



Introduction

In recent decades, the idea that historians present the past in an "objective" fashion has received intense questioning. Experimental ways of narrating history are now common, and indeed at the cutting edge of the profession as scholars (including Yale's John Demos and Jonathan Spence) blur the line between "fact" and "fiction."

Perhaps no other medium has shaken up the historical profession and its notions of truth telling more than film. Historians used to be adept at shaking off the presentation of history in film as simply "too popular." They were easily able to point to the many falsehoods that came out of Hollywood - and they considered that a sufficient critical viewpoint toward cinema.

Yet it has become increasingly apparent that academic historians cannot so easily dismiss film and video. For one thing, the success of movies ranging from "Pocahontas" to "JFK" has shown that the public often receives much, if not most, of its ideas about history from the silver screen. More substantively, historians have finally come to recognize that film offers a tremendous opportunity to rethink - often in a highly philosophical manner - how we construct memory and the past.

Academic historians have now, by and large, therefore embraced film and video. The most prominent journals in the field, the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*, devote substantial portions of their review space to movies. The journal *Film and History* has become an important forum for discussions of particular movies as well as the general issues of the field. And an Internet list, H-Film, is one of the most active H-Net scholarly discussion lists, which are partially financed by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The seminar on "The Use and Abuse of History in Film and Video" was designed to give teachers an introduction to the larger philosophical issues that the relationship between film and history presents as well as to familiarize the teachers with some of the most important historical films, focusing on their teaching potential in the classroom. We began with a discussion of the most basic ways in which historians assemble and construct the past through a discussion of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*, a Pulitzer-prize winning biography of frontier healer Martha Ballard, as well as the recent PBS documentary that focuses on both Ballard and Ulrich. We then switched radically to the Hollywood extravaganza of "Pocahontas," which provided the context for a particularly important discussion of Disney commercialization, the myths we hand down to young children, and the moral lessons we extract from the past.

Particularly because of the population of the New Haven schools, many other movies in the seminar focused on African American history, ranging from the New Haven-based "Amistad" to "Eyes on the Prize" to "Malcolm

X," which we paired with a reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. We also intensively examined the two directors who are arguably the most important purveyors of cinematic history, Ken Burns (documentaries on the Civil War and baseball) and Oliver Stone ("JFK"). Participants also presented at least one other film different from the week's common viewing. These varied from "Gone with the Wind" to "Cabeza de Vaca." We ended with John Sayle's profound meditation on memory, family, and the relevance of *The Alamo*, "Lone Star."

With the help of historian Robert Rosenstone's imaginative essays in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, we balanced our specific discussion of each film with an exploration of general theoretical questions such as: "what is truth?" "what is the primary responsibility of the historian?" "of the film maker?" and "why does history matter?" While never skirting the need for historians to be as accurate and truthful as possible, we developed something of a consensus that the realms of academic history and film history were complementary but needed to be evaluated on different epistemological grounds. We also recognized that effective teaching requires getting students (especially young ones) excited enough to engage in the never-ending dialogue that is the genuine meaning of history, rather than boring them with a continuous barrage of facts.

The teachers who participated have a wide range of students. We had a team of teachers from Beecher Elementary School as well as two middle school teachers and five high school teachers. Their units are a wonderful resource for bringing film into the classroom in an age when principals and many fellow teachers still often think that videos are the "easy way out." The units themselves include topics as different as the complex representation of nostalgia in 1950s movies to the intense politicization of movies about Latin American history. Other units concentrate on unusual topics such as parenting and music in historical movies. One member of the Beecher team concentrated on frontier history, focusing on new ways of looking at pioneers, and this was complemented by the Beecher media specialist's examination of three important heroines of "herstory": Harriet Tubman, Annie Oakley, and Wilma Rudolph. The other Beecher teachers were among the plurality of teachers who concentrated on African American history - one looked at migration to the North and the other examined baseball's Negro Leagues. Finally, the other teachers wrote their units about slave resistance, the Civil Rights movement, and how to teach about race and ethnicity through film.

The units should provide the reader with a strong sense of the value of the subject as well as the talent and thoughtfulness with which the teachers approached it. I hope they also offer some glimpse into the dedication of these teachers to their craft. I am immensely impressed with their energy and imagination, and it makes me much more hopeful about the future of our society and our democracy to know that the education of so many young people is in their hands.

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