

Feature film and teaching/learning

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What are the effects of feature film on student learning? While it seems widely assumed that the use of feature films in teaching serves to pique student interest and facilitate learning, there has been relatively little study of learning produced by films. What work has been done in this field mainly focuses on educationally designed instruction/training films rather than popular cinema productions. This is an area of special interest to me, since in 1997 I will be offering a unit titled Hollywood and History. The course examines twentieth century America through the lens of feature films such as JFK, Malcolm X and Apocalypse Now. For some time many historians have accepted the intrinsic value of feature films in teaching history, but without specific examination of how this affects student learning. I am interested in exploring this dilemma.

Introduction

In recent decades the use of feature film in teaching has become an increasingly accepted component in tertiary education. This would seem to be particularly the case in the teaching of American history. Numerous texts have been published investigating the way in which Hollywood has presented America's past (e.g. Carnes, 1995; Koppes and Black, 1987; Basinger, 1993; Rollins, 1983). Professional and popular journals including Teaching History, History Today, History Workshop and American Historical Review regularly publish articles which examine Hollywood's representation of the past.

It would seem widely assumed that feature film contributes to students' appreciation and understanding of history, yet I am unaware of any systematic investigation of how far this assumption is justified. As Robert A. Rosenstone recently noted, the historical profession has no agreed answer as to what kind of historical knowledge or understanding films can provide (Rosenstone, 1995b, p. 122). The specific dilemma I wish to pose is how one might go about investigating and measuring the effects of feature film on student learning in a unit on twentieth century American History.

Context

In second semester 1997 I will be coordinating the unit Hollywood and History for second/third year students at Murdoch University. The course examines the cultural and political history of the United States from the 1890s to the 1980s. Central to the course will be the use of feature films which relate to topics such as the Great Depression, Cold War, Civil Rights, Vietnam and Watergate. The rationale for using films in the course is threefold. First, they provide a representation of the past which is arguably as valid as written interpretations. Secondly, films (whether intentionally or not) provide insight into the culture which produced them. Thirdly, films often have a profound influence on attitudes and values (e.g. wartime propaganda).

The dilemma

In what ways does the use of feature films affect student learning of history? Is it in fact possible that Hollywood representations of the past have a negative impact on student learning? Let us take for example Oliver Stone's controversial film on the Kennedy assassination, JFK (1991). I intend to screen this film in conjunction with lectures, readings and tutorials. While historians have seriously undermined many of the premises in Stone's film, it is nevertheless possible that students might accept Stone's version of events as purely factual. Because film is such a powerful medium, it may be that Stone's images supersede more authoritative sources. It has been claimed that the

magnification of the film image has the capacity to displace 'real' life (Snead, 1994, p. 143). As Terry Christensen (1987, p. 5) observes, part of the power of films is that they appeal more to the emotions than to the intellect. How far are students able to temper the emotionalism of films with intellectual judgements? To what extent are students able to discern between the personal politics of film makers and historical authenticity? Does an actor's persona (e.g. Kevin Costner as district attorney Jim Garrison) affect student perceptions of historical characters?

I am seeking assistance in framing a research strategy that will help me answer these and related questions about the effects of feature film on student learning. Work in this area thus far seems to have focused more or less exclusively on educationally designed instruction/training films (e.g. Laurillard, 1993; Zuber-Skeritt, 1984; Romiszowski, 1974). My own interest on the other hand is in the effectiveness of incorporating feature films into a broader instructional strategy.

Conclusion

At a time when it is claimed that visual media have become the main transmitters of historical meaning in Western culture (Rosenstone, 1995b, p. 3), I think it is timely to investigate the relation between Hollywood presentations of history and perceptions of the past. I hope that discussion participants can suggest some constructive ways of integrating feature films into my teaching, while at the same time determining the effect of films on student learning.

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