Nate Parker, dir., *Birth of a Nation.* DVD, With Nate Parker, Armie Hammer, Mark Boone Jr. (Los Angeles, CA: Bron Studios, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2016).

Nate Parket's *Birth of a Nation* opens with the phrase "Based on a True Story", words that often generate concern for historians when they watch a dramatic reenactment about a historical event. It is also the first feature length film about the Nat Turner Revolt of 1831, the bloodiest slave rebellion in U.S. history. This makes it particularly unfortunate that the film takes liberties with historical facts and changes the context and meaning of this enormously important revolt and its place in the trajectory of events leading up to the Civil War. Instead of a film about rebellion against the slave system, Parker turns this revolt into a film about personal revenge.

Parker gets some of the basic facts right. Turner was a literate slave who preached in his Southampton Virginia community and he led more than four-dozen free and enslaved African Americans in a murderous insurrection that killed between fifty-five and sixty whites. However, Parker breaks from the historical record when he sensationalizes and sexualizes the events rewriting them into a revenge-driven drama.

The path where Hollywood and History diverge begins early. The silver screen Turner lives on a cotton plantation, although not much cotton was cultivated in Virginia. Turner marries a young slave named Cherry, and they carve a life for themselves that provides Turner with an escape from the terrible abuse of slaves he sees on other plantations. When his wife is gang raped by several white men, his rage comes close to the limit, but he does not yet pick up arms because his owner shows him kindness. When Turner's friend is forced to watch his wife brutally raped by a white guest of his owner, Turner is finally pushed to the edge. Enraged, he recruits slaves to his cause, they begin killing their masters and fight their way to the armory in

Jerusalem. Here they fight the army and the rebellion dies in a blaze of glory. At last, the film ties the rebellion to the Civil War through a boy who witnesses Nat Turner's execution and then we then glimpse the same boy as an adult serving the Union Army.

The most significant historical error is the film's assertion that it was personal revenge that galvanized Turner into action. Specifically, Parker claims that the gang rape of his wife, and the rape of his friend's wife, led Turner to re-assert his masculinity through bloodshed. Although it is known Turner was married there is no evidence that his wife was raped. In Turner's confession it was God who called him to lead the rebellion. His reading of the Bible inspired him to reject the yoke of slavery because it was unjust and God promised justice. By reframing the revolt as a quest for personal revenge, the film denies Turner's political consciousness and belittles the rebellion. The way the film tells the story, if it had not been for the rapes, Turner might never have taken up arms. This seriously mischaracterizes the man and his mission.

The film's closing imagery shifts the viewer to the Civil War and a black Union soldier who witnessed Turner's hanging. Historians agree that the Turner revolt was an important milestone on a continuum of resistance that culminated in the Civil War, but Parker's attempt to shoehorn this connection into his film is discordant with the tone of the movie he made. By making a revenge driven drama, Parker may have satisfied the anger viewers feel towards Turner's tormentors, but he clouded the history of the rebellion and its legacy.

Birth of a Nation is valuable for bringing the story of such an important figure to our attention, but viewers must independently consider what they have seen to sift fact from fiction.

Christopher Empett