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"Based on Entirely Coincidental Resemblances": The Legal Disclaimer in Hollywood Cinema

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Every Hollywood film includes in its paratext at least one statement clarifying the relation between real life and the events and characters it presents. A film is either "based on a true story" or it is "a work of fiction," in which every similarity to facts in the actual world "is entirely coincidental and unintentional." As reliable statements about individual films' relationship to reality, however, such claims and disclaimers prove highly inadequate. As practical tools for raising audience interest and/or protection against legal action, they reflect the conflict between Hollywood's enthusiasm for real-life stories and simultaneously its fear of them. This article defines and discusses functions, manifestations, problems and legal as well as narrative relevance of the Hollywood claims and disclaimers. Located at the margins of most films and thus often unnoticed by the viewer, these elements on the one hand mirror prevalent notions about truth status versus fiction in Hollywood filmmaking. On the other hand, by shifting our viewpoint from the viewer's impressions to the producer's own statements, they provide interesting incentive for reevaluation.

It is nothing new that Hollywood filmmakers, faced with the choice between portraying real events in an authentic manner and half-real events in a spectacular manner, tend to choose the latter. Examples abound of films that supposedly tell true stories. In order to achieve a dramatic effect, however, they twist and distort the source material until little truth is left in the final product. Hollywood films that claim to be "based on a true story" are released on a regular basis, but more regular still are films that are explicitly fictional, with standard disclaimers like the following from *Made of Honor* (2008, Paul Weiland): "This is a work

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of fiction. The characters, incidents and locations portrayed and the names herein are fictitious, and any similarity to or identification with the location, name, character or history of any person, product or entity is entirely coincidental and unintentional."

While much has been written about the difficult relationship between fact and fiction in American narrative cinema,[1] film scholars have given little attention to what the films themselves have to say about their own truth status. This perhaps because the answer to this question is simple: not much, except for one or two short sentences at the beginning and/or end claiming that the film is based on fact or that it is not – and sometimes, as we will see, both.

This article defines and discusses functions, manifestations, problems and legal as well as narrative relevance of the small paratextual elements located at the margins of most films and often unnoticed by viewers. These elements either mirror prevalent notions about truth versus fiction in Hollywood filmmaking or shift our perspective from the viewer's impressions to the producer's own statements. In both cases, they lend themselves to probing into larger questions concerning the status of fact and fiction in film in general.

The term "disclaimer" mostly occurs within a legal framework and is in its broadest sense, "a statement that denies something, esp. responsibility" ("Disclaimer"). Companies use such statements in order to warn customers of possible defects in their products. They do this out of necessity, since, as Heafey and Kennedy state, "courts have long held that the failure to warn of a products' hazard is a defect of the product itself, invoking all the trappings of product liability" (2f). Disclaimers are thus intended to protect a company from potential legal complaints by individuals who feel that said company has treated them unjustly. Concerning film, possible complaints usually emerge if one or more individuals feel they have been portrayed in a negative light on screen, or portrayed without previously having been asked permission. The film disclaimer thus serves "a disclosure made with the purpose of clarifying potentially misleading or deceptive statements" (Stutts and Hunnicutt 41).

The mere presence of such a disclaimer is, however, not sufficient to give production companies absolute protection against legal actions. If similarities between a particular character and an actual person are strong enough, the above denial and a (possibly) changed name will not automatically prevent courts from hearing the case. Especially problematic – and thus prone to legal disputes – are cases in which a film does

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[1] To name but three books: Aquino, *Truth and Lives on Film*; Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*; Vankin and Whalen, *Based on a True Story*.

not *deny* but explicitly *claim* a certain truth status for its story, usually by presenting at the beginning of the film the words, "based on a true story," "inspired by real events," or a similar statement to the same effect. Since Hollywood producers know how problematic such claims are, they place a disclaimer at the end to (belatedly) modify the opening claim. *Capote* (2005, Bennett Miller) features one such standard disclaimer:

> This story is based upon actual events. However, some of the characters and incidents portrayed and some of the names herein are fictitious, and with respect to such characters and incidents, any similarity to the name, character or history of any person, living or dead, or any actual event is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Although the disclaimer is primarily used for legal purposes, and it is thus the legal department of a production company that determines its exact wording (see Clark and Spohr 290), it can have other functions as well. It helps viewers who simply might want to know whether or not the film they have just seen is based on fact. If they have the feeling that it is, although no claim to that effect has been made at the beginning, then the disclaimer sets the record straight. But besides its legal implications, there is at times also a more creative dimension to claims and disclaimers, as is the case at the beginning of *Inglorious Basterds* (2009, Quentin Tarantino). The film's first chapter heading, "Once upon a time . . . in Nazi-occupied France," not only introduces the setting, but also indirectly serves as its disclaimer. The words "Nazi-occupied France" inevitably suggest a specific historical situation during the early 1940s, and viewers consequently might expect a reasonably faithful treatment of the subject – were it not for the initial words "Once upon a time," the universally known fairy-tale opening and thus a clear marker of fictionality (see Genette et al. 771). These first four words greatly conflict with the realism suggested in the last three. This contrast implicitly justifies portrayals of some events in the film that by conventional standards would be considered outrageous violations of historical facts – most notably, the violent deaths of Adolf Hitler and many of his fellow-Nazis in a Parisian movie theater.

The tension between the two parts of the chapter heading in *Inglorious Basterds* also features in the way they are presented on the screen. At the beginning we only see the first part of the sentence: "Once upon a time. . . ." Only after a few seconds' pause do the words "in Nazi-occupied France" also appear, heavily indented and beneath the first part. In only seven words we are told everything we need to know about

the truth status of the film, namely that fiction ("Once upon a time")[2] meets fact ("in Nazi-occupied France") and that the two overlap. There is one more textual element at the beginning of *Inglorious Basterds* besides the "in Nazi-occupied France" that contrasts with the disclaiming "Once upon a time." Only seconds after the chapter's title we find, superimposed over the first moments of principal photography, the year in which the events unfold: 1941. Technically speaking the presence of "Once upon a time" disqualifies any precise time specification. But a director like Quentin Tarantino apparently need not worry about such trifles.

Inglorious Basterds' official disclaimer at the very end of the film essentially repeats the opening (dis-)claimer but in a more soberly explicit manner. Although largely corresponding to standard practice, it is nevertheless surprisingly elaborate:

> This motion picture is based, in part, upon actual events, persons and companies. However, numerous of the characters, incidents and companies portrayed and the names used herein are fictitious. Any similarity of those fictitious characters, incidents or companies to the name, attributes or actual background of any actual person, living or dead, or to any actual event, or to any existing company, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Like *Inglorious Basterds*, *The Constant Gardener* (2005, Fernando Mereilles) also tries to have it both ways, i.e. to fulfill the studio's legal obligation of having a disclaimer while at the same time asserting the film's bearing on reality. Its disclaimer appears when we expect it to – at the end of the end credits – but not as a statement by the production company's legal department. Instead we get a quote by John le Carré, from the opening of his novel on which the film is based:

> Nobody in this story, and no outfit or corporation, thank God, is based upon an actual person or outfit in the real world. But I can tell you this; as my journey through the pharmaceutical jungle progressed, I came to realize that, by comparison with the reality, my story was as tame as a holiday postcard.

This statement ingeniously manages to minimize the risk of any potential legal complaints by any pharmaceutical corporation (in the film, one such corporation – a *fictional* one, to be sure – is depicted as utterly corrupt). It allows for serious criticism while at the same emphasizing the

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[2] *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952, Jean Yarbrough) features a similarly minimalist text to the effect that the events, characters etc. are fictitious. It simply reads, "This is a fable."

film's fictional status. Being a quote, it furthermore automatically transfers responsibility from the producers to the author of the source novel.

The opening statement of *Braveheart* (1995, Mel Gibson) is one more instance of filmmakers clandestinely getting their claims past their disclaimers. The statement is presented in voiceover narration by one of the film's characters, Robert the Bruce, who is based on a historical figure: "I shall tell you of William Wallace. Historians from England will say I am a liar, but history is written by those who have hanged heroes." This meta-statement, disguised by being embedded within the diegesis, anticipates criticism of the film – of which in fact it received plenty upon its release (see Lawrence and Jewett 163-4) – and as a preventive measure lashes out at historians by, essentially, accusing them of murder.

The producers of *Braveheart*, of course, had no cause to fear any legal steps taken against them. The farther back in time a story is set – and *Braveheart* is set in the fourteenth century – the less filmmakers need to worry about matters of accuracy, for the obvious reason that persons long dead cannot file complaints. Other films that are verifiably based on real persons and events, however, nevertheless possess an "all persons fictitious" disclaimer. In her essay "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead:' Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," Natalie Zemon Davis mentions as examples the films *Raging Bull* (1980, Martin Scorsese), *Platoon* (1986, Oliver Stone) and *Danton* (1983, Andrzej Wajda). Here the disclaimer denies what has clearly been (to some extent at least) the filmmakers' intention: a depiction of reality. Nevertheless the motivation for its presence is easily understood. After all, narrative filmmaking is by default largely fictional. Even the most thoroughly researched biopic must use dialogue, characterization, events or set designs that cannot be supported by historical documents because no history book can offer every detail that the film wants to present. Gaps have to be filled and events need to be altered for the screen or interpreted in a particular manner. And almost inevitably not everybody will be happy with it. Legally speaking, then, it is safer to renounce *all* claims of authenticity because with it one renounces all responsibility for potential misrepresentations of fact, whether willful or accidental. As the ironic definition at the beginning of *Dogma* (1999, Kevin Smith) pointedly states, a disclaimer is after all "a statement made to save one's own ass."

Perhaps the most drastic conflict between a claim and disclaimer can be found in *Fargo* (1996, Joel Coen), where the disclaimer at the end directly contradicts the explicit claim of authenticity at the beginning. The most commonly used claim of authenticity, "Based on a true story," still justifies a disclaimer at the end, since the words "based on" leave

room for creative license. "Inspired by a true story" (*Murder in the First* [1995, Marc Rocco]) leaves even more room, and "Based on a sorta true story" (*The Kid and I* [2005, Penelope Spheeris]) more still. *Fargo*'s opening claim, however, leaves next to no room at all. Presented directly before principal photography sets in, it reads:

> THIS IS A TRUE STORY.
> The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987.
> At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed.
> Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.

Considering these opening lines, the only valid disclaimer at the end would be one stating that any resemblance to actual *names* is coincidental, but what we get is the full treatment: "The persons and events portrayed in this production are fictitious. No similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is intended or should be inferred." Which of the two statements are cinemagoers to believe, the one at the beginning or the one at the end? As John Sterritt observes in "Fargo in Context: The Middle of Nowhere?":

> If casual moviegoers and careless critics tend to believe the first of these mutually canceling statements, it is for three reasons. First, the opening statement is foregrounded by its stark presentation in the film's first moments; second, there's no self-evident reason *not* to believe it; and third, the closing statement that contradicts it may not be heeded or even noticed by spectators accustomed to exiting the theater or hitting the fast-forward button long before the end credits are over. (17)

Furthermore, we might assume that the presence of the final disclaimer might have been carelessness on the part of those responsible for the final paratext (see Sterritt 18). After all, adding a disclaimer at the end is standard procedure, and they simply could have forgotten to adapt it. Although the story takes some rather strange turns, they are not strange enough for us to think them impossible to have actually happened.[3] And since few viewers will wait until the very end of the end credits to read the disclaimer, many will leave the cinema believing the opening

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[3] Consider Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels*, which, in its first pages, goes to some lengths trying to convince us that the events told in the book are authentic. But given the fact that they include dwarfs, giants, and talking horses, not even the most gullible will actually believe the opening statement. In film, similarly, we have obviously fake opening claims of authenticity, which are clearly intended – and easily identified – as a joke. *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985, Dan O'Bannon) features both zombies and the statement at the beginning that "The events portrayed in this film are all true."

statement. In truth, however, no crimes depicted in the film ever occurred in Minnesota in 1987 (see Sterritt 18), or at any other time or place.

Is *Fargo*'s opening claim meant to deceive us? To make audiences believe that what they are about to see actually happened in the real world arguably increases their emotional investment in the story. As Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen write:

> Inspirational stories are more inspiring if they're true. Feel-good movies feel better if we know that the events they depict really happened. Films with messages of social import seem more important if they are anchored in reality. Even horror movies tend to be that much more horrifying when the opening credits inform us that the terrors we are about to witness are not completely fake, even if the special effects are. (XV)

One can also say, however, that it does not matter whether the story is true or not, as long as it is *good*. And if the reception of *Fargo* – it was one of the Coen Brothers' most commercially successful films at the time and was nominated for seven Oscars (see Russell 140) – is anything to go by, its story is good indeed. The presence of the fake claim at the beginning therefore seems all the more surprising; the film does not need this prank, one that Sterritt thinks is ingenious and compelling (see 17), but that others might see as a cheap way of misleading the audience.

The only element in *Fargo*'s opening claim that might in fact betray it (perhaps paradoxically) as a paratextual marker of *fictionality* is its excessive authority. How is it humanly possible, even for directors committed to an authentic portrayal of events and characters, to retell a story on film "*exactly* as it occurred" (my italics) in the real world? Some perspicacious viewers, especially if they are familiar with the Coen Brothers' other works (and their general offbeat attitude towards filmmaking) might have grown suspicious right there.[4]

While the Coen Brothers might have included the claim just "for laughs," the contradiction between it and the disclaimer at the end poses a potentially serious problem: the fact that the directors got away with their joke as easily as they did lessens, or even destroys, the authority of such opening claims in general. If one film can pull such a trick with impunity, then what reason is there to believe that others cannot do the same? This is especially problematic when a film's dramatic development depends on audiences' belief in the opening claimer, as is the case

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[4] Suspicion is also appropriate when reading the opening (dis)claimer of *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004, Adam McKay) – where, it must be admitted, *less* perspicacity is required than in *Fargo*'s case: "Based on actual events. Only the people, places and events have been changed."

with *Changeling* (2008, Clint Eastwood). The plausibility of the events in that film largely relies on the story being on real events. In fact, according to the words presented directly after the title at the beginning of the film (as well as above the title on the poster), it is not only *based* on a true story, it *is* "A true story." I mentioned earlier that it does not necessarily matter to the viewer whether a story is true or not, as long as it is good. In *Changeling*, however, the story may only be deemed good *because* it is true. Would we, were we not told that *this actually happened in real life*, be able to suspend our disbelief? Would we believe that the whole police force of Los Angeles conspired against a single mother by replacing her missing child with another and declaring her insane because she insists that the boy returned to her is not her son? Would we believe that a police psychiatrist, after she has irrefutably proved that the boy is shorter than her son, tells her that traumatic experiences might cause a child to shrink? That the police lock her away to avoid having to admit to their bungled investigation? Perhaps not.

While in other films the "based on real events" claimer can be used to help increase the audience's emotional investment in the story, in *Changeling* it is used to prevent audiences from eventually ceasing to invest any emotions at all. In other words, some events that are presented seem so unlikely that, were we not told that they actually occurred, we would soon lose interest in the story.

The final paratextual clarification about the extent of truth in *Changeling* is perhaps particularly disappointing. Here an extensive clarification might be useful and intriguing more than in other films. As it is, it reveals the disclaimer's general inadequacy. At the very end of the film we only read, "While this picture is based upon a true story, some of the characters have been composited or invented, and a number of incidents fictionalized." Which characters? Which incidents? We are never told.

So far, this paper has discussed the disclaimer mainly in connection to the authentic or inauthentic portrayal of characters and events. These are, however, not the only elements whose authenticity the disclaimer may deny. At the end of *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), for instance, we find an appropriate example for a "thorough" version of the disclaimer: "The story, all names, characters and incidents portrayed in this motion picture are entirely fictitious. No identification with actual persons, institutions, places, buildings and/or products is intended or should be inferred." Each of these elements – names, institutions, places and buildings, and products (firms are also sometimes mentioned) – when referred to in the disclaimer, raise further questions and pose further problems. As for names, what do we do with a title such as *Being John Malkovich* (1999, Spike Jonze)? It features actor John Malkovich

playing a character named John Malkovich who, just like the real John Malkovich, happens to be a well-known Hollywood actor. Despite the disclaimer's denial, the effect of the title rests entirely on the audience's awareness of the existence of a *real* John Malkovich.[5]

Concerning buildings and products, *Blade Runner*'s disclaim of any relation to reality also ill fits with what we see and hear onscreen. If no identification with actual institutions, places, buildings and products is intended, why is the film set in a place called Los Angeles, and why does it feature an institution like the Los Angeles Police Department, a building called the Bradbury, and advertisements for products such as Budweiser, TDK, Atari, and, most prominently, Coca Cola? *Blade Runner* may be set in the future (in 2019, to be precise), which automatically distances the diegesis from our world of the present (or from the world as it was in 1982, when the film was made), but the names themselves do exist in the real world. If filmmakers had not wanted us to associate the fictional Los Angeles with the real one, they could easily have chosen a fictional name. If we see the fictional Los Angeles of the future, it is virtually impossible not to associate it with the real Los Angeles of the present, and it is unreasonable to think that the filmmaker did not intend such a connection. The interiors of the Bradbury building, for instance, where the film's showdown is set, look exactly like the real ones (many scenes were, in fact, shot inside that building). How is it possible not to link the fictional building with the real one, as a well as the fictional Los Angeles with the real one?

There is, however, one valid argument concerning the supposed fictionality of Los Angeles, namely the fictionalized geographical arrangement. The film includes typical (futurized) landmarks of the metropolis, but their placement does not correspond. As Will Brooker points out in his essay "The *Blade Runner* Experience: Pilgrimage and Liminal Space":

> "*Blade Runner* [. . .] blatantly warps [LA's] space. [. . . The film] has not lifted the real LA to cinema, respecting its layout and special relationships between places; it has selectively picked out interiors and transferred them into an entirely new creative geography that makes no sense in 'real' terms." (14f)

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[5] Even though *Being John Malkovich* is a uniquely problematic example, the "all names fictitious" disclaimer almost always conflicts with a film's content. Which film does not at one point or other mention one person that also exists outside its diegesis? By any strict standards, a conscientious filmmaker should at least include a list of the exceptions.

Brooker also states that the film "is not a symphony to the real Los Angeles; the title card identifying the city was a necessity, not an aesthetic choice" (11). The action could just as well have been set in a futuristic New York or Chicago (Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the 1968 novel *Blade Runner* is based on, is set in San Francisco). Being a Hollywood production, the use of the nearby Bradbury building was simply convenient, and as a consequence, the city had to carry the name where the famous monument, which many viewers are bound to recognize, is located.

But only few viewers will notice that most of the architecture of the fictional Los Angeles does not coincide with that of the real one (and would not be plausible even in 2019). As most people are not familiar with the metropolis, the connection to the real city inevitably remains in their minds. And *Blade Runner* is no exception. Films set in places that exist in the real world rarely present an accurate geography of them. *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995, Stanley Tong) ostensibly set in Boston, was shot entirely in Vancouver (see Druick 85). And to take an opposite example, in which a fictitious location looks, at least partly, very real, *The Dark Knight* (2008, Christopher Nolan), set in the fictional metropolis of Gotham City, was shot in Chicago (see Rousseau). New Zealand's landscape, finally, famously served as the fictional Middle Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-3, Peter Jackson). In any narrative film, a character may exit a particular city's church, walk around the corner and, after a cut, stand in front of the museum, even if in the real city the two buildings are miles apart. As long as viewers do not realize the inaccuracy, there is no problem. If they do, however, the film disrupts the illusion. An otherwise dramatic scene may now seem highly ridiculous. Here, just as in the other examples, the "fictional contract" between the filmmaker and the audience is broken.

We must, however, be careful in presupposing negative reactions in the viewer as a consequence of what Erving Goffman calls a "frame break." According to Goffman, "a proceeding which does not fit into the restriction of the frame results in bewilderment and chagrin on the part of the participants and constitutes a frame break" (345ff.). Even if the appearance of a real landmark in a supposedly fictitious environment constitutes such a frame break, it does not necessarily make viewers angry. The knowledge that the landscapes seen in *The Lord of the Rings* films actually exist in the very real New Zealand does not spoil the enjoyment. In fact, tourist travel to New Zealand greatly increased after the success of the trilogy (see Mathijs 48). We do not automatically dismiss a film if we find out that there is something suspicious about its geography. Apparently viewers are more aware of the fictionality of the film they are watching than one may think.

Like its relation to geography, *Blade Runner*'s claim that "no identification with actual [. . .] institutions [. . .] is intended or should be inferred" is charged with conflict. Just as we associate the fictional Los Angeles with the real Los Angeles do we also associate the fictional Los Angeles Police Department with the real one. While the film's LA of the future, however, has left a number of recognizable traces of the present – like Union Station, 2nd Street tunnel, and the aforementioned Bradbury building (see Brooker 16) – we cannot say the same about the LAPD. The uniforms look different, and in reality there exists, of course, no Blade Runner special unit whose task it is to kill (or "retire") replicants on the run. Apart from the name and the general function of upholding the law, there is little or nothing that *Blade Runner*'s Police Department has got in common with its real counterpart. Thus, even if the behavior of the police in *Blade Runner* is morally questionable, there is no reason for the real police to feel offended. But what about the representation of institutions in films set in the past or in the present, and which seem realistic in their depiction? Particularly problematic are, of course, films that show the police in a negative light. As a precaution, therefore, *The Gauntlet* (1977, Clint Eastwood), for instance, features a disclaimer reading, "Law enforcement procedures depicted in this film do not necessarily depict those of any law enforcement agency mentioned herein." Once more, Hollywood's maxim here seemed to be: Better safe than sorry.

Natalie Zemon Davis states that "the 'coincidence' and 'fictitious' disclaimers are inadequate summaries of the truth status of many films to which they are appended" (458). And never are they more inadequate than when it comes to the truth status of firms and products. If the honesty of the disclaimer's statement may at times seem questionable, in relation to products, especially in a film like *Blade Runner*, the term "honesty" does not apply at all.

Not only do the brand names of Atari and Coca Cola feature repeatedly on gigantic billboards in the film and correspond to actual firms, they even keep their original trademark design and style of lettering. Add to this the fact that both Atari and Coca Cola paid good money to have their brands represented in the film (see Lehu 66), for marketing purposes clearly aimed at an *extradiegetic* audience, and there remains no doubt about the disclaimer's blatant dishonesty. The abundance of such deliberate product placement risks making the film as a whole appear as what it, in fact, is: a commodity.[6]

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[6] For a detailed discussion of product placement in film, see Segrave.

As the above analyses have shown, claims and disclaimers very often increase, rather than solve, the conflict between fact and fiction in Hollywood cinema. And even though it is common knowledge that the relationship between Hollywood's "true stories" and *actual* true stories is difficult, it still surprises to see to what *extent* claims and disclaimers may at times contradict each other. In taking a close look at a claim like "inspired by a true story" one becomes aware of how little it actually means. It is obvious that nobody who goes to see a Hollywood film expects a list (let alone footnotes within the film)[7] of sources used for research that prove the authenticity of all elements dealt with in a film that claims to be based on real events. Nor do we expect an exact listing of those elements that have been added to fill gaps or, as the disclaimer for *The Amityville Horror* (1979, Stuart Rosenberg) states, "to heighten dramatic effect."[8] However, since the tools of claimers and disclaimers exist and are regularly used, there is no reason for filmmakers not to use them more conscientiously. But to demand that Hollywood reconsider its use of the disclaimer is fighting a losing battle. At least it seems that the industry is aware of their oftentimes blatant inadequacy, when we consider the many claim/disclaimer spoofs in comedies such as *Wrongfully Accused* (1998, Pat Proft), which opens with the line: "The following dramatization is true, based on real events, from other actual movies."

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[7] Examples of footnotes within a film do exist, however. At one point during the first few minutes at the beginning of *In Our Hospitality* (1923, John G. Blystone, Buster Keaton) a photograph of an old farmhouse serves to introduce the setting of the scene that follows. Beneath that photograph, marked with an asterisk, are the words, "from an old print" (which, admittedly, is not a very precise indication of source). D. W. Griffith was also fond of footnotes that named the sources of inspiration for his films. They appear repeatedly, for instance, in both *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916).

[8] The full *Amityville Horror's* disclaimer: "This motion picture is based on the book 'The Amityville Horror.' Certain characters and events have been changed to heighten dramatic effect."

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