

**"PASS THE POPCORN, PLEASE":  
TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTARY MOVIES IN  
THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

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One of the challenges in teaching history today is reaching an audience that is not always interested in the subject matter. The problem is often acute in an introductory class where students may be new to college or with returning students whose purpose for enrolling in the survey simply might be to fulfill requirements. James J. Lorence has commented that "student interest in history at two-year campuses is often superficial and sometimes latent." His assessment applies to many students at all colleges and universities, I fear. Lorence urged, however, that teachers of survey classes use their courses to "ignite that spark of inquiry that will lead new generations to value history as a way of learning vital lessons about ourselves, our society, and our world."<sup>1</sup> Now that sounds like a clarion—and a noble goal.

Lorence addressed every teacher who labors in the introductory history survey course, writing that "central objectives" in the survey "should be the development of critical thinking skills and the powers of analysis." Various methods work in this pursuit, but a favorite one for me is instructional use of documentary movies. My methods are simple and my goals are plain: I require students to watch and write critical reviews of a number of high-quality documentary movies. Through this process, students ideally develop their critical thinking skills, improve their writing abilities, and, quite possibly, strengthen their powers of concentration and imagination. Moreover, the active use of movies in the classroom can reach out to the "The MTV Generation"—represented metaphorically and comically by MTV's own Beavis and Butthead—who are but part of a larger culture in which the average household watches nearly eight hours of television each day. As teachers we must contend with the passivity engendered by television and turn a popular fascination with nonprint media to our own educational purposes. History teachers can use movies to address the "interests, situations, and needs" of today's students while introducing them to the variety and vitality of history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James J. Lorence, "Teaching History at the Two-Year Institution: A Status Report and View of the Future," *AHA Perspectives* (October 1994), 23-27.

<sup>2</sup>Some fifteen years ago, at a conference on the teaching of the introductory survey course, the late Warren Susman contended that introductory courses "should be built in large part on an understanding of student interests, situations, and needs." Susman spoke at the Annapolis Conference on the Introductory Survey Course in 1980, reprinted in Warren Susman, "Conclusion," in Kevin Reilly, ed., *The Introductory Survey Course* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1984), 153;

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To make movies an integral part of my courses, I try to select provocative, high-quality documentaries and frame them with relevant reading material and discussion. I urge students to view movies as valid sources of information—as "texts" that are as important as textbook and supplementary readings. I explicitly outline my expectations for the reviews, asking students to write short (two to three pages) typewritten reviews that are due in class one week after the movie is shown. Usually I show six or seven documentaries in a fifteen-week semester, but I ask for written reviews of only three of the first four shown in class. I do not want to be overwhelmed with grading, and I do not want students to complain about excessive written work in a three-credit course.

In particular, I ask students to analyze the following aspects of each movie, using an evaluation sheet (example below) to gauge their coverage of each issue:

- themes: major ideas put forth
- sources: academics, personal recollections, narrator
- evidence: basis of factual presentation, interpretation<sup>3</sup>
- "unusual stuff": catch-all phrase
- success of the movie makers in making their points clear
- broader themes of U.S. history raised (or not) in the movie
- "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" (à la Siskel & Ebert)

In short, this exercise is designed to sharpen students' ability to evaluate nonprint sources of information by asking them to assess each movie from an historian's perspective.<sup>4</sup>

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quoted in Lorence, "Teaching History," 27.

<sup>3</sup>Students appear to have the most difficulty in identifying and analyzing sources and evidence. A useful and brief discussion is found in M. Neil Browne and Stuart M. Keeley, *Asking the Right Questions, A Guide to Critical Thinking*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994). Briefly, they note that the quality of evidence rests upon its source, and that major sources of evidence include intuition, authorities and testimonials, personal experience, personal observations, case studies and examples, research studies, and analogies. Once sources are known, the quality of evidence can be evaluated. See *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>4</sup>This movie-reviewing exercise is not devoted to film history or criticism, since I am most interested in using documentary movies to help students understand that history is an exercise in interpretation. In a pamphlet that describes how to use films to teach history, John E. O'Connor tends to examine technical issues in analyzing the "visual language" of films. O'Connor summarizes concepts such as the "shot," "scenes," "mise-en-scène"—the things "literally put in the shot to create its narrative content"—and the photographic elements of each shot. See John E. O'Connor, *Teaching History with Film and Television* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1987). A different, textual approach is offered in Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), in which thirteen essays center on film as "a unique way of recounting the past" through what is called "New History cinema."

## History Movie Review Evaluation Sheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

OBJECTIVES                      Excellent                      Good                      Fair                      Poor

Format Followed? \_\_\_\_\_

Theme(s) Explained? \_\_\_\_\_

Source(s) Described? \_\_\_\_\_

Evidence Analyzed? \_\_\_\_\_

Unusual Stuff? \_\_\_\_\_

Success Analyzed? \_\_\_\_\_

Broader Themes? \_\_\_\_\_

"Thumbs up/down"? \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Coherence \_\_\_\_\_

Clarity \_\_\_\_\_

Length \_\_\_\_\_

## OTHER COMMENTS:

First up on the big screen in my post-Civil War survey course is *Last Stand at Little Big Horn*, a movie that compares and contrasts American Indians' and American whites' views of the infamous battle. The filmmakers successfully assault many myths associated with George Armstrong Custer, highlighting the importance of perspective and the multiplicity of sources available for historical interpretation. Next comes *Mr. Sears' Catalog*, an entertaining documentary that shows the connections between rural and urban culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, this movie has remarkably good photographic evidence and amusing excerpts from the Sears Catalog itself, punctuated by voiceovers representing Sears and his many customers. Later, students join Bill Moyers in his informative series, "A Walk Through the Twentieth Century." One of the films, *The Twenties*, offers a kaleidoscopic look at a decade shaped by the new forms of mass media, particularly the movies, and this documentary features newsreel clips and other moving images. Moyers, always the smooth narrator and often an omniscient one as well, mixes personalized anecdotes about his family with a challenging narrative thread and poignant interviews of about a dozen disparate people. I follow this with *The Democrat and the Dictator*, an engrossing biographical comparison of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler. This documentary highlights the value of studying history through biography, and, with its skillful editing of both German and

American films of the 1930s and 1940s, *The Democrat and The Dictator* subtly prods students to consider the power of film as propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

One of the benefits of this ongoing exercise is that when I show other movies later in the semester, students usually have gained confidence and skill in evaluating movies, and we can often have fruitful, lively discussions. I usually show one episode from the thirteen-part series, *Vietnam: A Television History*, and another episode from the superb series on the modern civil rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize*, Parts I and II. In general, I have found that my active use of documentary movies has been an enriching and educational experience for my students. How do I know? They tell me. In addition, I can see their engagement in this learning process through their written work, and I am often surprised at their observations and insights culled from watching a fifty- or sixty-minute movie that flashes past them rather quickly.

Besides benefits that students obtain from critically reviewing movies, we teachers and historians gain something as well. Movies—like all sources of historical knowledge—can help us to reshape course material, to form new opinions, and to reconsider previous interpretations or understandings of the past. As more and more high-quality historical documentaries are churned out by skilled practitioners such as Bill Moyers, Henry Hampton, Ken Burns, Ric Burns, Barbara Koppel, and the independent filmmakers who produce excellent movies for "The American Experience" on PBS, history teachers cannot complain about a dearth of adequate or appropriate nonprint historical sources. We teachers have access to a wealth of sources to help us find and use appropriate movies in our classrooms, ranging from flyers to reviews in professional journals. For example, producers of *Mary Silliman's War* distributed flyers, as did PBS Video to celebrate the seventh season of "*The American Experience*." PBS proclaims a "renewed interest" in using history to teach and of using films to teach history. They write that "educators are being urged to present history as a narrative filled with lively stories, biographies, and historical analysis," with film forming a vital component of that process.<sup>6</sup>

Publishers of college textbooks and our professional journals also ply us with plenty of information about new documentary movies.<sup>6</sup> Both the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History* have dedicated many pages and much attention to films. In an issue of the *Journal of American History* devoted to "The Practice

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<sup>5</sup>For more specific information about each movie, see the short appendix to this essay.

<sup>6</sup>Perhaps the most ambitious effort to link a textbook with nonprint sources is that of the American Social History Project, which has released a number of documentaries on videocassette to accompany their two-volume textbook, *Who Built America?* Most recently, the Project released a 28-minute black and white film entitled *Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl*, a film notable for winning the inaugural John E. O'Connor Film Award sponsored by the American Historical Association. Despite the movie-makers' ambitious efforts, one reviewer, Stephen Cole, complained about the movie's use of two "fictional" participants, the movie's eclectic visual style (such as adding animation to archival photographs), and the film's brevity. Still, Cole's thorough review highlights the seriousness with which historians are analyzing nonprint materials for use in the classroom. See Stephen Cole, review of *Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl*, in *The American Historical Review* (October 1994), 1264-1266.

is centered on rescuing history from the academy. Professional historians, Burns contended, have "done a terrific job in the last hundred years of murdering our history. . . . many of our most important historians helped kill the general public's appetite for history. That, plus our television culture, the very thing that I do, has gone a long way toward killing our historical curiosity." He went on to say that historical films can, at their best, vividly illustrate historical experiences and ideally provide "an approximation so close that we can begin to feel what it was like back then." Burns complained that professional historians "have failed and lost touch absolutely in the communication of history to the public . . . I would hope that the academy would change course and join a swelling chorus of interest in history for everyone."<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of what one might think of Burns, his movies, or his opinions of historians, his comments do underscore the power and promise of using movies to aid in our teaching of history. After all, good teaching is founded upon good communication. Burns is right to suggest that teachers of history have to find ways to communicate their knowledge of history—and the significance of history—to a larger audience. Movies can draw students into our classes and into an active learning process that explores the meaning and discipline of history.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, students asked to review nonprint materials might better develop critical thinking and clear writing, thereby sharpening their basic skills that will assist them in all learning endeavors. Movies can also stimulate students' interest in studying history at more advanced levels and in more sophisticated ways, one of the aims in teaching the survey course in the first place.

Students agree that historical documentaries spice up their history courses, and we teachers and historians have to acknowledge the power of movies as teaching tools and as sources of historical knowledge. At their best, historical films can "make the past come alive," as Ken Burns has suggested.<sup>10</sup> Even if we as teachers fall short of attaining that quixotic goal in our survey courses, we should strive to at least enliven the teaching of history. Movies offer both a medium and a message that we teachers need most in introducing today's students to the past.

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<sup>8</sup>"The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," interviews by David Thelen, *Journal of American History*, 81 (December 1994), 1031-1050.

<sup>9</sup>We should view historical documentaries as tools and as important sources of historical knowledge. And, if we agree with the American Historical Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work, we should view instructional use of historical documentaries as linked to the scholarly aims of advancing, integrating, applying, and transforming knowledge. See "Redefining Historical Scholarship: Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work," *Perspectives* (March 1994), 19-23.

<sup>10</sup>"Movie Maker as Historian," 1031-1050.

of American History" (December 1994), no less than twenty-three reviews were offered of recent historically-related movies. Titles included something for nearly every historian's taste or teaching topic, ranging from *Mary Silliman's War* to a spate of films released under the imprint of PBS Video: *The Hunt for Pancho Villa*, *Knute Rockne and His Fighting Irish*, *Amelia Earhart*, *The Great Depression*, *The Hurricane of '38*, and *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*.

In that same issue of the *Journal*, reviewer Douglas Flamming critiqued a fourteen-part series of half-hour videos entitled, *The American South Comes of Age*, produced by South Carolina Educational Television. Flamming touches upon broader issues that need to be raised in the context of teaching with movies:

Documentaries of recent history have one major advantage over those that deal with earlier periods: moving pictures. Indeed, moving pictures give documentaries an exceptional heuristic strength. Documentaries on colonial life or the Civil War amount to glamorized lectures. Moving pictures from the past, however, are instructive in a different way. Who would deny that students get a better sense of the historical moment by seeing and hearing, rather than merely reading, Lyndon B. Johnson's speech on the Voting Rights Act?

Flamming warns that "documentaries that resemble TV must be used with care" because "an education based on sound bites (even long ones, carefully presented) is not likely to inspire critical thought and independent analysis."<sup>7</sup> He reminds us of the pitfalls of relying excessively upon nonprint sources or of presenting them without adequate context or preparation.

In that same issue of the *Journal of American History*, editor David Thelen reported on a wide-ranging survey of professional historians centered on their teaching and scholarly opinions and experiences. Historians were asked questions such as, "What is your favorite movie about the United States?" The favorite movie, named by forty-nine respondents, was *Gone With the Wind*, followed by *Citizen Kane*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Glory*, and *Matewan*. This eclectic list also included *Dr. Strangelove* (23), *Little Big Man* (11), *Casablanca*, *Nashville*, and *The Birth of a Nation*, each with nine votes. Only one pure documentary found favor with respondents: *The Civil War*, with seventeen votes. I find this low vote total for *The Civil War* curious and disappointing for a provocative and popular PBS series. I am not sure how to interpret the survey, but it may suggest that historians have not sufficiently investigated or embraced documentary movies.

The *auteur* of the series on the Civil War, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, offered a number of observations in that same issue of the *Journal of American History*. Burns was frank in addressing professional historians, explaining that his "life's work"

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<sup>7</sup>Douglas Flamming, review of *The American South Comes of Age*, in *Journal of American History*, 81 (December 1994), 1394-1396.

## SOURCES FOR VIDEOS

PBS Video distributes some of the finest documentaries for instructional uses, including the superb series, *Eyes on the Prize, Part I, America's Civil Rights Years—1954-1965* (1987); *Eyes on the Prize, Part II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1964-1985* (1990); and *The Civil War* (1990). For more information contact PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria VA, 22314-1698; or call 800/344-3337, or FAX 703/739-5269. Under the imprint of "The American Experience," PBS has offered documentaries such as *Last Stand at Little Big Horn*, PBS, "The American Experience" (1992), 60 minutes, \$69.95 purchase price, individual order ISBN 0-7936-1115-6, individual order code AMED-506-CR94; and *Mr. Sears' Catalogue*, PBS, "The American Experience" (1989), 60 minutes, \$69.95 purchase price, individual order ISBN 0-7936-1136-9, individual order code AMED-207-CR94.

Bill Moyers has produced many outstanding documentaries, including his acclaimed series, "A Walk Through the 20th Century With Bill Moyers," a 19-part PBS series (1984); \$1,100 purchase price for entire series, series ISBN 1-55951-327-6; series order code AWTB-000-CR94. Individual titles include: *The Twenties*, PBS, "A Walk Through the 20th Century with Bill Moyers," (1984); 60 minutes, \$69.95 purchase price; individual order ISBN 1-55951-344-6, individual order code AWTB-117-CR94; and *The Democrat and the Dictator*, PBS, "A Walk Through the 20th Century With Bill Moyers," (1984), 60 minutes; \$69.95 purchase price, individual order ISBN 1-55951-332-2; individual order code AWTB-105-CR94.

The thirteen-part series, *Vietnam: A Television History*, is distributed by Films for the Humanities & Sciences, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053, or call 800/257-5126, or FAX 609/275-3767.