

# The Story of the Hurricane

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*THE HURRICANE* (1999). Dir. Norman Jewison. Starring Denzel Washington, Vicellous Reon Shannon, and Dan Hedaya. Universal Pictures.

*The Hurricane* tells the remarkable story of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter’s nineteen-year wrongful imprisonment for a 1966 triple homicide, his extraordinary courage, and his ultimate exoneration. Directed by veteran filmmaker Norman Jewison and starring Academy Award winner Denzel Washington as the former middleweight prizefighter, *The Hurricane* is a riveting film that raises important issues for historians, most notably the relationship between artistic license and historical integrity. At the same time, *The Hurricane* is cartoonish (the *New York Times* described it as “stirring but schmaltzy”) and manipulative.<sup>1</sup> Most important, the film missed an opportunity to examine the institutional nature of the racism that victimized Rubin Carter and continues to plague America’s legal system.

*The Hurricane* skillfully alternates between Carter himself and the story of Lesra Martin, an African-American teenager from Brooklyn adopted by three white Canadian idealists. In 1980, after Martin (played by Vicellous Reon Shannon) reads Carter’s autobiography and corresponds with the former boxer, he and his adopted family devote their lives to freeing Carter.<sup>2</sup> Jumping back and forth in time, *The Hurricane* recounts Carter’s troubled youth (he was incarcerated for stabbing a white child molester who was a “pillar of the community”), his escape from a juvenile detention center, and his enlistment in the Army, where he became an accomplished prizefighter. Unfortunately, following his discharge from the Army, Carter was reincarcerated for escaping from his reformatory. Upon his release from prison, Carter poured his fury into boxing; by the mid-1960s he was an up-and-coming middleweight contender. At this particularly volatile moment in the history of American race relations, two unidentified African-American men stormed into a bar in Paterson, New Jersey, shooting and killing three white people. Carter and a young fan, John Artis, were accused of the murders by the authorities because of their racial identity and because they were near the scene of the crime in a car similar to that reportedly used by the assailants. Although one of the fatally wounded victims indicated that Carter and

Artis were not the killers, on the basis of some dubious testimony they were convicted of the murders by an all-white jury. The remainder of the film traces Carter's tribulations in prison, his internal and external struggles with what has happened to him, and Martin and the Canadians' heroic (and eventually successful) efforts to vindicate him. *The Hurricane* concludes with a black-and-white flashback boxing scene, Carter's gloved fist held high in victory.

Denzel Washington's performance as Rubin Carter is superb, unquestionably the most compelling part of the film. From beginning to end, Washington brings what film critic David Denby describes as "a burnished and beautiful intensity" to his role.<sup>3</sup> This is apparent in the movie's opening scene, when Carter KOs Emile Griffith in the first round of their 1963 fight. It is one of the most credible Hollywood prizefights ever, primarily because Washington looks and moves like a skilled boxer. Obviously dedicated to his craft, Washington explains:

I never boxed before and was in training for two years. I did a lot of damage to my knuckle and my wrist and [right] shoulder.... I felt like I had to learn how to box as best as I could. I wanted to look as authentic as I could. And I wanted to be in the shape that a boxer would be.<sup>4</sup>

Washington also convincingly undergoes Carter's metamorphosis: he begins as a handsome, profligate womanizer, becomes a defiant bald-headed jailhouse writer (who has a photo of Malcolm X hanging in his cell), and ends the film as an increasingly desperate, weary, but nonetheless proud middle-aged man. Washington's "moving, fiercely compacted performance" carries the film and enables moviegoers to feel Carter's anger and pain, and the burning injustice of his plight.<sup>5</sup> According to Rubin Carter himself, Washington's Carter is remarkably persuasive:

...the more we talked, the more I liked him. I liked the way he moved. I liked his vocabulary. I liked his stridency. And I loved his laughter. I said, "Wow! I really love this guy. Shit, maybe I have been in jail too long!" Then it hit me, like a left hook and a straight right to the jaw. When I saw Denzel in front of the mirror, he was clearing his canvas to paint my portrait.

His face looked like putty. And from the moment he sat down, he was giving me back to me.<sup>6</sup>

This is not, of course, the first time Washington had played a historical figure. He was, for instance, the South African activist Steven Biko in *Cry Freedom* (1987). More memorably, Washington played the title role in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992). He earned Academy Award nominations for both performances. As Rubin Carter, Washington duplicated the power and authenticity he generated as Malcolm X, and was again nominated for an Academy Award.

Despite Washington's performance, *The Hurricane* received a great deal of criticism. Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* described the film as "proudly old-fashioned and unabashedly sentimental."<sup>7</sup> Film critic Owen Gleiberman referred to it as a "liberal rabble-rouser."<sup>8</sup> And David Denby called it a "clumpy and untrustworthy exercise in righteousness" and "a moralized racial melodrama."<sup>9</sup> These and other critics and journalists were troubled by how *The Hurricane* portrays (and ignores) some of the people and events on which the film is based—an argument with merit. The film does misrepresent elements of

the real-life story; it elides and conceals facts, conflates and romanticizes. Certainly the film represents Carter in the most noble and heroic light possible, neglecting to mention that in the late 1950s he served time in New Jersey prisons for robbery and assault.<sup>10</sup> *The Hurricane* also exaggerates the role of Lesra Martin and the Canadians—in reality, there were nine, not three—in freeing Carter. (Norman Jewison, it is worth noting, is Canadian, and the film is partly based on the recently reissued *Lazarus and the Hurricane: The Freeing of Rubin “Hurricane” Carter*, written by the two Canadian men portrayed in the film.<sup>11</sup>) According to Lewis M. Steel, one of Carter’s attorneys, Martin and the Canadians “did play an important role in giving Carter psychological support during the darkest hours of the twenty-year imprisonment. But the movie’s account of how the Canadians built Carter’s legal case simply did not occur.”<sup>12</sup> The film, moreover, completely ignores the important efforts of others on Carter’s behalf, such as New Jersey Public Defender’s office investigator Fred Hogan and journalist Selwyn Raab.<sup>13</sup> Apparently disturbed by the film’s version of the story he covered as a reporter, Raab argued that *The Hurricane* “presents a false vision of the legal battles and personal struggles that led to his freedom and creates spurious heroes in fictionalized episodes that attribute his vindication to members of a Canadian commune who unearth long suppressed evidence.”<sup>14</sup> Raab cited many of the film’s inaccuracies and omissions: that the two white men who claimed to witness Carter and Artis leaving the murder scene recanted their testimony; that Carter received support from relatives and friends long before the Canadians became interested in him; and that the jury in Carter and Artis’s second trial included two African Americans. *The Hurricane* takes many other liberties with the past, which is partially why critics like Denby complained that the film “feels false, evasive, and factually thin.”<sup>15</sup>

*The Hurricane* is obviously not the first film to modify and manipulate historical characters and events in the name of narrative efficiency, dramatic coherence, and artistic license. This has been standard operating procedure in the motion picture industry from the beginning, or at least since D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Works like Mark C. Carnes’s *Past Imperfect* and Robert Brent Toplin’s *History By Hollywood* make it clear that *The Hurricane*’s re-working of the past is not unusual.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is typical. This is what filmmakers and other popular storytellers, like novelists and playwrights, do: They dramatize, they imaginatively re-animate the past as they wish. How, then, should we think about and assess the ways in which filmmakers portray the past? Film critic Richard Corliss put it well: “At issue is the freedom of a filmmaker—or any artist—to twist the facts as they are recalled, to shape the truth as it is perceived. May a movie libel a historical past?”<sup>17</sup>

This is a good, tough question.<sup>18</sup> More so than anyone else, historian Robert A. Rosenstone has helped me think about it. Working from the premise that cinematic representations of history need to be taken seriously, Rosenstone argues that films like *The Hurricane* should be considered

another way of understanding our relationship to the past, another way of pursuing that conversation about where we came from, where we are going, and who we are. Film neither replaces written history nor supplements it. Film stands adjacent to written history, as it does to other forms of dealing with the past such as memory and the oral tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, Rosenstone suggests, it would be wise to “think of history on film as closer to past forms of history, as a way of dealing with the past that is more like oral history, or history told by bards, or *griots* in Africa, or history contained in classic epics.”<sup>20</sup> As such, critics and historians should not be too concerned about the “mistakes” in historical films, or the artistic license filmmakers take with their subjects; rather, they ought to be vigilant that historical films do not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past. All changes and inventions must be apposite to the truths of that discourse, and judgment must emerge from the accumulated knowledge of the world of historical texts into which the film enters.<sup>21</sup>

Because films (and novels and plays) *can* libel the past: they can distort and pervert it so badly that it bears virtually no relation to social reality, and thus hinder historical understanding and memory. But *The Hurricane*, for all its flaws, does not do this. The story it tells does not, it seems to me, libel the past nor violate its integrity. Rubin Carter and John Artis were wrongly imprisoned due to racism, and they were exonerated largely due to sympathetic and dedicated white people—just not the white people the film suggests. The moral remains the same, and Carter is no less courageous. In other words, *The Hurricane* may be a liberal fairy tale, but it is not, as Lewis Steel argued, “a cinematic crime.”<sup>22</sup>

This is not, however, to praise *The Hurricane* as an exemplary historical film, for as I mentioned at the outset, it is cartoonish and manipulative. Granted, all art (including history) is in some ways an act of manipulation, but the manner in which *The Hurricane* simplifies one important aspect of the Rubin Carter story does the film a disservice—as a work of art, as public history, and as cultural criticism. According to the film, Carter is framed for the Paterson murders by “a corrupt, racist, Javert-like policeman,” Della Pesca (Dan Hedaya), “whose sole aim in life seems to be the persecution, humiliation and destruction of a man he knows is innocent.”<sup>23</sup> By insisting that an obviously malevolent individual was primarily responsible for the injustice Carter suffers, the film minimizes the misdeeds of others, such as overzealous prosecutors and judges, and the inadequacies of the American legal system itself. As a result, white moviegoers can distance themselves from the racism that brutalizes Carter, and take comfort in the knowledge that, eventually, the judicial system worked and Carter was freed. Ironically, if the film offered a more accurate and honest portrayal of the complex legal machinations that imprisoned Carter, it would make his scapegoating seem even more Kafkaesque.

Still, *The Hurricane* tells a gripping story, with verve and artistry. In many ways, it is the filmic equivalent of Bob Dylan’s 1975 protest song “Hurricane,” which Jewison effectively uses several times on the film’s soundtrack. Like Dylan’s song, Jewison’s film bristles with outrage that a man was imprisoned “for somethin’ that he never done.” In the song’s penultimate stanza Dylan sings:

To see him obviously framed  
 Couldn’t help but make me feel ashamed  
 To live in a land  
 Where justice is a game.

*The Hurricane* expresses the same sentiment. Neither the justice system nor the film can “give him back the time he’s done,” but *The Hurricane* does bring Rubin Carter’s disturbing story up to the present and to millions of moviegoers, and thus, despite its problems, it serves well as a work of public history.

1. Stephen Holden, "Fighting the Demons Within," *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1999, E1.
2. Rubin Carter, *The Sixteenth Round: From Number 1 Contender To #454 72* (New York: Penguin, 1999). This is a reissue of a 1971 book.
3. David Denby, "On The Battlefield," *New Yorker*, 10 Jan. 2000, 92.
4. Quoted in Lloyd Grove, "Checking In With Denzel," *Washington Post*, 17 Sep. 1999, C3.
5. David Ansen and Allison Samuels, "In the Eye of 'The Hurricane,'" *Newsweek*, 10 Jan. 2000, 60.
6. Quoted in Brian D. Johnson, "Eye of the Hurricane," *Maclean's*, 6 Dec. 1999, 72.
7. Holden, "Fighting the Demons Within," 11.
8. Owen Gleiberman, "Freedom Fighter," [www.pathfinder.com/ew/review/movie/0,1683,1048,hurricane.html](http://www.pathfinder.com/ew/review/movie/0,1683,1048,hurricane.html)
9. Denby, "On The Battlefield," 91, 92.
10. See James S. Hirsch, *Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 76.
11. Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton, *Lazarus and the Hurricane: The Freeing of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). This is a reissue of a 1991 book.
12. Lewis M. Steel, "Rubin Carter: The Movie," *The Nation*, 3 Jan. 2000, 8.
13. See Dave Anderson, "One Man Carter Movie Ignored," *New York Times*, 6 Feb. 2000, sec. 8, p. 6.
14. Selwyn Raab, "Separating Truth From Fiction in 'The Hurricane,'" *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 1999, E1.
15. Denby, "On The Battlefield," 92.
16. Mark C. Carnes, et al., eds., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Holt, 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
17. Richard Corliss, "Fire This Time," *Time*, 9 Jan. 1989, 58.
18. It is not just an academic question. On February 16, 2000, former middleweight champion Joey Giardello, 69, filed suit against the film's makers for their portrayal of his December 14, 1964 fight against Carter, which the film suggests Carter lost due to racism. See "Ring of Truth," *Sports Illustrated*, 28 Feb. 2000, 26.
19. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 77.
20. *Ibid.*, 78.
21. *Ibid.*, 79.
22. Steel, "Rubin Carter: The Movie," 8.
23. Holden, "Fighting the Demons Within," E11.