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More Than "Showing What Happened": Exploring the Potential of Teaching History with Film

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In a world where students and the general public are likely to access historical information from a television program, film, or even video game, it is important to equip students with the ability to view historical representation critically. In this essay we present arguments for using film to engage students in rigorous and authentic social studies pedagogy and support these arguments with data and examples from our research over the past ten years. Our goal is not to promote film as the ultimate classroom source or as a replacement for a teacher, but to highlight how effective the use of film can be in engaging students in authentic intellectual work with important content and issues. If we have learned anything from our research on using film to teach about the past, it is that it is important to have a clear purpose for selecting a film, both justifying the use of time and *presenting the perspective that the teacher wants to portray.*

In school districts across the country, films are being restricted or even banished from the social studies classroom. In one Connecticut town, the Board of Education banned the use of all R-rated feature films in high school social studies classes in reaction to a parent complaint about a teacher's showing of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Films are not the only media on the mob's pitchfork (or blog) — as a group of parents in the same town urged the board to remove Mark Twain's book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as well from the schoolhouse doors. The board eventually relented in favor of the teachers on both issues, although under the caveat that all R-rated films were subject to board approval.

Seizing on the learning opportunity created by the racially-charged controversy that surrounded *Huckleberry Finn*, a teacher in the district showed *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as well as clips from more modern films such as *Norbit* (2007) and *Soul Man* (1986) to discuss blackface and racial stereotyping. Despite obstacles, this teacher thoughtfully and effectively used film to challenge his students to face a critical and important historical

and contemporary issue in his social studies classroom.

Over the last decade, we have found innumerable examples of social studies teachers' use of film, such as in the Connecticut town described above, that engage students in thoughtful and critical exploration of past and contemporary social or political issues. These examples of practice where film is used as part of critical inquiry and complex intellectual work provide evidence for why film should be used in the social studies classroom but in ways that go beyond the stereotypical philosophy of showing film–with little preview or follow-up–that often leads to the aforementioned scrutiny of teacher use of film. These practices also highlight the development of the critical and media literacy skills necessary for 21st century citizens.

Should Films be Viewed in the High School Classroom?

Should film even be used given the numerous issues in the high school classroom, such as the possibility of controversy, the view of films used as "babysitters," or the lack of students' critical viewing skills? Although praxis with film has often been critiqued, one of the strongest arguments for using film in the classroom is that film and similar media serve a larger role as historical sources for the public at large. We now know that many people outside of the classroom are not learning about history from reading books or from engaging in primary source research; instead, they are learning what they know about the past from engaging with media such as film, web based media, or video games (Rosenstone, 1995, 2006; Seixas, 1994). The impact of the heightened role of film as a source of history in society is illustrated in Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, and Duncan's (2007) study that examines how people learn about history, in their case the history of the Vietnam War. They found that film served as an influential source of historical information and perspective across family generations and was often at the center of family discussions about the past.

In addition to the expanded role of media, studies have also found that, without explicit instructions in critical analysis by a teacher,

students do not naturally critique what they are seeing. Thus, films provide a natural opportunity for teaching media literacy, an essential skill in today's technology-based world. Seixas (1994), in his study of how students viewed two Western films from different periods, *The Searchers* (1954) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), found that without explicit instruction students were able to identify stereotypical representations in the older film but not in the contemporary film, reflecting a lack of historical consciousness. In their recent study of the impact of historical film on views of accuracy and memory, Butler, Zaromb, Lyle, and Roediger (2009) found that, without explicit instruction in the inaccuracies of film, participants tended to cite examples of the film over examples from other text-based historical sources when asked to remember particular historical events. Similarly, Marcus (2005) also found that students tended to refer to examples from Hollywood films as fact even when they recognized the inaccuracies that are commonplace in these films. These examples show the need for teachers to be more explicit in teaching critical viewing skills to students when using media such as film and also, we argue, the need to think differently about how films might be used in the classroom.

What Films are Being Viewed?

Our journey into researching how film is used as a medium to teach social studies began with a quest to find out how much film was actually being viewed, and which films in particular, in social studies classes. We conducted a survey of high school social studies teachers in Connecticut and Wisconsin and found that approximately 92% of the teachers we surveyed reported showing all or part of a fiction film once a week or more, and 82% reported showing all or part of documentary-style film once a week or more (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007). This seems like a tremendous amount of film viewing, although we noticed that many teachers were using short clips from films regularly along with longer viewings of feature films.

The films identified as being used by at least ten percent of the teachers in the survey,

most of whom taught U.S. History, were: *Glory* (1989), *Amistad* (1997), *Schindler's List* (1993)*, Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Patriot* (2000) *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), and *Malcolm X* (1992). We noticed that there is a trend engaging students in examining emotional and difficult historical events and issues among the teachers we surveyed for the use of film.

We have also compiled over the years a list of films most identified for use in World History classes by teachers in workshops or sessions we have conducted around the country. Some of these films would be considered classics or blockbusters, while others are films that for one reason or another have caught the eye of teachers as presenting an important perspective or as a medium for discussing important historical issues or events. Some of the most popular smaller films are (in no particular order): *The Lost Battalion* (2001), *Swing Kids* (1994), *Breaker Morant* (1980), *El Norte* (1983), *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), *Osama* (2003), *Promises* (2001) (documentary), *To Live (Ikiru)* (1952), *Triumph of the Will (Triumph de Willens)* (1935), *The Lives of Others* (*Leben der Anderen, Das*) (2006), *The Pianist* (2002), *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), and *Europa Europa* (1990).

In this list, there also seems to be a trend among teachers of selecting films that represent very emotional events in history, or films that present a perspective that is often left out of, or marginalized in, textbooks. Although these lists are interesting and helpful for thinking about the types and content of film being utilized, the story they tell is limiting without further knowledge of *how* they are being used. Few studies have actually examined social studies teachers' decision-making about, and pedagogy with, film in the classroom (cf. Marcus, 2005, 2007; Metzger & Suh, 2008; Stoddard, 2007, 2009).

Generally, blockbuster films like *Saving Private Ryan*, are often the most dramatized and least accurate of the historical fiction genre films. This is most often because the

directors and producers of a Hollywood film feel the need to dramatize, romanticize, and alter the historical record of these events in order to make a film that appeals to a broad audience and is therefore profitable at the box office (Rosenstone, 1995; Stoddard & Marcus, 2006). If a teacher uses *Pearl Harbor* and *Saving Private Ryan* to show students what really happened in World War II as akin to the historical record and without critical analysis of what is portrayed, then learning from these films could be very problematic. Unfortunately, according to our survey and that of Hobbs (2006), this is exactly what is occurring in many high school classes.

However, what we have found in our later studies of teacher use of film in the classroom is that many teachers are also using select portions of films like *Pearl Harbor* and *Saving Private Ryan* for specific purposes, such as showing the violence and chaos of the D-Day invasions (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan*) by taking advantage of the aesthetic accuracy of the film or having students compare different representations of the events surrounding the Pearl Harbor attacks with the historical record (e.g. *Pearl Harbor, Tora! Tora! Tora!*). Essentially, students in these examples were engaged in critiquing the representation of the historical events, characters (especially the Japanese), and themes in the film, similar to how O'Connor (1988, 2007) advocates for using film as a historical source.

Unlike *Saving Private Ryan* or *Pearl Harbor*, which go to great lengths to make sure the characters and props look and sound accurate, films that present more complex historical storylines or strive to include multiple perspectives of an event often do not fare well at the box office. Several examples of this are *Glory*, *Amistad*, and *Ride with the Devil* (1999). This is not to argue that they are "accurate" historical representations, but the stories they tell tend to be more accurate than historical fiction examples such as *Saving Private Ryan*, where the central plot is largely fictitious. However, all can be used effectively in the classroom as a way to challenge students' views of the past through the questions or issues they raise and not necessarily the history they "show."

For example, clips from *Glory* could be used to engage students in discussions about racism that was prevalent in the North as well as the South and also the fraught relationship between African Americans and Irish immigrants in the North. Likewise, *Amistad* could be used to engage students in issues leading up to the Civil War such as differing cultures in the North and South, trade issues with slavery and the designation of "property," and the political firestorms that were brewing at the time. Rosenstone (1995, 2006) argues that using film in this way to engagestudents in larger questions about history and especially questions related to justice and power in the past may be the most powerful and effective role for films in the history classroom.

In addition to using film to examine historical representations and the historical record, which often highlights the inaccuracies of feature film, one of the primary goals of the teachers in our survey and in later studies has been the use of film to develop student empathy for historical characters or groups. For example, one teacher we observed used *Matewan* (1987) to help students recognize the perspectives of early labor leaders and miners in the coal mines of Appalachia and the struggles they faced against the large mining companies. The themes that emerged from this film arose again and again in class whenever labor issues were being examined (Stoddard, 2006). Another teacher we observed used *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004) to help students analyze multiple perspectives on women's suffrage including competing female perspectives (Marcus & Monaghan, 2009).

We also noticed that the most frequently used films on our list represented a range of those made over the past seventy years, which shows that teachers are not afraid to use films that may seem dated – or in many cases are selecting films specifically because they are dated, and they want their students to identify the norms and values of the time when a film was made, thus using film as a primary source. For instance, one used *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) as a primary source to examine the societal values and norms from the time during which the film was created; another used *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) to engage students in thinking about political and societal views during the Cold War.

Finally, we noticed that films are often being used to raise larger issues from the past or contemporary society that did not surface in textbooks and/or are difficult to broach. Some of these teachers used methods such as Socratic seminars to help students both make sense of the issues, ideas, and values in the film and also examine the context in which the film was produced and the backgrounds of who produced it. One example of this was a student teacher who showed the animated film *Barefoot Gen* (1983) during his World War II unit to help his students examine the impact of atomic weapons on the Japanese. The film not only depicts the horrors of the victims of atomic weaponry, but it also reflects the time when it was created, a period when there was a great push for nuclear arms control. The use of the seminar model engaged students in digging into the larger issues the film represents and also the context of the 1980s when it was made – a time when nuclear proliferation, disarmament, and Japan's self-examination of its own history was prominent.

Two Cases of Teaching with Film
Unlike other types of historical sources, which often serve more singular purposes, film can be utilized in a multitude of ways in the classroom depending on the film and the goals of the teacher. Two cases in particular that we have observed in the past help to illustrate the way that film can be used to work toward powerful social studies goals: a North Carolina teacher's use of *Ride with the Devil* to challenge students' beliefs about the causes of the Civil War and understandings of the border wars between Kansas and Missouri, and the aforementioned case of the Connecticut teacher who used films to engage students in a discussion of race, blackface, and stereotyping. Both of these cases reveal the ways in which film can be used to go beyond just showing what happened and engage students in critical thinking and

deliberation of important questions about the past and present.[1]

In the case of *Ride with the Devil*, the North Carolina teacher, Ms. Reid, wanted to challenge her students to realize that the

> "Civil War didn't just happen with Fort Sumter, but there were a lot of events that built on each other and it goes all the way back to the founding of the nation. Yes, it's states' rights, and yes it's slavery, and yes, it's economics. There's a lot of different things, and to use bleeding Kansas as a way of starting to talk about these events and to talk about the lesser known events."

She decided to use *Ride with the Devil* after attending a National Endowment for the Humanities workshop the previous summer on the conflict held in Lawrence, Kansas. She framed the lesson around how the conflict between pro-slavery Missouri Bushwhackers and anti-slavery Jayhawkers was still evident in popular culture today. She showed students a stuffed Jayhawk, the University of Kansas mascot, to open the lesson. This entrée helped to engage students in the lesson in a way that emphasized the effect of these events on the present. Reid then used the textbook to show how little is included on the events and to provide some context – especially the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 that allowed residents of Kansas to vote on the allowance of slavery in their state.

The clips of *Ride with the Devil* that Ms. Reid showed challenged the students to rethink not only their understanding of the events being portrayed, but also the nature of the conflict and the complexities of the motivations and beliefs of the people who lived in Missouri and Kansas at the time. The narrative of the film, from director Ang Lee, does not provide a clear good guy / bad guy dichotomy, as members from both sides are shown commit-

ting atrocities. Ms. Reid showed two long excerpts, a section at the beginning of the film that helps to provide context and background on the various historical perspectives in the film, and a second section to show the "Raid on Lawrence" in which Bushwhacker forces rounded up and murdered men in town believed to be Jayhawkers who were involved in atrocities against women and children in Missouri. She included a clip portraying an African American character shown riding with the pro-slavery Bushwhackers whose motivations are not clear – causing one student to call out "Why is the Black dude riding with the pro-slavery [forces]?" The film never provides an answer but instead challenges students to identify the various perspectives involved: Union soldiers, Lawrence Jayhawk militias, pro-slavery Bushwhackers, and other civilians caught in the middle.

Ms. Reid used a series of questions to guide her students toward the major issues she wanted to raise. This also helped to frame the post-viewing discussion. During this discussion, they analyzed and evaluated the perspectives and motivations of the major characters and whom they represented as well as possible reasons for why Holt, the African American character, was fighting on the pro-slavery side. Much like the film, however, this discussion did not come to a clear conclusion or a correct answer, but it had an immediate and definite impact on students' beliefs about what caused the American Civil War.

If Reid's use of *Ride with the Devil* helped students to see the complexities of the past and how it still impacts present day popular culture, Mr. Clark, the Connecticut teacher from the introduction, used the controversy over the attempted ban of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to help his students explore historic representations of race in popular culture. In particular, he focused on the concept of "blackface," the issues of racial stereotyping and race relations that it encompasses, and how it has evolved in American society. Framed within the study of American society in popular culture, Mr. Clark began by showing a historical example, the film *The Jazz Singer*. The class's examination of race identity, stereotyping, and blackface

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1 For a more in depth description and analysis of these two cases, see Marcus, Alan; Paxton, Richard; Metzger, Scott; and Stoddard, Jeremy, *Teaching History with Film: Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

centered on several questions: 1) Why was blackface performance present in America before the 1920s? 2) What was the intent of blackface performance, and why did people perform in this way? 3) What was the impact of blackface performance on all Americans?

The class also considered how *The Jazz Singer* connected to historical trends like the migration of African Americans from the South to Northern cities, the Harlem Renaissance, and the entertainment industry. Students were then asked to compare the historical example to contemporary films that dealt with blackface and other racial issues, such as *Norbit*, *Soulman*, and even an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants* in which a character appears in "squirrelface." Finally, the students examined the ways in which the films celebrated or demeaned African American culture.

The film examples illustrated concepts from readings Mr. Clark's class had discussed and raised many questions among students, such as, "What is the deal with the white circle around their eyes and mouth [when doing blackface]?" and, "Why couldn't he sing jazz on Broadway as a white man?" Over the course of the unit, Mr. Clark brought the focus back to contemporary issues of racial identity and its impact in society – especially in popular culture in the way rappers are portrayed or how films construct particular racial identities for an intended audience. For the final segment of the unit Mr. Clark connected the issues raised in the films to contemporary national and local racial contexts ranging from the election of an African American president to the conflict between parents at the school and the school board over whether Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be included in the curriculum. These two cases illustrate just several of the multiple ways film can be used as a historical account or representation, an example of popular culture, or even as a primary source. In order to take advantage of film as a historical media that can engage students in activities that encourage critical literacy development and historical thinking, there are several best practices that we can offer teachers in terms of selection and use of film.

Tips for Teaching History with Film

It is important to have a clear purpose for selecting a film, both in justifying the use of time to view a film *and* that the film presents the perspective that the teacher wants to portray. Viewing an entire film can take multiple hours, and even clips of films can take a major portion of a lesson, not to mention the pre-viewing and post-viewing activities. In order to justify this amount of instructional time, there needs to be strong reasoning both for engaging students in a film-related activity and in the careful selection of the film. This avoids any distrust on the part of administrators and parents and makes the time used to engage students in the study of film much more worthwhile.

Having a specific reason for selecting a particular film and specific goals for showing it are the most important keys to successful pedagogy with film. The examples above exemplify the use of film not as a form of video lecture, but as ways to engage students in more authentic pedagogy with film (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). Authentic pedagogy should engage students in some form of higher order thinking, a depth of understanding of the issue or event, and in substantive conversation or discussion surrounding the film or events it portrays. These examples illustrate how film can be used to engage students in critical analysis of the past and how these understandings are best formed through constructive discussions of various film "texts."

As part of this authentic pedagogy with film, teachers need to take the time to engage students in a study of the film that aligns with the goals of the course and also provides support to help students make sense of what they are seeing and to help them view the film more critically as a form of historical evidence or text. Students need to be focused on analysis during the viewing that focuses them on the perspectives or data from the film that will help them to reach the objectives for viewing – or will help to prepare them for any post-viewing activities. This analysis may involve shadowing a specific character or the perspectives of a group of characters, identifying any questions that the film raises about the nature

of the events, or critically analyzing the representations in the film against what they already know about the event. It is also often helpful to devise a graphic organizer or other data collection sheet to scaffold the viewing (see Woelders, 2007 for an example). This viewing task should be engaging and make the viewing more active – and it should focus on the interpretive nature of film and not film as a source of facts to be transmitted. Used in this way, teachers not only work toward course goals, but also help students develop critical media literacy skills important for their roles as citizens in a world more immersed in visual media than ever.

When preparing students for the viewing, it is important to explicitly identify the goal for viewing the film, especially what students should expect to learn and how they are going to engage with the film. This pre-viewing activity also presents the opportunity to reinforce to students the nature of how film represents history – leading to a better epistemic view of how media represent the past and the limitations of film as a historical source. For example, in the case of Ms. Reid's use of *Ride with the Devil*, she announced up front that the film was only a representation of what happened, but one that showed some events of the border wars quite well. She then explicitly explained what students were to gain from the viewing – an understanding of the complex roots of the Civil War west of the Mississippi and the violent and often unorganized nature of the conflict. This explicit identification by a teacher of the goal for the viewing activity and the nature of film helps students to better understand why and how they should view the film. It also helps to avoid any questions by parents or administrators as to why the film was viewed in class.

Finally, students need to be actively engaged in applying what they have learned from the film through discussion, written reflections, critical analysis, or even through the creation of their own short films on the event. The key to developing both a solid knowledge of the event or issue being taught *and* the skills and habits of mind of critical media literacy is a systematic analysis of film and applica-

tion of the material in a way that frames film and other media as a "value-laden" narrative (Hess, 2007) or text that needs to be interpreted. The goal is that by asking students to work with information from the film, and in a way that emphasizes critical analysis and multiple interpretations that these habits of mind will carry over to how they view other historical sources in and out of the class.

Conclusion

In a world where students and the general public are more likely to access historical information from a television program, film, or even video game, it is important to equip students with the ability to view historical representation critically. In this essay we have presented a number of examples of how film may be used to engage students in critical and important historical events and issues through effective and authentic pedagogy. Our goal is not to promote film as the ultimate classroom source or as a replacement for a teacher, but to highlight how effective the use of film can be in engaging students in authentic intellectual work with important content and issues, instead of as a reward or as a way to buy time to grade papers in the back of the classroom. Both of these stereotypes of film use in the social studies need to be challenged. We have shown here that many teachers are using film in ways that would be seen as exemplary practice. We also recognize, however, that most teacher education programs or professional development sessions do not explicitly help teachers to understand how film can and should be utilized as part of their practice. The examples and tips for teacher selection of, and pedagogy with, film presented here should help to fill this void and promote more effective film use in the history and social studies classroom.

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