

FILM REVIEW

ADDING HOLLYWOOD TO THE AMERICAN HISTORY SURVEY

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The Fog of War, Errol Mann, director, 2003.

The New World, Terrence Malick, director, 2005.

Apocalypto, Mel Gibson, director, 2007.

The movie critic and the history teacher do not look for the same things in films. Dialogue, plot, and denouncement for the critic give way to context, significance, and example for the teacher. The virtue of continuity for the critic yields to the teacher's need for the episode that accentuates the lecture's main points. The critic avoids missing a moment of a film; the teacher often will defeat his or her purpose if a selected film clip takes more than a few minutes from class time. A clip that runs too long can jeopardize classroom context and revert to a movie instead of an illustration or commentary on the lesson at hand. But, when used judiciously, film excerpts can provoke students' critical thinking about course materials, whether lecture, images, map study, primary-source analysis, or text. The purpose of this review is not to judge overall quality of *The Fog of War*, *The New World*, and *Apocalypto*, but to identify and evaluate selected segments from the three films for their usefulness in the American history survey.

Operating from the premise that the classroom is a place where enlightenment generally follows doubt, consternation, and reevaluation, I suggest that film might further this process of critical thinking by satisfying three criteria: Does the excerpt put a human face on what previously had been a mere *abstraction*? Does the clip create *empathy* in the student for historical characters previously unconsidered? Are the cinematic selections successful in prompting the *reevaluation* of old premises? For example: The discussion of Protestant martyrs in Reformation England is brought shockingly home to students who watch the five-minute prologue of *Elizabeth*.¹ Here three "heretics" are burned at the stake in a tumultuous scene that prompts discussion of religious toleration and its meaning in the sixteenth century while also providing a human face to the abstract ideal of martyrdom—a term in vogue today both in Palestine and Baghdad. *Black Robe*, a movie about seventeenth-century Jesuit priests in New France seeking a middle ground with Huron Indians, creates student empathy for both sides' mutual incomprehension.² The recent Arab-language film, *Paradise Now*, might or might not create sympathy for Palestinian suicide-bombers, though it will certainly

¹*Elizabeth*, Shekhar Kapur, director, 1998.

²*Black Robe*, Bruce Beresford, director, 1991.

cause a reappraisal of what students thought they knew about the conflict in the Middle East generally and the West Bank specifically.³

The Fog of War

For those over fifty, Robert McNamara's resume is easy to recall: He was a mathematical and managerial whiz-kid, a legendary statistician who worked to increase the efficiency of United States bombing campaigns in the Second World War, a professor at Harvard, an executive at Ford Motor Company before becoming its President in 1960, a tenure cut short when President-elect John Kennedy called him to head the Pentagon as Secretary of Defense. After leaving the Pentagon in 1968, McNamara became President of the World Bank, a post he kept for thirteen years. Although eighty-five years old when this film was made, McNamara's powerful presence has not been diminished by time.

Errol Man's film, *The Fog of War*, places the viewer face-to-face with the formidable figure of McNamara. Mann's camera stays focused on McNamara's face as he regales, regrets, explains, remembers, forgets, ignores, and assays responsibility for military actions undertaken with his participation or at his behest from World War II to the Cuban missile crisis and American involvement in Vietnam. Mann juxtaposes McNamara's expressive (and often emotional) visage with Cold War images and makes especially effective use of newly released taped-recordings from the oval office of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

The Fog of War is structured round eleven lessons learned by McNamara over the course of his long career. The history instructor benefits from McNamara's reiteration of the Cold War as the larger historical context for crises in Cuba, Berlin, and Vietnam. Lesson number one, "Empathize with the enemy," recounts how the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis occurred due to JFK's willingness to allow Premier Khrushchev an honorable way out of the dilemma. In lesson number seven, "Belief and seeing: both are often wrong," McNamara recalls the Tonkin Gulf incidents that were used to justify American escalation against North Vietnam in 1964-65. In a soliloquy eerily presaging the present president's entanglement in Iraq, McNamara says, over footage of Operation Rolling Thunder, that the American mission in Vietnam was "a struggle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese." As the screen explodes with heavy munitions and napalm, McNamara goes on to say that "as a prerequisite for that, we must be able to provide for their physical security." He admits that neither he nor anyone else at the upper levels of the United States government knew the Vietnamese "well enough to understand them." Just as the current president might have placed the so-called "War on Terror" in the wrong historical context ("Freedom" v. Terrorism), McNamara admits that "we saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War, not as they saw, as a civil war."

³*Paradise Now*, Hany Abu-Assad, director, 2005.

Lesson number eight, "Be prepared to reexamine your reasoning," is especially pertinent now in the midst of the current war in Iraq where last year's verities are finally being reevaluated along with presumptions about America's role in the world. McNamara's discussion of Vietnam confirms the old adage about history repeating itself.

McNamara's reflections on the end of the Second World War in the Pacific invariably provoke classroom discussions as he recalls the fire-bombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities prior to the dropping of the atomic bombs and asserts that there should be "proportionality in war" (lesson number five). He recalls how his Pacific commander, General Curtis LeMay, remarked to him that both of them would have been tried as war criminals had the United States lost and Japan won the war. McNamara's voice-over footage of Japan's destroyed cities asks, "What makes it immoral if you lost, but not immoral if you win?"

The New World

The New World's sustained dream-like sequences, extended scenes without dialogue, and fuzzy narrative, on initial viewing, would appear to promise little of use to the teacher seeking to illustrate the early seventeenth-century close encounters of the colonial kind. Upon closer examination, however, *The New World* demonstrates the useful conceptual ideas now common in the history classroom, that of Indian "agency," the liminality of persons caught between two cultures, and the myth of American "exceptionalism" whereby North America is portrayed as an empty Garden of Eden ready for occupation and exploitation by Europeans.

Native American agency is illustrated in the initial contact when it is the Indians that draw back from the stench of the Europeans, when they decide that "we must drive them away while they are few," and when they save the dwindling English colony from starvation by willingly giving their own stores of supplies. Both Pocahontas and John Smith become dislocated outside their proper place by their association with the "other." Smith's defense of his lover points to her untenable position as mediator between two sides and, when he proclaims that "she has been the instrument to preserve this colony from disaster," he further isolates her from her own people and his. Pocahontas's loyalty to her tribe is questioned by her attachment to the Englishman, Smith. Irony drips like dew in the humid Chesapeake Bay as one of the English proclaims amidst suffering and starvation: "Eden lies about us still. We have escaped the old world and its bondage." American exceptionalism begins here in the marshlands of the Chesapeake where ideals of a "New World" collide with the inhabitants of an old world.

Apocalypto

The classroom usefulness of Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* is limited to two sequences, though the implications of each are important to foster critical thinking (and viewing). Built round the traditional hero's tale of challenge, journey, and return, the bulk of this admittedly exciting Saturday afternoon adventure yarn lacks sufficient context or significance to make it applicable to the classroom. Yet the centerpiece of the film, when the captured hero is brought from his rainforest home to an urban area to be sacrificed, demonstrates both the specialization that results from a surplus supply of food and the power of the priestly class whose mediation with the gods gives them discretion over life and death.

The final scene of *Apocalypto* is especially useful for its stunning anachronism. On a long and treacherous trek home, the hero, after disposing of most of his enemies in a variety of macabre ways, is finally run down on a beach and apparently about to receive the *coup de grace* when the camera slows and begins to track the eyes of both the captured hero and his pursuers as all of them gaze with wonder on the appearance of three Spanish ships off shore, along with a smaller boat, loaded with a priest and soldiers making their way to the beach. The hero escapes as his pursuers venture forth to meet these strangely dressed men from across the seas. Now, this film's advance publicity, its advertisements, interviews with the director, and prior notice that the actors all speak Mayan with English subtitles, all imply Mayan civilization as the subject of the feature. Yet, every college textbook that tackles English exploration while discussing the indigenous peoples of the New World makes plain the demise of Mayan civilization some centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards. It is the Aztecs that famously encounter the conquistadors in the early sixteenth century, not the Maya of the twelfth.

If used to accentuate important points in the instructor's lecture, film is an effective tool to promote critical thinking among students of the United States history survey. Visuals lend themselves to enhanced learning in a society increasingly fixated on images emerging from myriad sources. The current undergraduate is more familiar with the laptop than with the Dewey decimal system, more comfortable with the verb construction "to google" than "to check out." To tilt against this prevailing wind is sometimes necessary, though in the case of film in the classroom, instructors might take advantage of the present preoccupation with images to make the history lesson resonate through both the ears and the eyes.