circumscribed or restricted to the knowledge and perspective of a character.... (Representing Reality 21)

In fictional films, the audience take for granted what the fictional characters say within the context of their fictional setting. Nichols has already acknowledged that documentaries, like fiction films, are indeed constructs. Under this assumption there is no way of differentiating between the inherent "truth" that a fictive character comments and that a documentary subject tells: they are both the "truths" of given constructed texts. Again, it becomes a matter of cognition. When the viewer is aware that s/he is viewing a fiction film, the characters will be believable within the context of that film.
With the knowledge that one is watching a documentary the interviewees or subjects, may immediately become suspect as long as the viewer is aware that these subjects are chosen (selected) for the purpose of a particular documentary discourse. Whereas fictive characters are presented with the backstory to make them “whole”, “believable” characters, documentary subjects are usually presented to deliver words on a particular topic, without any other knowledge of who they are, thereby diminishing the credibility.

Postmodernists and poststructuralists insist that there is no reality, and that any form of representation will inevitably be an illusion of something that may or may not exist. Documentary, therefore, cannot be anything other than a form of fiction. The very nature of “truth” is challenged by Renov: “... it has been supposed, depends on fiction finding its shape and substance through the agency of human invention” (10). There is an inescapable and illusory line between documentary and fiction. In this context, Winston observes: “Most important, since the audience’s understanding that what is on offer is indeed a truly subjective interaction with the world - one, unlike direct cinemas, unburdened by objectivity and actuality - what is on offer can be really ‘creatively treated’” (254). The postmodernist “solution” of a call for creativity may be significant. But it has been founded on an underlying assumption irrelevant to theoretical debate on documentary filmmaking. It will never be discovered what reality exists and to what extent. We live in a world that masks hidden ideologies at every level of institution and
representation. Instead we must look at what we can know; this is where it is useful to take the postmodernist suggestion for the “artful documentary” and combine it with a pragmatic approach: the belief that audience are not naive and are not being deluded every step of the way.

Contemporary thinking points to the increasing lack of distinction between documentary and fiction film. In this regard, Brian McIlroy’s observation is remarkable: “…it is now common to read that, theoretically speaking, documentary and narrative fiction film ‘proper’ are indistinguishable as constructed realities” (288). There are many who, in blind deference to semiological axiom, have made a point of denying that there is any distinction between documentary and fiction film. What is at stake in this thought is the integrity of the photograph as being linked to our understanding of reality. Dai Vaughan, a documentary film editor, refers to the term “actuality” to describe our belief in the reality of the photographic image. He states: “…this actuality…is the subjective conviction on the part of the viewer of that prior and independent existence of the represented world which is specific to the photograph” (182). In a discussion of documentary film Nichols suggests that documentary appears more “real” than fiction. He observes that in documentary footage “some quality of the moment persists outside the grip of textual organization” (Representing Reality 231). Therefore, the understanding we have of documentary depends on the ability of the photographic image to impart to us a belief in the existence
of the represented world beyond its filmic representation. It is in this context, Vaughan suggests that “documentary may best be defined as the attempt at a materialist reading of film,” (198). It is a way of examining a filmic text to decide on its position with respect to documentary.

In recent years, along with the growing difficulty in distinguishing between documentary and fiction film, there is an increase in the popularity of films that celebrate the dissolution of the borders between the two. Linda Williams has suggested that, in the postmodern era, documentary films are increasingly foregrounding the processes of manipulation of the film medium. This is a strategy which challenges the very documentary nature of the subjects they purport to present. Williams notes that the current popularity of the postmodern documentary illustrates one of postmodernism’s many contradictions: an increasing distrust of the photographic image in conjunction with an ever increasing thirst for the truth of documentary footage.

The postmodernist skepticism of represented reality questions the very function of documentary. Bill Nichols has also noted documentary’s recent tendencies towards the questioning of documented truth: “Documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction” (Renov 174). Recent documentaries tend to move away from an understanding of truth as a function of the traditional notion of the photograph’s indexical relationship
with reality to a growing acceptance of truth as the subjective construction of our perceptions. It is in this context that Williams calls for a definition of documentary “not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (“Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary” 14). Here we come closer to the idea that documentary truth lies in an understanding of film as a similar process to the way humans organize the world through perception. Williams suggests that in our daily lives we choose to extract from our experience of the world an understanding of it based on the constant perceiving and organization of that experience. We choose to believe what we see, and construct elaborate narratives which we refer to in order to make our way through life. Films which illustrate this process of the construction of our understanding of reality are concerned with truth. Documentary truth can thus be seen as the truth of meaning making processes, not simply the “actuality” of an image.

The breakdown of distinction between fiction and documentary is acute, as both forms of filmmaking can foreground the subjective construction of experience. If truth in film is separated from the image’s indexical relationship with the pro-filmic event, then there would be no distinguishing between fiction and documentary. However, Williams suggests that “an overly simplified dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the root of our difficulty in thinking about the truth in
documentary” (“Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary”20). In order to overcome such over-simplification, it is better to examine the notion that the truth we seek in documentary lies somewhere in between the concrete categorizations we have set out for ourselves - in the way the mind constructs meaning from the world.

In his book, *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols explores the new definition of documentary. The adequacy of a definition, he claims, has less to do with how well it corresponds to common usage than with how well it locates and addresses important (theoretical) questions. The theoretical questions that Nichols wishes to locate and address have to do primarily with how power circulates in documentary discourses. That is certainly an important question. But, it is only one aspect of how documentaries function as a discourse. Moreover, Nichols appears to recognize that one cannot adequately address the question of how power circulates in a discourse without first understanding how the discourse is perceived and interpreted by its recipients. Accordingly, he begins by offering his view of how documentaries are conventionally understood.

According to Nichols, conventions circulate and they are negotiated and nailed down in three discursive arenas or sites: a community of practitioners with its institutional supports, a corpus of texts, and a constituency of viewers. Since these three things are inextricably bound together, the distinction between them is purely analytical but a useful one.
For documentary discourses, the community of practitioners consists of people who make or engage in the circulation of documentary films. Its institutional supports include funders like the National Endowment for the Arts, distributors like PBS, professional associations, documentary film festivals, and so on. The corpus of texts includes everything that is commonly considered to be a documentary. The constituency of viewers includes, in its broadest sense, everyone who occasionally watches documentaries. The defining characteristic of this constituency is certain kinds of knowledge about what constitutes a documentary and about how to make sense of one in conventionally accepted ways. The constituency of viewers has its own institutional supports, like newspaper criticism, the educational establishment, and distributors like PBS which determine how a film is labeled and the context in which it is seen.

As Nichols maintains, the key factor that defines the community of practitioners, is “a common, self-chosen mandate to represent the historical world rather than imaginary ones.” The corpus of texts is defined by an “informing logic” that involves “a representation, case, or argument about the historical world.” The constituency of viewers is defined by two common assumptions: first, “the images we see (and many of the sounds we hear) had their origin in the historical world” and, second, that documentaries do not merely portray the historical world but make some sort of “argument” about it (Representing Reality 9). The definitive factor in every case is “the historical
world.” Whether you are looking at why documentaries are made, how they are put together, or how they are interpreted; what conventionally defines them is their relationship to “the historical world.” Specifically, he claims that they make “arguments” about the historical world.

A three-hour BBC documentary on *Gandhi* (2009) does a reasonable job of covering Gandhi's life: basic biographical details, historical events, key influences, lucky breaks, setbacks, and so on. Based on mainstream scholarship, it avoids edgy controversy while conveying a sense of this immensely brave, complex and charismatic man who, despite his many flaws and idiosyncrasies, still captivates people worldwide and has become an icon for non-violent resistance. It includes some rare historical footage as well. The three episodes are: The Making of the Mahatma, The Rise to Fame, and The Road to Freedom.

Mishal Hussein, BBC news presenter, presents this on-location reappraisal of Gandhi’s life. This indeed turned out to be one of the main attractions of the series: it is visually attractive, being shot on locations in the various places made famous by Gandhi’s presence. Period footage is judiciously interspersed between solid interviews with close associates, historians and others with personal memories to produce a coherent narrative with good historical perspective. For example, the firsthand accounts of the massacre in Amritsar are both harrowing and instructive of the political shockwave that passed throughout India in the aftermath.
But, there is something not quite right with this production. First, there is too much of Mishal Hussein persona: Mishal looking reflexive, Mishal’s profile against a stunning landscape. This Mishal persona intrudes on the material. This aspect of the documentary becomes irritating after a while. It is important to have an engaging presenter to take the viewer into the material.

Second is the question that lingers over Mishal’s relationship with the man himself. In the first episode she discloses that her family and cultural background put her at odds with the legend of Gandhi. At the beginning of the second episode she reveals: “As my journey continues, I uncover a different Gandhi from the saintly Hollywood version.” This hints that there are unpleasant secrets to be uncovered that have never been told before.

At other points the viewer gets the impression that he is being told that his prior knowledge and understanding of the subject is somehow biased and romantic and that Mishal is here to put the record straight. A feeling of dissonance underpins this production. A framework of ‘straw-man’ like introductory statements by the presenter is followed by interviews and information which apparently contradict them. At times the approach simply does not make sense. At one point Mishal states: “I’ve come to realize that there was nothing inevitable or smooth about Gandhi’s rise to power. Indeed when he was finally released from prison his views were unchanged. He was still convinced of the value of spinning and marching.”
While there was no direct attack, this documentary indirectly blames him for alienating Muslims, especially when he attended the round table conference, and while creating Pakistan. This was also unique because it tried to make fun of his experiments on celibacy. Lack of sensitivity is deliberate and with a hidden agenda. It is one of the most blatant display of colonial audacity where a past colonial power uses its popular mouth-piece (BBC). It seems, somewhere, British still cannot forget the hurt of losing the ‘gem’ of the crown. As if the final rape (partition) was not enough!

In the first (The Making of Mahatma, 3 Oct 2009) of three programmes examining the life and legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, journalist and newsreader Mishal Husain journeys through Gandhi’s early years in India to the end of his controversial career in South Africa. Along the way, she confronts accusations of racism and hypocrisy levelled against Gandhi during this period, and discovers how London played a vital role in the development of the Indian Messiah.

In the second part of the series (The Rise to Fame, 10 Oct 2009), Mishal Husain traces Gandhi’s transformation from the obscure lawyer to the Father of the Nation and discovers a more complicated and intriguing man than the saintly Hollywood version. Gandhi had to face unpopularity, political failure and British jails. But in 1930 he triumphed, launching the most astute campaign of the age- the 240 mile Salt March that succeeded in humiliating the British Raj.
In the final episode (The Road to Freedom, 17 Oct 2009), Mishal Husain explores the dramatic last years of Gandhi’s life, which culminated in his death by an assassin's bullet. She gets to the bottom of an enduring mystery - Gandhi is revered as the Father of the Nation, though India turned its back on Gandhi's blueprint for the country. Mishal retraces Gandhi’s visit to England in 1931 and uncovers evidence that Gandhi may have unwittingly contributed to the eventual partition of India. Newsreel footage from the time captures Gandhi meeting the people of Lancashire and London’s East End, and Tony Benn recalls meeting him as a six-year-old boy. Sixteen years later India is free, but by then Gandhi is a broken man: sidelined from the centre of power and devastated by partition and the horrific violence that independence brings. But it is Gandhi’s darkest hour that finally brings his greatest triumph.

The presenter Mishal Hussein’s background makes it all the more interesting. She says at the outset: “They (her grandfather and others in the family, more broadly the Muslims in India generally) didn’t feel that he (Gandhi) was a leader for them or understood the fears they had about an independent India dominated by the Hindus. So the family fled to the newly born Pakistan at the time of the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947. So did many other Muslims, millions of them. Likewise innumerable Hindus and Sikhs fled Pakistan to India.” Mishal is checking this evaluation of India by her own family throughout the presentation. It was mostly the deteriorating communal, and predominantly the Hindu-Muslim, relations that
worried her family at that time. These relations worsened by the stiff attitude of Gandhi at the time of the Second Round Table Conference convened by the British Government to discuss the constitutional future of India in London in 1931.

The presentation goes further and says that it was Gandhi who wrecked the Round Table Conference by his refusal to agree to the demands for separate, as against joint, electorates by others, and made it impossible to arrive at a new constitution of India. Some reservations on these points can be raised without trying to defend Gandhi in particular. First, the Hindus and Muslims, the two major communities of India, had already agreed on the separate electorates back in 1916. It is another question whether the system is conducive to a better relation between the two, as it was a system which makes a political dialogue across the communities impossible and unnecessary. The nature of the system being as above, there had been several attempts to reach an inter-communal agreement to do away with the system, but unfortunately they failed. The most prominent of them was the Motilal Nehru Report of 1928 and some amendments put forward by Muslim politicians. Gandhi was out of the picture then. Third, Mishal, while researching on the Round Table Conference, was told that it was Gandhi who brought the Conference to a failure. But, while the other delegates were all nominees of the British and therefore not likely to say anything embarrassing to them, Gandhi was the only one appointed by a political party. It was said
in the narration that he was unprepared. It seems he always spoke on the spur of the moment, and was always unprepared for a meeting in the form of papers. It is true that Gandhi went home empty-handed, but he was prepared to concede to the demand of the separate electorate and a more decentralized government, once the Muslims agreed to support the Congress demand for independence, and to ascertain if the separate electorate was supported by the Muslim masses. But they were not interested.

The British tried to make use of Muslims and the “untouchables” to split the independence movement. The Indian Princely states is another element, the most persistent legacy of which is the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir. Given the conditions at the time of Partition, Mishal’s forefathers would be justified in their fear of the Hindu dominance. But she was doing more justice to Gandhi when she said at the end that she was “ambivalent and skeptical” toward Gandhi in the beginning, but that has changed and now she thinks he was “genuine” in his intentions.

_Mahatma: Life of Gandhi, 1869–1948_ is a 1968 documentary biography film, detailing the life of Mahatma Gandhi. The film was produced by The Gandhi National Memorial Fund in cooperation with the Films Division of the Government of India. It was directed and scripted by Vithalbhai Jhaveri, who provided the commentary throughout the film. The film is in black and white runs for 330 minutes. The documentary tells the life-story of Gandhi and his incessant search for Truth. It largely reflects
the history of India’s struggle for freedom. The film contains animation, live photography and old prints to provide an integrated image of his life. The story is narrated using mostly Gandhi’s own words. Gandhi is presented as a man of peace and goodwill who fought evil and injustice with soul force. His life gives the message of truth and non-violence, supreme, unlimited love. He is the Mahatma- the Great Soul- the name given to him by the people of India.

Gandhi, who is depicted as a spiritual leader, led nationwide campaigns for easing poverty, expanding women’s rights, building religious and ethnic amity, ending untouchability, increasing economic self-reliance, and above all for achieving Swaraj- the independence of India from British domination. Gandhi led Indians in protesting the national salt tax with the 400 km Dandi Salt March in 1930, and later in demanding the British to immediately Quit India in 1942, during World War II. He was imprisoned for that and for numerous other political offenses over the years. Gandhi sought to practice non-violence and truth in all situations, and advocated that others do the same. For him villages were the core of the true India and he promoted self-sufficiency.

Gandhi took leadership of Congress in 1920 and began a steady escalation of demands (with intermittent compromises or pauses) until on 26 January 1930 the Indian National Congress declared the independence of India. The British did not recognize that and more negotiations ensued,
with Congress taking a role in provincial government in late 1930s. Tensions escalated until Gandhi demanded immediate independence in 1942 and the British responded by imprisoning him and tens of thousands of Congress leaders. Meanwhile the Muslim League cooperated with Britain and moved, against Gandhi’s strong opposition, to demand for a totally separate Muslim state of Pakistan. In August 1947 the British partitioned the land, with India and Pakistan each achieving independence on terms Gandhi disapproved.

Gandhi is presented as a man who strongly favoured the emancipation of women, and he even said that “the women have come to look upon me as one of themselves.” He opposed purdah, child marriage, untouchability, and the extreme oppression of Hindu widows, and including sati. He particularly recruited women to participate in the salt tax campaigns and the boycott of foreign products. Gandhi's success in enlisting women in his campaigns, including the salt tax campaign, anti-untouchability campaign and the peasant movement, gave many women a new self-confidence and dignity in the mainstream of Indian public life. In the documentary, Gandhi is the messiah who succeeded in incorporating radical forces into the nonviolent resistance movement.

Every intellectual enterprise is based on a personal commitment and motivated by personal pleasures that sustain the researcher through the difficulties of his work. Historians are driven by their immediate context-intellectual, economic, social, political - and the individual concerns
that move them to select one project over another. Each historian works from a specific position in relation to the historical object; a bias is implicit in his “angle” of observation that carries with it the risk of ideological prejudice.

Film and television have been accepted as having a pervasive influence on how people understand the world. An important aspect of this is the relationship of history and film. The different views of the past created by film, television and video now attract closer attention from historians, cultural critics and filmmakers. Many indeed have already come to terms with the moving image as an agent of historical knowledge.

History, like the cinema, can often be a matter of perspective. That is why Clint Eastwood’s decision to narrate the Battle of Iwo Jima from both the American and the Japanese point of view is not really new; it had been done before in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), for instance. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is a combination of two movies that document the event from two perspectives - Japanese and American. Each segment is written and directed by different directors (Japanese by Kinji Fukasaku and Toshio Masuda, American by Richard Fleischer). Yet the two parts work together as a whole. First, it documents political events that led to the Japanese decision to attack; then the long Japanese preparations for attack and unsuccessful American attempts to predict and prevent their hostile intention; finally, we see the attack itself and its immediate and devastating consequences. In those segments we could see a sharp contrast between Japanese and Americans. Japanese are presented
as hard working, patriotic, brave and intelligent warriors who carefully prepare for their daring raid, leaving nothing to chance. Americans are, on the other hand, portrayed as bunch of incompetent idiots, with few exceptions, whose common sense cannot defeat sheer idiocy of military and political red tape.

But by dividing these perspectives in different films—*Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*—directed for Japanese and international audiences, Eastwood makes history not merely an issue of which side you are on, but of how to look at history itself. The exercise itself, making two films from opposing angles, hints at Eastwood’s message that heroism is subjective.

The symbol of the flag raising and the flag raisers themselves are distorted and packaged by the media in ways that serve the interests of the government, but they are not necessarily reflective of the truth. The media is responsible for the American people’s perception of the war, but during the majority of the battle on Iwo Jima, that perception contrasted with reality. The flag raising was turned into a symbol of success and victory, a convenient symbol of a “happy ending.” Attention had begun to shift away from Iwo Jima, even as the great bulk of the bloodletting began.

In February, 1945, one of the fiercest battles of the Pacific theater of World War II occured on the tiny island of Iwo Jima. Thousands of Marines attacked the stronghold maintained by thousands of Japanese, and the slaughter on both sides was horrific. The Marines attacked twelve thousand
Japanese protecting the twenty square kilometers of the Iwo Jima island in a very violent battle. Early in the battle, when they reached Mount Suribachi, six soldiers raised the American flag on the top, and a photograph of the raising became an American cause to celebrate. The picture became a symbol in a post Great Depression America. As a powerful inspiration to war-sick Americans, the photo became a symbol of the Allied cause. During the War the American Government’s war chest was empty because the American people did not have faith that they could win, so they stopped buying war bonds. So a campaign was launched using the photo of the Flag Raising at Iwo Jima. The three surviving flag raisers, Rene Gagnon, John Bradley and Ira Hayes, were whisked back to civilization to help raise funds for the war effort. The government brought the three survivors to America to raise funds for war, bringing hope to desolate people, and making the three men heroes of the war. They learned that the story the government released to the press was full inaccuracies and they had to keep on saying the story even though it was not true. However, the traumatized trio had difficulty dealing with the image built by their superiors, sharing the heroism with their mates. The accolades for heroism heaped on the three men were at odds with their own personal realizations that thousands of real heroes lie dead on Iwo Jima, and that their own contributions to the fight were only symbolic and not deserving of the singling out they were experiencing. Each of the three must come to terms with the honors, exploitation, and grief that they faced simply for being in a photograph.
The picture of six marines raising the US flag after the exhausting, bloody conquest of barren volcanic island Iwo Jima, the first piece of sacred home soil the Japanese must cede, became iconic. It was significant for the Pacific campaign at the time as it gave a false sense of victory being nearly won. A complex structure of flashbacks interlaces three phases in their lives. First, the battle, involving countless comrades, many of whom fell like the Japanese defenders. Then the survivors being commandeered as the face of a homeland tour to sell the public war bonds to refill the empty war chest, a luxury reprieve from battle but also a guilt paradox. Finally, the after-war, mainly trying to fit in civilian life again, until the present of the narrator, the son of one of them.

There were five Marines and one Navy Corpsman photographed raising the U.S. flag on Mt. Suribachi by Joe Rosenthal on February 23, 1945. *Flags of Our Fathers* is the story of three of the six surviving servicemen, John Bradley, Rene Gagnon and Ira Hayes, who fought the battle of Iwo Jima. The picture became one of the most famous images of the U.S. winning a battle during World War II. However, the battle for Iwo Jima raged on for another month with three of the marines being killed in action. The other three servicemen were taken out of battle and flown back to the US. The photo made these men heroes and the government used these new heroes. The three men did not believe they were heroes, even though the American public did. What actually happened was this. On February 23, 1945, the fifth day
of battle, the men of Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, planted the US flag atop
the island’s Mount Suribachi. The extinct volcano, which rose 550 feet above
the island, dominated its topography. The thousands of soldiers in control of
the black-sand beachhead below cheered long and tumultuously. A few
moments later, a top Navy official expressed his desire to obtain that flag as
trophy. It was promptly taken down and replaced with another. There was no
fanfare for the second flag; it was not the flag of conquest, but a snapshot of it
was taken. Within a matter of days, Joe Rosenthal’s iconic second photograph
became a symbol of American patriotism and bravery. It appeared in all the
major newspapers, won the Pulitzer Prize and later became a staple in history
books. The Battle of Iwo Jima continued for about four more weeks. Three of
the men who raised the second flag died in the fighting. Thanks to
government propaganda back home, the three who survived became instant
heroes. The government purposely ignored the truth: that these men were not
the ones who had raised the original flag, but it used them anyway in a public
relations campaign to sell war bonds.

Director Clint Eastwood’s somber Flags of Our Fathers, based on a
book by James Bradley (the son of one of the flag raisers at Iwo Jima)
published in 2000, tells the story of the effects of this campaign on the three
flag-raising soldiers who survived. On this occasion Eastwood’s usual laconic
style, devoid of hysteria or cheap emotions, works in his favour, allowing him
to achieve a certain intensity that does not seem laboured. He thus manages,
without being preachy or pedantic, to make a statement not only against war, but against governmental hypocrisy and manipulation in manufacturing heroes for its own ends. In the film, the men are at first happy to participate in the bogus campaign because it is for a good cause. For a while, they also enjoy the adulation and adoration of the crowds. But the more the government pushes them into its orgiastic campaign of patriotism, the more the men retreat into themselves. Their enjoyment soon turns to disillusionment and, unable to continue living a lie, they become uncomfortable and bitter. They know their actions were not at all heroic, that planting the second flag on Mount Suribachi took hardly any effort at all and that the mythic photograph was at best serendipitous. Bradley, the medic who had risked his life in the field of battle innumerable times, becomes more taciturn and is haunted by the memories of the bloody battles on the island. Marine paratrooper Ira Hayes, the Pima Native American who becomes the moral conscience of the story, turns into an alcoholic, or his alcoholism takes a turn for the worse. Despite the adoring crowds, he encounters racism everywhere he goes. He sinks further and further into despair and dies tragically at a relatively young age. At first, Gagnon is happy to play the hero, but eventually he becomes uneasy in his role.

*Flags of Our Fathers*, the American version, is less about the battle than the memory of war, focusing in particular on how nations compulsively create heroes when they need them (like the soldiers who raised the flag
on Iwo Jima) and forget them later when they do not. Instead of giving the national narrative of bravery in capturing Iwo Jima, the film shows how such stories are manufactured by media and governments to further the aims of the country, whatever may be the truth or the feelings of the individual soldiers. Against the constructed nature of public heroism, Eastwood poses the private real bonds between men; against public memory he focuses on personal trauma.

*Flags* sets off to deconstruct the myth of the “Greatest Generation” not by way of attacking the reputation of the soldiers who fought the war but by revealing how their images have served to signify something, ideologically and morally, while stripping their human experience of its substance. *Flags* follows three of the men who raised the American flag, moving across three time periods, including the present day. This illuminates the gulf between experience and memory, and between memory and history, using its protagonists deliberately as symbols, showing how collective need and the sweep of history rendered the subtleties of their personalities and experiences irrelevant. War is hell, heroism is subjective, and seemingly insignificant events are exploited for the benefit of the power elite. With *Flags of Our Fathers* Clint Eastwood, known in Hollywood as a political conservative, has made a statement against war. Moreover, he has severely criticized the government’s manipulation of soldiers’ sacrifices and their families’ expectations and emotions for its own crass ends. More importantly
he has taken on the government’s manufactured patriotism and its tragic influence on people.

With *Flags of Our Fathers*, Eastwood has created an elegant, elegiac mood piece. It is steadily somber from beginning to end. Some sequences are memorable. In one, the government bureaucrats ask our three protagonists to climb atop a replica of Mount Suribachi erected at Chicago’s Soldier Field. They are to recreate the planting of the flag at Iwo Jima before thousands of people. When confronted with their task, the soldiers show their disgust at having to perform such a task. After all, as one of them later says, “All I was trying to do was not to get shot.”

The recreation of Mount Suribachi has the effect of making the men retreat more into themselves as it reminds them of the horrible carnage that took place on Iwo Jima. So, while campaigning as “heroes”, the men are forced to relive, time and time again, the horrors of their war experiences. The film seems to ask, “What is a hero?” The extended question is: how many of our heroes have been manufactured to manipulate public opinion to win favour for the war and goad people into emptying their pockets to finance it. It is a question that has much resonance for us today, though it is not necessarily the director’s intention.

*Flags of Our Fathers* seems to say that heroism is totally subjective; that true heroes do not need to impress on anyone their valorous deeds. They do what they do and then pull back, unnoticed. “Heroism” is the tool
appropriated by the ruling powers to fool and control the population. On another note, the Japanese soldiers are never individualized in the film. One barely sees them; they are little more than shadows. For the most part they remain hidden throughout the entire battle. That might have been the way the American soldiers saw them. But Eastwood, to his credit, has refused to demonize them in any way.

The Japanese edition, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, is about similar issues, but Eastwood changes his approach to history itself with this film. It, like *Flags*, begins decades after the war was over. But it tells the story not through the traumatic flashbacks of the survivors, but effectively through the letters of soldiers unearthed from an island cave. *Flags* is about how to remember the war, giving a new view on an incident everyone knows; *Letters* is about listening to those who fought it, trying to create a memory tableau of something most people, including Japanese, know little about.

Mostly relating the battle as if it is in the present, *Letters* is a more conventional war film. If *Flags* is an ambitious attempt to deconstruct the Hollywood war movie and similar media that work to create fictions of heroism, *Letters*, initially inspired by Eastwood’s encounter with the letters of General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, the Japanese commander on Iwo Jima, appears more simply as an American effort to understand the complex human beings on the other side, to tell the world that they were brave too.
And some of the figures are fascinating. Kuribayashi had studied in the United States, wrote loving letters to his son with comic illustrations, and protected his men against abusive officers; his close associate, Baron Nishi, was a gold medalist at the Los Angeles Olympics and a friend of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. These two are in conflict with more traditional officers like Ito, who seem more concerned with achieving a glorious suicidal death than defending the island and thus delaying the Allied forces’ march on Tokyo. Under Kuribayashi’s unconventional command, a garrison that was supposed to fall in 5 days lasted for 36. The result was that just 1,083 of Japan’s 22,000 troops from army and navy units survived. The United States suffered the highest casualties of the Pacific War to that time. The 70,000 Marines thrown into the battle suffered 26,000 casualties including 6,821 deaths.

The fear when one country’s artist dabbles in another nation’s history is that unwitting mistakes of facts and interpretations will be made. Usually the problem is inaccuracy or distortion. Eastwood does much to undermine the military glory. Despite ads touting the vigorous defense, very little of that is shown as the film quickly turns to the soldiers’ choice between suicide and surrender. Suicide itself is shown as a grisly and, in contrast to old Japanese war films, distinctly unaesthetic experience. The soul of Eastwood’s film is the baker-turned-soldier Saigo, who has promised his wife to return alive and never fires a shot.
Japanese atrocities are mostly shown in *Flags* and American crimes in *Letters*. But Eastwood completely avoids the controversial issue of how Japanese should remember the war, even though he allows some of his characters, one in fact ironically, to survive. The critique of national history through personal trauma that centres *Flags* is barely raised in *Letters*. One therefore, wonders whether Eastwood, in honoring these other soldiers in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, may be unwittingly engaging in the same process of creating “heroes” that *Flags of Our Fathers* criticized, albeit for another country. The primary hero here is Kuribayashi and he is someone whom the virtually pacifist Saigo eventually comes to revere and actually fight for.

Eastwood, by walking the tightrope between mutual deference and mutual criticism, remains somewhat detached and never openly declares what kind of hero Kuribayashi is (or should be): a public hero like the beleaguered flag-raisers in *Flags*, or simply a private hero (like Mike, the skilled sergeant in *Flags*) for a life-loving baker. Both remain open as possibilities and it is left to the audience, with the help of the media context they inhabit, to decide. The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures voted *Letters from Iwo Jima* the best film of 2006, proclaiming it Eastwood’s “masterpiece”. His detached but deferential stance also reminds us that cinema, like history, can often be a matter of perspective. It is up to us, not just the films, to determine the perspective as well as our history and our heroes.
Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* is a remarkable film. It is rare for a war film, the focus of which is usually on the heroism and patriotism of a country’s soldiers, to consider the human face of the enemy. Such films are even rarer in the history of films about the conflict between Japanese and Americans during World War II.

During the war, audience in the English speaking world were trained to view the Japanese enemy as a monolithic entity with films that emphasized myths and stereotypes about the Japanese. The Japanese army is rendered faceless sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically in the films of this period. When the faces of the Japanese enemy can be seen, they are generally shown in one of two ways: as foolish-looking stereotypes or as taking pleasure in warfare and cruelty. Ironically the films that have done the most to understand the humanity of both Japanese and the Allied Forces have been films of Japanese P.O.W. camps. Outside of the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese forces against Asians during the war, the P.O.W camps were the site of some of the most horrific war crimes imaginable.

Clint Eastwood’s concern about the perspective of the Japanese in the battle of Iwo Jima haunted him throughout the preparation for *Flags of our Fathers* so much that he encouraged one of his research assistants, Iris Yamashita, to dig deeper into their story. The result is a deeply moving film that follows the Japanese soldiers at Iwo Jima from their preparations for the American invasion until their last heroic push at the end of the battle.
In *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Eastwood dispenses with many stereotypes of both Japanese and American soldiers and tries to tell the Japanese side of the battle with dignity.

Inspired by the picture letters of Army General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the story of the Japanese soldiers is told through the letters they wrote home to their loved ones. As almost all of the twenty thousand plus Japanese on the island were killed, anecdotes from letters are really the only way their histories can be recounted. Kuribayashi and Baron Nishi add an element of poignancy to the film, for both men had spent time in the US and had many American friends. Kuribayashi knows that the Japanese are doomed to failure due to America’s industrial superiority. His understanding of the enemy and his unconventional leadership lead to many interesting conflicts between officers in the film.

The character of Baron Nishi is based on the historical figure Takeichi Nishi, who won a gold medal at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. One of the most moving moments in the film comes when he translates a dead American soldier’s letter from his mother to the soldiers in his unit. The young soldiers are deeply moved by the letter to the point that young Shimizu says that his mother could have written such a letter. This is just one moment of many in the film where Eastwood demonstrates that despite different belief systems and social customs, Japanese and American soldiers are actually not so different from each other in terms of their hopes and dreams for themselves.
and for their families. Saigo, the character we are invited to identify the most strongly with, is filled with doubts about the war; he misses his wife so much that he writes her letters whenever he has a chance, and longs to survive the war so that he can meet his newborn daughter.

The choice of colour for the film has a great deal to help the viewer at a point of objectivity. Images are almost completely drained of colour. It has the appearance of a faded old colour photograph. One can say that Letters from Iwo Jima is one of the few movies in which American soldiers are shown to do unethical and unheroic things. It pulls down a lot of stereotypes about the Japanese that have stood for too long in Western culture.

Clint Eastwood’s Letters from Iwo Jima is, in many ways, an unusual and remarkable work. The director, after representing, in Flags of Our Fathers, the American side of the World War II battle for the Japanese island of Iwo Jima and its later consequences for a number of soldiers, has turned his attention to the fate of the Japanese troops. In the conflict, which raged for more than a month in February and March 1945, 100,000 US troops attempted to root out 22,000 defenders. Nearly 7,000 American forces died (and some 19,000 were wounded) on Iwo Jima; only 1,100 or so Japanese survived.

Letters from Iwo Jima does everything that Flags of our Fathers failed to do. It tells the story of the fight, instead of war campaign at home. The film begins months before the United States’ invasion of the Japanese island
Iwo Jima, with Imperial troops fortifying and digging in. Everyone knows Iwo Jima is a death trap. As a framing device, Eastwood stages the digging up of a batch of letters on Iwo Jima in 2005. Throughout the film we hear passages from letters written by Lt. General Tadamichi Kuribayashi as well as a more humble soldier, the baker Saigo. Kuribayashi was placed in charge of Iwo Jima’s defenses in the summer of 1944. The film begins with his arrival on the island. Saigo and his comrades are slogging away, digging trenches on the beach. The new commander puts an end to that and insists on building defenses in the island’s mountains instead. In the end, the Japanese built an elaborate network of 5,000 caves, tunnels and pillboxes, approximately 18 miles long. Some of the manmade caverns could hold as many as 300 to 400 people.

Kuribayashi insists on a walking tour of the island against his officer’s advice. He realizes that they have got everything all wrong. Kuribayashi has travelled and studied in America, and knows how the Americans think. The Japanese military is in disarray, the navy has been defeated. They cannot rely on outside support. He discards his commander’s defensive plans. Eastwood’s film portrays Kuribayashi as a cosmopolitan figure. Of samurai descent and an aristocrat, the Japanese officer had been partially educated in Canada and lived for two years in the US, serving as a deputy military attaché. He was reportedly opposed to a Japanese war with America, impressed as he was in particular by the latter’s industrial capacity.
Iwo Jima is the last line of defense before the Americans attack the Japanese mainland. Kuribayashi sets his troops to digging in. The Japanese forces hide in a network of caves and tunnels throughout the island. Kuribayashi has to struggle against his own men’s code of honour, as soldiers schooled in the old way of honour fighting refuse to retreat, preferring suicide to tactical withdrawal. Kuribayashi realizes that his forces would not be able to hold out in the end against a massive invasion force. The Japanese high command is not able to provide him with any air or naval support. His aim is to make the taking of Iwo Jima as costly as possible for the Americans. “Do not expect to return home alive,” he tells his men. Opposed to ritual suicide and the equally suicidal and bloodcurdling “banzai charge,” which alerts the enemy to one’s presence, Kuribayashi insists that no soldier could die before killing 10 from the other side.

Kuribayashi believes that a dead soldier is a useless soldier, and desperately tries to convince his troops to learn when to withdraw and survive another day. His commanders see only their old code of honour, and prefer death to the dishonor of defeat. In the end none of these matters. They all know that they are all dead. Letters from Iwo Jima is not a movie about finding victory, but a lesson in what it really means to die with honour. Amidst the most vicious, protracted pieces of war the world has ever seen, Letters from Iwo Jima tells individual stories of heroism as Japanese fighters prepare to die. In doing so, the movie raises questions about what courage is,
which real bravery is: the soldier who rushes heedlessly into battle to give his life in service to his country, or the man who refuses to die so that he can make it back home to see his wife and daughter.

Iris Yamashita’s script is heartbreaking, capturing the broader strokes of what is happening in the battle by focusing on the quiet internal struggle going on inside individuals in Kuribayashi’s doomed forces. The movie’s central character is a former young baker, Saigo, forced into service by the Emperor and ripped away from his wife and unborn daughter to die on Iwo Jima’s distant shores. When everyone around him is looking for a way to die, he is looking for a way to live. The movie’s journey is really his as he escapes one route after another until he ends up with Kuribayashi right at the very end. All round him one comrade after another dies, some willingly, some unwilling. But Saigo scrambles on, dodging death, avoiding suspicions among his fellow troops, his only thought is to find a way home to his baby and wife.

*Letters* is shot in washed out colors, the only vibrancy coming from explosions, fire and blood. The film is completely without glamour or glitz, yet in its bleakness it is a kind of desperate beauty. It is the story of men being chewed up and spit out by forces beyond their control. Eastwood finds more to say in defeat than he does in victory.

The reasons of the devastating attack on the United States at Pearl Harbour are attributed to shortcomings in the areas of people, process and technology. These failings are examined in depth by “*Tora! Tora! Tora!*,”
a 1970 American and Japanese co-production that meticulously dramatizes the attack on Pearl Harbor. Though the narrative is somewhat choppy, as it is essentially a historical highlight reel, it remains a fascinating film that is executed with the state-of-the-art special effects of the period. The Japanese segments were originally to be filmed by acclaimed director Akira Kurosawa, but the task eventually went to directors Kinji Fukasaku and Toshio Masuda. The American segment is directed Richard Fleischer.

As the film progresses, we learn that surprise attacks are a long-standing practice in Japanese military doctrine, and that the Japanese felt compelled to attack the United States as a means of securing much-needed oil, metal, and rubber resources needed to fuel their continuing four-year long invasion of China. There were also internal schisms within the Japanese military, between the Army and the Navy, as well as between the ‘old guard’, who still believed in the infallibility of naval power, and a new generation of military strategists, who saw air power as the key to victory on the modern battlefield. Meanwhile, on the American end, a number of key failures and limitations in the areas of people, process, and technology in the American military contributed to the catastrophic losses resulting from the attack. Though the Americans had anticipated an escalation of Japanese military actions in the Pacific, they mistakenly believed that such actions would be limited to the Philippines, Thailand, or Borneo, and the possibility of hostilities in Hawaii was remote. On account of this mindset, there was
a scarcity of resources made available for the defense of Pearl Harbor. For example, a shortage of aircraft restricted the number of air patrols around Oahu, allowing the Japanese carrier strike force, traveling under radio silence, to amass within striking distance, directly north of the island.

Lt. General Walter C. Short, who was in charge of defending the Pacific Fleet and Hawaii from attack, ordered all fighter planes to be kept in close quarters in the middle of the airfield in order to prevent sabotage, which he considered to be the most likely enemy action. Unfortunately, by doing so, he actually made it easier for the Japanese to destroy the planes on the ground. Though they had access to long-range radar equipment, local laws and jurisdictional conflicts prevented the Navy from deploying them in optimal locations for detecting the Japanese fleet. Even when a poorly trained radar operator lucked out in spotting a large formation of planes headed towards the island, his observation was mistakenly attributed to an incoming formation of American bombers.

Though American intelligence was able to intercept and decode a transmission between Tokyo and its embassies that suggested an attack was imminent, key decision makers were unavailable due to it being a weekend, thereby slowing the dissemination of vital information. This bureaucratic morass was further exacerbated by the unreliable and slow communications channels of the time. As a result, a general alert did not reach the military brass at Pearl Harbor until the attack was already well underway.
Although conceived by the American film studio Twentieth-Century Fox as a way to mark a new beginning for the two nations, certain popular opinions at the time, particularly in Japan, regarded *Tora! Tora! Tora!* as a cultural extension of the unequal security partnership of the 1960. On the American side, Pearl Harbor has come to wield such iconic proprietorship that it may seem inconceivable that the authorship of such pivotal memory could ever be shared with the former enemy.

Despite its claims to tell both national sides of the attack, *Tora! Tora!* *Tora!* evoked discussions of genre and accuracy in cinematic representations of war and nation, with much interest, especially in America, over the “American view” and the “Japanese view.” Japanese critics were less concerned about the film’s reference to Pearl Harbor in 1941 than the politics of the 1960s framing the film as an expression of unequal bilateral relations or glorification of state violence. While there is validity to such concerns, the film also offered a unique space for integrating narratives not entirely reducible to exigent security matters.

*Tora! Tora! Tora!*’s screenplay was adapted from the extensive writings of historian Gordon Prange, including an early work titled, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and Ladislas Farago’s *The Broken Seal* (1967). Though Prange died in 1980, his former students, Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, published his meticulous document on Pearl Harbour posthumously as *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl*
Harbor (1981), widely considered an epic, an unparalleled work compiling Prange’s thirty-seven years of research. After researching both national perspectives and claiming “no preconceived thesis” (and originally intending to do primarily the Japanese side), Prange’s “reflective” rather than “judgmental” conclusion, expressed by Goldstein and Dillon, was that there were “no deliberate villains”:

[Prange] considered those involved on both sides to be honest, hardworking, dedicated, and for the most part, intelligent. But as human beings some were brilliant and some mediocre, some broad-minded and some of narrow vision, some strong and some weak-and every single one fallible, capable of mistakes of omission and commission. (35)

Writing mostly in the post-Occupation years but before the 1980s, Prange’s Pearl Harbor works including At Dawn assumed a “happy ending on both sides” marked by peaceful relations and the rise of the Japanese economy under the American military umbrella. As technical adviser to the film version of Tora! Tora! Tora! Prange’s signature themes of communication failures, mutual mistakes and diffused responsibility are prominent.

For many Japanese citizens during this time, the inescapable backdrop of the mutual security treaty acquired a narrative power of its own, metaphorically coding the film in terms of the unhappy hegemony of one side’s overwhelming military superiority. There are no indications
of the filmmakers making an Ampo (the U.S.-Japan security agreement) statement willfully, though certainly the American power equation coupled with the gravitas of a major Hollywood studio conditioned audience and critics to connect the dots to American military dominance. Major events shape people’s understanding of the world around them according to the storylines they half-consciously absorb and retain.

Given the conventional wisdom that Japan and the U.S. maintain, divergent national memories of the Pearl Harbor attack—America remembers, Japan forgets—makes the audience puzzle how filmmakers from the two nations merged their creative efforts. To add to the irony, the film enjoyed relatively greater box office success in Japan than in the United States. Although a feature film, it inevitably produced critical debates about historical truth and the politics of national war memory. Although the Pearl Harbor attack has generated a significant body of both documentary and feature film production, a close examination of both types of films suggests that these genre distinctions have little significance for cinematic claims of historical veracity. Though classified as a feature film, Tora! Tora! Tora! can easily be viewed as a comprehensive “documentary” for its relentless attention to details and causal sequences.

War films in general use affective, technological and strategic components to attract “war buffs” and technophiles regardless of nationality. Tora! Tora! Tora! deployed all such devices, along with
the somewhat anodyne humbling of national identities achieved through the Prange-ian assertion that “they all made mistakes” (35). Yet the film also enabled, though some feared, the forging of a more forgetful binational identity, serving the mutual security alliance. The forgetting began less than one month after Japan’s surrender to transform the nation from enemy to friend.

_Tora!_ required years of negotiation between Japanese and American investors, leading to parallel productions under the control of Twentieth Century-Fox edited somewhat differently for each national audience. Advertising for _Tora!_ suggested that the film would help seal the past-following Prange’s thematic that mistakes were made on both sides. _Tora! Tora! Tora!_ shows the deceptions, the blunders, the innocence, the blindness, the brass minds and the freak twists. The all-too-human events led to the incredible sea and sky armadas that clashed at Pearl Harbor. The film recreates the monumental attack from plan to execution, as seen through both eyes.

Japanese commentators focused on the film’s relationship to the political environment of the sixties, whereas American critics zeroed in on the film’s failure as narrative, as cinematic storytelling as entertainment, in short. Critic after critic lamented the absence of dramatic story in a film intent on representing historical details. Vincent Canby, titled his review in the _New York Times_ “Tora-ble, Tora-ble, Tora-ble” writing, “a movie of recreated
history like “Tora! Tora! Tora!” which, with the best of motives…, purports to tell nothing but the truth, winds up as castrated fiction (7).

On a plain reading documentaries and films seem to have a closer relation to history. Documentary can function like journalism or on-the-spot news. But on a deeper look one often finds that a documentary or a film which is about “real life” is treated subjectively and sometimes doctored just as much as a piece of fiction. Though documentary is relied on as objective fact, as proven support for something, it can easily be a constructed, subjective artifact synonymous with social persuasion or propaganda. We can say that these types of film and documentary are interpretation of the past and not objective descriptions of the facts of the past. They are poetic speculations on the past.