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Historians have described the middle of the seventeenth century in Western Europe as a period of gloom and uncertainty, of a general crisis in intellectual, political, moral and religious values, illustrated by revolts and revolutions in several countries. The English Revolution of 1640, also known as the Civil Wars or Clarendon’s Great Rebellion, epitomizes the atmosphere of anxiety and conflict, in which time-hallowed institutions and traditions were called in question and the world turned upside down. The bitter struggle for supremacy between the Stuart king, Charles I, and Parliament led to the outbreak of a bloody civil war; hundreds of communities were split and members of the same family fought on opposing sides. In August 1642 the king raised his standard at Nottingham and declared war on Parliament. After the battle of Preston in September 1648, chaos reigned in England (Morrill, 2008: 98). Although the majority of the people yearned for a peaceful settlement, the king was tried and beheaded in 1649, monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished and a Commonwealth established. Following these sweeping transformations the new republican regime commissioned Oliver Cromwell to conquer Ireland (1649-50) and subdue Scotland (1650-51), missions the now Lord General discharged brilliantly and ruthlessly. In December 1653 Cromwell became Lord Protector.

Biographers have described Cromwell as “God’s Englishman” (Hill 1970), “Our Chief of Men” (Fraser 1997), “An Honourable Enemy” (Reilly 1999) and as “God’s Warrior” (Gentles 2011). As one of the major historical figures of the English Civil Wars it comes as no surprise that Cromwell has been portrayed in the cinema several times, but this paper will convey the perspective of a researcher in the history of ideas in early modern England and focus mainly on the film Cromwell, directed and
written by Ken Hughes, with Ronald Harwood as script consultant, released in 1970 in the U. S. A. by Columbia Pictures. This film is all the more significant as the publicity boasted of many years of research and, according to the New York Times reviewer, Vincent Canby\(^1\), had its claims for accuracy certified by Will and Ariel Durant. Yet, despite these credentials, the movie has become famous for its numerous inaccuracies. On January 20\(^{th}\), 2004, David Annandale\(^2\) remarked: ‘Apart from some famous dialogue, any resemblance to actual history is coincidental and purely unintentional, but there’s still a decent amount of entertainment to be had.’

The director Ken Hughes became obsessed with the subject after reading a biography of Oliver Cromwell in the early 60s and is said to have read more than 120 books about him over the next nine years.\(^3\) According to Rob Nixon, Hughes’s purpose to pull together a tragic drama having “all the haunting inevitability of Greek tragedy” became possible when he met Irving Allen, a producer who shared his obsession with Cromwell:

By the time principal photography began in the spring of 1969, they had poured their mutual interest into a huge cinematic undertaking, with more than 200 workers at Shepperton Studios building the largest outdoor set ever constructed for an English-made film (…) Close to 4,000 costumes were made, 16,000 separate props items found or made, and thousands of wigs ordered from all over Europe.

Unfortunately this lavish care with physical details did not extend to historical events. At the outset of the film, John Pym (Geoffrey Keen), leader of the parliamentary opposition, and Henry Ireton (Michael Jayston), Cromwell’s future son-in-law, ride out a-historically to meet Cromwell (Richard Harris) at his home in an attempt to convince him to stay and not to immigrate to America. This scene, set in the first months of 1640, when Charles I summoned Parliament, shows us Cromwell as someone who

\(^1\) http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E01E5DD173BEE34BC4F51DFB667838B669EDE

\(^2\) http://upcomingdiscs.com/2004/01/20/cromwell

\(^3\) Rob Nixon: http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/193982%7C0/Cromwell.html.
had already stood in the parliament of 1628 for the rights and privileges of the common people, and had become an important political figure, whose support was deemed essential by the leaders of the opposition. However, all this does not match history. In 1640 Oliver Cromwell was a minor country gentleman who had made next to no impact (Gentles 3) in the 1628 parliament and had played no political role whatsoever since then. The film reverses the political standing of John Pym and Oliver Cromwell. Pym was a famous parliamentary opponent of the Crown, Cromwell was unknown. If someone wished to rally someone’s support, it would have been Cromwell to seek Pym’s support, not the other way round. At the opening of the Long Parliament in November 1640, Cromwell was a nobody.

The exaggeration and the falsity of Cromwell’s portrayal continue when Pym and other parliamentary leaders (Cromwell is among them) meet the King, played by Alec Guinness, present him with the Grand Remonstrance and Cromwell, portrayed by Richard Harris, makes a speech advocating the need to ‘move forward to a more enlightened form of government, based upon a true representation of a free people, known as democracy’. Besides the anachronism of such a concept of democracy, Cromwell only met Charles I some years later and, if the director wishes to make us believe — and I am sure he does — that Cromwell was a democrat in our sense of the word, a champion of the rights and liberties of the common and ordinary people, then he is wrong once more, because Cromwell demonstrated in several occasions that he wished to preserve the traditional hierarchical order of English society. As Henry Ireton made clear at the Putney debates against the army radicals, the right to vote was restricted to those with a “permanent fixed interest” in the kingdom, i.e. to men of property:

I think that no person has a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom, and in determining or choosing those that shall determine what laws we shall be ruled by here — no person hath a right to this, that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom, and those persons together are properly the represented of this kingdom, and consequently are [also] to make up the representers of this kingdom (…) (Woodhouse 53-54)
Then comes a famous scene portraying the King’s attempt to arrest five Members of Parliament, namely John Pym, John Hampden, Sir Arthur Haselrig, Ireton and Cromwell, according to information previously supplied by Sir Edward Hyde. All but Cromwell leave the Commons room, and there he sits quietly, alone and boldly facing the King and his imminent arrest. Cromwell was justly famous for his physical courage, but unfortunately for the director, neither Cromwell nor Ireton were two of the five members. By 1642 Cromwell acted as the attack dog (Gentles 14) of main opposition leaders such as the Earls of Bedford and Warwick, Viscount Saye and Sele, Oliver St. John, John Hampden and John Pym, and became known by his radical religious views but did not play any major role in the events leading to the outbreak of the first civil war.

Any attempt to portray Cromwell’s career, Charles I’s political decisions or the evolution of the republican regime on the screen must understandably compress a multitude of diverse data and leave out many significant events or even add fictional characters and their respective actions. A historical film is chiefly entertainment and nobody expects such a film to abide by the standards of academic history, but as presentations of history they become liable to scrutiny. Filmmakers usually publicize unfounded claims to accuracy, as was the case with Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde, James Cameron’s Titanic, Oliver Stone’s JFK, (Freeman 7-8) and Fred Zinnemann’s A Man for All Seasons (Marshall 51). Every art has its own rules, its own economy. But this economy cannot be held responsible for unexpected and unnecessary omissions, distortions and inventions, as becomes increasingly clear in the scene depicting the battle of Naseby in June 1645.

First, it is baffling to realize that Marston Moor (2 July 1644), the biggest battle of the Civil Wars, gets no mention or allusion at all, and that the director preferred to portray Edgehill, the first important battle taking place in 1642, but which ended in stalemate, in sharp contrast to the crushing defeat imposed on the King in Marston Moor. Cromwell played a conspicuous and decisive part in facing the best of the King’s cavalry troops and overwhelming them (Gentles 36), demonstrating an unexpected military expertise. Secondly, in Naseby, the film misleads the audience as regards an invented superiority of the King’s forces, amounting to 7,000, as against Cromwell’s 3,000. As a matter of fact, Royalists, with 12,500,
were heavily outnumbered by the 17,000 soldiers commanded by Sir Thomas Fairfax (Gentles 43) and not by Cromwell, Lieutenant-General and second in command. Then, adding a touch of pathos to the heroic image of Cromwell which he is painstakingly composing, the director shows us Oliver’s elder son killed in action, his body on a horse led by his younger brother. However, Cromwell’s son had already died of fever in 1644.

Cromwell’s reputation had been steadily growing after Marston Moor, not least because of his capacity to recruit, train, discipline and communicate to his troops his utter conviction that they were the instruments of a divine plan God had devised for England as an elect nation (Woolrych 96-7). After Naseby, that ‘happy victory’, Oliver Cromwell enjoyed the status of a popular hero whose deeds were regarded as signs or providences of God’s approval, as Cromwell himself repeatedly emphasized. His string of military victories at Preston (1648), Dunbar (1650) and Worcester (1651) demonstrated that God had a plan for England, however unfathomable, and that Cromwell was His tool to eradicate corruption, to carry out a reformation of manners, and lead the ‘poor godly people’ to peace and prosperity.

The invasion and bloody submission of Ireland, the unexpected and crushing defeats inflicted on the Scots and the Royalists are Cromwell’s major achievements, and in his eyes confirmed time after time the righteousness of his providentialism, but the director Ken Hughes preferred to omit any reference to such outstanding events and to indulge in his fantasies of making Cromwell arrest the King, Charles I, at Oxford, and of portraying Sir Thomas Fairfax, the actual Commander in Chief, as if he were a mere messenger conveying the information of John Pym’s death to Cromwell in church. Needless to say, both facts are false. It was Cornet Joyce, not Cromwell, who arrested the King, and John Pym had already died three years earlier, in 1643.

A few minutes later Cromwell is depicted as negotiating a settlement with the King, putting forward the proposal of a constitutional government to be framed by Parliament and headed by a king. Cromwell says: “An England without a king is unthinkable.” Generally speaking, the scene matches history and should be placed in the context of Parliament’s and Cromwell’s attempts to come to terms with the King. However, when
Charles’s negotiations with Ireland and Scotland became known and his duplicity uncovered, Cromwell, who had just stated that the army had fought to institute a parliamentary system and overthrow the monarchical tyranny, realized that the King must stand trial, even if Parliament opposed such unconstitutional and dangerous path and most people craved for a speedy and peaceful settlement.

To overcome the expected opposition of Parliament to the army’s plans to put the King on trial, Colonel Pride actually purged those MPs nourishing unfavourable opinions, while the film shows Cromwell and his troops invading the House of Commons and claiming a majority. Once again, Cromwell is ascribed a prominent role he did not play, but the irony is not lost: a stalwart defender of the rights and liberties embodied in Parliament finds out that his sword must rule after all. I suppose it is apt to quote Cromwell’s actual speech of rejection of the King (Fraser 275): “Since the Providence of God hath cast this upon us, I cannot but submit to Providence, though I am not yet provided to give you my advice.”

And this meant that Cromwell would no longer attempt to reach an agreement with the King. Furthermore, to quote John Morrill’s words (2009: 210), the film is “outrageously free in its combination of characters and events”, especially in the ways it depicts Sir Edward Hyde, who would become Earl of Clarendon after the Restoration in 1660. Early in the film Edward Hyde is portrayed as King Charles adviser at the arrival of the Earl of Stratford from Ireland, but shortly afterwards we see him enter the Commons room and inform Ireton of the imminent arrest of five MPs, as if he had betrayed the King. Later on, when Cromwell is suppressing a mutiny in his camp, Hyde arrives unexpectedly and discloses highly sensitive information: the King has been secretly negotiating with the Scots. But to crown these wild fantasies Edward Hyde is depicted at the trial as testifying against the King! Nothing less than high treason, based on the supposedly most abject and vilest behaviour of one of Charles’s closest advisers.

None of this squares with what actually happened. At the end of 1641 Sir Edward Hyde became the King’s propagandist (Seaward x), drafting statements and declarations for the King. When civil war broke out, he became involved in most important negotiations and belonged to the main core of royalist advisers. He had joined the court at The Hague
when Charles I was put on trial and so could not be present to give evidence; his loyalty was never questioned. Therefore, in this movie we are not dealing with a bunch of inaccuracies but with the utter falsification of history which is intellectually reproachful.

Near the end of the film we find Cromwell back home, brooding by the fire, looking as if he had retired and was living on his farm, following the example of the Roman farmer Cincinnatus who led his armies to victory, rejected the offer of dictatorship and returned to his farm⁴, when in real life he invaded Ireland and slaughtered those papists and ‘barbarous wretches’ (Stevenson 158) at the sieges of Drogheda (September 1649) — “a name of infamy down through the centuries” (Gentles 113) — and Wexford where he condoned indiscriminate massacres (Stevenson 157; Gentles 115). Cromwell returned then to England and, following a decision taken by the Council of State, launched the invasion of Scotland, not without regretting his duty to fight a Protestant people. He imposed crushing defeats to the Scots at Dunbar (1650) and to Charles II’s army and allied Scots at Worcester (3rd September 1651). Two years later, on 16th December 1653, Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector and established a military regime.

Once we keep these facts in mind it becomes clear they don’t fit in the wholly invented image of Cromwell fancied by Ken Hughes and must be left out of the film; otherwise he would be portrayed as a dictator — a tyrant, in seventeenth-century terminology — and not as a champion of the underprivileged. It has been recently noticed (Smith 220-1) that the Cromwell who appears in films is Cromwell the military leader, the crusader or the regicide, but never Cromwell as Lord Protector. We see him as fighting for an ideal, rebelling against a tyrannical king, and struggling for a representative political system rather than the ruler who, though venerating Parliament, proved unable to cope with his own parliaments and dissolved them, or who established the Major-Generals regime (August 1655 – January 1657), the closest England ever came to becoming a police state (Gentles 164). The truth is that Cromwell as Lord Protector, convinced as

⁴ Smith, http://www.popmatters.com/review/cromwell/
he was that the English were a godly nation and that the liberty of conscience of the godly minority should be safeguarded, never achieved an extended popular support for his military rule and failed in many ways to bring about those changes he had dreamed about. The portrayal of failure is neither attractive nor commercially rewarding, and that is why the last phase of Cromwell’s life has not been portrayed on film.

However, so great a gulf between claims to accuracy and the numerous errors and distortions calls for an explanation, as I suspect that they should not been considered as simple mistakes or discrepancies growing out of ignorance or absent-mindedness, but rather as a coherent, deliberate and invented view of what Cromwell should have been — and still represented — according to Ken Hughes’s hidden political agenda. Timothy Chant5 situated the film *Cromwell* in the context of the bitter aftermath of the revolutionary decade in the 1960s, felt by many as a time of change:

By 1970 such idealistic pretensions were beginning to fade, and such revolutions as had occurred were slipping into increasingly brutal military dictatorships not wholly dissimilar to that of Cromwell’s which Hughes attempts to excuse. (…) there can be discerned a very definite attempt to explain the failure of the 1960s revolutionary spirit and the vaunted Labour government of Wilson by explaining the failure of the English Revolution through being an internal betrayal which forced into being a brutal military tyranny.

This interpretation places the film in an English context, but there is an alternative view put forward by Lesley Smith.6 In fact, the director, the cast and the subject matter were all British, but the film was released first in America in 1970 at the peak of the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and became relevant in the American context of General Wesley Clark’s candidacy to U.S. Presidency. In fact, Smith argued (7 October 2003) that Cromwell portrayed the ideal of the citizen-soldier, a Cincinnatus

5 http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~histweb/scothist/brown_k/film/closed/reviews/cromwell.html

of his day, as a kind of über-politician, a purer and more altruistic politician. As Hughes framed Cromwell as the archetypal reluctant hero struggling for the rights of the common people, he also managed to “recast the military, particularly its leaders, as betrayed by politicians of all stripes” and “to frame Cromwell further as a proto-American democrat.”

Such blatant anachronisms should make us aware of the power of cinema to propagate biased, distorted and misleading history, especially when claims to accuracy are often included as part of the publicity for historical films (Freeman 6) or when filmmakers tailor the past to convey a political message, as was the case with Cromwell. Historical films usually are both a powerful source of entertainment and of disseminating particular beliefs which may prove offensive or unacceptable to contemporary social groups, even if they are historically accurate. Historical accuracy can’t be elevated to become the sole and decisive criterion, but all of us should beware of distortions and oversimplifications.

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**Filmography**

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ABSTRACT

Three hundred and fifty years after his death Oliver Cromwell remains a highly polemical historical figure producing contradictory assessments of his deeds and beliefs. Cinema is a powerful medium which has developed a controversial relationship with history, especially with the criterion of historical accuracy. It is no wonder that, from the outset, a biopic of Cromwell would give rise to disparate judgements, but the film *Cromwell*, directed by Ken Hughes and released in 1970, is particularly striking on account of its numerous errors and conscious distortions which this paper aims to analyse. Hughes’s portrayal of Cromwell as a proto-democrat and champion of the rights of the common people owes more to the director’s hidden agenda than to the amassed historical knowledge of the real Oliver Cromwell.

KEYWORDS
Cromwell; Charles I; Civil Wars; Stuart age; Film studies

RESUMO

Três séculos e meio após a sua morte Oliver Cromwell permanece uma personalidade histórica muito controversa que origina juízos contraditórios sobre os seus actos e as suas ideias. O cinema é um meio poderoso que tem mantido relações problemáticas com a história e, em particular, com o critério de rigor histórico. À partida, seria de esperar que um filme biográfico de Cromwell despertasse opiniões desavindas, mas o filme *Cromwell*, realizado por Ken Hughes e estreado em 1970, destaca-se pelos seus erros e distorções em grande escala, cuja análise constitui o objectivo deste estudo. A caracterização de Cromwell como um democrata *avant la lettre* e defensor dos direitos do povo deve mais a propósitos implícitos do realizador do que ao conhecimento histórico acumulado sobre o verdadeiro Oliver Cromwell.

PALAVRAS CHAVE
Cromwell; Charles I; Guerra Civil; Época Stuart; Estudos de cinema