
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Top 10 Historical Movies to Watch on Netflix

Our Friends · Monday, November 11th, 2019

Some nights, you're in the mood for sitcom-driven comedies to give you a cheap laugh. Other nights, you have a steamy rom-com on your mind. But, sometimes, you want a history-dense drama that transports you to another time and place.

Luckily, Netflix has all of the above (and then some.) When it comes to history, Netflix has expanded its palette over the past few years — acquiring old series and producing new ones ala “Netflix Originals.” Sure! There are plenty of historical documentaries that will give you an insight into specific periods and their struggles, sacrifices, triumphs, and, ultimately their realism.

But, history dramas give you something entirely different — they provide you with grittiness of history with the entertainment value of drama. It's a win-win. This list will focus solely on the American version of Netflix. There are also TONS of amazing history movies on the British, Indian, and French version of Netflix. Unfortunately, they're blocking in America.

If you're wondering how to access Netflix globally or wanted to [unblock Netflix](#) on your college dorm, you'll need a decent VPN.

Without further ado, here are 10 history movies that you should definitely be watching on Netflix.

1. Lincoln

Starring Daniel Day-Lewis, this Abraham Lincoln biopic directed by Steven Spielberg, was nominated for 12 academy awards for a reason — it's beautiful. Every moment is managed perfectly, and each whisper, smirk, and glance from Lincoln and his supporting crew seem purposeful and intense.

This movie is really a coming of age tale. It's how America was able to survive a gripping and destructive Civil War without rotting from the inside out. And most of that was due to Lincoln's ability to inspire, lead, and ultimately bring people together. This isn't an action movie or a war movie; it's a movie about an unbelievably patient man faced with remarkably difficult circumstances. And his ability to navigate through those circumstances with grace and ease while still having the smarts and wit to play politics when necessary.

This was one of the last films that Roger Ebert gave a thumbs up to, and it will stand the test-of-time as one of the most profoundly engaging non-war history dramas of all time.

2. The King's Speech

There's something amazing about a movie that can do so much with so little. The relationship between a king and his speech therapist sounds a little too drab to capture 3+ hours of your time, right? Prince Albert (played by Colin Firth) has to ascend the throne, but his speech issues make his political prowess seem... off.

So, he hires Lionel Logue (played by Geoffrey Rush) to help him hone his speechcraft and give him the skills he needs to effectively run a nation. The film is gripping, beautiful, and pacy despite its premise and run length.

3. Saving Mr. Banks

History doesn't have to be war-soaked or extremely period-oriented to tell a fantastic story. Take Mr. Banks, a wonderful take about Walt Disney's (Tom Hanks) quest to receive the rights to Marry Poppins from Pamela "P. L." Travers (Emma Thompson) the original author.

The movie showcases two struggles. Walt Disney is desperately trying to secure the rights to a film he promised his children he would secure. And Pamela Travers is trying to safeguard her greatest creation from being twisted and abused. In particular, she doesn't like the way that Disney is interpreting Mr. Banks — the father of the children. She envisions him as kind, not cruel (hence the title.) It's a heartwarming journey that plays almost like a coming of age tale.

4. Once Upon a Time in America

While Martin Scorsese may receive the bulk of the credit for "mafia" movies, Sergio Leone's Once Upon a Time in America is perhaps the most brutally honest, sad, and beautiful mafia tale ever put on screen. The premise is based on a true story. And, like others on this list, creative freedom is explored — but not so much that it degrades the historical accuracy.

The story centers around David "Noodles" Aaronson (Robert De Niro) and Maximilian "Max" Bercovicz (James Woods) as they rise through the ranks of the underworld as Jewish youths. But, during this journey (which is certainly marked with the occasional blood splatter and macho encounter), themes of friendship, love, loss, and personal growth are explored thoroughly.

5. The Aviator

Speaking of Martin Scorsese, The Aviator is his most history-driven film, and possibly his best. The premise of Aviator is the life of Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his eccentric lifestyle. On the one hand, Hughes was a massively successful aviator and film producer, making him hyper-successful (2nd richest man in the world at the time.) On the other hand, Hughes suffered from crippling obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that, throughout the film, continues to progress and make Hughes more and more reclusive, strange, and bizarre.

So, while Hughes produces [Hell's Angels](#) (one of the most successful movies of its time) and creates spectacular planes, he also sits alone in his house and lines the walls with thousands of milk bottles. It's a strange topic that pulls together brilliantly with an all-star cast and (obviously) an all-star director.

6. Schindler's List

You can't complete a history-drama list without Schindler's List. This period drama produced by Steven Spielberg showcases the brutality of the Nazi regime by following Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) and his quest to save Jewish people from the horrors of the Holocaust by employing them in his factories.

The film is shot entirely in black-and-white, and it juxtaposes Schindler's brave and righteous quest against the brutality and horror perpetrated by Amon Göth — a German SS officer who would eventually be tried and executed for war crimes. As a warning, you should expect some brutal scenes and horrible imagery. The movie tells an important story, albeit a heartbreaking one at times.

7. All the President's Men

This American political film follows the [Watergate scandal](#) — which would eventually lead to the resignation of Richard Nixon from the presidency. Carl Bernstein (Robert Redford) and Bob Woodward (Dustin Hoffman) are two journalists for the Washington Post that are trying to get the inside scoop on Watergate, a scandal perpetrated by Nixon.

Since Watergate involved robberies, political theatre, and loose connections, the two journalists leverage a mishmash of sources, eventually getting involved with “Deep Throat” a tell-all source they meet in a parking garage. The film is pacey, filled with interesting tidbits about the Watergate scandal. And, most importantly, showcases the cut-throat world of journalism at its finest.

8. Dangerous Beauty

So far, this list has touched on relatively modern historical pieces. *Dangerous Beauty* goes back to the 16th century to follow Veronica Franco (Catherine McCormack) — a woman who is a hero in the city of Venice. Veronica is a courtesan (which is a high-class prostitute) in Venice, and she seduces powerful men in order to be allowed access to education. Her lover, Marco (Rufus Sewell), is a politician who aims to be a senator.

Veronica goes so far as to seduce the King of France to gain a military alliance for Venice — sacrificing herself for her city. The movie then takes a dark turn as zealots overtake and Veronica is put on the chopping block with accusations that she's a witch.

Overall, the movie was a sleeper. But its ability to weave a coming-of-age journey with the political underbelly of 16th century Venice is stunning and well-thought.

9. The Gangs of New York

This is the second Scorsese film to make the list. And it tells the story of when New York City was still a city bustling with Irish and Italian immigrants as well as roving street gangs. The primary gangs showcased in the film are the Dead Rabbits (and Irish Catholic gang) and the Natives (an American protestant gang.)

Unlike some gang-related movies, the actual gang warfare has little to do with the movie. The Dead Rabbits are slaughtered and forgotten in the first 10 minutes. Instead, the film focuses on Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), the son of the slain Dead Rabbits leader Priest Vallon and his quest to kill Bill the Butcher (Daniel Day-Lewis) for the murder of his father.

The movie is set to the backdrop of a bustling city that's slowly degrading into an apocalyptic nightmare under the regime of Bill the Butcher, and it's equal parts fantasy and reality come crashing down on the viewer in beautiful and profound ways.

10. The Theory of Everything

In the wake of Stephen Hawking's unfortunate death, *The Theory of Everything* tells the story of his life and his journey to becoming one of the most brilliant physicists and theorists on the planet. From his ongoing struggle with motor neuron disease (which would eventually cripple him and leave him unable to speak) to his unbelievable passion for physics, black holes, and the universe, Stephen Hawking is portrayed as a deep character that breaks the mold of his typical media portrayal. The film has love, loss, and ultimately, one man's struggle with a life-destroying disease juxtaposed with his fascination with everything in life.

Image:  Lloyd Dirks

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