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Comment

Hollywood does history

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One of the most disgusting moments in modern cinema came in the epilogue to Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*, a film about the disastrous US raid on Somali rebels in Mogadishu in 1993. The names of the 18 American victims of the US military's single biggest firefight since Vietnam scrolled across the screen in order to honour the dead. We were then told that more than 1,000 Somalis died in the same battle, but their identities remained obscure. Perhaps the director thought viewers would get bored sitting through a list of African names.

Black Hawk Down

Release: 2001

Country: USA

Cert (UK): 15

Runtime: 146 mins

Directors: Ridley Scott

Cast: Eric Bana, Ewan McGregor, Ewen Bremner, Jason Isaacs, Josh Hartnett, Ridley Scott, Tom Sizemore

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Or maybe Ridley Scott didn't think it worth his while to try to find out - after all, he was telling the story of American heroism in the face of some unexplained evil. This is the way the media (cinema included) memorialises those who resemble its target audience. That sometimes may seem a natural and even justifiable thing; it becomes more dubious only when we realise how many nameless dead are thus systematically sidelined and misrepresented in the rhetorical clamour to honour the favoured few. Somalians never had a Jerry Bruckheimer to spend \$90m to tell their side of the story.

Scott's film has the same grammar as Cy Enfield's *Zulu* in which wave after anonymous wave of black men raced towards the heavily outnumbered British troops at Rorke's Drift.

This isn't a trivial matter. We learn our history from such films. Our knowledge of the Zulu war of 1879 may be hazy, but we now seem to know some heroic redcoats stood firm against spear-carriers. We may not know what American servicemen were doing in Mogadishu (mounting an unjustifiably gung-ho raid without UN support, in fact), but we were discouraged from asking difficult questions and urged to bask in their allegedly superior courage and moral fibre.

That is why it is worrying to learn that two of Hollywood's leading directors, Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone, are currently filming movies that dramatise politically sensitive incidents. Stone's film will be about two police officers trapped in the rubble of the twin towers after rescuing scores of workers. "It's an exploration of heroism in our

country - but at the same time it is international in its humanity," says Stone.

But is that exploration worthwhile? Hasn't the heroism of New York's police officers and firefighters been trumpeted sufficiently from newspapers, TVs and T-shirts? Do we need the first feature film to tackle 9/11 to do so through US flag-waving masquerading as a globally relevant human drama? It is not to disrespect the dead nor living heroes to suggest that we don't. It seems likely that it will further solidify the myth of the stoicism of New Yorkers (a myth as questionable as that now being touted about Londoners) in a way that stops us thinking imaginatively about what happened in New York then, and why.

When Hollywood does history it not only often gets it wrong (think of U-571, which suggested Americans rather than the Royal Navy captured the Enigma decoding machine), but makes us more stupid. And why always heroism? Why not memorialise cowardice? If we are to learn from history, we need to recount it warts and all. Hollywood doesn't do warts.

Spielberg's film, *Vengeance*, is intriguing, since one of the side dramas is his continuing wrangle with his ancestry. It will deal with the revenge assassinations by Mossad squads following the murder at the 1972 Munich Olympics of 11 Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists. What responsibilities does the world's most famous Jewish director, albeit one raised in the Protestant suburbs, have to his people?

This week it was reported that he was stirred by his Judaism into making *Vengeance*, as he had been in making *Schindler's List* in 1993. But even there, one's doubts flare up: if *Schindler's List* was not a feelgood Holocaust movie then it was insufficiently feel bad, since its box office success was assured by means of a narrative about a gentile saving Jews from the gas chambers. Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, more truthful though they were to the Holocaust's horror, could never do such good box office.

Similarly *Vengeance* makes one suspicious. Can the director of *ET*, whose career is all but premised on not growing up, really be the right guy to make this film? I'm doubtful because I've just seen his adaptation of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds* and felt deprived of a sick bag when Tom Cruise sang a soothing ditty to his doe-eyed daughter. It would be wonderful if Spielberg could prove wrong my scepticism about what happens when Hollywood tackles politics, but that seems unlikely.

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