

INCORPORATING FILMS INTO A HISTORY CLASSROOM: A TEACHING NOTE

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While reading and writing remain at the core of the history classes that I teach, it is simply a fact of life that, as Robert Toplin and Robert Rosenstone have argued persuasively, students tend to receive most of their history through film and television.¹ Accordingly, it is imperative that history teachers provide them with some tools for visual literacy. Faculty and students discuss these topics today in the nation's graduate schools, but when I was pursuing my advanced degrees in history, no consideration was given to the subject of film. I found it necessary to educate myself in the grammar of film by reading such essential texts as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art*.² History teachers also must recognize that there are differences between history on film and traditional historical writing, but it is important to acknowledge that both films and monographs are reconstructions of the past. In telling about the past, filmmakers as historians must compress certain details and characters to fit within a two-hour format. History teachers should concentrate on whether cinematic history contributes to our understanding of the larger historical truths rather than focusing on the minutia of detail.

While I have been fortunate over the last quarter century to teach a senior-year elective that uses popular film as a primary source through which to examine the formation of values and ideology in post-World War II America, I also try to incorporate the study of film into the eleventh-grade American history survey class. I believe that many of the issues that I introduce in this college preparatory course are applicable to college and university history curriculum and classrooms as well.

Time is certainly an issue with film in the classroom, so in most cases I simply utilize film clips running from five to fifteen minutes to illustrate a point. Preparing these clips certainly takes some time and energy, as teachers must carefully select a brief segment of the film that visually illustrates the point that they wish to make with the class. Also in feature narrative films, it is certainly essential to establish for the class the characters and plot context for the selected clip. Accordingly, the scenes employed in the classroom need to be introduced carefully.

We do make some use of documentaries (such as the work of Ken Burns on jazz, baseball, the Civil War, and Mark Twain), but students need guidance to understand that "documentary" does not necessarily mean accuracy and objectivity. To illustrate this point, we spend some time with the amusing 1980s documentary *Atomic Café* that

¹Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), and Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (New York: Longman, 2006).

²David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

shows clips of life under threat from an atomic cloud in the late forties and fifties. We examine how the film fits into the political discourse of the 1980s surrounding Ronald Reagan's efforts to reinvigorate the Cold War in the early years of his presidency. Generally speaking, students do not enjoy documentaries, which they perceive as being dominated by the talking-head expert, but this is not the case in *Atomic Café*.

Noting this general aversion to documentaries among students, I tend to rely on clips from Hollywood features to tweak student interest and provide some visual historical reconstructions. In addition, this approach allows for an examination of the role played by Hollywood in shaping the national consciousness. The idea is not that Hollywood is an accurate historian, but rather that popular films also tend to reflect the ideological assumptions of the time period in which they were made. Thus, teachers can employ popular films as primary sources through which to examine ideological developments in the twentieth century, just as scholars often use novels to study nineteenth-century America. For example, a film such as the classic western *High Noon* (1952) is valuable not for what little light the film might shed upon the American West, but rather as an allegorical text that might tell us a great deal about such concerns of the 1950s as the Cold War, conformity in the suburbs, McCarthyism, and the Hollywood Ten.

I would like to describe specifically a few of the clips that I use and the teaching points that I try to make with them. Mel Gibson's *The Patriot* (2000) allows students to envision how the Revolutionary War battlefield looked, but of greater significance is how the film might be misleading. In one section, the film depicts how an enslaved man earns his freedom by fighting for the patriots. This was certainly possible, as approximately 5000 slaves followed this path to freedom. However, someone not educated in the larger historical reality of the American Revolution might come away from this film assuming that most enslaved people were freed following the war, rather than recognizing that the ideology of the Revolution failed to alter the status of most slaves.

Students also enjoy looking at the Walt Disney production of *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1956). It is somewhat campy today, but the popularity of the Crockett series and its merchandising tell us a great deal about the values of the 1950s. We also deconstruct some of the mythology surrounding Crockett and the Alamo, examining the fact that one of the liberties for which the Texans were fighting was the right to hold slaves. Students also investigate contemporary scholarship that suggests that Crockett's role at the Alamo might have been less heroic than portrayed in the cinema. I like to have students grapple with the question of whether we should attempt to correct mythology with historical accuracy that might undermine traditional heroes.

Perhaps one of the most important issues regarding the power of popular culture comes with the screening of D.W. Griffith's epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915). While the film is important for its contributions to cinematic art, we concentrate on the film's historical representation of Reconstruction. We only screen about thirty minutes of the

these films primarily to show how Hollywood's history can be misleading, even if on the surface the message is an affirmative one. While it is true that students generally do not care for documentaries, to provide them with a greater understanding of black agency, I include segments from *Eyes on the Prize* (Set I in 1992 and Set II in 1993), an excellent study of the civil rights movement produced for public television. An African-American feature film perspective might be introduced by examining the controversial cinema of director Spike Lee in films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992), both of which provide excellent supplementary material for any class reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Overall there is a tendency to perceive the civil rights movement in terms of black and white race relations, but in the Southwest where I teach and really everywhere it is important to recognize that stories about the Chicano and Native American struggle need to be incorporated into the historical narrative. *Chicano! History of the Mexican Civil Rights Movement* (1996) and *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1990), both of which aired on public television, have proven successful in broadening student horizons. Fortunately, Hollywood is becoming somewhat more accessible to Latinos and Native Americans, and teachers now have the opportunity to introduce clips from such films as *Mi Familia* (1995) and *Smoke Signals* (1998).

Insecurities regarding the post-World War II role of women in American society can be addressed in the immediate postwar years by examining the popular Hollywood production *Mildred Pierce* (1945), starring Joan Crawford. More positive depictions of working-class women in post-World War II America—albeit in later decades—can be found in films such as *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Silkwood* (1983).

Hollywood films need not always be viewed as perpetuating stereotypes and misunderstanding of historical events. For example, *Glory* (1990), which tells the story of the black 54th Massachusetts regiment during the Civil War, is inaccurate when it comes to some historical details, but it deserves credit for calling popular attention to an often neglected but important aspect of American history, providing a greater sense of black agency than most Hollywood films.

One of the few films that I usually screen in its entirety is director John Sayles's *Matewan* (1987), which focuses upon a post-World War I coal strike in West Virginia. I take valuable class time for this film as my students, many of whom tend to be affluent or middle class, often have difficulty grasping the sacrifices and contributions made by the working class. They are often quick to adopt the perspective of Frederick Jackson

Turner, arguing that discontented workers should have moved west and taken advantage of the Homestead Act. In *Matewan*, Sayles provides a visual narrative that explains to students why forging a labor movement was really the only viable alternative for coal miners. Economic exploitation such as payment in scrip, use of company detectives, government suppression to prevent unionization, manipulation of ethnic and religious divisions to divide the workers, the role of violence, and working-class solidarity are all themes that Sayles incorporates into his film. In a nation in

film, for cinema of the silent era fails to engage most young people. They are, nevertheless, shocked and appalled by many of the film's racist images. But what we try to do in class is dig somewhat deeper, investigating how Griffith's film reflects race relations in the Progressive era. President Woodrow Wilson's endorsement of the film, protest by the NAACP, and the sexual politics of the film illustrate well to students how, amid the context of the Great Migration out of the South, the post-World War I period was characterized by racial violence and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan on a national level. The imagery of the rape of the South is also perpetuated by *Gone With the Wind* (1939). In a brief film clip Scarlet O'Hara is attacked by freedmen and scalawags, but she is saved by her loyal former slaves. She is avenged by a group of night riders—the film avoids calling them the Klan—who destroy the freedmen's camp.

While historiography is not a major component of the course, students read a few pages from William Dunning's work on Reconstruction, and they recognize that Griffith's interpretation parallels that of some historians. In fact, several enterprising students examined Klan web pages, discovering that the Dunning/Griffith/*Gone With the Wind* interpretation of Reconstruction continues to be perpetuated on the political fringe. Students recognize that contemporary historians have discredited the Dunning school, but many point out that in a less crude fashion, despite the best effort of scholars such as Eric Foner, the image of the South at the mercy of uneducated freedmen and scalawags in conjunction with ruthless carpetbaggers still carries considerable weight with the American public, demonstrating the power of popular culture.³

Mythology is also an essential element of examining the American West and its cinematic image. We look at clips from John Ford's cavalry trilogy, *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950), considering how the films tend to reinforce Cold War attitudes and how Anglo settlement is portrayed as a civilizing factor. For contrast, it is useful to show a clip from *Little Big Man* (1970), asking students why General George Armstrong Custer is now depicted as a villain in popular culture. Finally, for how outdated cowboy imagery might be for the contemporary world, a short clip from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), depicting Slim Pickens slamming on a cowboy hat and preparing to go to nuclear war "toe-to-toe with the Russkies," is most effective.

In general, Hollywood cinema, controlled primarily by white males, has perpetuated stereotypes of African-Americans, and well-intended liberal films have a tendency to deny black agency and pit evil racist whites against saintly white liberals, while blacks are placed on the political sidelines. Examples of this white liberal approach include such films as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), and *Amistad* (1997). I show clips from

³William Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), and Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

which our labor heritage seems to be in danger of being lost, *Matewan* serves as a crucial reminder of our working-class legacy.

I have found clips from some of the films introduced above to be instrumental in exciting the intellectual curiosity of many students. We usually follow the clips with spirited discussion. Of course, there are always students who will perceive film as being superfluous, and they might refuse to take this aspect of the course seriously. Therefore, I would suggest that, in response to student focus upon grades and evaluation, teachers make it clear that the film texts will be on the test.