

Reel to Real: Teaching the Twentieth Century with Classic Hollywood Films

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MAKING STUDENTS' LEARNING experiences as direct and real as possible has always been challenging for educators. Ancient wars and forgotten statesmen often hold little excitement for students. Innovative teachers often use artifacts and primary source documents to transform a vicarious learning experience to a much more direct one. Lee Ann Potter observes that primary source documents "allow us, quite literally, to touch and connect with the past."¹

Films, like artifacts and photographs, can also bring students closer to the people and events that they are studying. Teachers have long used film to make social studies topics seem more real, first as 16mm movies from state and university libraries, and more recently as videotapes and DVDs from instructional media suppliers. Many are invaluable, particularly for units, for example, on colonization or the Civil War. But Hollywood feature films can also serve as a type of primary source or artifact in the social studies class.

Beginning in the late 1800s, as the motion picture industry evolved, films have served as a primary source of entertainment. Prior to the invention of the television, from the early 1900s to well into the 1960s moviegoers relied on films not only for entertainment but for news and information as well. During the first half of the twentieth century, filmmakers shot thousands of hours of newsreels documenting the people, places, and culture of their time. These old moving images, both fiction and documentary, provide histori-

cal artifacts, virtually primary source documents, that are very easy to obtain and yet are too rarely used. Here, we hope to give teachers a sense of which films are most appropriate and to provide a workable method for guiding students to critically examine these historical artifacts.

Celluloid Anthropology

Students can study films in a manner similar to the way an anthropologist studies a culture. If we were to study the culture of a community in the Brazilian rainforest, we would observe social rules, modes of dress, the role of religion, the structure of the family, and other established social and cultural codes, procedures, or traditions. Classic films can be virtual windows into the past, allowing students to observe how the average American lived decades ago.

In the late 1920s, actress Clara Bow, who popularized the 1920s flapper style, starred in a film entitled *It*. The film catapulted Bow to fame and had a defining effect on her generation. In the film, as "The It Girl," Bow plays a "lowly" salesclerk in a large department store. She shares an apartment with a friend and co-worker who has recently given birth out of wedlock; since the new mother is ill, Bow's character

works to support all three. At work, Bow has caught the eye of a wealthy young man, a friend of the store owner's son. In this brief beginning to a feature length film, viewers see three important locations as they were in the late 1920s. We see the downtown department store, so different from the suburban malls we know today. We see the humble apartment, the decorations, and the absence of technology. And, finally, we see the restaurant.

While watching this film, as any other movie of a different era, viewers can observe manners and behaviors, note what things are important to the characters in the film, observe the various modes of



Actress Clara Bow is pictured in New York City in the early 1930s.

Examples of classic Hollywood films useful for studying different periods

Learn more about each of these movies at the Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com

1910-1919

Caught in a Cabaret (1914) -
Charlie Chaplin, Mable Normand
Mabel's Married Life (1914) -
Charlie Chaplin, Mable Normand

1919-1929

Safety Last (1923) - Harold Lloyd
The Showoff (1926) - Louise Brooks
It (1927) - Clara Bow
Sunrise (1927) - Janet Gaynor

1930-1939

The Dentist (1932) - WC Fields
It Happened One Night (1934) - Clark Gable
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) -
James Stewart

1940-1949

Meet John Doe (1941) - Gary Cooper
The Best Years of Our Lives (1946) -
Dana Andrews
Sorry, Wrong Number (1948) -
Barbara Stanwyck

1950-1959

The Wild One (1953) - Marlon Brando
On the Waterfront (1954) - Marlon Brando
The Trouble With Harry (1955) -
Alfred Hitchcock
Rebel Without a Cause (1955) - James Dean
Marty (1955) - Ernest Borgnine

1960-1969

Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961) -
Audrey Hepburn
A Patch of Blue (1965) - Sidney Poitier
The Graduate (1967) - Dustin Hoffman
Easy Rider (1969) - Peter Fonda

1970-1979

Five Easy Pieces (1970) - Jack Nicholson
The Sunshine Boys (1975) - Walter Matthau
All the President's Men (1976) -
Dustin Hoffman
Saturday Night Fever (1977) - John Travolta

1980-1989

The Four Seasons (1981) - Alan Alda
Terms of Endearment (1983) -
Shirley MacLaine
Mystic Pizza (1988) - Julia Roberts
Say Anything (1989) - John Cusack

transportation, examine clothing, and take notice of contemporary speech and language.

Alleman and Brophy recommend the use of timelines to help students recognize changes people have experienced over time.² Films can highlight and expand the events we typically place on timelines. For example, we know that when women finally won the right to vote in 1920, this new measure of equality brought with it rapid and profound changes. Simply comparing the women in a 1917 Charlie Chaplin comedy with those in Clara Bow's 1920s films illustrates the changes in women's lives in that short period of time.

The right films can provide a rich and varied timeline of twentieth century America, offering insight into people's lives and depicting the changes that they experienced over any given period.

Choosing Appropriate Films

The films that are most effective for this purpose are those that are actually set in the time in which they were filmed. A film made in 1920 about people who live in 1920 has the potential to be much more accurate than a film made in 1970 about the 1920s in which the details are invented and dramatized.

In addition to Hollywood movies, newsreels and, perhaps surprisingly, citizenship and morality films made for schools in the 1940s can also be useful as historical artifacts. One example is a short school safety film made in 1960 called *Bicycle Today, Automobile Tomorrow*. This film on bicycle safety compares riding a bicycle to driving a car. The details in the film, a boy's rolled up blue jeans, a little girl in her pleated skirt and bobby socks, the cars in the background, and the bicycle itself, reveal the world of 1960. Teachers

can download this eight-minute film from the internet at the Internet Movie Archive, www.archive.org/movies/movies.php. This film archive has numerous newsreels, instructional films, and feature films that are part of the public domain; these can be downloaded and transferred to a DVD or viewed right from a computer.

The sidebar offers a list of Hollywood films, organized by decade, which can be used for this kind of history study. Many classic films are available in local video stores, or may be recorded from one of the excellent classic film channels on television. Turner Classic Movies shows award-winning classics from the 1930s to the 1980s and routinely shows silent films from the 1920s. Not all of these films are contemporary with the times in which they were made, and not all take place in real settings, so the teacher will have to choose carefully.

It is not necessary to use the whole film; and it is often wise not to do so. This is particularly true when more recent movies are used, since many have questionable language and depict adult subject matter. Teachers should preview films to select a 15- to 20-minute sequence that is particularly illustrative of the world in which the characters live. Even a carefully selected segment of a 1985 film can be used for this activity; it may surprise students and even the teacher to note how much life has changed in 20 short years.

Studying Classic Movies as Artifacts:

A Lesson Framework

Putman and Rommel-Esham have described an approach for the integration of oral interviewing, reading, and writing to study changes over time during the past century.³ Hollywood films, newsreels, and documentary films from the past can serve as the impetus for a similar study.

Divide the class into five equal groups. The groups will be responsible for only one aspect of the time and place they are about to study. Each group should first decide upon a reporter who will record the members' observations to share with the rest of the class. All members of the group will work individually while viewing the film to write down as many examples

of their assigned aspect as they can. When the film is done, the group members will collaborate before sharing with the rest of the class. Some members will notice things that others did not. The goal is for each group to generate as complete a list of items related to their aspect of the film as possible. The following groups should be formed for the data-gathering portion of this activity:

Technology: This group should look closely at the background as well as the action in the foreground of the film to see what electrical or mechanical tools and devices were available and used by people of that day. Of course they will see automobiles, lamps, toasters, and refrigerators. But encourage them to look for the common and mundane as well, such as light switches that turn rather than flip, huge “skeleton” keys, or milk in glass bottles rather than cartons.

Fashion: This group will look only at the hairstyles, hygiene and clothing styles. As students travel through time with the film they will see numerous and profound changes in women’s clothing as well as much more subtle changes in men’s clothing.

Language: This group will listen (or read) to find turns of phrase, slang, and word choices that sound odd or different. Also they will look at written language that appears in the background, on signs, buildings, or in newspapers.

Culture: For this group, the task is a bit more challenging. They must note traditions, accepted routines, conventions, morals, and values of the period. For example, in the 1927 Clara Bow movie mentioned earlier, the characters perceived the idea of an unwed mother as scandalous and shocking. How do we view such circumstances today? In addition, the students in the Culture group will observe how families interact with one another, their daily routines, and the ways in which they conduct their family business.

Economy: This group has the most challenging task of all. They must watch closely to see how much things cost, how much people earned, and how they chose to pay for things. Often in films we see close-ups of menus, ads in newspapers,

or signs in store windows. Sometimes economic norms are discussed in film dialogue, such as one man telling another how much he makes or how much he spent on a certain item.

Students should be guided to look not only at what is seen but what is not seen. For example, they will notice secretaries without computers, homes without microwaves, and phones without caller ID.

Finally, each group will share what they have observed about their assigned aspect of the film. A student, or the teacher, can collate all of the observations to create a multidimensional description of the period represented by the film.

Marty: An Example

Marty, which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1955, stars Ernest Borgnine as a 34-year-old ex-GI working as a butcher in the Bronx. The character is unmarried and while his many single friends and his married cousin denigrate marriage, his customers and his elderly Italian-born mother constantly pressure him to get married. He would actually like to get married, but has no prospects until he meets a woman at a local ballroom, whose romantic experiences are similar to his own. Following is a set of observations made by a group of pre-service teachers who viewed the film.

Technology

- Phone booths with wooden folding doors.
- Phone booth in the bar.
- Black and white TV.
- Cigarette machines.
- Big black phones with dials and cords that are straight, not spiral.
- No cordless phones, no cell phones.
- Old fashioned cash registers, not digital.
- No digital scale.
- Wall switches that turn left and right for on and off.
- No digital watches or clocks.
- Coffee pot on the stove—no coffee maker.
- Cars are styled differently. Round headlights, divided windshield.

Fashion

- Pleated skirts with wide belts for women.
- Men wear ties everywhere.
- Not many people wear blue jeans or sweatshirts.
- No baseball caps, just dress hats that match their suits.
- Guys’ hair is slicked back.
- Women have big curls.
- Guys dress up to go out on Saturday night (also related to Culture).
- Some men had bow ties.
- The ballroom had a “hat check.”

Language:

- “It was a real nice affair.”
- “Waiting for me by the hatchcheck.”
- “Give her a ring.” (Call her on the phone)
- “Nice tomatoes.” (Single girls)
- “Taking in a movie.” (Going to a movie)
- “That’s swell.” (Awesome)
- “I thought I’d take a shave.” (I need to shave)
- “She gave me the brush.” (She wasn’t interested)
- “Ice box.” (refrigerator)
- “I’m all knocked out.” (tired)
- “What are you so sore about?” (angry)
- “She threw a pass.” (flirting)
- “I was thinking of doing away with myself.” (Suicide)

Culture

- Single people gather at “The Ballroom.”
- The Brooklyn Dodgers were a team and people seemed to be a lot more interested in baseball than they are now.
- Widows had no place to go except to be taken care of by their grown children.
- Was 56 considered old back then?
- Butchers not wearing gloves when touching raw meat. No hats.
- It’s not a big deal now that a woman of 29 isn’t married, but it was then.
- Everyone in the ballroom is white, the only African Americans are on the bus and they sit in back.
- They dress up to go out on Saturday night: Blue suit and tie.
- They all smoke and they can smoke anywhere they want to.
- Supermarkets are a new idea, just starting

to catch on.

- Mostly small business, not as many corporations and franchises.
- The gas station has an attendant that pumps the gas and a mechanic, no convenience store.
- He didn't shower before going to Mass.
- Coke in glass bottles.
- Can't buy a beer on Sunday.
- One TV—only in the living room.
- People meet, talk, read the paper in the bar after work. Not like now.
- No women in the bar after work.
- People had larger families and the old people had accents.
- The chemistry teacher knows she can't be a department head because she is a woman; she seems to take that for granted.

Economy

- Prices on the butcher shop wall—stew meat 54¢ a pound, chicken 58¢ a pound.
- A dime to make a phone call in a phone booth.
- Rent on the shop is \$102 a month.
- He said his old job paid 40¢ an hour (\$16 a week!)
- Seventy-seven cents is the cover charge at the ballroom.
- Sign on the gas station: 31.9¢ a gallon.
- Cigarettes were cheap—just a little change.

As the various groups share their observations, a more complete picture of the era begins to emerge. We learn that there were different styles, a different moral code, and different access to com-

munication and information. We learn how people got in touch with someone; how they got the news and weather; we learn about types of entertainment and leisure activities; how much things cost then; and how much people earned.

The details we have learned about the past can be added to a typical historical timeline to provide a clearer idea of how certain geopolitical events led to cultural changes. In this film, which predates the civil rights movement, we see subtle signs of segregation. We view the emerging fortunes of a young man who served his country in World War II. We can also see the innocence that predates the turbulent 1960s.

The observations made by the groups often spark energetic and sometimes heated discussions. Hess observed the many benefits of motivated discussion, including the development of the skill of critical thought and the opportunity for students to articulate their understandings.⁴ We can discuss the issues of why people thought the way they did, why they did things the way they did, and even make judgments, based on our twenty-first century views about what was right or wrong about their way of doing things.

Follow-up

McCoy strongly recommends including the teaching of writing in social studies education as a way to improve both thought processes and writing abilities.⁵ Writing provides a context for gathering disparate facts into a comprehensive whole. After gathering and sharing their data, students can write a historical essay. Teachers may

wish to require a formal report, organized with subheadings that reflect the names of the five discussion groups, or teachers may choose to release students' creativity and ask them to write a fact-based narrative, or a less formal expository piece. Some writing prompts for such pieces might include, "A Day in My Life, Summer 1955," or "I Woke Up in 1927."

Other possibilities could include a newspaper or a television news program. Groups can be reorganized with a reporter from each of the five data collection groups and an editor or anchorperson. The students' task is to create a newspaper or news program that depicts life in the period they have just observed, juxtaposing the national and world events of that period with the culture and lifestyles of common people.

Conclusion

Students often have an innate interest in history, specifically in imagining what life was like for children their age long ago, or imagining themselves in a different time. By watching and studying classic films, which provide a virtual window into the past, students can see how their lives might have been in different times. For the teacher, classic films can help to make history real and meaningful, adding a new and interesting dimension to the teaching of formal history. Today, more than ever before, these artifacts of past eras are easily accessible and often free to use. 📺

Notes

1. Lee Ann Potter, "Connecting with the Past: Uncovering Clues in Primary Source Documents," *Social Education* 67, no. 7 (2003): 372-380.
2. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, "History is Alive: Teaching Young Children about Changes over Time," *The Social Studies* 94, no. 3, (2003): 107-110.
3. Errol Putman and Katie Rommel-Esham, "Using Oral History to Study Change: An Integrated Approach," *The Social Studies* 95, no. 5 (2003): 201-205.
4. Diane E. Hess, "Discussion in the Social Studies: Is it Worth the Trouble?" *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (2004): 155-289.
5. Marie M. McCoy, "Incorporating Effective Writing Strategies," *Social Education* 67, no. 4 (2003): 200-202.

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