

Historical Literacy: Reading History through Film

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When I can't express what I really feel
I practice feeling what I can express.

—Nikki Giovanni

Using films to teach historical time periods, people, or events is not a new idea. Many of us remember the strategy from our own grade school days. The *You Are There* filmstrips seemed to be especially popular among the teachers who taught social studies to my generation. The premise of the series was to show students what a particular time period was like. However well-intentioned those showing the filmstrips might have been, most students' memories of the film strips, including mine, generally never went beyond the contest over who would be allowed to operate the projector, the loud beep that signaled it was time to advance the filmstrip, and the phrase "and you are there" iterated at the beginning and end of each strip.

In many classrooms, filmstrips and 16mm films, for the most part, have been replaced by videocassettes and DVDs.

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However, the advances in technology have not led to a similar evolution in the ideas of what historical films are and how they might be effectively used in a classroom. Each semester, over a period of four years, I assigned students (pre-service social studies teachers seeking certification at the secondary level) who were placed in either a U.S. history or world history class to make a list of the films that their mentor teachers (or other teachers in their building) showed in class. They listed a number of documentary type videos shown on topics ranging from ancient Egypt to the geography of Antarctica. Other documentary type videos included several PBS broadcasts and an episode of ABC's *20/20: Is America Number 1?* (1999) with John Stossel. Several popular films were on the list, and the most common were: *13 Days* (2000), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Far and Away* (1992), *Glory* (1989), *JFK* (1991), *Mary Queen of Scots* (1971), and *Nixon* (1995). My students also reported some quirky outliers, including *Shogun* (1980).

Once the preservice teachers submitted their lists, I asked them to identify what specific knowledge or skill the students in the class gain through viewing the film. With all films, whether documentaries or popular movies, they

usually responded that students in the class viewed the films to learn or to increase their knowledge of facts about a particular person, place, or event. Statements such as "students would see what a time period was really like" and "students can learn facts more deeply" were common.

According to the preservice teachers, focal attentiveness was the only skill development their mentor teachers focused on while using film. Success in developing that particular skill was generally determined in the following ways:

1. By observing the students to see if they appeared to watch the film and did not close their eyes or do other seat-work. Some teachers used worksheets with questions on minutia from the film to ensure that students were awake and focused.
2. Test scores: some teachers included questions on later tests that related directly to some aspect of the film.

I contend that teachers who use film solely to teach historical facts or to test students' ability to stay awake miss an important opportunity to aid in the development of students' real historical understanding. For many who are involved in the teaching of history, promoting real historical understanding among students

is preferable to a passive reception of facts, dates, names, and places (Kincheloe 2001; Wineburg 2001; National Center for History in the Schools 1996).

Historical Understanding as Literacy: Reading Film

Real historical understanding of a historical period, person, place, or event requires historical literacy. Students must develop their historical literacy skills, which are the skills set that gives them the tools to understand a text from a historical period. The word text generally means anything that can take on meaning, such as events, places, images, sounds, gestures, and so forth. The decoding and comprehension skills required to make sense of a text are complicated by the fact that a text can take on different meanings, depending on the situation, context, usage, culture, or historical period (Gee 2003). Historical literacy skills or the ability to interpret and understand a text by analyzing its meaning to the participants and their culture provide students with the tools to develop a historical understanding.

Proficiency with any skill requires practice, and historical literacy skills are no exception. Students need a variety of opportunities to develop those skills, and although that can be done through print, films provide a more relevant exercise. Often the medium becomes confused with the message, and the message gets ignored.

Undeniably, media images are powerful and influential in our society. Today's students are bombarded by media (Prensky 2001). As Postman (1985) argues, media culture rather than the classroom has become students' first curriculum. In 1991, the Media Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) warned that students who lack the tools to evaluate and work with nonprint media will be unprepared to live thoughtfully and productively in the present and the future. Therefore, the skill to read the message through the medium is as essential as the message.

All films are cultural artifacts, and as such, become an important teaching tool

in history. Mintz and Roberts point out that "movies open windows into American cultural and social history. . . . They provide a host of insights into Americans' shifting ideals, fantasies, and pre-occupations" (1993, 1–2). Films that were not regarded as historical when they were made have since become important historical documents (Mintz and Roberts 1993; Carnes 1995). Films, especially those with popular audience appeal, provide information about the ideas and attitudes of the era that produced them. Often teachers choose films that are about a particular historical period and use them as secondary source documents. A better choice would be to use films as primary source documents. If teachers want students to see what it was like during a particular historical period, I suggest that they avoid a contrived piece that is often someone's idealized version of a particular period and send students to the artifacts of the period to interpret the era for themselves.

The great learning opportunity with film is the development and exercise of students' historical literacy skills. Those skills provide students with the tools that allow them to gain a real historical understanding of a text from a historical period.

How might a high school history teacher begin to use films in a classroom to develop historical literacy skills? First, students have to realize that viewing films is an active learning activity, not a passive one. To make sense of film,

- the viewer must be able to adopt—if only imaginatively and temporarily—the social, political, and ideological interests that are the conditions for the knowledge it constructs. In this way, the film's discourse seeks to engage its viewers;
- the viewer engages in the activity of knowledge construction and in the construction of knowledge from a particular social, political, and ideological point of view. (Ellsworth 1990, 13)

Students need to be taught to "read between the lines" of the film text. Viewers identify the context clues, or concepts, that will reveal information about a particular historical era. Before

students can reach that point, they must learn to identify concepts. This is better accomplished by using short scenes.

Many scenes from many films that can be used in the introductory experiences. One of the best I have found is the scene from *A Bug's Life* (1998) in which a falling leaf lands in the middle of a line of ants carrying food. An ant that was just on the other side of the leaf stops abruptly and screams a frightened "I'm lost!" The ant foreman quickly hurries over, tells the ants not to panic, and then guides them around the leaf to where they can rejoin the original line of ants. Students have identified several concepts, including the dangers of not thinking for oneself and being part of a group while maintaining one's individuality, especially the ability to think for oneself. Generally, after a few basic concept identification exercises, students are ready for more critical analysis opportunities.

Once students are fairly adept at identifying concepts in film, they begin developing their primary source evaluation skills. Because films are being used as primary sources, the steps in analysis are similar to those used to examine any other primary source. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in its journal *Social Education* published document analysis worksheets in a special edition on Teaching U.S. History with Primary Sources, including a worksheet specifically designed for motion picture analysis (*Social Education* 2003, 426–27). The filmmaking questions and some of the technical issues might be de-emphasised so that students concentrate on identifying concepts, ideas, characters; the central message of the movie; and descriptions of life in the United States at the time the movie was made. Finding those points can prepare students to develop understanding of a historical period.

In addition to learning from the primary source analysis worksheets, students benefit from trying to answer a question that is a guide to their viewing. Eventually students are practiced to the degree that they will no longer need

worksheets or guiding questions; however, those aids are essential in the beginning.

As a general rule, the guiding questions require students to go beyond topical research. Teachers need to avoid requiring students to find a great deal of information about something without analyzing it. They should structure questions, built on the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy, so that students must analyze, synthesize, or evaluate to answer them. Questions of that type cannot be found but must be invented.

Theory to Practice

In the following example, I use film to address an overarching question inspired by Sam Wineburg (2001): Has the historical progress of the U.S. from the 1950s to the 1990s been in a linear and positively progressive direction? To answer the question, students must have sufficient background content knowledge of each of the decades before they can begin to think critically about the entire period. The example works best as a culminating project that emphasizes skill development. A review of significant people, places, and events of the decade should precede the showing of a film. The emphasis of the review should be on the content that would help students address the guiding question and analyze the film's historical period. Films produced during each of the decades can give students another text and context in which to examine the people, places, and events of the period and to give them an idea of a particular era. The guiding questions included here are meant to provide an intentionally narrowed idea of the historical era and are aimed at giving students the information necessary to answer the original question. The primary rule for selecting films for the list is that they had to be rated PG-13 or lower. A rating of NR means "not rated." The main points for review were drawn from a high school history textbook: *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century* (2003, Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell).

1950s

The Cold War. At the end of World War II, Americans became increasingly alarmed about communism as it was embodied in the USSR. Many believed that it threatened the American way of life.

Guiding question. Answer the following question from the viewpoint of a 1950s American: What message about the American dream did *Angels in the Outfield* (1951) portray to your fellow citizens and to the world, especially to those who might be living under Communists.

Plot summary (from the Internet Movie Database [IMDB]): *Angels in the Outfield (1951) NR.* A young woman reporter blames the Pittsburgh Pirates' losing streak on the obscenely abusive manager. Although she attempts to learn more about him for her column, he begins hearing the voice of an angel promising him help for the team if he will mend his ways. As he does so, an orphan girl who is a Pirates fan and has been praying for the team begins noticing angels on the ball field. The Pirates start winning, and manager McGovern tries to turn his life around. The question is, can he keep his temper long enough for the Pirates to win the National League pennant?

Historical understanding of the Communist scare in the 1950s based on the film. The film is a visual representation of "consensus" history (events for the community good) in 1950s America. The presence of angels signifying a reconciling of science and religion serve as a reminder that communism was antireligious. The film features baseball as the great American pastime.

1960s

Civil Rights. In 1960, segregation literally and figuratively divided the citizens of the United States. African Americans were denied access to jobs and housing

and were refused service at restaurants and stores. The voices of the oppressed joined with those who supported rights for all citizens, and together they took to the streets, demanding civil rights for all Americans.

Guiding question. Students assume a 1968 viewpoint, and pretend that they have just seen a nightly national news broadcast that touted the achievements in civil rights. The tactics of some working toward the guarantee of civil rights for everyone have changed since the early 1960s. When students watch *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), they begin to understand why the protestors started becoming more confrontational. What makes events in the movie help students understand the problem?

Plot summary (from the Internet Movie Database [IMDB]): *Night of the Living Dead (1968) NR.* Chaos descends on the world as the brains of the recently deceased become inexplicably reanimated, causing the dead to rise and feed on human flesh. As the catastrophe unfolds, a young woman visiting her father's grave takes refuge in a nearby farmhouse, where she is met by an African American man who protects her and barricades them inside. They both later discover people hiding in the basement, and they each attempt to cope with the situation. Their only hope rests on getting some gasoline from a nearby pump into a truck whose tank is nearly empty, but that requires braving the hordes of ravenous corpses walking about outside. When they finally put their plans into action, panic and personal tensions only add to their terror as they try to survive.

Possible historical understandings about race relations in the 1960s. Viewers see a visual representation of conflict history in 1960s America and of race relations in the United States and Pittsburgh. The African American protagonist/hero survives the zombie attacks only to be shot by a member of the local militia, which is all white. The images of police dog attacks on zombies

are reminiscent of pictures shot in the American South at that time.

1970s

Watergate and trust in government. The main points for the decade concern Watergate; presidential disgrace; and government mistrust. On August 9, 1974, Richard M. Nixon resigned the presidency because of his role in illegal activities that culminated in a break-in at the Democratic party headquarters in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. Many U.S. citizens believed that the trust that they once placed in their leaders had been broken.

Guiding question. Students assume the role of one who had voted for Nixon for president in 1968 and 1972 and felt betrayed when he resigned in 1974. Although the person voted for Carter in 1976, the person's faith in the government's honesty and credibility has not been restored. Now two years into the Carter presidency, the person goes to the movies to see including former football star O. J. Simpson, in *Capricorn One* (1978). When that person leaves the movie theater that night, does he or she feel that his or her beliefs about the U.S. political system were confirmed or denied?

Plot summary (from the Internet Movie Database [IMDB]): *Capricorn One* (1978) PG. Seconds before the launch of NASA's first manned mission to Mars, the entire team is pulled secretly from the capsule and the rocket leaves earth unmanned. The head of the program explains to the astronauts that the life support system was faulty and that NASA cannot afford the publicity of a cancelled mission. The plan is to fake the Mars landing and keep the astronauts at a remote base until the mission is over, but then an investigative journalist starts to suspect something.

Historical understanding regarding government mistrust in the 1970s. Citizens believed that those at the highest levels of government must monitor

agencies under their control, people have a responsibility to vote and then to oversee their elected officials, and freedom of the press is essential in a democracy.

1980s

The conservative tide. In 1980, the conservative candidate for the presidency of the United States was Ronald Reagan, who sought to promote a conservative agenda of less government, lower taxes, and traditional values in public policy. Social and political conservatism has continued to influence both political parties.

Guiding question. As a typical teenager in the 1980s, you are told over and over by your parents and members of their generation that the 1950s were the "good old days." After seeing 1955 through the eyes of Marty McFly, do you agree that things were better then? Were things better for everyone?

Plot summary (from the Internet Movie Database [IMDB]): *Back to the Future* (1985) PG. The future of Marty McFly, a typical teenager of the 1980s, is not shaping up well. His family is dysfunctional; his teacher, Mr. Strickland, is out to get him; his music is too loud and the rest of the world does not care about his problems. Only with his girlfriend and local eccentric scientist, Dr. Emmet Brown, does he find the encouragement and excitement that he needs. Then, one of Doc Brown's experiments goes slightly wrong, and Marty is sent back to 1955 in a plutonium-powered DeLorean "time machine." During his trip back in time, Marty must make certain his teenage parents-to-be meet and fall in love—so he can get back to the future.

Possible historical understanding of the rise of conservatism in the 1980s, based on the film. The belief that the 1950s were the "good old days" is not shared by everyone. For example, women and minorities had far fewer rights than they have today. Teen beliefs and behavior in

the 1950s are similar to those of today's teens. The interests of business sometimes favor the privileged over individuals and society.

1990s

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the focus was on technology, providing access to the new technology, and regulating its use. Accessibility and regulation are also challenges facing twenty-first century America.

Guiding question. You have just seen a talk show interview that discussed the possibilities of getting cancer from cell phones. Then at the gas station, you saw a warning that said that cell phones could cause sparks that might ignite gas in the pumps. To relax, you go to the movies to see *Jurassic Park*, only to find yourself watching dinosaurs wreak terror on the twentieth century. Do you leave the theater, throw away your cell phone, and decide to become a Luddite?

Plot summary (from the Internet Movie Database [IMDB]): *Jurassic Park* (1993) PG13. *Jurassic Park* is set on a remote island, where a wealthy entrepreneur secretly creates a theme park featuring living dinosaurs drawn from prehistoric DNA. Before opening the attraction to the public, he invites a top paleontologist, a paleobotanist, a mathematician/theorist, and his two eager grandchildren to experience the park and help calm anxious investors. However, their park visit is anything but tranquil once the park's security system breaks down, the prehistoric creatures break out, and the excitement builds to surprising results. The plot is based on Michael Crichton's best-selling novel.

Possible historical understanding about the new technologies of the 1990s, based on the film. New technologies are not always for the better, and they require oversight and regulation. Just because one can do something, does not mean that one should do it.

Conclusion

In a history classroom, documentaries and historical films are typically treated as statements of fact. Students are generally not required to think beyond the scenes presented. Popular films are cultural artifacts and as such, require students' critical historical thinking so that they make connections to the periods in which the movies were made. The use of film as a primary source can provide students with opportunities to develop their own ideas rather than memorize facts.

When watching popular films, students use their higher-level thinking skills to discover less overt ideas. Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are not inherent in students and must be taught. When the class sees its first movie, the students must understand that the experience is equivalent to reading a book and will be treated the same way in the course of study.

More active and meaningful learning will result when students think, construct, or solve, rather than memorize information. Teachers who use films merely to communicate some historical information or fact, however well-

intentioned they may be, accomplish no more than teachers who rely solely on textbooks and lectures. Films read as literal text often generate the same level of passive receptivity among students as printed textbooks do. History teachers must set active, higher-level expectations for their students in every educational endeavor, including the use of films in the classroom.

Key words: film in the classroom, film literacy, teaching film literacy, using films in history class

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