

Hollywood and student learning

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During second semester 1997 we undertook a project to ascertain how the use of Hollywood feature films with historical content affected students' learning of twentieth century American History. Questionnaires, reflective journals and interviews were used to gauge the impact of films on student learning. In this Research Vignette we will report on our findings.

Introduction

While the use of film has long been an accepted part of academic curriculum, there has been little attempt to study how film influences learning. To date, work in this field focuses on educationally designed instruction/training films (see for example Laurillard, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1984; Romiszowski, 1974). Our study focuses on the use of Hollywood feature films in the teaching of twentieth century American history. We were particularly interested in exploring the following questions:

- To what extent does the use of feature films facilitate the learning of history?
- What kinds of learning take place?
- To what extent does the use of films stimulate/motivate students to do further learning?
- Does the use of feature films distort the learning of history, and if so, in what ways?

Our research was conducted with students enrolled in the Murdoch University history unit *Hollywood and History*. Each topic in the unit was approached through watching a Hollywood feature film, together with selected readings, lectures and tutorial discussion. In assessing students' learning we administered a number of questionnaires, conducted individual and group interviews and analysed reflective journals written by students.

Preliminary survey

Students completed a preliminary survey at the beginning of the unit (45 respondents). Students came from a variety of academic disciplines, but the largest group were History majors. Nevertheless, in assigning a reason for enrolling in the unit, almost as many students cited an interest in film (42%) as in history (51%). Over half (60%) indicated that the inclusion of feature films in the unit influenced their enrolment. While the largest number of students (64%) stated that they hoped to gain a greater understanding of America and its history from the unit, a substantial number (42%) stated that they wanted to gain a critical understanding of film.

Substantial numbers of students had already viewed at least some of the films screened in the unit. The films most often viewed before were *Fatal Attraction*, (64%) and *JFK*, (57%). The films least viewed before were *The Birth of a Nation*, (4%) and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, (4%). A minority (18%) said that they had not seen any of the films before.

JFK: The Movie

In assessing student learning, we gave particular attention to the Oliver Stone film *JFK* (1991). This film was

enormously controversial when first released, and its historical value continues to be intensely debated by academic historians. Most controversial is Stone's interweaving of archival footage with imaginative reconstructions, and the blend of fact and conjecture (see for example Burgoyne, 1996; Toplin, 1996; Rosenstone, 1997). We administered a questionnaire to students before (37 respondents) and after (33 respondents) viewing the film. Questions ranged from factual details such as the date of John F. Kennedy's assassination to students' interpretation of who killed Kennedy and why.

The post-film questionnaire indicated a greater grasp of factual details such as the year Kennedy was killed. Before watching the film 49% of respondents knew Kennedy was killed in 1963, with the proportion jumping up to 91% for the post-film questionnaire. At the same time, there was considerably less attention to such details as the time of the assassination and the street where it occurred. Although the film makes a number of references to the time of Kennedy's assassination, only 21% of students correctly stated the time as 12:30.

When asked to describe how certain people were related to John F. Kennedy, most students knew such figures as Lee Harvey Oswald (89%) and Oliver Stone (84%) before viewing the film. There was, however, a marked change in the proportions who knew the characters Jim Garrison and Clay Shaw. Previous to viewing the film 27% of respondents correctly described Garrison compared to 91% after the film. For Shaw the proportion increased from 14% to 91%.

There were also some interesting patterns in the way characters were described. Critics of Stone's film have commented on its juxtaposition of homosexual conspirators against the patriarchal family life of District Attorney Jim Garrison (see Simon, 1996, pp. 216-17). In this respect it is perhaps worth noting that when asked to describe the created character Willie O'Keefe, 45% mentioned that he was 'gay', 'homosexual' or a 'male prostitute' compared to 39% students who noted that the character was fictional. Smaller proportions noted that Clay Shaw (12%) and David Ferrie (15%) were gay/homosexual.

Part of the power of movies is that they strike responsive chords and identification among the audience. Indeed Arthur Berger suggests this may include internalising actors' beliefs as represented on screen (Berger, 1989, p. 92). While over a third (36%) of the students indicated they did not identify with any particular character in the film, 30% said they identified with the Jim Garrison character (played by Kevin Costner) and 15% with the Lee Harvey Oswald character (played by Gary Oldman). A majority of students who identified with Jim Garrison thought that had influenced their viewing of the film. Although some students' explanations included the credibility of Garrison's argument, wanting him to 'win' or wanting to know the truth like Garrison, others said that they were still aware of the fact/fiction mixture and Garrison's biases.

The pre and post-film questionnaires revealed substantial changes in students' interpretation of the Kennedy assassination. The most marked change was in the proportion who believed Kennedy was killed by more than one gunman. Before viewing the film, 30% believed Kennedy was killed by more than one gunman. After the film the proportion was 73%. It is perhaps significant that among those who professed an identification with the Garrison or Oswald characters, the proportion of those who believed Kennedy was killed by more than one gunman was over 80%. There were less marked increases in the proportion of students who believed Kennedy's death was related to a conspiracy organised by the military-industrial complex, part of a conspiracy organised by the CIA and anti-Castro Cubans, and part of a conspiracy to keep US armed forces in Vietnam. These are all suppositions put forward by Stone's film. Again it may be significant that those who said they identified with the Jim Garrison character were more likely to support these contentions.

Students were asked if they thought they had changed their interpretation of Kennedy's assassination. Here there was a substantial disparity, with a number of students apparently unaware that their interpretation had changed. Of fifteen students who indicated that they had not changed their interpretation of Kennedy's assassination since viewing the film, nine clearly had changed their interpretation. It should be noted, though, that their pre-film knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Kennedy's death was generally of a low level. It may be that they did not really know enough information to form an opinion. In their reflective journals, a few students alluded to this possibility:

I had little knowledge of the Kennedy assassination before viewing this film.

I have never really known who the conspirators were or what part they supposedly played.

A majority of these students, however, commented on the difficulty of separating fact from fiction:

People, including myself, with a somewhat limited knowledge of the events surrounding the assassination, have difficulty watching scenes and trying to work out [if] they're historically true, or if they're a figment of Stone's imagination.

Stone is very successful in the blending of fact with fiction.

While his [Stone's] theory seems very credible from his film, I think you do have to be very dubious about how "true" it really is.

Of those who believed their interpretation had changed, the largest proportion (58%) attributed this to the film, followed by discussion (48%) and reading (45%). In their reflective journals most of these students admitted their limited prior knowledge, and were able to explain how their knowledge had changed:

I considered myself something of a knowledge bowl in the fact that I knew that Lee Harvey Oswald was suspected not to be the shooter of JFK. In reality, I knew nothing... There can be little doubt that Oswald had connections to the CIA or some form of military intelligence. I was quite excited to discover this through watching the movie as it gives weight to the idea that there was a conspiracy behind the assassination of JFK.

I have to admit that I did not know much about Kennedy's assassination, I knew the name of Oswald and Jack Ruby. I had heard of "the incident on the grassy knoll", ... Apart from this, I knew little. ... I can say that *JFK* has provided me with a lot of information regarding the possible alternative theories of Kennedy's death...

Perhaps the most encouraging response was the proportion of students who stated in the questionnaire that the film stimulated them to further inquiry or discussion. When asked whether after viewing the film they had discussed John F. Kennedy or the events surrounding his death with others outside of class or done additional reading on the topic, two-thirds of students responded in the affirmative.

General comments offered on the film reflect a degree of ambivalence. One student remarked that the topic did not interest them, and that the movie 'actually confused rather than informed me!' Another stated that showing the film in class was 'dangerous'. On the other hand, one student stated, 'I found this film an excellent way to provoke my interest into this subject.' With even more enthusiasm, another student wrote, 'I went to the Uni library and public library and got a few books on JFK and the 60s, discussed it with my parents, and planned my trip to America in my year of retirement to study the files in 2000 whatever when they're released.'

Conclusions

To return to our original questions, we can now offer some tentative conclusions based not only on the *JFK* questionnaires, but student interviews. In terms of facilitating the learning of history, most students indicated that the inclusion of films made learning more interesting. Many students also indicated that the use of feature films influenced their perception of the study of history. The films helped make explicit the idea that history is not simply a body of uncontested facts, but is constructed and multi-representational.

This leads into the question of what kind of learning is taking place. Many students mentioned that the use of films reinforced the idea that history may have multiple interpretations. Some students were gratified by this idea, while some found the notion troubling. Beyond this, students commented that they were able to get a better sense of particular historical eras. Films could provide visual confirmation of just how different things were in some earlier periods. More than readings, they could allow an appreciation of material culture in earlier times such as the cars people drove and the clothes they wore. Films could also affect viewers emotionally, as for example the powerful way in which the movie *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) portrays the desperation of the Great Depression. Some students noted

that they had studied the Depression before and found it boring, yet they were stunned by the film's images.

It is more difficult to discern the way in which films might distort the learning of history. It may be that some students organised their knowledge around the films *per se*, rather than the historical periods they were meant to represent. For media students in particular, it may be that they sometimes became more absorbed in the structure of films than their historical content. Some students were apparently 'turned off' by the earlier films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) which was shot in black and white, and lacked sound. From their perspective the film lacked sophistication, although certainly some others found the film a powerful comment on the period in which it was made.

Because film is such a powerful medium, the question arises how far the emotionalism of films is tempered by students' intellectual judgments. Gavriel Salomon (1979, p. 55) argues that individuals tend to process the information depicted in film as if it were lifelike, and where deviations from their own representations occur, they use the film as the basis of knowledge construction. How far, for example, did Oliver Stone's version of events in *JFK* supersede more authoritative sources and credible interpretations?

As already noted, some people appeared to find *JFK* confusing. A number of students commented that showing the film was 'dangerous', at least to those uninitiated in the director's mixture of archival and recreated film footage. The uncertainty between fact and fiction, between interpretation and some ultimate 'truth', clearly made some viewers uncomfortable. On the other hand, this disparity stimulated others to find out more about the events depicted in the film. They accepted that there might be discrepancies in the historical record, and the necessity of examining additional evidence in order to form their own judgments. Many students professed a keenness to discuss the film both inside and outside the classroom. Some were at least motivated to do the assigned reading, which they apparently would not have done otherwise. A couple of students even delved into the voluminous Warren Commission which originally investigated Kennedy's assassination.

It is in terms of motivating students that the use of feature films appears most clear-cut. Films with historical content help explicate the past not only by their representations of history, but by encouraging discourse on the past. In our image-based culture, the use of feature films may also foster greater visual literacy and critical viewing skills (Considine, 1989, pp. 230, 232; Rebhorn, 1988, p. 2).

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