

Using Film in Historical Inquiry: As Medium, as Evidence, for Empathy

Jeremy Stoddard

College of William & Mary, USA

Though often portrayed as a clichéd example of poor history pedagogy, there is now ample research and numerous models of best practice to support the use of film in an inquiry-based history curriculum. In this article I present best practice models and practical examples of using film as a medium to engage students in inquiry. In doing so, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What happens when film portrays history, and especially controversial events?
- What are some effective goals and models for teaching with film?
- How does film act as a historical text or as historical evidence?
- How should I select films and structure film-based lessons?

History on Film

History is always shaped by the context in which it was recorded and constrained by the perspectives and evidence it contains. Similarly, any time a film is made to represent historical events, issues or peoples, whether it is a documentary or fictitious, it should be viewed as containing “perspective laden-narratives” (Hess, 2007). This is because films are: 1) made by people with particular views and within a particular context, 2) often based on written accounts that are compressed or adapted using dramatic liberty due to the need to fit the narrative and time constraints of film, and 3) usually driven with profit in mind – and thus need to attract an audience.

Further, because of the need to represent narratives that extend over long periods of time, great distances, or multiple perspectives, films also rely on genre conventions to help the audience follow the narrative and keep

track of what is going on. This is why war movies often include stock characters such as the tough sergeant, or rely on cinematic effects such as lighting and music to help the audience identify the hero and villain easily. These conventions can be limited to particular audiences, such as those from the particular language, national, or cultural group for whom the film is intended, and may be interpreted very differently by audience members from outside of this intended audience. Regardless of whether or not a person is a member of an intended audience, however, every individual may interpret or understand aspects of the film differently based on their own knowledge of the events or people being represented, their experience in viewing film, or as a matter of personal preference.

Documentary films can be particularly problematic as they are often viewed as being objective accounts of the past because they include interviews with experts, film of actual events, and are most akin to written history. However, these films are still the result of thousands of decisions made by the film’s director and editor and are also reflective of particular genre conventions that shape the story being told. Historically, documentary style film has been a medium of propaganda used to influence audiences on political and social issues.

This does not mean that films are not useful as either historical accounts or as historical evidence. As films are shaped by people from particular contexts (e.g., time, place), and with particular views, they serve as a reflection or artifact documenting different time periods and societies. They serve as historical evidence of particular values, interpretations, and material culture. They also

serve as a medium for historiography and for raising particular historical questions or controversial issues.

It is necessary, however, to treat all films consistently as an interpretation, as something that is constructed for a particular purpose and from a particular perspective. For example, American films set during the conflict in Vietnam represent radically different views on the war, from the early John Wayne feature *Green Beret's* (1968), which is styled after a nationalistic and heroic World War II film, to the "noble grunt films" (Aufderheide, 1990) of the 1980s, including *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Platoon* (1986), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987). These latter films emphasize the national sentiment that emerged during the period that the veterans for the war should be supported and shown empathy even while the war itself could be reviled.

Models for Teaching Historical Inquiry with Film

Given these characteristics of the medium, and how it shapes the history it represents, film should not be used as a direct "window into the past" akin to a lecture but as part of teaching through historical inquiry. Below I describe five strategies for engaging in historical inquiry with film and provide examples that align with content from the History and Citizenship courses of study.

Regardless of specific desired outcomes, there are several key aspects of successful pedagogy with film. First, films should be selected for the particular perspective they represent and not the general topic of the film, and should be consistently framed as being constructed and containing a value-laden narrative. Second, there needs to be specific curricular goals for showing a film or a portion of a film (e.g., a particular historical perspective, as evidence of a time period). Finally, students need to be given a task while viewing the film that focuses them on collecting or identifying information in the film aligned with the specific goal for viewing. This task should force them to view the film and begin to analyze what they are viewing in

ways similar to how they might interrogate other historical texts or evidence.

Film as Interpretation and Representation of the Past

One of the affordances of film as a medium for teaching history is the rich visual landscape and representation of the past that it creates – and, as a result, the affective response these visuals and audio tracks can elicit from students. For example, instead of reading about a historical event, or even looking at images taken of the event, film can both provide a visual of what these events may have looked like as well as raise questions about the events for students to investigate further. In this way, film may be used to deepen students' thinking about what an event or time period may have looked like, in terms of aspects such as geography, topography, and cultural practices, as well as to engage students in conducting further inquiry by raising questions or challenging their beliefs or understandings of particular historical events.

For example, when studying the Persian Gulf conflict of 1991, the film *Jarhead* (2005) could be used to help students visualize particular aspects of the conflict by using clips that show coalition forces waiting in the desert, the destruction caused by massive air attacks against the Iraqi Army, or the destruction of the oil fields that were set on fire as the coalition forces advanced. These images can also be used to raise questions about the various motivations of the coalition countries (e.g., to liberate Kuwait, the need for oil from the region). Of course, this film is also an interpretation of the events at the time it was made, particularly the second invasion of Iraq in 2003 by largely American forces, and also raises questions about those contemporary events as well.

Similarly, even more fictionalized accounts of those events, such as the film *Three Kings* (1999), which follows four soldiers as they try to find the missing Kuwaiti gold, can be useful in raising questions about those events. For example, there are scenes that show the destruction of the fleeing Iraqi

Army on the infamous “highway of death,” scenes showing the looted luxury consumer goods that the Iraqi soldiers stole from Kuwait, and the plight of the minority groups who attempted to rise up against Saddam Hussein’s government with the encouragement of the US government. This latter group was left to suffer under Saddam Hussein when the US decided to stop at the Iraqi border and not support the revolt that they encouraged. These scenes from the film raise important questions about the motivations for the coalition countries and whether or not the US and other countries followed through on their promises. These questions are particularly important when you look at the context in which a film like *Jarhead* was filmed, as the US and other countries were again embroiled in a conflict in Iraq.

When viewing clips like those described above, students should first be asked what they see in the clips and how these images and sounds make them feel – what is their affective response to the film and what does that say about the goals of the film? Selected clips highlighting the aspects of the conflict identified above could be investigated using questions such as: What questions do these clips raise about the motivations of the coalition forces? What was the impact of the conflict on the Kuwaiti’s and minority groups in Iraq who opposed Saddam? What do these clips tell you about how society viewed the Gulf War at the time when these films were made? What do you think the goal of the filmmaker was in making the film?

Concept Formation

A second important function of film can be as a concept example for key concepts in history and social science. Teaching using a concept formation model is effective as it asks students to induce the characteristics of a concept and form a working definition. This understanding at a conceptual level can then be used to evaluate later examples and determine whether or not it is a concept example. One example of this application is the use of the American made for television

movie *The Wave* (1981) by teachers I studied (Stoddard, 2007). This film, set in a California high school, tells the story of a teacher who engaged his students in simulating the tactics of the Nazi youth to help them understand how totalitarians are able to gain power, and how events such as genocide can occur. As the teacher describes in the book of the same title, the students and even he became caught up in the power of the movement he created at the school; a movement that soon spiraled out of control as his Wave students began bullying others who were not in the group and exhibiting similar superiority characteristics indicative of the Nazi Youth who they were emulating.

In order to develop the concept of “totalitarianism,” and the tactics used by totalitarians to gain power, the teacher split her class into Group A and Group B and asked them to complete the following task while viewing the film.

Task during viewing:

Group A: Identify how students were drawn into the group [The Wave], and specifically the behaviors and comments between three groups - the teacher and students, students and students, and student and parents.

Group B: Identify how the teachers and group members built cohesiveness, including techniques used and actions taken by the teacher to create the bond.

After viewing the film, the groups discussed what they had identified and used it to form a concept definition for how totalitarians gain power and then applied this concept definition to cases of totalitarianism in the period leading up to World War II (e.g., Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Stalinist USSR). (See Figure 1 for an example). Similarly, films or film clips could be used to teach important history and social science concepts such as civil disobedience, colonialism, and imperialism.

Figure 1: Example of Concept Definition and Comparison Chart of Totalitarians using *The Wave*.

	② THE WAVE	STALIN	HITLER	MUSSOLINI
① CREATE TERROR	• Fights off members + non-members	• KGB, secret police • work camps in Siberia	• concentration camps	
② PROPAGANDA	• booklets + arm bands	• Pravda newspaper	• secret police • controlled all media	
③ INSTALL NATIONALISM	• hand movements/sign • chants • gave building committees → being our if not in	• said all ppl equal	• "master race" - Aryans • 3rd Reich	
④ EDUCATE THE YOUTH	• through the classes • pamphlets	• gave kids idea, if bad → work camp	Hitler with MUSIC	
⑤ AUTHORITATIVE FIGURE	MR. ROSS	Stalin	Hitler	Mussolini
⑥ CREATE A COMMON ENEMY	• people who don't join or believe • "non-members"	• anyone who disagrees • non communists	• Jews, homosexuals • gypsies + disabled • communists	• communism

For Empathy and Perspective Recognition

The case of using *The Wave* could also be a way to engage students in developing empathy as perspective recognition (Barton & Levstik, 2004), meaning the ability to recognize the perspective of others in the past in order to understand their actions, decisions, or experiences. Because of the way film can present characters or groups' perspectives, and the affective way in which film can engage an audience, it is a powerful tool for engaging students in perspective recognition. While *The Wave* could be used to attempt to understand how genocide or other acts of inhumanity could occur, other films may be used to recognize the perspectives of groups involved in significant conflicts or persistent historical issues, or to recognize how events were viewed during different periods.

For example, in order to attempt to recognize the differing perspectives on why the Viet Minh were able to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French film

Dien Bien Phu (1992), a narrative and dramatic film based on the event, could be juxtaposed with a film from the perspective of the Vietnamese, such as the documentary *Indochine: A People's War* (2009). Portions of these two films could be used to engage students in differing accounts of what happened and why the Vietnamese were able to defeat the French, including the overwhelming numbers of the Vietnamese and their ability to logistically and tactically outmaneuver the French, and the French underestimation of the Vietnamese and inability to supply their soldiers.

More specifically, while viewing the films, students could be asked to chart data from the viewing in four areas for comparison: 1) evidence of the time and context of production, 2) the film's perspective on the battle, 3) their affective or emotional response to the film (or the response it is designed to promote), and 4) the narrative or explanation of cause/effect of the event (see Figure 2 for an example chart). Then, students can compare the perspectives the films represent by

examining the chart categorically and as a whole. This activity promotes student development of literacy skills as well as their

knowledge of competing perspectives on the event being portrayed.

Figure 2: Comparing Historical Narrative Accounts in Film: The Battle of Dien Bien Phu

	Dien Bien Phu (1992)	A People's War (2009)
Context and Time of Production		
Perspective on the battle		
Affective or emotional feel of film		
Narrative or Explanation of Cause / Effect		

Presentation Site: <http://social-studies.wmwikis.net/Singapore2013>

Stoddard, 2013

As Evidence of the Period of Production

One could also use film to focus more specifically on just analyzing how film can reflect particular social, political, or economic views from the place and period of its production. For example, there are many short films made during World War II that reflect propaganda from the period. In *The Spirit of '4* (link to: http://archive.org/details/TheSpiritOf43_56), the popular Disney character Donald Duck is used to promote civilian savings and the payment of Federal income taxes to support the war effort.

In this short film, which was likely shown before feature films in local cinemas alongside newsreels, a stereotypically thrifty Scottish McDuck character tells Donald that he should save the money he has earned in order to pay his income taxes and help defeat Hitler and Hirohito. This Scottish character is juxtaposed

with a Zoot suited “spendthrift” duck who tempts Donald to spend his pay on women and going to clubs. In the end, the message is to “save for taxes” over the desire to “spend for the Axis.” The film then goes on to show all of the various armaments, aircraft, and other supplies needed for the war effort that tax dollars were buying.

The messages of these films are generally quite obvious and clear. However, they give us a sense of the messages given to the public at the time that is hard to capture in other mediums – especially with the use of popular animated characters. To debrief the viewing, teachers may ask students to analyze what they have viewed using questions such as:





- What is your immediate reaction to this film? How did it make you feel? What did it make you think about?
- Who made it? Where was it made?

- What was the central message(s) of this film? Who do the characters represent?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the goal of the film and filmmaker?
- How does the film reflect the time it was made?
- Why a cartoon? Where would audiences have viewed this?

Alternatively, teachers can use a film like this along with an analysis guide. A good example is provided by the US National Archives (link to: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/motion_picture_analysis_worksheet.pdf). This worksheet provides questions to help

students look at context and source, the way images are used to convey particular meanings, and to identify the messages in the context of the period. Another way to help teach students analysis skills while also looking at the views of the time of production is to have them “reverse storyboard” the short film. In this activity, a blank storyboard similar to what is often used to design and pitch a movie is provided (see Figure 3 for an example), and students are asked to sketch out the various scenes in the film on the paper as a way to start to recognize how camera angles, movement, different shots, music and audio effects, and dialogue are used to make a message.

Figure 3: Sample of Storyboard Chart

	
Audio:	Audio:
Dialogue:	Dialogue:
	
Audio:	Audio:
Dialogue:	Dialogue:

For Raising Controversial Issues

In addition to these very explicit propaganda films, many films are made with the goal of exploring controversial historical events or people, to raise questions about events and how they have been represented historically, or to present a perspective that is often missing from the discussion. Therefore, film can also be an effective medium for engaging students in exploring these controversial events. However, because of the power of the medium, it is important to be explicit about the goal of the viewing and any supplementary activities: is it to raise a controversial issue that will be explored using additional materials – or is it to explore one particular perspective on the events? Two pedagogical models can be helpful toward these goals: the seminar discussion and the deliberation. In order to provide examples of how these models might work, I use the example of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the invasion of Singapore by the Japanese in World War II as case studies.

Depending on what period and aspect of the conflict in Northern Ireland is the focus, films could be used as part of a seminar to explore the nature of the conflict being represented as well as how it reflects the period when it was made. Similar to looking at the film as historical evidence, a seminar model makes the film a “text” to be interrogated in depth. For example, the film *Hunger* (2008) can be used to explore the events surrounding the hunger strike engaged in by IRA prisoners in 1981 as well as what the film reveals about the views of these events almost 30 years later. Similarly, the film *Omagh* (2004) could be used to explore the impact of the violence on Irish civilians caught in the crossfire, and how the many victims of this conflict on both sides are being remembered and memorialized.

As the goal of the seminar is to understand the issues, ideas, and values raised in the film, students need to be guided in their viewing to collect information that will help them during the discussion to reach these goals. Teachers may want to pause during the viewing at key

points for students to take notes on what they are seeing as well as what they are feeling or to record questions the film has raised for them. Then, during the seminar discussion, they will be able to refer back to the evidence they collected during the viewing. Sources such as film reviews and background information on the director and writer, or sources used to write the script, may also be helpful to provide context. For example, if your class is studying the earlier conflicts for Irish independence rather than the troubles in Northern Ireland, clips from films such as *Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2004) or *Michael Collins* (1996) could be used along with sources from the period representing alternative accounts. After the seminar, students could be engaged in comparing what they viewed with other sources from the period – and especially sources that may present counter arguments or alternative conclusions.

In addition to centering the exploration of an issue within one film in the seminar format, an alternative is to use a film to raise an issue for deliberation or a film clip as one piece of evidence for use in a deliberation or inquiry lesson as evidence of something. As films almost always represent only one main perspective on an event, they do not work well as a source for evidence alone for a deliberation, but make a great source when used with additional sources that present competing evidence or perspectives. A documentary such as *The Fall of Singapore: The Great Betrayal* (2012) could be used as an introduction to raise the controversy or alongside other sources when asking students to deliberate whether or not the British did all they could to protect Singapore from the Japanese invasion. It is important that in a deliberation, students are engaged in sources that present a “best case, fair hearing, of competing points of view” (Kelly, 1986). The students could be engaged in using a structured academic controversy model or an alternative model such as the “continuum” discussion, which asks them to identify a position that represents their view along a continuum in the classroom and then allows them to move during the discussion if their view shifts.

Film and Activity Selection

In this article, I have attempted to present some starting points for using film in historical inquiry. With any of these strategies, there are several keys for best practice: 1) indicate a clear goal for selecting a particular film – beyond the topic it represents, 2) learn about the background and context of the film and who made it (the Internet Movie Database - imdb.com is helpful), 3) provide students with background information and a clear rationale for viewing the film – as well as a task for during the viewing that focuses on this goal, and 4) take the time to teach students explicit analytical skills and allow for a debrief of any films and the rich representations they contain. There are additional considerations, of course, that need to be given to using film, such as whether or not the content of the film is appropriate for the groups of students you are working with. The actual uses of film in teaching history, and engaging students in historical inquiry in particular, are only limited to the extent of your imagination and those of your classes. Film can provide an engaging, motivating, and rich source for helping students become more critical, thoughtful, and knowledgeable of the past and the ways in which it is constructed and represented.

References

- Aufderheide, P. (1990). Good Soldiers. In Miller, M. ed. *Seeing through Movies*. New York: Pantheon.
- Barton, K., & Levstik, L. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Binns, S. (Producer & Director). (2009). *Indochine: A people's war in colour* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: Big Ape Media.
- Brennan, G. (Producer), & Travis, P. (Director). (2004). *Omagh* [Television broadcast]. Ireland: Tiger Aspect Productions.
- Elston, P. (Director). (2012). *The fall of Singapore: The great betrayal* [Television broadcast]. United Kingdom: Brave New Media.
- Felsberg, U. (Producer), & Loach, K. (Director). (2006). *The wind that shakes the barley* [Motion picture]. Ireland: Sixteen Films.
- Grant, J. (Writer), & King, J. (Director). (1943). *The spirit of '43* [Animated short]. United States: Walt Disney Productions.
- Hess, D. (2007, May/June). From “Banished” to “Brother Outsider,” “Miss Navajo” to “An Inconvenient Truth”: Documentary films as perspective-laden narratives. *Social Education*, 71(4), 194–199.
- Jones, R. (Writer), & Grasshoff, A. (Director). (1981). *The wave* [Television broadcast]. Los Angeles, CA: TAT Communications.
- Kelly, T. E. (1986). Discussing controversial issues: Four perspectives on the teacher's role. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 19: 113-138.
- Kirsner, J. (Producer), & Schoendeorffer, P. (Director). (1992). *Dien bien phu* [Motion picture]. France: Flach Film.
- Mercer, S. L. (Producer), & Mendes, S. (Director). (2005). *Jarhead* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.
- Stoddard, J. (2007). Attempting to understand the lives of others: Film as a tool for developing historical empathy. In A. Marcus (Ed.) *Celluloid blackboard: Teaching history with film* (pp. 187-214). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Witt, P. J. (Producer), & Russell, D. O. (Director). (1999). *Three kings* [Motion picture]. States: Warner Bros.
- Woolley, S. (Producer), & Jordan, N. (Director). (1996). *Michael Collins* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Appendix: Additional Resources on Teaching History with Film

- Marcus, A., & Stoddard, J. (November/December 2009). The inconvenient truth about teaching history with documentary film: Strategies for presenting multiple perspectives and teaching controversial issues. *The Social Studies*, 100(6), 279-284.
- Marcus, A., Metzger, S., Paxton, R., & Stoddard, J. (2010). *Teaching history with film: Strategies for secondary social studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Marcus, A., & Stoddard, J. (May/June, 2007). Tinsel town as teacher: Hollywood film in the high school history classroom. *The History Teacher*, 40(3), 303-330.
- Marcus, A. (2007). Students making sense of the past: "It's almost like living the event." In A. Marcus (Ed.), *Celluloid blackboard: Teaching history with film* (pp. 121-166). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Marcus, A., Paxton, R., & Meyerson, P. (2006). "The reality of it all": History students read the movies. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 34(3), 516-552.
- McCloone, M. (2009) *Film, television and the troubles: A 'troubles archive' essay*. Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Available online: <http://eprints.ulster.ac.uk/11861/>
- Metzger, S. A. (2010). Maximizing the educational power of history movies in the classroom. *The Social Studies*, 101(3), 127-136.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nisbet, M., & Aufderheide, P. (2009). Documentary film: Towards a research agenda on forms, functions, and impacts. *Mass Communication and Society*, 12(4), 450-456
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1995). *Visions of the past: The challenge of film to our idea of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rosenstone, R. (2006). *History on film/film on history*. Harlow, England: Pearson.
- Seixas, P. (1994). Confronting the moral frames of popular film: Young people respond to historical revisionism. *American Journal of Education*, 102(3), 261-285.
- Stoddard, J., & Marcus, A. (Spring, 2006). The burden of historical representation: Race, freedom and "educational" Hollywood film. *Film & History*, 36(1), 26-35.
- Stoddard, J. (in press - 2013). Hillary: The Movie, The History Channel, and the challenge of the documentary for democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 115(3). Available online: <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16731>
- Stoddard, J., & Marcus, A. (2010). More than "showing what happened": Exploring the potential for teaching history with film. *The High School Journal* 93(2), 83-90.
- Stoddard, J. (2012). Film as a "thoughtful" medium for teaching history. *Learning, Media, and Technology*, 37(3), 271-288.
- Walker, T. (2006). Historical literacy: Reading history through film. *The Social Studies*, 97(1), 30-34.
- Woelders, A. (2007). "It makes you think more when you watch things": Scaffolding for historical inquiry using film in the middle school classroom. *The Social Studies*, 98(4), 145-152.