

The Reel History of the World: Teaching World History with Major Motion Pictures

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In today's society, film is a part of popular culture and is relevant to students' everyday lives. Most students spend over 7 hours a day using media (over 50 hours a week).¹ Nearly 50 percent of students' media use per day is devoted to videos (film) and television. With the popularity and availability of film, it is natural that teachers attempt to engage students with such a relevant medium. In fact, in a recent study of social studies teachers, 100 percent reported using film at least once a month to help teach content.² In a national study of 327 teachers, 69 percent reported that they use some type of film/movie to help teach Holocaust content. The method of using film and the method of using firsthand accounts were tied for the number one method teachers use to teach Holocaust content.³ Furthermore, a national survey of social studies teachers conducted in 2006, found that 63 percent of eighth-grade teachers reported using some type of video-based activity in the last social studies class they taught.⁴

The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with a rationale and model for teaching world history with film. This article will also provide teachers with a filmography that can be used to help teach world history.

Teaching World History with Film

Teaching world history with film can be an effective strategy for several reasons. Movies can (a) arouse emotions, which helps students connect with and remember specific events and figures.⁵ Movies can also help develop students' (b) historical thinking skills, (c) awareness of historical perspective, and (d) general understanding of the past.

Film can offer an accurate interpretation of history and can bring students closer to the people and events that they are studying.⁶ It is an enhancement tool

that increases student interest in content and promotes higher order thinking skills. Teaching with film helps teachers achieve instructional goals like retention, understanding, reasoning, and critical thinking.⁷

I have outlined four stages, which I dub the *Russell Model for Using Film*, which can ensure the appropriate use of film in the classroom:⁸

Preparation. This critical stage involves creating lesson plans that incorporate film, while meeting instructional goals/objectives, state standards, national standards, and adhering to all legal requirements. Remember to obtain permission from the administration and parents prior to showing a film.

Pre-viewing. Teachers must preview films before showing them and prepare an introduction of the film for students

as well as an explanation as to why the class will view the film.

Watching the Film. When students are watching the film (in its entirety or selected clips), ensure that they are aware of what they should be paying particular attention to. Pause the film to pose a question, provide background, or make a connection with an earlier lesson. Interrupting a showing (at least once) subtly reminds students that the purpose of this classroom activity is not entertainment, but critical thinking.

The Culminating Activity. During this stage, teachers can focus on reviewing, clarifying, and discussing major points, concepts, issues, scenes, and/or inaccuracies. Teachers should also assess student learning in some fashion. Assessment strategies can include class discussion, class debate, rewriting the ending of the film, writing a review of the film, taking a test/quiz, completing a written assignment aligned with the film and topic/unit, reenactment (have students reenact a scene from the film), having students conduct a mock interview with the star, director, and/or producer of the film, or having students analyze and evaluate the film.

World History Films for the Classroom

The following is a list of effective films for teaching a typical world history

curriculum based on instructional use, availability, and connection to the curriculum. The films can be rented (online or from a video rental store) or can be purchased online (e.g., www.amazon.com) for a nominal price. The films are listed in chronological order by topic (pre-history,

modern history), and each entry includes a synopsis, teaching ideas, and bibliographic information (year, genre, Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating, alternative title/s, director, producer, length, language, color, company, and cast). Ultimately, teachers must deter-

mine the appropriateness of the film for their particular students. As with any type of classroom instruction, teachers need to ensure that the curriculum and instruction meets the learning goals/objectives and the individual needs of students.

PRE-HISTORY

Quest for Fire (1981)

Alternative Title: *La guerre du feu*

Drama, Rated R, 100 minutes, Color, Language: No Dialogue

Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud; Producers: Vera Belmont, Jacques Dorfmann, Denis Heroux, and John Kemeny; Writer:

Gerard Brach

Production Company: Belstar Productions

Cast: Everett McGill, Ron Perlman, Nicholas Kadi, and Rae

Dawn Chong

Quest for Fire is set in prehistoric times and follows three Paleolithic humans as they search for fire. It is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on pre-history, and helps students grasp the value of fire and other tools/technologies that are now common and disposable. The film, which won an Academy Award for Best Makeup, is based on the classic book by J.H. Rosny Ainé.

Provide students with samples of natural resources (e.g., sticks, rocks, hemp twine, clay) and have them imagine creating a livable dwelling with only these materials. How would basic human needs like cooking, bathing, and sleeping safely be met in their dwelling?

GREECE

Alexander (2004)

Alternative Title: *Alexander Revisited: The Final Cut*

Drama, Rated R, 175 minutes, Color, Language: English

Director: Oliver Stone; Producers: Oliver Stone, Iain Smith, Thomas Schuhly, Jon Kilik, and Moritz Borman; Writers: Oliver

Stone, Christopher Kyle, and Laeta Kalogridis

Production Company: Warner Bros. Pictures

Cast: Colin Farrell, Angelina Jolie, Val Kilmer, Anthony Hopkins, Rosario Dawson, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers

Alexander is based on the life of the King of Macedonia, Alexander the Great (Colin Farrell). The film traces Alexander's short and successful life from his childhood, to his conquest of nearly 90 percent of the known world by the age of 25, and finally to his death at age 32 in 323 BCE.

This film is a good resource for teaching a unit on ancient Greece. The film conveys historical atmosphere and helps

students grasp Alexander's role in exploring the world. Have students complete an action and impact chart where they list Alexander's actions in one column. In the next column, students list the impact of those actions. Students can then share the action and impact chart with the class.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Gladiator (2000)

Alternative Title: *The Gladiators*

Drama, Rated R, 155 minutes, Color, Language: English

Director: Ridley Scott; Producers by: David Franzoni, Branko Lustig, and Douglas Wick; Writers: David Franzoni, John Logan, and William Nicholson

Production Company: DreamWorks SKG

Cast: Russell Crowe, Joaquin Phoenix, Connie Nielsen, Richard Harris, and Djimon Hounsou

Gladiator is based on historical events. However, the story is fictional. The story portrays Maximus Decimus Meridius (Russell Crowe), who is the General of the Roman Army and friend of Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) the Emperor of Rome. After the emperor is murdered, Maximus is betrayed and enslaved as a gladiator. *Gladiator* won five Academy Awards including Best Actor and Best Picture.

This film is a great resource for teaching a unit on the Roman Empire, and provides students with unmatched visual images of the Roman Empire. The historical atmosphere conveyed will provide students with a rich knowledge base for understanding the social and political factors of the Roman Empire.

Students can participate in a role-playing activity in which the emperor (who was a Stoic philosopher and author of *Meditations*) and his supporters debate with some Roman citizens who want more extravagant and expensive entertainment at the Coliseum.

THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The Message (1976)

Alternative Title: *Mohammad: Messenger of God*

Drama, Rated PG, 177 minutes, Color, Language: English/Arabic

Director: Moustapha Akkad; Producer: Moustapha Akkad;

Writers: H.A.L. Craig, Tewfik El-Hakim, A.B. Jawdat El-Sahhar, A.B. Rahman El-Sharkawi, and Mohammad Ali Maher

Production Company: Filmco International Productions
Cast: Anthony Quinn, Irene Papas, Michael Ansara, Johnny Sekka, Michael Forest, and Damien Thomas

The Message is based on the central figure of Islam and messenger of God, Muhammad. The film depicts the life of Muhammad and highlights key events throughout his journey to being named the Prophet of Islam. The film is told from the perspectives of various individuals including his uncle Hamza (Anthony Quinn). The film was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Score.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on the Islamic World. The film provides a historical account of Muhammad's life and provides viewers with a rich knowledge base for understanding Muhammad's impact on religion and the world. Have students complete a timeline of Muhammad's life. Be sure that they highlight key events and explain the impact of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

MIDDLE AGES

Braveheart (1995)

Drama, Rated R, 177 minutes, Color,
Language: English

Director: Mel Gibson; Producers: Bruce Davey, Mel Gibson, and Alan Ladd;

Writer: Randall Wallace

Production Company: Icon Productions

Cast: Mel Gibson, James Robinson, Sean Lawlor, Patrick McGoohan, and James Cosmo

Braveheart is a historically based film about a Scottish commoner, William Wallace (Mel Gibson), who led an uprising against England and King Edward I (Patrick McGoohan) for Scotland's freedom. *Braveheart* won five Academy Awards including Best Director and Best Picture. This film is a good resource for teaching a unit on the middle ages. The film provides a historical account of the events surrounding William Wallace's life.

Have students keep personal journals (at least three to five entries) as if they were soldiers who fought alongside of William Wallace for Scotland's freedom. Encourage students to create vivid accounts of journeys and battles along with mundane routines of daily life in Scotland.

The Lion in Winter (1968)

Drama, Rated PG, 134 minutes, Color, Language: English
Director: Anthony Harvey; Producer: Martin Poll;

Writer: James Goldman

Production Company: AVCO Embassy

Cast: Peter O'Toole, Katherine Hepburn, Anthony Hopkins, and Timothy Dalton

The Lion in Winter is a historically based film about King Henry II and his quest to name one of his three sons his successor to the throne. Set in 1183, the film explores the dynamics of royal court life combined with political and family infighting. The film won Academy Awards for Best



The Lion In Winter, from left: Katharine Hepburn as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Peter O'Toole as King Henry II, Anthony Hopkins as Richard the Lionhearted, 1968

Actress in a Leading Role (Katherine Hepburn), Best Original Score, and Best Screenplay.

This film is a great resource for teaching a unit on the middle ages. To stimulate student engagement, have students take on the role of King Henry II during the period when he needed to select one of his three sons as a successor. Have students make a selection that they are able to defend. Students can then share their selection with classmates.

EXPLORATION

1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992)

Alternative Title: *1492: Christophe Colomb*

Drama, Rated PG-13, 154 minutes, Color, Language: English

Director: Ridley Scott; Producers: Ridley Scott and Alain Goldman; Writer: Roselyne Bosch

Production Company: Gaumont

Cast: Gerard Depardieu, Armand Assante, Sigourney Weaver, and Loren Dean

1492: Conquest of Paradise traces Christopher Columbus (Gerard Depardieu) and his discovery of the New World.

The film depicts the effect of the encounter on the indigenous people as well as Columbus's relationship with Queen Isabella (Sigourney Weaver).

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on European exploration. The film helps students grasp Spain's role in exploring the New World. Have students complete a flow chart of events surrounding the exploration and share the flow charts with the class.

REFORMATION

A Man for All Seasons (1966)

Drama, Rated G, 120 minutes, Color, Language: English
Producer/Director: Fred Zinnemann; Writer: Robert Bolt
Production Company: Highland Films
Cast: Paul Scofield, Wendy Hiller, Leo McKern, Robert Shaw, & Orson Welles

A Man for All Seasons is set in sixteenth-century England. The film depicts The Chancellor of England, Thomas More, and his refusal to endorse King Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon because of her inability to bear a son. The film won Academy Awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Paul Scofield), Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Picture.

This film is a great resource for teaching a unit on the reformation. It provides a knowledge base for understanding the impact King Henry VIII had on religion. To help engage students, have them complete an action-and-impact chart that lists the actions of King Henry VIII and Thomas More in one column. In the next column, students should list the impact of those actions. Students can then share the action and impact chart with the class.

Luther (2003)

Drama, Rated PG-13, 123 minutes, Color, Language: English and Latin
Director: Eric Till; Producers: Dennis Clauss, Brigitte Rochow, Christian Stehr, Alexander Thies, and Franz Thies; Writers: Camille Thomasson and Bart Gavigan
Production Company: Eikon Film
Cast: Joseph Fiennes, Jonathan Firth, Alfred Molina, and Peter Ustinov

Luther is a biographical account of the life of Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German monk whose ideas sparked the Protestant Reformation. An outstanding piece of cinema, this film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on the Reformation. The historical account of Martin Luther's life will provide students with a rich knowledge base for understanding Luther's impact on religion and Western civilization.

Have students complete a timeline of Luther's life. Be sure

that they highlight key events and explain the impact of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

A Tale of Two Cities (1935)

Alternative Title: *Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities'*
Drama, Not Rated, 121 minutes, Black and White, Language: English
Director: Jack Conway; Producer: David O. Selznick; Writers: W.P. Lipscomb and S.N. Behrman
Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios
Cast: Ronald Colman, Donald Woods, Elizabeth Allen, Edna May Oliver, Reginald Owen, and Basil Rathbone

Based on Charles Dickens's 1859 historical novel, this film is set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. The film includes depictions of the oppression of peasants by the French aristocracy and the subsequent brutality of revolutionaries. The film follows the lives of individuals living during this time period and provides some interesting social comparisons.

This is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on the French Revolution. Have students complete a timeline of the French Revolution. Be sure that they include key events and explain the importance of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

AGE OF IMPERIALISM

Zulu Dawn (1979)

Drama, Rated PG, 113 minutes, Color, Language: English and Zulu
Director: Douglas Hickox; Producer: Nate Kohn; Writers: Cy Endfield and Anthony Story
Production Company: Lamitas
Cast: Burt Lancaster, Peter O'Toole, Simon Ward, Denholm Elliott, Bob Hoskins, and Ronald Lacey

Zulu Dawn is set in British South Africa in January of 1879. The film focuses on events leading up to the Anglo-Zulu war and the British invasion of Zululand.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on imperialism. To help engage students in the learning process have students examine imperialism as depicted in the film and the readings accompanying the unit. Have students compare various forms of imperialism around the globe and share their findings and opinions with classmates.

WORLD WAR I

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Drama, Rated G, 227 minutes, Color, Language: English
Director: David Lean; Producer: Sam Spiegel; Writer: Robert Bolt

Production Company: Horizon Pictures
Cast: Peter O'Toole, Alec Guinness, Anthony Quinn, Omar Sharif, and Jack Hawkins

Lawrence of Arabia is a biographical account of the life of T.E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole), a British Army lieutenant. The film depicts Lawrence's experiences during World War I and his role in helping Prince Feisal of Arabia revolt against the Ottoman Empire. The film won seven Academy Awards including Best Director and Best Picture.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on World War I. To help engage students, have them examine

War I. To help engage students in the learning process, have them keep personal journals as if they were soldiers in World War I. Encourage students to keep vivid writings of experiences and battles along with mundane routines of daily life.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Nicholas and Alexandra (1971)

Drama, Rated PG, 183 minutes, Color; Language: English
Director: Franklin J. Schaffner; Producers: Franklin J. Schaffner and Sam Spiegel; Writer: James Goldman
Production Company: Horizon Pictures
Cast: Michael Jayston, Roderic Noble, Janet Suzman, and Ania Marson

Based on the non-fiction book by Pulitzer Prize winning author Robert Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra* tells the story of the Czar of Russia, Nicholas II, and his wife Alexandra. Set during the Russian Revolution, the film depicts the events surrounding Nicholas II's abdication. The film won Academy Awards for Best Art/Set Decoration and Best Costume Design.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on the Russian Revolution. Have students complete a timeline of the Russian Revolution. Be sure that they include key events and explain the importance of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

Gandhi (1982)

Alternative Title: *Richard Attenborough's Film: Gandhi*
Drama, Rated PG, 188 minutes, Color/Black and White, Language: English
Producer/director: Richard Attenborough; Writer: John Briley
Production Company: Carolina Bank
Cast: Ben Kingsley, Candice Bergen, John Gielgud, and Martin Sheen

This film is a biographical account of the life of Mahatma Gandhi, a lawyer who became a major political and spiritual leader of India. *Gandhi* won eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Director.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on nationalist movements and/or India. The film is an outstanding piece of cinema and can be used as a secondary source or record of the past. The historical account of Gandhi's life will

photo: Everett Collection



Lawrence of Arabia, Peter O'Toole, 1962

the alliances of the war. To what degree did a system of international alliances contribute to the outbreak of World War I? Encourage students to share opinions with classmates.

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)

Drama, Rated PG, 133 minutes, Black and White, Language: English
Director: Lewis Milestone; Producer: Carl Laemmle Jr.; Writer: George Abbott
Production Company: Universal Pictures
Cast: Louis Wolheim, Arnold Lucy, Lew Ayres, Scott Kolk, & John Wray,

All Quiet on the Western Front is based on the novel by the same name written by Erich Maria Remarque. The film is told from the perspectives of young German soldiers and highlights the mental and physical challenges associated with war. The film won Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture.

This is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on World

provide students with a rich knowledge base for understanding his impact on the world.

Have students discuss examples of nonviolent disobedience in American history such as labor strikes, attempts of suffragettes to vote at polling places, or the Montgomery bus boycott. What is the definition of nonviolence? Was the Boston Tea Party a nonviolent protest? Is the occupation of a public park or a factory floor a nonviolent action?

***The Last Emperor* (1987)**

Alternative Title: *Modai Huangdi*

Drama, Rated PG-13, 160 minutes, Color, Language: English

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci; Producer: Jeremy Thomas;

Writers: Mark Peploe and Bernardo Bertolucci

Production Company: Yanco Films Limited

Cast: John Lone, Peter O'Toole, Joan Chen, Vivian Wu, and Victor Wong

The Last Emperor is based on the autobiography of Pu Yi (1906–1967), who was named the emperor of China at the age of three, but deposed a few years later. He lived in China for most of his life, including a period of imprisonment during which he was “reformed” under Communist rule. The film provides a unique perspective, as it was the first film ever made in the Forbidden City. The film won nine Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director.

An outstanding piece of cinema, this film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on nationalist movements and/or China. To help engage students, have them complete a timeline of Pu Yi's life. Be sure that they highlight key events and explain the impact of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

HOLOCAUST

***Schindler's List* (1993)**

Drama, Rated R, 195 minutes, Black & White/Color, Language: English

Director: Steven Spielberg; Produced By: Branko Lustig, Gerald Molen, and Steven Spielberg; Writer: Steven Zaillian

Production Company: Universal Pictures

Cast: Liam Neeson, Ben Kingsley, Ralph Fiennes, and Caroline Goodall

Based on Thomas Keneally's 1982 Booker Prize winning book, *Schindler's Ark*, this movie is the true story of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), a businessman and a member of the Nazi party, who helped save the lives of over 1,000 Jews during the Holocaust by having them work in his factories. *Schindler's List* won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on the Holocaust. The film is an outstanding piece of cinema and

can be used as a secondary source or record of the past. Have students complete a timeline of the Holocaust. Be sure that they include key events and explain the importance of the events. Students can then share the timeline with the class.

WORLD WAR II

***Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006)**

Alternative Title: *Red Sun, Black Sand*

Drama, Rated R, 141 minutes, Color, Language: English

Director: Clint Eastwood; Producers: Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, and Steven Spielberg; Writer: Iris Yamashita

Production Company: Amblin Entertainment

Cast: Ken Watanabe, Tsuyoshi Ihara, Ryo Kase, and Kazunari Ninomiya

Letters from Iwo Jima is based on the non-fiction books *Sad To Fall In Battle: An Account of War* by Kumiko Kakehashi and *Picture Letters from the Commander in Chief* by General Tadamichi Kuribayashi. The film depicts the battle of Iwo Jima from the perspective of the Japanese and serves as an excellent companion to *Flag of Our Fathers*, which depicts the battle of Iwo Jima from the United States perspective. The film won an Academy Awards for Best Achievement in Sound Editing.

This film does an excellent job helping students understand multiple perspectives. Have small groups of students examine the perspectives from which history is often recorded. Encourage students to share personal examples depicting an event that can be viewed from multiple perspectives.

AFRICA SINCE 1945

***Cry Freedom* (1987)**

Drama, Rated PG, 157 minutes, Color, Language: English

Producer/Director: Richard Attenborough; Writer: John Briley

Production Company: Universal Pictures

Cast: Kevin Kline, Denzel Washington, Ian Richardson, Penelope Wilton, and John Thaw

Adapted from the books *Biko* and *Asking for Trouble* by Donald Woods, *Cry Freedom* tells the true story of Woods (Kevin Kline), a white South African newspaper editor, and his fight to publish a true account of the death of anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko (Denzel Washington). The film was well received and was nominated for three Academy Awards.

This film is an excellent resource for teaching a unit on Africa since 1945 and/or apartheid. To promote engagement, have students examine apartheid as depicted in the film and the readings accompanying the unit. How did this system of oppression originate? How was it maintained? To what degree did international economic sanctions contribute to the downfall of apartheid? To what degree was it an internal

LEGAL ISSUES

Teachers are allowed to use copyrighted films in the classroom. However, there are legal guidelines. Section 110 (1) of Title 17 of the United States Code on Copyright and Conditions cites the following exemption for the use of copyrighted films for educational purposes:

Performance or display of a work by instructors or pupils in the course of face-to-face teaching activities of a non-profit educational institution, in a classroom or similar place devoted to instruction, unless in the case of a motion picture or other audiovisual work, the performance, or the display of individual images, is given by means of a copy that was not lawfully made under this title, and that the person responsible for the performance knew or had reason to believe was not lawfully made.

In other words,

- Films must be shown in a non-profit educational institution. Within the institution, the film must be shown in a classroom or place intended for instruction.
- Films must be for planned educational purposes, not for extra-curricular entertainment.
- Films must be shown by the teacher in a “face-to-face” encounter with students.

Although the Teach Act, signed by George W. Bush in 2002, loosened restrictions on classroom use of copyrighted materials, teachers are prohibited from making or showing a pirated copy of a film, using film for public performance, and/or from making a profit from the film.

struggle? Have students compare racial segregation in South Africa with such segregation in other countries. Have students share opinions with classmates.

Hotel Rwanda (2004)

Drama, Rated PG-13, 121 minutes, Color, Language:

English

Director: Terry George; Producers: Terry George and A.

Kitman Ho; Writers: Keir Pearson and Terry George

Production Company: United Artists

Cast: Don Cheadle, Nick Nolte, and Joaquin Phoenix

Hotel Rwanda is set in 1994, during the Rwandan Genocide in which an estimated one million Tutsis were murdered by Hutu militias. This movie tells the true story of Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), a hotel manager who provided shelter to over a thousand Tutsi refugees during the siege by Hutu militias. *Hotel Rwanda* was nominated for three Academy Awards including Best Actor and Best Original Screenplay.

This film is a good resource for teaching a unit on Africa since 1945 and/or the phenomenon of genocide. Have students examine the Rwandan Genocide as depicted in the film and the readings accompanying the unit. Have them compare events surrounding the Rwandan Genocide, to other genocides around the globe (e.g., ethnic conflict, scapegoating, hate media/propaganda) and throughout history and share what they have learned with classmates.

Conclusion

Film can be an extremely effective tool and valuable resource for enhancing the curriculum. It should never be used as a time-filler, but only to enhance the lesson. Films can increase student interest in the content, increasing their historical understanding, and motivate students to go beyond rote memorization. Enabling students to go beyond recall and move toward higher order thinking is a goal of all social studies teachers. These higher order thinking skills will promote decision making—the heart of social studies education.⁹ The films detailed in this article will enable students to gain a deeper understanding, interest, and appreciation for world history. 📺

Notes

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