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# “It Is as It Was”: Feature Film in the History Classroom

ALAN S. MARCUS

“It is as it was,” declared Pope John Paul II after previewing *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson’s controversial film about the last hours of Christ that was released on February 25, 2004. At least that is what was reported by Steve McEveety, Gibson’s producer. Several days later, a Vatican spokesperson denied the authenticity of the Pope’s statement, fueling the controversy already gripping the film. Maybe only the Pope’s boss knows what the Pontiff really thought, but his specific views are not what caught my attention; it was the notion behind the unsubstantiated remark. Can any film, or any historical representation, be “as it was”? The answer for most historians is no, and Gibson has come under attack for saying the film is “just the way it happened” (Lampman 2004), and for denying the creative leaps necessary to tell any historical narrative in which documentation is sketchy, as detailed in the *Los Angeles Times* (Shapiro 2004). Hollywood films based in history are inevitably a blend of historical record, fiction, and a filmmaker’s perspective.

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ALAN S. MARCUS is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

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If films are not perfect representations of the past, then how can and should we interpret their images and messages? How might teachers talk about or show historically based films during lessons in a way that promotes students’ historical understanding? In this article, I write about more than simply using film as a pedagogical tool, which we accept as a given, and focus on exploring more deeply what it means to interpret inevitably inaccurate film portrayals in a way that promotes, rather than diminishes, historical understanding.

In the following sections, I examine previous conceptions of the relevance of Hollywood film in high school, consider what recent researchers tell us about Hollywood film and students’ historical understanding, and offer specific suggestions for how to use films to promote students’ historical understanding. I use the topic of World War II as a context.

## The Relevance of Hollywood Film in High School

Today’s classroom is less than ever insulated from the cultural environment, and we cannot ignore the pervasiveness of electronic mass media. Think about which has made a greater impression on the mass consciousness, myriad scholarly studies

of the Normandy invasion or Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*? . . . We should acknowledge film and television as the great history educators of our time. (Weinstein 2001, 27)

Interpreting Hollywood’s version of history in the classroom is more important than ever. Outside the classroom, students are consuming large volumes of feature films, many of which contain historical themes or are based in history. In addition, films have great potential to motivate and engage students with historical content and present alternative perspectives. However, at the same time, students may need additional scaffolding to be able to view and examine films as historical documents.

Researchers indicate that students have access to and view significant quantities of mass media, averaging over three hours a day of television and videos (Kaiser Family Foundation 1999). Students spend more time watching television than doing anything except sleeping (Avery et al., quoted in Horgen, Choate, and Brownell 2001), and teenagers, who are only 16 percent of the total population, are 26 percent of the movie viewers in the theater (Rauzi 1998, quoted in Strasburger 2001).

Many of the films students encounter contain historical themes or are based in

history, and those films become a common source of historical knowledge (Davis 2000). In one recent study (Marcus 2003), I found that a majority of high school students had seen historically based films, among them *Forrest Gump* (86 percent of the students in the study), *Apollo 13* (80 percent), *Saving Private Ryan* (75 percent), *Pearl Harbor* (61 percent), and *Glory* (55 percent). In addition, since 1986, thirteen of the eighteen Academy Award winners for best film either depict a specific historical event or are strongly based in history. Those winners include *Dances with Wolves* (1990 best picture winner), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Titanic* (1997), and *Gladiator* (2000).

Hollywood films may tender opportunities to develop students' historical understanding, including, but not limited to, interpretation of evidence, increased historical empathy, exploration of historical perspective, and connecting the past to the present and to one's own life. Films can serve as evidence of the past, what Seixas (1996) calls *traces* and *accounts*, and become documents that students analyze and interpret. By applying films as a tool of historical inquiry, teachers provide students with engaging primary and secondary sources that connect to their lives and offer unique perspectives and interpretations of historical events and themes. The power of films' visual medium coupled with their narrative core open the door for students, with guidance, to cultivate a mature sense of historical empathy. Finally, watching films and examining the circumstances around their creation, public reception, and historical context may promote students' historical thinking and awareness of historical perspective.

Using film in the classroom allows teachers to build on students' out-of-school experiences with film. However, the power of film to develop historical understanding is lost unless teachers cultivate students' ability to interpret film, which we might call their historical film literacy. Without historical film literacy skills, students may accept films at face value, believing that the images and dialogue are historical fact. For

example, students may have a difficult time separating reality from storyline in a film like *Forrest Gump*, which merges documentary footage with fictional creations, or in a film like *JFK*, which is based on real-life events but told through the director's point of view.

*The Passion* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore's latest documentary, offer more recent examples of the importance of historical film literacy. Even if those films are not viewed in class, teachers can enhance the way students examine film as evidence of history by seizing on issues such as the following:

The films' creation (*The Passion* was personally funded by Gibson)

The films' distribution (no major film distributor would distribute *The Passion* and Disney refused to release *Fahrenheit 9/11* because the company opposed the content of the film)

The films' content (many Jewish leaders are concerned about *The Passion*'s fueling anti-Semitism, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* is extremely critical of President Bush and the war in Iraq)

The film director's mission (Gibson was quoted as saying, "I hope the film has the power to evangelize" [Goodstan 2004], whereas Moore's political views in his film are overt)

How the film is received by the public (*The Passion* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* were enormous financial successes, seen by millions)

An exploration or critique of the films' narrative and portrayal of historic events

Although public school teachers may encounter legal, administrative, or parental obstacles to showing these films in class, ignoring the films' existence as cultural events and lightning rods for controversy would be akin to disregarding the presidential election that concurrently dominated the airwaves and print media over the past year.

### **Hollywood Film and Students' Historical Understanding**

The suggestion of using Hollywood film to teach history is not new. Numerous articles in social studies and history journals contain critiques of films and

creative ideas for incorporating films into classroom practice (Briley 2002; Feinberg and Totten 1995; Goldstein 1995; Johnson and Vargas 1994; Mason 2000; Weinstein 2001). An article in *The Social Studies* explored how the film *JFK* affected the learning and critical thinking of college students (Sturma and MacCallum 2000). There is also an established set of writings in which the authors discuss films as historical representations (Rollins 2004; Toplin 1996; Rosenstone 1995; Davis 2000; Carnes 1996; Justice 2003). Yet, relatively little has been written about film as a means of promoting historical understanding, and there is insufficient empirical knowledge about the connections between teachers' use of film in high school classrooms and students' historical understanding.

Weinburg (2001) suggests that feature films play a role in how students learn and think about historical events, contributing to what he calls collective memory. For example, student participants in his research (analyses of over 150 formal interviews with students, parents, and teachers; 130 hours of classroom observation; and 2,000 pages of written documents) often referenced the film *Forrest Gump* when discussing the Vietnam War. He found that for many high school students and their parents, the film was a common point of reference in discussions about the Vietnam War. Wineburg advocates that rather than ignoring films as a source of history, "we might try instead to understand how these forces shape historical consciousness, and how they might be used, rather than spurned or, worse, simply ignored, to advance students' historical understanding" (Weinburg 2001, 250).

In a recent study (Marcus 2003), I examined students' beliefs concerning historical sources of information and the way that students use various in-class historical sources to construct and interpret history. Data collection was conducted in four United States history classrooms at the same high school, two classrooms of one teacher and two classrooms of a second teacher. The research in the four classrooms took place during

study of a unit on World War II (WWII). In general, the students considered their teachers, textbooks, documentary films, and the majority of primary sources to be the most trustworthy sources of historical information, and feature films and fellow students to be the least trustworthy. In interviews, students identified the following three central criteria for a source's trustworthiness:

1. The perceived authority and/or knowledge of a source
2. The perceived motive, agenda, or bias of a source
3. The nature of the source as a primary or secondary account

These three beliefs accounted for 64 percent of all responses. All other responses were each less than 10 percent of the total answers. In isolating students' beliefs about film, I found that the most prevalent reason for accuracy and believability was the perceived motive, agenda, or bias of the film. Typical comments from the students about the general trustworthiness of film included, "Movies can be embellished by fiction. If it was all fact, it wouldn't be as gutsy and gory as it seems . . . so *Pearl Harbor* . . . it's like WWII propaganda." Another student said, "Hollywood films and stuff like that are selling for entertainment and money, so they are not going to be a good source. They focus on the things that aren't important when studying history."

Despite what seem like potentially sophisticated conceptions of the trustworthiness of sources, those students did not apply those beliefs during classroom activities. As a whole, students used sources of historical information (e.g., lectures, film, the textbook) as banks of information from which to make a withdrawal. Students' relationships to sources were passive; they sought to acquire and memorize information. Only on rare occasions did students exhibit a more sophisticated way to employ sources in constructing history, such as comparing sources to one another or considering author bias. During the unit on WWII, the students were not constructing their own history. Their sources provided an already erected his-

torical framework, and that became their edifice of history. The students used sources mainly as places to acquire information to memorize and as texts to read, but not as sources of information to analyze or use in constructing their own conceptions of history.

An example is the use of the film *Fat Man and Little Boy*. Students were asked to take notes on the film during viewing. What students recorded are the central arguments that appear in the film. For instance, the characters in the film emphasized reasons the bomb should be used, including citing the many lives that would be lost in an invasion of Japan; the need to "have something to show," given the enormous cost of building the bomb; and a lack of nuclear material available for both a demonstration and eventual use of the bomb. Arguments against using the bomb focused on moral issues and the loss of innocent lives. In the collected samples of student work, students' T-charts contained the same arguments, often with the exact same language, such as "you must show the enemy in the harshest terms" and "the Japanese brought it on themselves." Students did not question the use of a film or the film's content at any point during the unit, nor did they compare the film to other sources. They simply used the film as a text from which to gather "facts" passively. The teacher disclosed that during the unit, as well as during the entire year, he has observed students' use of historical sources, including film, as uncritical and simplistic. Reacting to how students used sources during the WWII unit, he said,

I don't have the sense that they are taking the source and then [comparing it to] another to layer onto their understanding. . . . I have a sense that mostly what they have is they get information and put them in different boxes and the deeper connection is not strong. . . . As a group they are uncritical and they are also reasonably simplistic. They will look for an answer and once they think they have an answer they are done. I don't see a lot of nuanced thinking. Nuance is not their friend. . . . they continue to just look at everything and say wow. . . . I don't know if they question much the believability and accuracy of sources.

As a result, I consider as a critical finding that, despite the students' claims in interviews that feature films were much less believable and accurate than other sources of historical information, they treated the film clips shown in class as legitimate and trustworthy. Students did not openly question the films, the use of the films by the teacher, or any specific component of the films. A disconnect existed between students' beliefs about sources and their use of sources (Marcus 2003). That finding is consistent with the conclusions of Paxton and Meyerson (2002).

When they accept historical sources at face value, students fail to recognize a critical skill in historical understanding. Students' general beliefs about feature films hold the promise that they consider feature films that incorporate history to be sources of information that need to be examined and assessed carefully. Those general student beliefs, however, did not translate into a sophisticated level of historical understanding in relation to film and the construction of history. During film clips, students either recorded information ("facts") from the film (if assigned to do so by the teacher) or simply watched the clips. Students viewed films either as texts, with the data gleaned in films reported in class discussion or small group tasks, or viewed films as entertainment.

Why and how did students move from viewing film in general as a less trustworthy source of information to viewing specific, in-class films as a legitimate source of information? From the study, I can suggest several possible explanations, including the following:

1. The authority of teachers legitimized the films.
2. The classroom activities in conjunction with films did not require or support a deeper examination of the films, thus reinforcing the films as good historical sources. There were no discussions of possible biases or inaccuracies in the films.
3. Several students explained that the big picture of the film—the overall themes, content, and story—are true, and that it is the little details, which the stu-

dents say “don’t really matter,” that get altered.

### Suggestions for the Use of Films

During a focus group exercise, Seixas (1994) found that high school students viewed recent films as a mirror of the past. I suggest that instead of looking at films as a mirror, teachers ask students to invoke the image of a lake. At times,

tains a list of print and online resources to support my suggestions.

### Film as Evidence of History

Feature films are representations of history and can serve as primary and secondary source documents, depending on the film used and the questions we help students ask of a film. There are a number of practices that I use in class-

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## **Feature films are representations of history and can be primary and secondary resources. Teachers use films to help students explore history. Films are not stand-alone documents but contain interesting information about historical events.**

a lake is calm and reflects a more accurate, though still slightly distorted, picture of the past. At other times, wind or children playing and skipping rocks create ripples in the water, further warping the image reflected. Some films have more ripples than others (e.g., the intent of director, the film as entertainment or a profit-making enterprise, a lack of research, various political agendas and societal attitudes, or the atmosphere at the time of the film’s release). Films, textbooks, the teacher, and other sources of students’ historical knowledge are far from mirrors. They are valuable but distorted sources. Teachers can bring students to the lake to show them the reflective process.

Next, I offer ideas for how to use Hollywood film in high school history classrooms. To provide specific examples, I focus on World War II, a unit common in U.S. and world history classes and one with a large choice of films. The suggestions are by no means complete, but are an effort to expand the dialogue among educators, historians, and filmmakers and more explicitly bind pedagogy with film to improve students’ historical understanding. In the suggestions, I consider film as evidence of history and film as a tool to develop and explore issues of historical empathy, historical perspective, and historical significance. The appendix at the end of the article con-

rooms and observe other teachers following that seem to use film productively as a vehicle for thinking historically. Many secondary teachers discuss carefully choosing films and clips to use in class, considering lesson objectives, the film’s content and perspective, time, and other factors. Many teachers also research the film’s target audience, the director’s viewpoints or aims, the actors’ views, what was happening in society at the time the film was created and released, other historical and cultural contexts, and the aesthetic aspects of film (the resource list can assist teachers in this task without their giving up their prized lunch duty). One key may be not to rely solely on any one film as a source of historical information or on films to provide the facts. Instead, teachers can use the film to assist students in the act of creating and exploring history. Another successful strategy is to use film in conjunction with other sources, such as photos, textbooks, and primary source documents, and to present a film as one piece of the historical puzzle, challenging the students’ and the teacher’s notions of the trustworthiness of all historical sources, including film. An approach that often works well is to incorporate film into lessons throughout the year, alongside readings and other activities, so that students have multiple opportunities to develop

deeper understanding and to practice making sense of film.

Hundreds of WWII feature films are available and appropriate for high school classrooms. The film *Fat Man and Little Boy* (1989) tells the story of the building of the atomic bomb during WWII. Reflected primarily through the eyes of General Groves, the military officer in charge of the project, and Robert Oppenheimer, the lead scientist, students can follow the arguments for and against building and then using the atomic bomb. The on-screen debates are a good starting point for in-class dialogue. The discussion in the film can also be compared to primary source documents that detail the positions and viewpoints of various scientists, military officials, and political leaders.

The films *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *Tora Tora Tora!* (1970) offer varying perspectives on the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The films can be compared to each other, not only for how they portray events leading up to the Japanese attack but also for how the viewpoints vary, based on the historical context in which each film was made. Similar comparisons can be made between films created and released during or right after WWII and decades later. Students can study the perspectives that those films take and how society’s attitudes and beliefs influence a film’s storyline, dialogue, and audience reception. Consider comparing films (or segments of the films) such as *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and examining how the films are a reflection of the society of their time.

Although films are not stand-alone historical documents, many WWII films do offer important and interesting evidence of historical events. The images presented in feature films are re-created but done often with painstaking detail and authenticity. *The Thin Red Line* and other films present realistic battle scenes, and *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *Come See the Paradise* (1990) represent the struggles and mistreatment of humans with blunt, stark images. *Patton*

(1970) is a biography that not only offers a historical narrative about the wartime general but also in many ways is a product of its time (filmed and released during the Vietnam conflict) and has been cited as both a prowar and antiwar statement. Films can be used as evidence of a specific historical event and as evidence of societal characteristics during the time period in which they were created.

### Historical Perspective

The advertisement for the film *Remember the Titans* (2000) includes the line, "History is written by the winners." A cursory study of history can often be a narrative constructed around the "winner's" perspective. Are not social studies teachers obligated to tell the story of the past from the perspective of more than just the winners? If so, questions to ask of films include the following: Whose story is being told? Who is telling the story? Whose viewpoint or story is absent and at what expense? Every film has a perspective or point of view, although that may not be obvious to students. Examining perspective is critical to understanding film and equally important in studying history.

*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) is as interesting for the multiple perspectives it offers as for the points of view that are absent. The film follows three WWII veterans home as they adjust to civilian life after the war. Each of the veterans represents a different class of society and point of view. At the same time, there is no significant minority representation in the film. Minorities are underrepresented in WWII films. For a Japanese-American perspective, consider *Come See the Paradise* (1990) or *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999). *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995) is one example of the African American experience during the war. Students can explore the perspectives contained within the film as well as compare the films' point of view, or missing viewpoints, to other films and other historical documents.

Another film with interesting perspectives is *Tora Tora Tora!* (1970). It is the story about the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor as told from two points of view. The scenes of Americans had an American director, and the scenes of the Japanese had a Japanese director. Two additional films allow students to see non-American perspectives on the war. *Das Boot* (1981) is the story of a German U-boat crew and their experiences during the war, all from the German point of view. *The Longest Day* (1962) portrays D-Day from multiple points of view, including American, French, British, and German viewpoints. Students can be assigned to focus on one perspective or to compare and contrast all points of view.

Although those films present non-American perspectives, a truly unique way to expose students to nontraditional points of view on WWII is to show Soviet, German, and Italian films made before, during, and just after WWII (such as *The Eternal Jew* [1933]). Such films may be more difficult to find and are more likely to require additional research by the teacher, but they are excellent documents to compare portrayals of wartime enemies, propaganda messages, and the viewpoints of the victorious and the defeated.

### Historical Empathy

Students' engagement with film can expand discussion and may support the development of historical empathy. The entertainment value of film allows students to relate to the content, form bonds with characters, and "feel" history. Films can be entertaining and educational. For instance, WWII films often present serious content, containing such themes as death, human rights, broken families, and psychological trauma. The solemn and somber nature of many war films naturally evokes empathy; however, they always require sensitivity to students who may get upset. *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Life Is Beautiful* (1998) provide powerful and realistic images of the Holocaust. They also provide a contrast in film-making style and how to deal with a serious subject. *Schindler's List* is filmed in black and white to recreate the film images of the time period, whereas *Life Is Beautiful* uses

humor to tackle the death and horror. In addition to prefilm activities, such as preparing students for the graphic images they will see in the film, acquiring parent permission, and providing background information about the Holocaust, I find that keeping journals while viewing the films allows students to process their intellectual and emotional reactions to the films. Journal entries might be general reactions to the film or answers to such specific questions as the following:

What strategies did individuals and families use to cope with the brutality and death around them?

How do the characters in these films act differently and similarly to what you see in today's society (whether in the U.S. or Iraq)?

Whether showing the films in their entirety or culling clips, a helpful technique that many teachers use is to pause the film periodically so students have time to write and process in their journals without a continual bombardment of jolting scenes.

In addition to presenting the human dimension of the Holocaust, war films offer ample opportunities to create empathy with soldiers and the terror of battle. Many teachers use the opening scene from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) to illustrate the brutal warfare of D-Day. This scene can also be shown in conjunction with real documentary footage or scenes from *The Longest Day* (1962) to compare and contrast various perspectives on the invasion of Europe. Students usually have limited personal experience with the horror of participating in battle. Films have the potential to re-create, with varying degrees of accuracy, those emotionally powerful experiences.

### Historical Significance

Films are the means to help students see our relationship to the past. Images from WWII films can be compared to video and photographs from U.S. military involvement in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, linking several different wars to each other and to the present. The films *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999)

and *Come See the Paradise* (1990), which contain scenes about Japanese Internment during WWII, can be contrasted with film and written accounts from Vietnam and with images from U.S. treatment of Iraqi prisoners from the 2003–04 Iraq war.

A film that promotes bridging the past and the present is HBO's *Band of Brothers* (2001). This ten-episode drama that chronicles the WWII experiences of Easy Company incorporates interviews and dialogue with the real-life characters on which the film is based. That feature of the film promotes reflection on the events portrayed in the film and can serve as an entry point to examining how the war affected individuals and the world today. Because the extraordinary number of characters in the film can be confusing, a productive exercise with students is to have them shadow one character throughout the film.

## Conclusion

Teachers have an obligation to contemplate the influence of Hollywood film on students' historical understanding and to consider the use of film in their teaching practices. Students are exposed to expansive representations of history through film, though only a narrow representation of perspectives. Despite film's often fictional inclinations, it can be useful, "[a]s long as we bear in mind the differences between film and professional prose, we can take film seriously as a source of valuable and even innovative historical vision" (Davis 2000, 15).

Any group of humans, even expert historians, do not fully agree on how to interpret today's events, such as the U.S. presence in Iraq, voters' decisions in national elections, or the impact of Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction," let alone what happened almost two thousand years ago. Films present one version of history. It is, however, a slippery slope when any historical representation—fiction or nonfiction, film or text—claims to be *the truth* about the past and deprives us of the wonder and reality of historical discovery. Teachers are responsible for

ensuring that students possess the historical film literacy skills to learn from, interpret, and evaluate the creations of Spielberg, Stone, Gibson, Moore, and other popular-culture "historians."

*Key words: assessing accuracy in movies, evaluating historical film, films in social studies classes*

## APPENDIX A Additional Resources for Teachers

The following books, articles, and Web sites are useful references.

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The FREE Consumer Action Website is the consumer's new best friend. It's got thousands of links to companies and government agencies – the names, numbers, advice, and connections you need to get your wrongs righted.

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