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## Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School Classroom

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IN ONE OF THE MOST EMOTIONALLY POWERFUL scenes in the Civil War film *Glory*, Colonel Shaw, played by Matthew Broderick, orders a soldier under his command to be beaten for deserting the unit. The scene is reminiscent of films about slavery in which a white man with a whip inflicts bloody wounds on the back of a black man. Shaw later discovers that the soldier, played by Denzel Washington, deserted the regiment – the all black Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> – to search for a pair of shoes because the unit was ill equipped. Perhaps out of guilt, or sympathy, or to ensure military preparedness or some combination of these factors, Shaw then takes extraordinary efforts to provide shoes for his troops. Although this scene provides a powerful moment in the film and furthers the characters' development, the real Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> was well equipped and did not have such supply shortages (Browne & Kreiser, 2003) and flogging was banned in the Union army at that time (Nathan, 2002). Does this deviation from the historical record matter? What are the implications for teacher practices with this film and others that present engaging historical narratives, but often with dramatic licenses?

The data available to answer such questions are limited. While anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of Hollywood films for classroom instruction is widespread, we have a very incomplete empirical picture of which

Hollywood films history teachers use, how they are used, why they are used, and the impact on student learning and understanding of history. In fact, the study reported in this paper was conducted after a frustrating search for data on history teachers' practices with film yielded surprisingly insufficient results.

Reported here are the results of research that explored which feature films teachers are using to teach high school United States history and how and why they are using these films. The terms "feature film" and "Hollywood film" are used throughout to refer to movies commercially created for a mass audience, often for entertainment and profit. Although documentary films may also be a staple of many history classrooms, they are often created for different purposes and use different techniques, so they are not considered in our analysis. The study strives to establish baseline data to provide resources for those studying issues of film pedagogy and students' historical understanding and to continue the work of those documenting and examining teacher practices in general. Data from the study provide an understanding of the practices of one group of teachers in utilizing film as a resource and of the potential influence on their classrooms' history curriculum. For example, the analyses include examining ways in which the Hollywood films being used provide materials that supplement and/or diversify those available in high school textbooks, asking how their use either promotes narratives alternative to traditional United States history, or just reinforces traditional historical messages.

### **Film and Historical Understanding**

Before we began our project, we reviewed the research of the past fifteen years which explores how students learn to think historically and develop historical understanding (e.g., Grant, 2001; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Levstik & Barton, 1994; Seixas, 1996; VanSledright & Brophy 1997; Wineburg, 2001). Many of these studies emphasize the importance of understanding how students make sense of the past by interpreting and analyzing documents and others sources of historical evidence, and highlight the need to understand how teacher practices influence and support this process. Marcus (2005) reports that teacher practices with film may play an important role in how students learn to interpret and analyze films, particularly the way in which students assess the trustworthiness of film as a document about the past. His article also suggests that film is a unique historical document and that teachers need to consider film-specific pedagogical strategies to develop historical film literacy in students.

Film has emerged as a pervasive medium with a wide-ranging influence, and many films are rooted in history (e.g., *Glory*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Gladi-*

ator) or based on a specific historical event (e.g., *Amistad* and *Good Night, and Good Luck*). There have been a variety of articles in social studies, history, and education journals as well as some books which critique films and offer creative ideas for incorporating films into classroom practices (e.g., Goldstein, 1995; Johnson & Vargas, 1994; Lenihan, 2002; Metzger, 2005; Wilson & Herman, 2002). But there is little evidence about how and if these ideas have been incorporated into classroom practice and if so, the potential influence their use has on students' historical understanding. A handful of recent studies do explore the influence of practices with feature film on students' historical understanding, but few directly investigate the specific practices of teachers with feature film using empirical data. (For example, see: Dimitriadis, 2002; Marcus, Paxton, and Meyerson, 2006; Marcus, 2007; Paxton & Meyerson, 2002; Seixas, 1994).

### Teacher Practices with Film

Teacher practices with film may influence how students make use of and conceive of the past, yet we know relatively little about how and why teachers are using film and which practices may best support student understanding. A review of studies specific to film use offers no clear view of teacher practices with film.<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that teachers' use of film (documentary and feature film) has increased over the last twenty years (Corporation for Public Broadcasting [CPB], 1997), and that teachers have increased access to televisions and VCRs in their classrooms (CPB). However, little is known about the frequency of use of feature film specifically and how and why teachers use feature films. During the 1980s, new technologies such as the VCR made using film easier and more accessible to classrooms beyond those in affluent school districts and gave teachers the ability to use films without having to worry about schedules or getting films from a film library. Since the 1980s, the price of VHS tapes and DVDs used to store films, and their players, has dropped and availability has increased. This increased access may be part of the reason why media use increased by a considerable margin during the 1980s.

More recent studies disclose that K-12 teachers (of all subjects) average slightly under twenty minutes of feature film use a week out of a total of ninety-four minutes of all types of video/televised lessons per week. Thirty-eight percent of all social studies teachers and thirty-five percent of all history teachers report using film (CPB, 1997). Another study found that sixty percent of K-12 teachers use video/film frequently<sup>2</sup> or sometimes, while forty percent of teachers use video/film occasionally or not often (Hobbs, 1999).<sup>3</sup> This latter survey also reported that TV, video, and film are the most frequently used media in classrooms and are used more often

than newspapers, magazines, and computers.

As teacher use of video increases, how are these videos incorporated into classroom practices? Cuban reports an interesting dichotomy of reasons for teacher use of film through the mid-1980s. On the one hand, teachers see positive educational benefits for their students. On the other hand, some teachers appear to use film and television as a way to solve some of their own problems of classroom management or lack of planning (Cuban, 1986). The 1996-97 CPB survey reports that ninety-two percent of teachers said using television and video helps them teach more effectively, and eighty-eight percent said it enables them to be more creative. The Hobbs study (1999) presents a less flattering view of why teachers use television and video. His study found that teachers thought using television and video could be effective in capturing student attention, in motivating students, and in informing students, but as a whole the study found several common uses of television and film which he called "misuse." These were students viewing videotape with no opportunity to discuss or ask questions, the teacher showing video in order to get "real work" done, and the showing of video as a classroom management strategy.

While many studies indicate teacher practices have been slow to change (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Downey & Levstik, 1998; Weis, 1978; Tharp & Gallimore, 1998; Cuban, 1993), teachers' increased use of film runs counter to this trend. This may tentatively be explained by the fact that the nature of teacher practices did not change even though the specific pedagogical tool was altered. In other words, practices centered on recitation and teacher talk are still the central pillar of classroom pedagogy, and film is used as a text to support these teacher practices.

Finally, although Cuban (1986) notes that, at least early on, video was still not widely adopted because it was not accessible or because teachers feared accusations of simply entertaining students by using too many videos, many history educators and researchers promoted the use of film and video in history classrooms (e.g., Cates, 1990; Considine, 1989; Paris, 1997). With wider access to films and viewing technologies, however, this "video boom" in the social studies prompted the development of several models for instructing with film and video and new literature on how history was represented in media, especially in commercial films (Carnes, 1996; Toplin, 1996). The notion that using entertainment in class was taboo began to diminish as readily available feature films based on historical events were of higher production quality than educational versions and were found to be more engaging by students (Considine; Paris). Unfortunately, much of the data available are not specific to either the field of history, high school teaching, and/or focused on feature films. These inconsistencies in the research and the overall trend of increased teacher use of film have exacerbated the need for additional research.

## Research Methods

The data for this study were collected through an on-line survey targeting high school United States History teachers in Connecticut and Wisconsin. (see Appendix A for the full survey protocol). United States history was chosen as the area of focus for three reasons. 1) It is a requirement for all high school students in both states; 2) There are a large number of Hollywood films available on United States history topics; and 3) Preliminary evidence indicated that it was an area of the social studies curriculum where the use of Hollywood films is prevalent. A convenience sample was recruited through emails and letters to department chairs, postings in state social studies newsletters, and through personal contacts. A total of eighty-five teachers completed the survey, sixty from Connecticut and twenty-five from Wisconsin. Eighty-four of these responses contained complete data and were used in the data analysis. This convenience sample allowed the acquiring of baseline data about teacher practices with film and validated the research instrument for future data collection. A sample of this nature also places limitations on the results and implications. It was suspected that the participants would be more heavily weighted toward those who use film in the classroom or those interested in incorporating film, as is the case with most convenience samples. The results supported this hypothesis. However, given the primary rationale of this study, which was to explore how and why teachers include film in their curriculum, the extensive practices with film reported provide a rich and interesting picture of film as a teaching tool in history for these particular classrooms. Thus, the discussion that follows highlights which films were shown and how these films were used by teachers who use films frequently, and are not necessarily generalizable for the teacher population as a whole.

The survey contained four sections in addition to demographic information (see Appendix B for demographic data of the sample). The first section listed specific films, asking teachers to indicate which of these films they used in their classroom, how much of the film they used, how recently they have shown the film, and the reasons why each film was used. The list of films included *Glory*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Patriot*, *Mississippi Burning*, and *JFK*, among others. These were films we hypothesized – based on our experience as classroom teachers, supervisors of pre-service teachers, and researchers – may be regularly shown in class. Space was provided for teachers to add in any films not on the list. Section two inquired about teachers' classroom practices, including practices with film, by providing a list of practices and a five point likert scale that ranged from never to always. These included practices such as lecture, group work, discussion with film, and editing films. The third section asked about teachers'

beliefs regarding the use of film as a teaching tool and used a five point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items in this section included prompts targeting teachers' beliefs about film as a teaching tool and film as a representation of history, among others. The last section included three open-response prompts:

- Can you give me a recent example of a Hollywood film you used and how you used it?
- In general, how do you choose which films to use in class?
- Please list any film resources (books, web sites, etc.) you have found useful.

The survey was piloted with a group of fifteen teachers and minor adjustments were completed based on feedback and results.

Teacher responses were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. However, the analysis in this paper is limited to descriptive data which provided information about the frequency of specific films being shown, teachers' beliefs about films, and teachers' classroom practices. The free response answers were coded using a constant comparative framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) and inductive pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These data complement and provide depth to the statistical data.

## Findings

It is clear from the data that teachers obtain access to film-viewing equipment easily and utilize this access to incorporate large numbers of feature films into their curriculum. The results also shed light on how and why teachers integrate film into their classroom practices, and indicate that teachers choose films for class with the goals of connecting the films to the content of the lessons and to the development of historical empathy in students, among other reasons.

### *Overall Use of Film*

The teachers in our sample use an extraordinary amount of film in class. As indicated in Table 1, seventy-five percent of teachers reported using some portion of a Hollywood film either every day or a few times a week, and almost eighteen percent used Hollywood film once a week. This means that a total of over ninety-two percent of the teachers who responded had used Hollywood film *at least* once a week. Less than five percent of the teachers used Hollywood film once a month or less, or not at all. These teachers' use of Hollywood film in the classroom exceeds their use of documentary film, though teachers' incorporation of documentary films into lessons is also high with over eighty-two percent of teachers using documentary film on average at least once a week.

**Table 1 – Teachers' Use of Film in Class**

n = 84

Type of Film	Every Day	A few times a week	Once a week	A few times a month	Once a month or less	Never
Hollywood/ Feature Film	3.6%	71.4%	17.9%	2.4%	3.6%	1.2%
Documentary Film	1.2%	40.5%	41.7%	8.3%	8.3%	0%

In addition to the data on general film use, the teachers reported showing 169 specific feature films in their history classes (see Appendix C for a complete list of films). Across the sample, these films were used a total of 567 times. Not surprisingly, 89% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the prompt "I have access to a TV and VCR and/or DVD player at school whenever I request them." Out of the 169 films used in class, 42 were used by three or more teachers, while 127 were used by only one or two teachers. The films included a wide variety of genres and historical representations of events, people, and contexts.

Several of the responses to prompts regarding teacher beliefs may help to explain why history teachers' classroom practices incorporate such sizeable quantities of Hollywood film. Using a scale of (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree, our teachers agreed or somewhat agreed that:

- Hollywood film should be a part of the high school history curriculum (3.5/5).
- Students are more motivated when teachers use Hollywood film (4.0/5).
- Students learn more when teachers use Hollywood film (3.7/5).
- Students understand history better from Hollywood film than from traditional texts (3.2/5).
- Hollywood film helps connect content to the lives of students (4.0/5).

These teacher beliefs all support the use of Hollywood film to teach history, particularly as a motivational tool and to help students connect history to their lives. It appears these teachers perceive a potential scaffold for student learning of history by showing film in the classroom.

It seems evident that not only are teachers using large numbers of films, but that they are showing substantial amounts of each film. Of the 169 films shown by our respondents reported showing:

- The majority of all of 65% of films.
- One quarter to one half of 21% of the films.
- Ten minutes or less 13% of the films.



The sheer volume of film shown might suggest that perhaps, due to time constraints, teachers are showing small segments of the films; however, for the majority of films that appears to be a false presumption.

When asked about the reasons for using the 169 films, our teachers reported using most films for multiple reasons. As specified in Table 2, providing subject matter content and developing empathy/bringing a time period to life each account for slightly over one-third of all reasons for teachers' use of film. Using film as a grabber explains another twenty-two percent of the reasons for use of film. These categories are not mutually exclusive; teachers could check as many reasons as applied. Only one percent of teachers' rationales for using Hollywood film were because a substitute was teaching, while another one percent were for other non-academic reasons.

**Table 2 – Why Teachers Report Using Specific Films**  
n=84

To provide subject matter content	35%
To develop empathy or bring a subject/time period to life	35%
As a grabber or introduction to a topic or lesson	22%
Because a substitute teacher is present	1%
Non Academic (to fill time after a test, as entertainment)	1%
Other	5%

“Other” reasons for classroom film use reported to us amounted to only five percent of all reasons, and these ranged from academic reasons such as to look at film as an interpretation of history and using film as part of a research project, to responses such as film being used for extra credit or to counteract low-level student interest. It is possible that teachers using film because of a substitute teacher or for non-academic reasons may be under-reported. Despite an anonymous on-line survey, teachers may prefer to promote themselves as thoughtful instructors and avoid the stigma of using film for non-academic purposes, or what the Hobbs' (1999) study called misuses. Even if misuses are not fully represented, the reported results suggest that many teachers are integrating films into their curriculum and not just using them to “fill time.”

The survey questions about teacher practices provide an overall glimpse into how teachers incorporate film into their lessons and are represented in Table 3. The teachers reported that they sometimes use readings with films, but often hold class discussions prior to viewing a film and even more frequently hold class discussions after a film.

**Table 3 - Classroom Practice Means**  
 Scale from Never (1) to Nearly always (5)  
 n=84

Classroom Use	Mean
I use readings with film.	3.1
I hold discussions about a film prior to viewing.	4.0
I hold discussions about a film after viewing.	4.6
My ideas for lessons with film come from colleagues.	2.5
My ideas for lessons with film come from the internet.	2.1
My ideas for lessons with film come from books, journals, and other print media.	2.7
I edit or don't show parts of a film based on content.	3.3
I edit or don't show parts of a film based on time constraints.	3.2

While this information is valuable, we realize that "discussions" vary in form, length, and effectiveness. However, the free response portion of the survey, which asked teachers to choose one recent example of film use as a means of providing a richer context, offers further insight.

The majority of free responses highlighted characteristics of the films that the teachers perceived as enhancing the lessons. Similar to their earlier answers about the reasons they used films, the majority of teachers' free responses discussed the films as tools to learn content and the ability of the films to provide historical context and/or to bring a time period to life. Representative of responses that mentioned film delivering content are examples from one teacher who uses *Inherit the Wind* "to illustrate the growing tensions between science and religion in the 1920s" and another teacher who uses *The Alamo* "to introduce students to the men who fought at the Alamo and the historical impact of their stand there."

Many teachers specified the visual impact of film as fundamental to how they use film – the film's ability to bring a time period to life. For example, one teacher commented, "I typically use war movies to give the students a sense of what the fighting was actually like." More specifically, another teacher reported using *Forrest Gump* "to show the Vietnam scene to illustrate the terrain/conditions encountered by the soldiers" and another teacher showed "*Far and Away* and *Gangs of New York* to show the immigrant's experience arriving in New York Harbor."

A handful of teachers mentioned showing a movie as a way to examine

film as a representation of history or as an alternative source of historical information. For example, one teacher described using *Glory* as a tool for students to explore "the accuracy of the film as compared to other sources on the regiment and its role/main people."

These teacher responses added depth to the understanding of their pedagogical choices and goals. Our respondents appear to use film frequently because the movies enhance the teaching of history in a way that other sources cannot. They did so particularly through compelling images and powerful narratives that support teaching the topic and helped students reach a deeper understanding of what it might have been like for people in the past to experience events. These possibilities led us to formulate additional questions such as: how do students' experiences with film in the classroom differ from their experiences with other sources of historical information such as textbooks and primary source documents? Teachers' classroom practices also invite a more critical examination. A handful of teachers did report that film was used as a primary source to reflect on the time period in which it was made, but more often it was shown only as a secondary source, as if the film was a text that students "read" to learn history. We are led to ask, "What then, is the added value of using film? Are some films better historical sources (whether primary or secondary) than others? To explore the answers to these questions, a more in-depth assessment of teacher responses follows.

#### *Specific Films Used*

A deeper analysis and examination of the data on the films most frequently shown in the high school history classroom presents a rich portrait of teachers' use of film in the classroom. As described in Table 4, six of the 169 films are used by at least twenty-five percent of all the teachers in the study (see Appendix C for descriptions of the six most commonly used films). An in-depth examination of these six films provides further insight into how and why these teachers incorporate film into their classroom practices and what their use may imply about the curriculum and how students are learning history.

Almost every teacher reported using film to connect to subject matter and/or to develop historical empathy with one film or another. These two reasons for use are the most common explanations provided and, as previously mentioned, are each thirty-five percent of all responses about why film is used. But among the six most used films, developing empathy was chosen by teachers as a reason for use more often than connecting to subject matter (content). Table 5 shows the reasons for use for these six films.

**Table 4 - Films Used by at Least 25% of Teachers**  
n=84

<b>Film</b>	<b>Percentage of teachers indicating they use the film</b>
Glory	52%
Amistad	41%
Schindler's List	35%
Saving Private Ryan	31%
All Quiet on the Western Front	30%
Dances with Wolves	25%

**Table 5 – Reasons for Use for top six films**  
Percentage of teachers reporting each use of film  
n=84

	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>Subject Matter</b>	<b>Grabber</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Glory</b>	89%	77%	41%	7%
<b>Amistad</b>	79%	65%	32%	12%
<b>Schindler's List</b>	83%	76%	38%	7%
<b>Saving Private Ryan</b>	81%	58%	62%	8%
<b>All Quiet on the Western Front</b>	88%	80%	56%	6%
<b>Dances with Wolves</b>	76%	67%	43%	5%

The pedagogical decisions about why these six films are used may provide insight into how teachers decide which films to use and how to use them, and may be related to the films' historical content and point of view.

*Developing Empathy and Bringing a Time Period to Life*

Why is the development of empathy the most common reason for choosing these six films? Are teachers likely to be successful in using these films for this purpose? All of these six films portray powerful and emotional stories that are interesting and provocative. Human suffering is a particularly poignant

theme, including the oppression and struggles of marginalized groups (e.g., African-Americans, Jews, Native-Americans). In *Glory*, it is the larger theme of African-American suffering as well as the hardships of Civil War soldiers. *Amistad* shows the brutality of the middle passage for slaves. *Schindler's List* depicts the horrors of the Holocaust with painful detail. *Saving Private Ryan* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* examine the dreadfulness of war, particularly D-day during World War II and trench warfare during World War I. And, *Dances With Wolves* illustrates the mistreatment of Native-Americans at the hands of white Americans. *Glory*, *Amistad*, and *Schindler's List*, the top three films shown in class, are all based on specific historical events while *Saving Private Ryan*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Dances With Wolves* are fictionalized accounts based in historic time periods.

We use the terms "empathy/bringing a time period to life," as defined in the scholarship of Barton and Levstik (2004). They define empathy both as perspective recognition, "using the perspectives of people in the past to explain their actions" (p. 208), and as caring, "a term that covers a variety of related meanings." All caring, however, "involves some relationship between learners and the object of study, and these relationships often include emotional commitments or feelings of personal relevance" (p. 229). In coding teacher responses about how they use film, the ways in which their responses represent empathy as "perspective recognition," "caring," or both, were explored.

Given the films' content and imagery, it is not surprising that the most common reason why teachers show these is to develop empathy/bring a time period to life. The violent scenes, human suffering, and powerful images provided the teachers with extensive opportunities to develop empathy with historical characters and to bring the past to life. This helped students to recognize the perspectives of people in the past and how those perspectives influenced their actions and promoted a sense of personal connection to people in the past. It is the ability of films to emotionally engage us with both visuals and sound that re-creates the past perhaps more vividly than most other sources of history. For example, in *Amistad*, Steven Spielberg re-created past human suffering with powerful images. Some scenes, such as those depicting The Middle Passage, are so evocative that the African actors wept and were angry filming these scenes and the crew "broke down as well" (Davis, 2000). Once again, the film invites students to care about the historical characters. The film also depicts a variety of perspectives about an explosive issue (slavery) and scaffolds students' understanding of how these various perspectives could each seem reasonable to people at the time and how they created conflict. Earlier it was asked what added value films bring to the classroom. One answer, at least for the six most commonly used films, is that the images and stories about the struggles of African-Americans, Jews, and Native-Americans present the potential for

bringing a time period to life and enhancing students' historical empathy. However, as these films are largely told through the perspectives of white characters (e.g., Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* and Colonel Shaw in *Glory*), and meant for largely white audiences, teachers need to keep these aspects in mind when showing one of these films.

Additional research is needed to determine if the teachers' purpose in using film to develop empathy actually impacts students' historical thinking. There are several questions to consider including: which films are most appropriate for developing empathy and which films contain images perhaps too distressing (e.g., *Schindler's List* or *Amistad*)? If used uncritically, could these films reinforce or legitimize stereotypes of marginalized groups? And, how do films, with their unique combination of visual and audio narrative in conjunction with their ambition as vehicles of entertainment, influence historical empathy and how does that compare with students' other sources of information about the past such as textbooks and primary source documents?

#### *Providing Subject Matter Content*

Like the development of empathy, providing subject matter content is a substantial reason why our teachers showed these six films in their classrooms. But what, exactly, is the content teachers are connecting to and what are the narratives, images, and messages in these six films? Do these films provide materials that supplement and/or diversify those available in the textbook and other classroom materials thus promoting alternative narratives for United States history, or do they reinforce traditional historical messages? Are these films substantially different from other feature films the students see? The evidence does not yield a simple answer to these questions and thus data are presented that supports both the potential of these films as promoting alternative historical narratives and as reinforcing traditional historical messages.

At first glance these six films do not appear to challenge the traditional U.S. History curriculum. The subjects of these films – slavery, Native Americans, WWI, WWII, the Holocaust, and the Civil War – are generally covered in textbooks and state curriculum standards, though not necessarily equally or thoroughly. However, a more critical examination reveals characteristics of these films that both sustain and challenge the traditional narrative in United States history classrooms. Four of these six films revolve around or represent minority or underrepresented groups including African-Americans, Jews, and Native Americans. In this respect, their focus differs from most history and social studies curricula and the average textbook. This is notable because “history, more than any other discipline, is dominated by textbooks” (Loewen, 1995, p.13). Most history curricula marginalize issues of race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1996). History textbooks have improved in their

inclusiveness over the past decade, but they are still dominated by a narrative of white Europeans and “are so Anglocentric that they might be considered Protestant history” (Loewen, p.313). Even in films, minority groups are often left out. For example, black soldiers are underrepresented in war films (Browne & Kreiser, 2003). Therefore, films focused on the struggles of African-Americans, Jews, and Native-Americans, may present alternative perspectives to the traditional core of history teaching materials.

Undoubtedly, each curriculum and textbook varies in its coverage of these groups and there is no question that Native Americans, Slavery, and the Holocaust are included in the curriculum and textbooks of history classes. However, the struggles of these groups are not at the core of the textbooks the way they are at the heart of these films. Nor do textbooks allow historically marginalized groups to tell the story from their perspective, the way some of these films do. Students may spend considerably more time thinking about issues of slavery, for example, because they have watched *Glory* and *Amistad* and participated in some type of discussion than they would spend as a result of reading a few paragraphs or pages from a textbook.

However, more time studying a subject does not necessarily translate into deeper understanding. Teachers must plan effective instructional activities in order to promote historical thinking. Nevertheless, even a shift of emphasis toward the inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups may open students to new historical perspectives and points of view. In addition, the aforementioned powerful images of these films may impact the students to a greater degree than any text. These films not only offer the possibility of telling the story of history from a different point of view, but also pose a potential challenge because these films take on a “burden of representation” for these groups which may have a “lasting impact on how people view the world and the groups that are represented” (Shohat & Stamm as cited in Stoddard & Marcus, 2006, p. 182).

Not only do these films potentially challenge typical coverage in United States history classrooms, individually several of them emphasize unique film making perspectives. More than 700 Hollywood films portray United States history from 1861-1877 (Civil War and Reconstruction), but *Glory* is the first to deal directly with the role of black soldiers in the Civil War (Browne & Kreiser, 2003). *All Quiet on the Western Front* introduces students to a German perspective on the First World War, a rare look at an “enemy’s” point of view. Most Hollywood war films follow a traditional pattern of presenting the good guys (Americans and their allies) and the bad guys (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Schindler’s List*). *All Quiet on the Western Front* confronts this tradition. Average soldiers are the good guys and war itself is the evil. Finally, *Dances with Wolves* was a “landmark” because “it treated American Indians as fully realized human beings”

(Kilpatrick, 2003, p.285), offering a new approach to filmmaking about Native-Americans, who, according to Loewen, are “the most lied-about subset of our population” (Loewen, 1995, p.99). Finally, *Glory*, *Amistad*, and *Dances with Wolves* take the unusual step of confronting controversial and un-proud moments in United States history. Generally, textbooks “leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character” (Loewen, 1995, p.13). Using these movies fills gaps in many texts.

While keeping these positive aspects in mind, it is important to look at how these films also convey more traditional historical and film narratives. From this perspective, it is clear that these six films support the current and most common historical narratives. For example, although four of the six most used films include minority groups as an important aspect of the films’ narratives, the main characters in these films do not always belong to these minority groups. The lead roles in these films are reserved for the white “leaders” or “saviors.” While one could argue that the films highlight African Americans, Jews, and Native Americans, white characters wield the power (e.g., in *Glory*, Colonel Shaw runs the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> and controls the African Americans, and in *Schindler’s List*, the fate of the Jews is in the hands of Oskar Schindler, a non-Jewish Austrian). These leaders are portrayed as the heroes of the film – Schindler rescues the Jews, Colonel Shaw trains and prepares his soldiers, and the white lawyers in *Amistad* help free the slaves. These roles for whites only reinforce the “herofication” (Loewen, 1995, p.19) that runs rampant in our textbooks, where even stories of underrepresented non-white groups are often marginalized to breakout boxes and are not part of the overall Eurocentric historical narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Thus, there is no definitive answer as to whether or not the top six films used by teachers support current trends in curricula and textbooks or offer a viable alternative perspective. Ultimately, how the teacher uses the film determines how a film will be received by students and the film’s lasting impact.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Thomas Edison once said “I believe that the motion picture is destined to revolutionize our educational system and that in a few years it will supplant largely, if not entirely, the use of books.” His prediction has yet to be realized. However, feature film as a teaching tool in the history classroom continues to gain prominence as the number of historically based films continues to grow and as teachers’ use of film expands. Our study is only a first step in a timely and significant line of inquiry. It is clear that students are being exposed to historical representations through feature films primarily to provide them with subject matter content and to develop empathy and bring a time period to life. Film is used as a secondary source more frequently than as primary



source. While teachers describe having a generally positive attitude toward using feature film as a pedagogical tool in history classrooms, the details of how these films are used and their impact on student learning are as yet not fully explored. Nevertheless, the teachers who participated in our survey indicated that their classroom activities may be shifting away from traditional teaching dominated by the traditional historical narrative.

The six films most frequently shown by the teachers appear to support pedagogy that could mainstream underrepresented or marginalized groups, depending on specific teacher practices. The powerful images and narratives of these films suggest the potential of film as a significant influence on the way students learn and understand history. In addition to the groups included in the six films – African-Americans, Jews, and Native-Americans – other marginalized groups should also find representation in the classroom. For example, there is a rapidly expanding Hispanic population in the United States and in our schools, but this group remains underrepresented in the history curriculum. It is not enough, however, to simply have students watch films that introduce alternative perspectives. Teachers must make students aware of who is telling the story and why they are telling it. They must also teach students to look for whose viewpoint or story is absent and at what cost. Every film has a perspective or point of view, though it may not be obvious to students. Examining perspective is critical to understanding film and equally important in studying history.

Relying on films to include portrayals of underrepresented groups and to develop empathy is encouraging, but this strategy must be combined with teaching students to examine the extent to which films are reliable evidence of the past. Examining films as primary sources means asking, for example, about the time and the society in which they were produced. Not only do films with African-American characters and narratives expose students to alternative viewpoints of the past and potentially develop empathy, but comparing the way these characters and narratives are represented in films made from the 1950s through the 1990s would provide perspectives on continuity and change, thus enhancing students' historical thinking. Teachers should also ask students to consider the film's target audience, the director's viewpoints or aims, what was happening in society at the time the film was created and released, and what other historical documents can tell them about how to interpret a film. It is also important not to rely solely on any one film as a source of historical information or to depend solely on films to provide the facts, but instead to draw on film to assist students in the act of creating and exploring history. A potentially successful strategy is to use film in conjunction with other sources such as textbooks, photos, and other primary source documents, presenting film as one piece of the historical puzzle, and thus to challenge students' notions of the trustworthiness of all

historical sources, including film. Additionally, it is also obviously desirable to imbed film in lessons throughout the year alongside readings and other activities so that students can have multiple opportunities to develop deeper understanding and to practice making sense of film.

The potential benefits of film will only be realized if teachers have pre-service and in-service training about the use of film. Unfortunately, the teachers who responded in our study reported that the topic of using feature film to teach history was rarely included in the curriculum of their teacher education program (a mean of 2.0 on a scale of 1 [never] to 5 [always]). The pervasiveness of feature films based in history should not be ignored by teachers, and social studies methods instructors have an obligation to include feature films as a tool in the arsenal of teachers' pedagogical strategies. "They [films] are competing effectively with the schoolteacher, the college professor, and the history book author. Their work deserves attention" (Toplin, 1996, p.ix).

Many questions still remain. What are the most effective classroom practices with film? In what ways should film be used to develop historical empathy, show historical perspectives, or promote connections between the past and the present? Which films can best achieve teachers' goals if their aim is to further the understanding of history? And more specifically, how do current events such as 9/11 and the war in Iraq, particularly given the intense media coverage of these events and the high number of war films used by teachers, impact students' attitudes and understandings? Historians and teachers wrestle with what to include in historical accounts and what to leave out. In some ways, films may render this task more difficult by providing additional competing narratives. However, the potential of feature film to introduce new perspectives or to enhance and enliven perspectives is great. Film as a means to understand the past affords many opportunities, but also creates the challenge of critically examining our own classroom practices.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. Unfortunately, the nature of the research available has several limitations. First, many of the reports do not distinguish among various uses of a television screen in the classroom. It is often difficult to make a distinction between watching a television show, viewing a feature film, or seeing a documentary. Thus, some of the studies cited refer to the use of a television as the mechanism through which film was viewed or use the term video as a blanket term for television programs, feature film, and educational film. In addition, few of the studies differentiate use by social studies/history teachers and/or secondary social studies/history teachers.

2. The study report did not provide an explanation or definition of frequently/sometimes or occasionally/not often.
3. The Hobbs study surveyed 130 secondary teachers over the phone about their use of and attitudes toward mass media.
4. Thank you to Anand Marri for feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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## Appendix A

## Teacher Survey – Uses of Hollywood Film

*\*\*Note the survey presented here does not match the exact formatting of the on-line version; however the content is the same*

Directions: Please answer the questions below as accurately as possible.

How many years have you been teaching (including this year)? \_\_\_\_\_

What subjects do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)

- U.S. History                       World Hist./Wld. Studies       Economics  
 Government/Civics             Geography                       AP U.S. History  
 Other AP Course (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_  Other \_\_\_\_\_

What subjects have you taught in the past? (Check all that apply)

- U.S. History                       World Hist./Wld. Studies       Economics  
 Government/Civics             Geography                       AP U.S. History  
 Other AP Course (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Gender

- Male  Female

Age

- Under 25                       25-35                       36-45                       Over 45

Racial/Ethnic Identification

- African American     Asian/Asian American     European American/Caucasian  
 Hispanic American/Latino/Latina     Native American/Pacific Islander  
 Mixed Ethnic/Racial Heritage (specify if you like): \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Background (completed degree)

- Bachelors                       Masters                       Ph.D.                       Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the appropriate categories that describe your school:

Location

- Urban                       Suburban                       Rural

Organizational form

- Public                       Private

Your best estimate of the family income of the overall student population

- High income                       Middle income                       Low income

General characterization of performance of school (based on state or federal categorization)

- High performing                       Average performing                       Under-performing

**For this survey we define “Hollywood film” as films produced by Hollywood studios for the primary purpose of entertainment and/or profit. We define “documentary film” as films created for the primary purpose of education or distribution of information, with less emphasis on profit.**

Approximately how often do you use Hollywood film in your lessons (Check the box that best applies)?

- Every Day     A few times a week     Once a week     A few times a month     Once a month or less     Never

How often do you use documentary film in your lessons (Check the box that best applies)?

- Every Day     A few times a week     Once a week     A few times a month     Once a month or less     Never

Choosing from the list below, please place a check next to each film you have used in your U.S. History classroom. For each film that you have used, please use the key below to indicate the amount of the film shown, how recently the film was shown, and your reasons for using the film. List as many of the reasons for use that apply. Please add any Hollywood (non-documentary) films or reasons for showing films that are not included below:

**Amount of Film Shown**

**How recently**

**Reason for use**  
**(list all that apply)**

- A) Less than 10 minutes
- B) One quarter to half of film
- C) The majority or all of film

- Y) Within the last four years
- Z) More than four years ago

- 1) To provide subject matter content
- 2) As a grabber or introduction to a topic or lesson
- 3) To develop empathy or bring a subject /time period to life
- 4) Because a sub was teaching
- 5) Non-academic (to fill time after a test, as entertainment)
- 6) Other (please specify)

<b><i>Film Title</i></b>	<b><i>Amount of film Shown</i></b>	<b><i>How recently film shown</i></b>	<b><i>Reason for use of film (list all that apply)</i></b>
<input type="checkbox"/> 1776			
<input type="checkbox"/> 1492			
<input type="checkbox"/> All Quiet on the Western Front			
<input type="checkbox"/> Amistad			
<input type="checkbox"/> Apollo 13			
<input type="checkbox"/> Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure			
<input type="checkbox"/> Casablanca			
<input type="checkbox"/> Christopher Columbus			
<input type="checkbox"/> Dances With Wolves			
<input type="checkbox"/> Enemy at the Gates			
<input type="checkbox"/> Forrest Gump			
<input type="checkbox"/> Glory			
<input type="checkbox"/> Gone With the Wind			
<input type="checkbox"/> JFK			
<input type="checkbox"/> Life is Beautiful			
<input type="checkbox"/> Malcolm X			

<input type="checkbox"/> Mississippi Burning			
<input type="checkbox"/> Nixon			
<input type="checkbox"/> Patton			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pearl Harbor			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pleasantville			
<input type="checkbox"/> Rebel Without A Cause			
<input type="checkbox"/> Saving Private Ryan			
<input type="checkbox"/> Schindler's List			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Crossing			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Diary of Anne Frank			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Grapes of Wrath			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Last of the Mohicans			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Longest Day			
<input type="checkbox"/> The Patriot			
<input type="checkbox"/> Thirteen Days			
<input type="checkbox"/> Tora Tora Tora			
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:			

**Directions:** Please indicate how often the following occurs in your classroom.

<i>Classroom Use</i>	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Nearly Always
<input type="checkbox"/> I lecture during lessons.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I use group work during lessons.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I use simulations or role plays.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I use readings with film.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I hold discussions about a film prior to viewing.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I hold discussions about a film after viewing.					
<input type="checkbox"/> My ideas for lessons with film come from colleagues					
<input type="checkbox"/> My ideas for lessons with film come from the internet.					
<input type="checkbox"/> My ideas for lessons with film come from books, journals, and other print media.					
<input type="checkbox"/> Using film to teach history was part of the curriculum in my teacher preparation program.					
<input type="checkbox"/> During class discussions, students use examples from Hollywood film when referring to historical events or periods.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I have access to a TV and VCR and/or DVD player at school whenever I request them.					
<input type="checkbox"/> When I show Hollywood film I use VHS tapes.					
<input type="checkbox"/> When I show Hollywood film I use DVDs.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I rent film that I use in class.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I get film for class from my school/department.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I own film I use in class.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I send home permission slips to parents for R rated movies I use in class.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I edit or don't show parts of a film based on content.					
<input type="checkbox"/> I edit or don't show parts of a film based on time constraints.					



**Directions:** Please indicate your level of agreement with these statements.

<i>Qualities of Films and Film Use</i>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Hollywood film is generally historically accurate.					
Hollywood film should be part of the history curriculum in high school.					
I find students to be more motivated when I show Hollywood film.					
Students tend to view Hollywood film as entertainment more than as academic content.					
Hollywood film is more of an accessory than a core part of my curriculum.					
It is difficult to use Hollywood film because of violence or sexual content.					
There is not enough time to show Hollywood film in class.					
Hollywood film should be used to increase students' media/video literacy.					
I am more likely to use Hollywood film in an honors class than a lower-track class.					
Students learn more when I use Hollywood film in class.					
Students understand history better from Hollywood film than from traditional texts.					
Hollywood film helps connect content to the lives of students.					

**Open-ended response: please type or write a short response to each question:**

Can you give me a recent example of a Hollywood film you used and how you used it?

In general, how do you choose which films to use in class?

Please list any film resources (books, web sites, etc.) you have found useful:

If you would like results of the survey emailed to you please provide your email address (you will not receive any emails other than data from the survey):

Would you be interested and willing to participate in a confidential follow-up interview to discuss your use of Hollywood film in your U.S. History class?

Yes     No

If yes, please provide your email address:

THANK YOU!!!!

Appendix B

Survey Results

**Table 6 - Demographic Data of Survey Participants**  
n=84

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b> 57%	<b>Female</b> 42%		
<b>Age</b>	<b>Under 25</b> 14%	<b>25-35</b> 34%	<b>36-45</b> 25%	<b>Over 45</b> 23%
<b>Race</b>	<b>European/Caucasian</b> 93%	<b>Hispanic/Latino/a</b> 1%	<b>Mixed Race</b> 2%	<b>Other</b> 4%
<b>School Location</b>	<b>Urban</b> 22%	<b>Suburban</b> 39%	<b>Rural</b> 38%	
<b>Family Income of Students</b>	<b>Low Income</b> 32%	<b>Middle Income</b> 62%	<b>High Income</b> 5%	
<b>School Performance</b>	<b>Under Performing</b> 17%	<b>Average Performing</b> 61%	<b>High Performing</b> 21%	

**Table 7 - Films Used and Percentage of Teachers using each film**  
n=84

Glory	52.4%
Amistad	40.5
Schindler's List	34.5
Saving Private Ryan	31.0
All Quiet on the Western Front	29.8
Dances with Wolves	25.0
The Patriot	21.4

The Last of the Mohicans	19.0
Forrest Gump	17.9
The Grapes of Wrath	16.7
Tora Tora Tora	15.5
Pearl Harbor	14.3
Mississippi Burning	13.1
Malcolm X	10.7

Thirteen Days	10.7
1776	9.5
Enemy at the Gates	8.3
Pleasantville	8.3
Gone with the Wind	7.1
JFK	7.1
Life is Beautiful	7.1
Patton	7.1
Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure	6.0
Apollo 13	4.8
Bowling for Columbine	4.8
Gandhi	4.8
Gettysburg	4.8
Remember the Titans	4.8
Separate but Equal	4.8
The Crossing	4.8
The Diary of Anne Frank	4.8
The Gods must be Crazy	4.8
The Lost Battalion	4.8
The Mission	4.8
1492	3.6
12 Angry Men	3.6
A Beautiful Mind	3.6
Casablanca	3.6
Nixon	3.6
The Killing Fields	3.6
The Longest Day	3.6
Tuskegee Airmen	3.6
American History X	2.4
Andersonville	2.4
Apocalypse Now	2.4
Band of Brothers	2.4
Christopher Columbus	2.4
Civil War- Ken Burns Doc	2.4
Cotton Club	2.4
Cry Freedom	2.4
Dr. Strangelove	2.4
Far and Away	2.4
Gallipoli	2.4

Gangs of NY	2.4
Gladiator	2.4
Little Big Man	2.4
Matewan	2.4
Memphis Belle	2.4
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington	2.4
Quiz Show	2.4
Swing Kids	2.4
The Breakfast Club	2.4
The Crucible	2.4
The Front	2.4
The Power of One	2.4
Wag the Dog	2.4
We were Soldiers	2.4
A Bridge Too Far	1.2
A Knight's Tale	1.2
A Midwife's Tale	1.2
A Time to Kill	1.2
Al	1.2
Ali	1.2
All The President's Men	1.2
April Morning	1.2
Assault at Westpoint	1.2
Avalon	1.2
Back to Bataan	1.2
Big	1.2
Birth of A Nation	1.2
Black Robe	1.2
Braveheart	1.2
Brother Future	1.2
Bullworth	1.2
Cast Away	1.2
Century Series/Jennings	1.2
Chasing Amy	1.2
Civil Action	1.2
Cocoon	1.2
Conspiracy	1.2
Dead Man Walking	1.2
Dear America- Letters home	1.2

Do the Right Thing	1.2
Elizabeth	1.2
Escape from Sobibor	1.2
Exodus	1.2
Field of Dreams	1.2
Fly Away Home	1.2
Frontier House	1.2
Gattaca	1.2
Go For Broke	1.2
Good Will Hunting	1.2
Guess Who's coming to Dinner	1.2
Guilty by Suspicion	1.2
Hair	1.2
Inherit the Wind	1.2
Into the Arms of Stranger	1.2
Invasion of the Body Snatchers	1.2
Ireland Documentary	1.2
Iron-Jawed Angels	1.2
Jeremiah Johnson	1.2
Joan of Ark	1.2
Krippendorf's Tribe	1.2
Lagaan	1.2
Leper of St. Giles/Brothe	1.2
Lewis and Clark	1.2
Lord of the Flies	1.2
Mandela	1.2
Medicine Man	1.2
Memphis blue	1.2
Moby Dick	1.2
Modern Times	1.2
Mornin	1.2
Murder on a Sunday	1.2
Nell	1.2
No Drums, No Bugles	1.2
Nuremberg	1.2
Our Town	1.2
Pianist	1.2
Places in the Heart	1.2
Platoon	1.2

Pow Wow Highway	1.2
Promises	1.2
Rebel Without a Cause	1.2
Red Badge of Courage	1.2
Richard III	1.2
Robin Hood	1.2
Robin Hood Prince of Thieves	1.2
Roots	1.2
Ruby Bridges	1.2
Simple Justice	1.2
Spartacus	1.2
Squanto: A Warrior's Tale	1.2
Stalin	1.2
Sybil	1.2
The 50's	1.2
The Alamo	1.2
The Alamo (John Wayne)	1.2
The Ernest Green Story	1.2
The Fighting Sullivans	1.2
The Final Countdown	1.2
The Great Dictator	1.2
The Last Emperor	1.2
The Long Riders	1.2
The Pentagon Papers	1.2
The Rabbit Proof Fence	1.2
The Sound of Music	1.2
The Truman Show	1.2
The Untouchables	1.2
The Vikings	1.2
Three Faces of Eye	1.2
To Kill a Mockingbird	1.2
To Live	1.2
Truman	1.2
Uprising	1.2
Westward Expansion	1.2
Whale Rider	1.2
What's Love got to do wit	1.2
When we were Colored	1.2

## Appendix C

### Film Description for Six Most Shown Films

All descriptions are adapted from [www.hollywood.com](http://www.hollywood.com) and [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

#### *All Quiet on Western Front*

This film tells the story of a group of German teenagers who volunteer for action on the Western Front in 1914 during WWI. It offers various German perspectives on the war and on early 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare.

#### *Amistad*

This is the story of a true 1839 revolt by Africans on the Spanish slave ship Amistad. The film includes their trial in American as well as flashbacks about their capture in Africa and the middle passage.

#### *Dances with Wolves*

As settlers begin their westward trek into the lands of the Native Americans, a Union Army Civil War officer (Kevin Costner), eager to experience the "last frontier" before it vanishes, befriends a Native-American tribe and has to balance his familiar white world with his new Native-American friends.

#### *Glory*

Glory, based on a true story, tells the tale of the Massachusetts' 54<sup>th</sup> regiment of black soldiers during the civil war. The regiment is led by Colonel Shaw (Matthew Broderick). Also starring Denzel Washington.

#### *Saving Private Ryan*

Shortly after D-Day in WWII three of four brothers are killed in combat. The film is about the Normandy invasion and the subsequent search for the fourth brother, Private Ryan, in order to send him home to his family. Government policy dictates that he should return home lest his family be deprived of all its male offspring. A team of soldiers, led by Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) and fresh from the beaches of Normandy, is assembled to find and save Private Ryan.

#### *Schindler's List*

The story of Austrian industrialist Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), who harbored Polish Jews during WWII by using them as workers in his factory. Schindler saved 1,100 Jews from certain death.

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