The German Love Affair with American Indians: Rudolf Cronau’s Epiphany



By the turn of the twentieth century, thinking about American Indians had become integral to German culture.

Roundtable on TURN: Washington’s Spies – Introduction: Truth Versus Accuracy



A Historical Turn for the Better, or Worse?

Scholars of early America have a complicated relationship with historical movies and television shows. While popular dramas with mass audiences have the potential to kindle wide interest in a historical period, Hollywood history productions are often glaringly inaccurate, presenting a glamorized and heavily distorted version of crucial periods such as the Civil War and the American Revolution.

Of course, not all historical dramas are created equal. At one end of the spectrum are unabashed historical fantasies like *Sleepy Hollow* and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*; productions with no expectation of being taken as serious history by anyone. At the opposite end are conscientiously produced "docudramas" like HBO's *John Adams* that stay palpably close to the historical record.

Most historical dramas fall somewhere in the middle of those two extremes, including AMC's recent television series *Turn: Washington's Spies*.

Historical fiction, for better or worse, can play a huge role in shaping popular historical memory.

Turn, which revolves around British and colonial spycraft during the Revolutionary War, was aggressively promoted as a meticulously researched show before its premiere in April 2014. Advertisements described it as "the true story of America's first spy ring." But as Season 1 unfolded, viewers discovered that *Turn* placed as low a priority on staying true to documented facts as most other historical dramas. It quickly became a prime target in the perennial debate over the importance of accuracy in historical film.

Last February, before the debut of *Turn's* second season, a group of the show's writers, producers, and cast members assembled before a large crowd at the College of William and Mary for a discussion (viewable in its entirety here) of the differences between academic history and historical drama. There, they argued that the altered history portrayed in *Turn* represented an "authenticity" and even a form of "truth" that transcended factual accuracy.
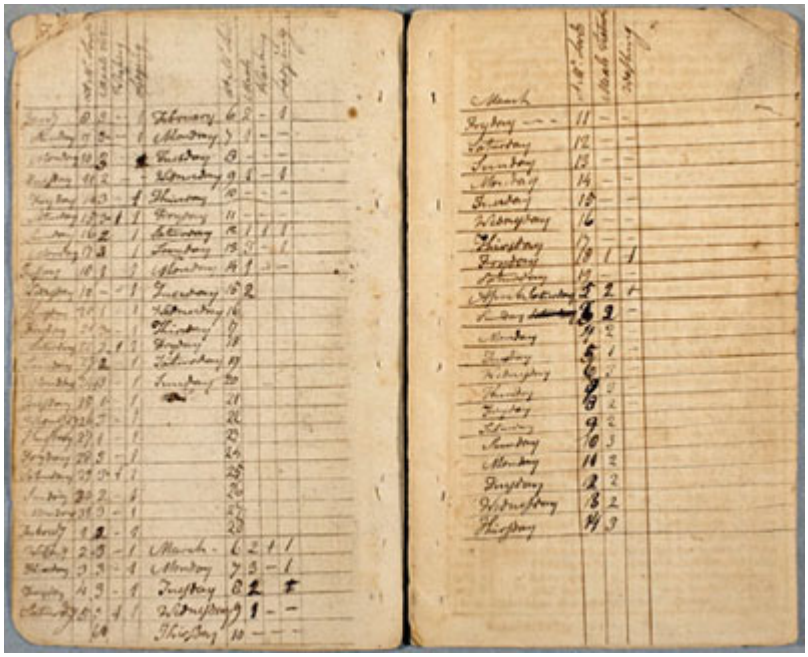
Do the virtues of inaccurate historical films outweigh their vices? How much weight should accuracy have in our evaluation of historical film? Most importantly, are there historical narrative truths that supersede factual accuracy?

Historical fiction, for better or worse, can play a huge role in shaping popular historical memory, and early American scholars ought to help frame the discussions surrounding shows like *Turn.* In this double review, historian Cole Jones and social studies education professor Jeremy Stoddard weigh in on this new turn in historical interpretation.

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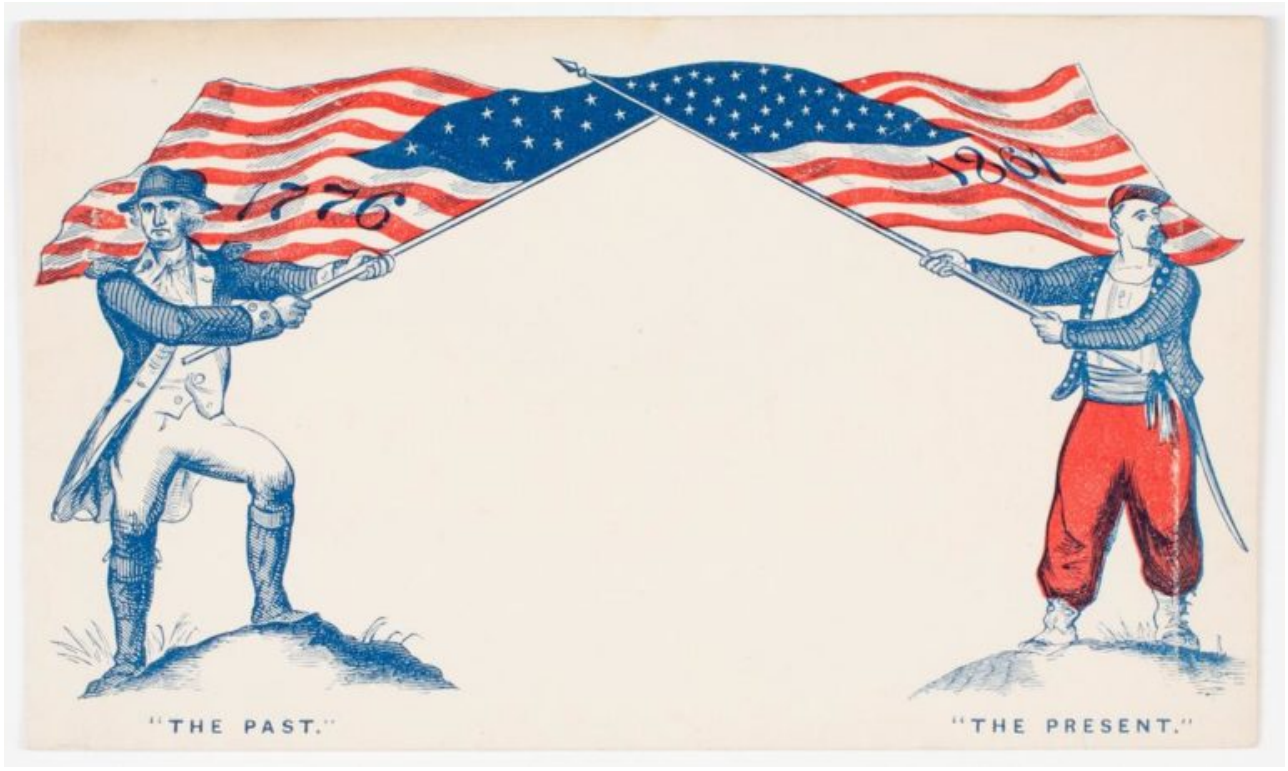
Rachel L. Smith, founder of the *Turn to a Historian* blog, works for the Office of the Connecticut State Historian at the University of Connecticut; as a historical consultant; and as an administrative editor for Commonplace.

Redeeming the Almanac: Learning to Appreciate the iPhone of Early America



With so many uses, the almanac, like an iPhone, was truly interactive.

The Arc of the Moral Universe, and Other Long Things



The Civil War was one great eruption of something immanent in human civilization: an ineradicable cycle of violence, a timeless struggle for democracy and freedom.

Unveiling the American Actor: The Evolution of Celebrity in the Early American Theater



The actors who clawed their way to fame in the early decades of the American theater labored in an entrepreneurial industry that was far more reminiscent of prospecting for gold or financing merchant ships than it was of modern industrial production.

Two Early American Bestsellers

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN



HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Presented as part of the Special Literature Issue

The prehistory of American bestsellers takes us beyond questions about the content and literary value of bestselling texts and invites us instead to explore just what makes such a phenomenon possible.

Where All the Trains Ran: Chicago



Presented as part of the special issue “Early Cities of the Americas.”

“In a city increasingly characterized by class and ethnic distinctions, the trip in by train was arguably the one significant personal experience that more Chicagoans had in common than any other.”

A View from the Parish Jail: New Orleans



Presented as part of the special issue “Early Cities of the Americas.”

“It was very hot and damp six months a year, it was one of the least-favored ports in the New World, and huge swarms of insects appeared seasonally with terrifying predictability.”

Poems



Dry Creek Valley

On the second

and third

wires over the wire
on which forks the zinfandel vine:
barbed knots
and spirals of old
severed vinetips:
one can flick
these wishbones of waterless
grapewood into
full rotations
on the wire:
some are not wyes,
some have the look of shrew-sized
brainstems into

the knots
of which I fail
to not
project my proprioception
and the regulation
and insistence of my breathing here
in the plutocratic hills,
while quaked reactors fail
Japan, and bombs fall
in Afghanistan
for purposes of regulation
and insistence, and
there’s a crow (in an oak with a copy of
Whitman’s beard
on every limb)
counting to five
over and over and a propane truck
filling the tanks of the vineyard opposite.

Maalaea

Stones half-buried in pulverized star-
fish, silica, coral, basalt shatter, a waterline-
threaded
band of scatter, an-
agrammatic
stone notes in a wave sequencer: bright, ‘h-
onest’ tones, each
has ‘bend’ and ‘pitch,’
has length,
and some come
with echo effect: a stone
turns in the eye into
a minor model of the cloud-and-
turbine-
studded Pu’u
Kukui, itself
a scale-
invariant stone
in sequence in littoral blue
isolation as

the eternity-bird’s eye view zooms out: Earth-
stone in sequence, tonal music
of sphere after
sphere broken by
sweetwater, spacewater, saltwater
dulcimer hammers into
non-Euclidean scales, corals, and
liquid iron cores and pitchblendes and
denser half-life
ores in a band of
stellar
scatter, each with pitch and
bend of light
  from Spica blue
to Proxima
Centauri red to red
of an open mouth to benthic blue
back to late childhóod,
when I lóved yoú.

Saugatuck Dunes

I and the others, over the dune hill wall,
confronted the Great Lake and wandered
with paper, pens and dying in different
parents
directions, and I sat a long time on a beech log and wrote

The Dearth of Rods:

The structure of the retina imposes limitations
on *homo sapiens sapiens’* powers of observation.

Spacewise, rods and cones being finite, resolution
must be finite. So the 17th century invention

of the microscope began the apprehension
of the infinite space bounded which is that suspension

of reactor stars and matter darkly theorized to be what
it resembles: something of a universe within a hazelnut

within an Epicurian atom. Timewise, that neuronal

signals pulse discretely means that any visible phenomenon

must last beyond the interval

(during which Lucifer-Icarus falls) of milliseconds

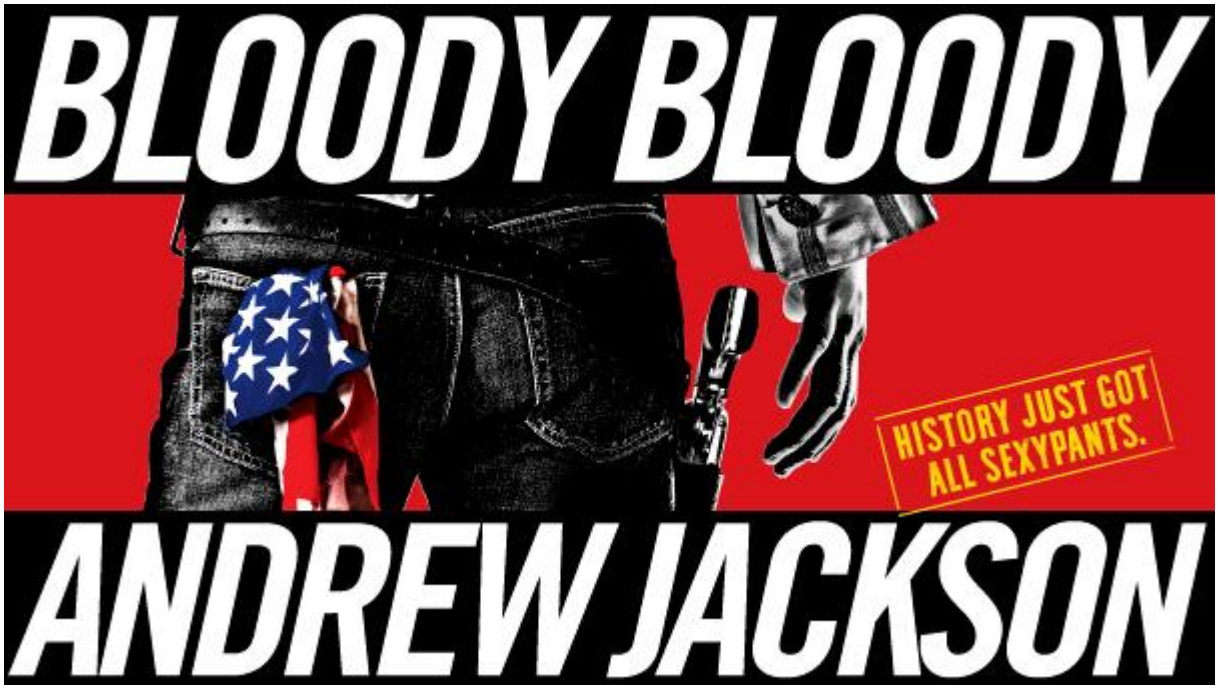
needed by a primate brain to render an experiénce, hence
the 19th century invention of photography commencedthe death birth of God,

until one of the others walked
toward the black dot
that was me
and arrived
and sat, and I felt a pulsation, acute,
a desire to
protect, and felt, too,
protected, but she
sat with me
for less than
a minute in silence, then
asked for more paper and walked off.

Could it be True I Once, Alone Walking, Found

A split tree trunk
with a torn off back
half of a water-
logged *Paradiso*
in its hollow?

Populism! Yeah? Yeah!!



Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

On a chilly weekend shortly before Christmas, the Stunning Significant Other (hereafter, SSO) and I took a quick trip from snowy, abstemious New England down to New York City. With no Friday night plans in place, as Metro North whisked us toward Grand Central I asked her if there were anything in particular she'd like to do that evening. Any restaurants she'd like to visit? Perhaps we could see what the Metropolitan Opera was performing? Or maybe a Broadway show? I will confess that I was not entirely lacking in ulterior motives in asking these questions. She replied that it would be great to see a show—but what was playing? Well, I cautiously replied, there was a soon-to-close musical that I'd heard was really great. "What's it about?" Well, I ventured, even more cautiously, it's about antebellum politics and Manifest Destiny. "That sounds absolutely awesome," was the response. (A word of caution: I would not try this with just any significant other. It helps if he/she is also a devotee of nineteenth-century Americana. You've been warned.)

The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events.

That's how we found ourselves at the Bernard Jacobs Theatre on West 45th Street later that evening, ready to see "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." This musical, originally conceived by Les Freres Corbusier, a downtown theatre troupe that is "devoted to aggressively visceral theatre combining historical revisionism, sophomoric humor, and rigorous academic research," had its roots in the downtown theater scene, although it was first performed in Los Angeles. This production was brought to Broadway by the Public Theater in fall 2010. Apparently the audience for a loosely historical musical satire about our seventh president was not as large as the producers had hoped. The show, which cost $4.5 million to stage, closed on January 2, 2011, after only 120

performances, finishing its run substantially in the red.

"Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson" combines the emo-rock musical stylings that made "Spring Awakening" such a smash earlier in the decade with an irreverent, free-wheeling approach to American history and presidential politics. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the little-seen but highly entertaining "President Harding is a Rock Star," a glam rock musical that got its start on the experimental stages of the East Village before enjoying a run in Washington, D.C., in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. Indeed, one of the main messages of BBAJ is the importance of media appeal—and particularly sex appeal—in the marketing of presidential candidates: the posters for the show seen on bus shelters around New York showed this image (fig. 1), whose slogan "History Just Got All Sexypants" seemed to be one of the key themes (if not desires) of the show.


Fig. 1. Publicity image from "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson." Courtesy of the show's Website, www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

The interior of the Jacobs Theatre was a welter of old-timey bric-a-brac, taxidermy, velvet swagged curtains, portraits of nineteenth-century political figures, duct tape, strings of lights, piles of empty beer cans and liquor bottles: picture Peale's Museum, trashed by the Delta Tau Chis. Suspended from the ceiling was a stuffed horse, its legs trussed together by a chain. I waited all evening for it to burst open and shower something—Confetti? Whiskey? Worthless currency from the pet banks?—over the audience, to no avail.

Much of the press that BBAJ received related to the undeniable charisma and appeal of the show's star, Benjamin Walker (fig. 2). He swaggered onstage at the outset of the show in tight jeans and a military jacket, a holstered pistol at his side, surveyed the audience, and declared, "You guys are sexy as shit!" After some additional prefatory patter, he declared "I'm Andrew Jackson! I'm your president! Let's go!" And the night was off to the races with the show's opening full-cast number, "Populism, Yea, Yea!" (A song that I was singing to myself on the way over to the theater—the SSO thought I had made it up.) The opening number offers the essence of the show's take on Jackson's appeal, and also its less-than-subtle link to current political events, describing populism as a movement that is

For people like us,
Who don't just think about things—
People who make things happen.
Sometimes with guns,
Sometimes with speeches too,
And also other things.


Fig 2. Benjamin Walker as Andrew Jackson. Courtesy of the media gallery at www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

The ironic, winking connection to contemporary politics runs throughout the musical, and can at times verge into the self-satisfied (as many reviews of the show noted, this tone did not translate well from smaller downtown venues to the scale of a Broadway production). The musical offers a loose—very loose—outline of Jackson's upbringing on the Tennessee frontier (his family is depicted as being killed by Indians, cementing young Andrew's remorseless hatred of the people whom he would as president persecute so thoroughly), and offering an explanation of his later populist politics in his father's rants against the urban elites of the East who don't give a damn about the needs of citizens in the West. The show races to put Jackson in action, in the War of 1812. It is in the wake of his stunning victory at the Battle of New Orleans that Jackson the public figure—the real subject of the musical—comes to the fore, in a song titled "I'm Not That Guy." Jackson struggles with the implications of life in the public eye, including the exposure that a career in politics would bring to his marriage to his wife, Rachel, whose lack of an official divorce from her first husband before marrying Jackson would dog him throughout his career. Walker as Jackson quickly reconciles these misgivings, however, and at the end of the song declares what the rest of the musical will show to be the primary tenet of Jackson's political beliefs: "Who am I? I'm Andrew Fucking Jackson!"

A ninety-minute musical that is primarily being played for laughs can't be expected to offer much in the way of historical detail, and BBAJ makes no claim to fidelity to the facts (although the show's Website does offer a link to additional resources for those who are interested in learning more about Jackson and his era). Most of the historical context that is present in the show is offered by the Storyteller (Broadway veteran Kristine Nielsen), supposedly a retired history teacher and admitted Jackson aficionado who periodically rolls onstage in a motorized wheelchair accessorized with an American flag. The central section of the musical deals with the high points of Jackson's career: the election of 1824, and the "corrupt bargain" that put John Quincy Adams in the White House; Jackson's decision to run again in 1828; and his first term in office. Through this portion of the show Jackson shares the stage with the main political players in those events: John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Martin Van Buren. It is in the depiction of these figures that many readers of *Common-place*might find the most to enjoy.

Darren Goldstein plays Calhoun as a slick backroom wheeler-dealer, with a voice seemingly lifted from the cartoon chicken Foghorn Leghorn. Lucas Near-Verbrugghe's Van Buren is a fawning, two-faced petty bureaucrat, interested in nothing more than feathering his own nest. The show's version of John Quincy Adams is a far cry from Anthony Hopkins' incorruptible idealist in the film "Amistad." Here, Jeff Hiller plays the sixth president as a stupefied, incompetent, adenoidal lummox; when the deal is consummated that hands Adams victory in the 1824 presidential election, he clumps offstage and yelps, "This is exciting! I never win anything!" Most notable, however, is Bryce Pinkham's performance as Henry Clay, who speaks in a near-incomprehensible shriek, may or may not have a hunchback, has hair that appears to have been styled by a

mid-80s Robert Smith, and is continually stroking some sort of rodent—too sleek for a marmot, too big for a weasel. Perhaps a mink (fig. 3).

For theatre-goers who are familiar with the historical context, all of this is very entertaining. And the key message of this central section—that the qualities that it takes to get elected president are very different from those that are required to govern effectively—is one that has obvious connections to more contemporary periods. Yet many members of the audience seemed a bit baffled. The show's satirical humor seemed to have difficulty connecting with the audience in a venue of this size, and its music and choreography are not as polished as many visitors to New York likely expect to see on a Broadway stage (especially if they paid the full price of over $100 a ticket).

Fig 3. Darren Goldstein as Calhoun, Bryce Pinkham as Clay, Ben Steinfeld as Monroe, Jeff Hiller as John Quincy Adams and Lucas Near-Verbrugghe as Van Buren. Courtesy of the media gallery at www.bloodybloodyandrewjackson.com

Perhaps more perplexing was the show's shift in tone in its final third, where things turned somber as the focus swung to the one historical event that most members of the audience probably associated with Jackson: the Trail of Tears. A Native American leader named "Black Fox" is depicted as being a close confidante of Jackson, aiding his policies of Indian removal by betraying numerous tribes in his role as Jackson's chief negotiator (the character was called Black Hawk in the show's first run at the Public Theater, but the name was changed after Native Americans who saw the show objected that the character's negative portrayal could lead audiences to think that it referred to the real Black Hawk, the Sauk and Fox war leader of the early nineteenth century). But at the end of the show, Black Fox's own people stand in the way of Jackson's expansionist vision, and Black Fox is forced to take leave of Washington to lead his tribe in what he knows will be a futile war against U.S. troops. Jackson explains that the conflict between Indians and white settlers hungry for land was foreordained from the moment Europeans first set foot on the continent, and that even if he wanted to stop what he refers to as the "genocide" that is underway, he is powerless in the face of historical forces he can't control.

The show concluded with a rousing version of "The Hunters of Kentucky," an 1821 song that Jackson used as his campaign anthem in 1824 and 1828. Yet despite ending on this energetic note, the underlying theme of the show left one feeling somewhat uneasy. As BBAJ showed, the United States as it is presently constituted is the result of a long list of bad (if not downright immoral) decisions throughout history—decisions that modern voters might regret, but that have also made us who we are. We have been the material beneficiaries of Jackson's power-mad, bloodthirsty streak, and even if we could right these wrongs, the musical asks us whether we would want to. BBAJ's combination of history and satire was likely not well suited for the Broadway stage—it simply isn't commercial enough to fill that many seats night after night. A smaller

venue, and an even sharper edge, would have helped this entertaining historical mash-up enjoy a longer run.