



# Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History (Studies)

*Professor George Custen*

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Enhanced by charts, appendixes, notes, and references to approximately 300 movies from 1927 to 1960 (with additional material on the biopics' absorption by contemporary television), this volume analyzes biographical film production, distribution, and exhibition under the constraints of censorship, libel law, producer proclivities, and casting. Custen (communications, CUNY) explains why biographies of entertainers proliferated after World War II, how studio moguls fostered biographical narratives similar to their own rags-to-riches stories, and to what extent research departments affected veracity. A good addition to a scant literature that includes Michael Pitts's *Hollywood and American History* (McFarland & Co., 1984) and George MacDonald Fraser's *The Hollywood History of the World* (LJ 9/15/88). Essential for comprehensive film collections. Movie Entertainment Book Club selection.

"Helps us to understand how Hollywood films shaped public consciousness about the past by constructing a very specific, ideologically charged version of that past. . . . A fresh and important contribution to film history and cultural studies."--Daniel Czitrom, Mount Holyoke College

Bio/Pics is the first comprehensive study of a once important film genre, the biographical film. Using previously unavailable archival materials from Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Bros., MGM, and RKO studios, as well as censorship files from the Production Code Administration, George Custen argues that, through these films, Hollywood manufactured a nearly monochromatic view of history that was systematically distorted in regard to race, gender, nationality, and profession. Utilizing a carefully selected sample of over 100 films produced during the Studio Era (1927-1960), Custen maintains that the biopic constructed a Hollywood code of history out of a tightly controlled reference system, glamorizing the producers' own personal visions of what constituted a great life. Custen's examination of production practices reveals that the machinery of public history operating through these films was fueled by difference sources. His analysis of the roles played by star personae, legal considerations, censorship practices, and the producers' own ideologies brings the world of biopic alive, even into the age of the made-for-TV movie.

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