MOVIES AS HISTORY

BY KEVIN MATTSON

IT STARTED with *no way.* Then *maybe*, and, finally, a begrudging *sure*. But the ambivalence remained even as I stood and stared at the course catalog. There I was, listed as teaching a 300-level course (mostly juniors and seniors) entitled History Through Film.

When first asked by my assistant chair, I thought the course to be little more than a Rocks for Jocks or Physics for Poets equivalent. I couldn't come up with an appropriate name for it (History for . . . Whom?), but it struck me as the give-them-a-little-history-in-a-fun-sort-of-way type of course. Then I started thinking: Why was I so afraid of teaching it? After all, who could deny that watching a film might tell us just as much about the past as reading a history book or presidential speech?

Take a movie that you'd be least suspicious of thinking of as a historical document—say, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). I know, your mind's eye sees John Travolta gyrating in a white sportsuit with wide lapels, finger stabbing the air. But consider again the broad themes the movie explores that relate back to the 1970s, a decade that historians increasingly recognize as crucial in the development of postmodern America. Witness the movie's focus on ethnicity, working-class woes, strained relations between the sexes, and urban life on the skids. If you wanted to set the mood for a class that explores the significance of the 1970s, this film is not a bad place to start—especially if you supplement it with Jimmy Carter's famous "Crisis of Confidence," aka "malaise" speech, and Christopher Lasch's bestseller, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978).

And who would dare deny the historical importance of the film *Casablanca* (1942), which makes nearly everyone's top-ten list of best all-time Hollywood films and has come to signify one of the more serious treatments of wartime political commitment? Numerous historians, most ably Robert Westbrook, have pointed out that in an individualistic, rights-based society like America, leaders have a difficult time asking citizens to sacrifice for a common good. (One needs only think of President Bush's exhortation after 9/11 that Americans go out and shop to show our resolve against terrorism.) Humphrey Bogart's character Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* struggles over saving himself from destruction by the Nazis while learning to see how his own antifascism will require sacrifice, including giving up his true love, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman). No wonder the Office of War Information thought the film's antifascist message, though muted, to be an acceptable Hollywood effort in wartime.

And what better film than *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to capture postwar anxiety, especially that of returning GI's who had to face their economic fears as well as an increasingly domesticated existence that many perceived as a threat to their masculinity? I'd sooner use that film than Henry Luce's overly optimistic "American Century" essay to get a sense of how some viewed America's future after the war.

Most everyone could talk favorite films or film clips—but there was not much thought given to tactics. Perhaps some of this has to do with the embarrassment factor. Too often when someone says they're showing a film in class, what they really mean is, *I have a conference to attend that day*.

As I began to think about teaching the course, I started to wonder how other historians used films in their classes. So I did the usual dutiful things: I went to the library, and I asked around, talking to colleagues. I was astounded to find out how very little pedagogical reflection goes on about *how* to use films in class. Most everyone could talk favorite films or film clips—but there was not much thought given to tactics. Perhaps some of this has to do with the embarrassment factor. Too often when someone says they're showing a film in class, what they really mean is, *I have a conference to attend that day*. Then again, as with much university teaching, this isn't exactly rocket science. What more do you need to do than provide a little background to the film, a responsible dollop of historical context, hit the "play" button—and then discuss? The pedagogy questions aren't that deep.

But when it comes to using dramatic film, I discovered, when I pushed for more explicit answers, that there are significantly different schools of thought. One approach suggests that you use film to tell a story about the past—sometimes even a myth—so that you can then unmask it and expose its ideology. By this process, the film becomes the glittering but misleading foil to "real" history (the kind held under lock and key by the professors). My friends and colleagues who teach history courses outside the 20th century—medieval history or the American Revolution, let's say—and want to use film to illustrate a point often do precisely this. They will show a film about medieval Europe and then go on to explain what the film accurately depicted and what it did not. There are some good books about historical films—with titles like *Past Imperfect* (1995)—that help describe the historical references (and inaccuracies) bound up in Hollywood historical films. But I didn't find this approach satisfying, and I didn't want my teaching to deteriorate into mere nitpicking of Hollywood's loose historical conscience. Such a practice seemed pedantic and far too easy.

One colleague told me he used *The Patriot*, a 2000 film starring Mel Gibson as a beleaguered American landowner who, after some initial re-

luctance, chooses to fight the British. My colleague showed the film and then used it to discuss the grittier realities of the American Revolution—by then, the film had dropped out of the picture. It's a sensible and smart approach, no doubt. But when I sat down to watch the movie, I laughed myself silly at the film's melodramatic schmaltz, its demonization of the British, and its ahistorical view of race relations. My immediate reaction was: I would just as soon use this film as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) to teach about Kennedy and Vietnam, or *All the President's Men* (1976) to discuss Watergate. (The latter film makes it seem as though Woodward and Bernstein were personally responsible for Nixon's fall from power—a grossly exaggerated misreading of events and a dangerous excursion into glam-journalism.) In the case of *JFK*, it would take me twice as long as the movie itself (a film that represents what the French must mean by *longue dureé*) to explain to students all the things Stone completely botched in suggesting that LBJ had JFK killed in order to start the mass killing in Vietnam. And where do such exercises ever end?

Robert Toplin, perhaps the leading scholar on history and film in America, provides another reason for resisting such an approach. He argues that historians are naive to begin with when they expect Hollywood to treat the past accurately. Instead, Toplin suggests, Hollywood's narratives *have to* simplify and miss details. The medium makes the message. "A great deal of ink and airtime are wasted on angry indictments of cinematic history for engaging in practices of the genre or for inventing and manipulating evidence," Toplin writes. So, even though others do it, I don't find it at all appealing to pick apart Hollywood fluff in the interests of making historical reality perfectly clear. And besides, unlike my colleagues in other fields, I don't *have to*. There's another approach I can use.

My approach draws on a comment made by another scholar ruminating about film and history: "Hollywood has often been an unwitting recorder of national moods." In other words, films can be viewed as historical documents, produced in the period under investigation in the course outline. As documents, these films can offer the same sort of insights as novels, speeches, and essays. This was the approach that most appealed to me as a cultural and political historian of 20th-century America. And in seizing it, I realized that this was a rare moment in my intellectual development, when I could easily go with the postmodern flow. After all, scores of cultural studies mavens had expanded the meaning of "text" to include just about anything beyond merely humdrum words on a page. That's what I was doing with movies. Now I, too, could brag to friends about "exploding the bounds of textuality."

I would be remiss if all I mentioned was my internal monologue about the boundary-busting, pedagogically hip contours of my course. Because there was an administrative dialogue that ran alongside my own. History Through Film was, to use the stock expression found in registrar offices throughout America, a "butts in seats" course. It was designed to encourage high enrollment—certainly higher numbers of students than I saw in many of my other courses in American intellectual history. Colleagues in my department considered History Through Film a "service" course, meaning that it was something you did because it helped out the department, equivalent to helping someone prepare a tenure file. ("You haven't *lived* until you've done that," a friend once joked.) More butts in seats, more money for the department—the bottom line had spoken.

In deciding to teach History Through Film, I had entered the world of the postmodern academy—a world that has been ably dissected by such critics as Mark Edmundson and Jennifer Washburn. It is a world that has no correspondence to the shrill criticisms of academe that in recent years have characterized America's classrooms as dungeons of indoctrination and left-wing brainwashing. And it most certainly is not the world dreamed of by the idealists with whom I studied for the doctorate. ("One day, I'm going to teach undergraduates and change the world," a colleague in graduate school once told me, with not a tinge of irony.)

Instead, it's a place where consumerism and entertainment seep in. It's a place demanding—and these are real cases—that universities build Jacuzzis and water parks for students. It's a place summed up by the omnipresent student center that looks like a megamall replete with food courts. It's a place where "party school rankings" are as desirable as research rankings, and where teaching is done on the cheap—usually by graduate students and adjuncts—in order to preserve money for CEO salaries paid to presidents. It's a place where the term *democracy* is not about self-knowledge or citizenship but rather impulsive consumer ratings about what you like and dislike in the classroom. It's a place where a course like History Through Film makes perfect sense.

Let me back up a bit. In thinking about this course, I realized I wasn't the one who had introduced films into my courses in the first

place. It was my students. Here is how the in-class "film reference" goes:

Johnny raises his hand and says, "Did you see *Movie X*?" Then a comparison is made between the reading under discussion in class that day and some part of the movie. Then Mary refers to the movie and says how much she liked it. Then Marvin, sitting to her left, says he didn't like it, and pretty soon we are spiraling away from what we should have been talking about and descending into a cacophony of amateur film criticism and mounting opinions.

I remember very well a student trying to use *The Matrix* (1999) to explain to his fellow students Platonic theories of knowledge. The students forgot the original point and got caught up in the details of the film, particularly its special effects and the quality of acting and lack thereof. They were supremely comfortable in using the film as a frame of reference. In fact, they were much more comfortable with it than with the actual substance of the reading in question, in this case, Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922)—a work that makes a strong Platonic case that citizens simply don't know enough to govern themselves. Indeed! The film vaulted them onto an alternative plane, away from the issues of the course. And so whenever I heard an impending "film reference" from that point onward, I grew wary, which might explain my first trepidation about teaching History Through Film.

Yet here we capture an operating principle of the postmodern academy that too many educational theorists will consistently uphold: Student discussion is a good thing, no matter what. The bad thing is standing up there and lecturing (now pejoratively called "chalk and talk" or "sage on the stage" teaching). For these theorists, talk is good, monologue is bad. Sometimes the desired activity is called *active learning*, a term that flows out of the mouths of educational theorists and administrators who rarely enter classrooms and have little idea of the realities of what they wish for.

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This isn't tangential to the problem of including movies in history courses. I understood this by reading some early pleas for including films in college classes. One representative example is a bland pamphlet entitled *Teaching History With Film*, published by the American Historical Association in 1974. Like many professional association writings on pedagogy, it makes a reader's eyes glaze over. But it's one of the few documents that explores *why* professors should use films in class, and its message is clear: We learn the crucial postmodern academic principle that some students might have a difficult time with authors like John Steinbeck or Clifford Odets, so "bringing a film into the classroom is a very effective way to stimulate class participation in discussion. It matters little if the students are disadvantaged, slow learners, or poor readers, for everyone can get something from a movie."

Yes, I thought, but couldn't this be as much of a problem as an asset?

There's a special absurdity about exalting discussion in the case of my course. Remember, this was a "butts in seats" course, and when I walked in on the first day of class, I found myself staring at more than 150 students. The classroom featured stadium seating—an honest appellation if there ever was one. Behind me stood a big screen for the films we would watch together. Projection lights sat above my head, and a computer console to the side, where I could project whatever I wanted from the Internet or a DVD player. I started to drift back to the first rock concert I ever attended, and the thought crossed my mind: Now all I need is a smoke machine.

To encourage discussion in this cavernous chamber, and to ensure that a professor could hear what someone in the back of the room was saying, the acoustics were designed to amplify student voices. The conversation of the students washed over me like a thunderous wave. (This was, after all, the "shopping period" for classes, that time when students figure out what course lineup can provide the right mix for career preparation and fun.) The noisy audience awaited my performance. And so my first words to the students were something about it seeming like a rock concert rather than a classroom.

You can go to the Rate My Professors website and see someone else's report on this incident rather than mine. There it's related that I said, "Holy shit, it sounds like a fucking rock 'n' roll concert in here!" Now, I don't believe I said "rock 'n' roll concert." That doesn't sound like me. But it's not the reporting that matters, it's the website—which introduces a second principle about the postmodern academy, one called "student evaluation."

Student evaluations don't matter in the terms some might think.

Yes, there are people who take them too seriously. I have seen people try to figure out professors' raises in strict accordance with the numbers reported on student evaluations (which are sucked through Scantrons and then calculated out to infinite decimals). What these professors and administrators miss is that the student evaluation is not actually intended as serious evaluation but rather as a chance for students to nurture the feeling that they are actors in a great consumer republic—learning at the conclusion of each course the principle of pseudo-democratic participation. The postmodern academy has taken what used to be an informal exercise of gossip—is the professor "nice," "cute," "hot," "fun," "hard," "dour," the sort of question heard in hallway conversation—and turned it into an administrative institution meant to disturb the sleep of the untenured.

Many students are savvy enough to know this evaluation process is in many respects downright silly. One question on my department's student evaluations in the past (until someone had the good sense to excise it) asked, "How well does the professor know the subject matter presented?" Which is laughable when we consider that those being asked such a question are hardly in a position to judge. When students arrived at the "General Statements" section at the end of the evaluation form, we allowed them to riff on whatever came to mind. I have read observations in this portion of the form that go: "The earth revolves around the Sun" and "Popcorn is food." The classroom consumers, it seemed to me, were giving the empty exercise its due.

Of course, the official university student evaluation is fast becoming outdated, and we are seeing the resurgence of the old-fashioned networks that RateMyProfessors.com perfectly captures. Here again is pseudo-democracy in practice. The slogan of the site reads: "Where students do the grading!" And this principle is enhanced by the medium, because the discussion occurs on the open public sphere of the Internet—a medium already notorious for offering overblown promises of democracy.

Over and over I saw this played out: once the film started to roll in class, the pens went down, and the students' eyes glazed over. I could almost hear the critical circuits in the brains snapping off.

This leads me to a third principle in the postmodern academy: The Internet is omnipresent and godlike. This fact was punctuated for me when I read one of the most egregiously plagiarized papers ever in my teaching experience, an essay written for the History Through Film course. The essay, about Dennis Hopper's 1969 film classic *Easy Rider*, was downloaded entirely from the Internet. I was suspicious of the paper, because it was such a well-written piece by a student who hadn't written very well before—and who had a tendency to come in with excuses for missing class that always seemed a tad bit too detailed and thought-out. I had hoped to get observations about 1960s political backlash to the counterculture in essays about *Easy Rider*. In this case, I got weird writing about the literary symbol of the motorcycle and road travel. A grader in the course (another term for underpaid graduate student) discovered the paper's source simply by Googling one of its sentences. And there the whole thing magically popped up. I was witnessing the globalization of cheating. Initially shocked by this discovery, like many in my guild I have become jaded about the numerous websites that offer free papers without any sense of guilt or shame.

These websites symbolize something deeper. From online education to student research, the Internet is fast defining university life. At my own university, the library administration decided that the best way to improve research skills was to put out lots of computers for students and make them available 24 hours a day (and, yes, our "learning commons," as this place full of computers is called, also has an espresso bar). Older books and journals have been moved to an "annex" situated next to car dealerships in my small college town, in order to make room for more computer stations.

The same university administrators overseeing these changes have appeared grim and ponderous about the rise of cheating on campus. They up the number of computers but still expect the burden of catching student cheaters to be the onus of professors. Meanwhile, the message sent to students is: There in that computer console resides *all* knowledge. Go and download it.

Many people might think that the challenge of teaching films in class would be the problem of myths. Films enchant us with

myths, especially the emotional ones pumped up with loud music and panoramic imagery. Think of *The Patriot*, for instance. Or go back and watch just about any Western ever made (except those by Sam Peckinpah) or the cartoonish treatment of Reconstruction in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Puncturing myths would seem a natural component of a History Through Film course.

The problem is that my students don't carry these myths with them. They don't carry very much at all—especially not in advanced history courses that have no prerequisites, a feature of the cafeteria-feel of postmodern education. My students, though, aren't suckers. They're way too cynical to be that. But they don't have enough of a sense of reality in their minds to allow something to stand out as a myth. And you certainly can't measure Hollywood's unreality against the reality of the historical record, because they know so little about the historical record.

Thus, the term "myth" seems outdated to me. It assumes a bygone era when something called "enlightenment" could work—when education was that force for truth that exposed lies and portrayed reality. But this isn't what was happening with my course. No, what was happening was something different. It was an attempt to use the seduction of entertainment to ensnare students, and then to elevate that opening seductive move into something higher: a blind and hubristic faith that celluloid could give way to substance. The invitation was made: Here's something sexy and you'll learn something without even knowing it! The problem with this premise is that it ignores how entertainment works. It ignores just how much the line between entertainment and historical knowledge blurs in today's culture—what with the History Channel, mainstream movies about the past, and the general decline of reading (except maybe for the work of blockbuster historians like David McCullough).

I can replay the course and its movie offerings and see over and over how this problem of entertainment emerged. I watched my students watch *Casablanca*. I thought to myself: I'm certain that they're thinking occasionally about the theme of "commitment" (I drove it into their heads. I assigned essays from that period, including "The Irresponsibles," Archibald MacLeish's 1940 attack against those who had opposed the war).

But I also knew the students were at their happiest—you could see it in their eyes and the expressions on their faces—when Bogart kissed Bergman. That was what they liked. In the papers they wrote about the film, I noticed a tendency by the students to borrow visuals from this scene with which they adorned their text, often on the cover page of the essay. I had rarely seen that kind of treatment in previous college papers. The students were clearly in love with the images.

When I showed *Birth of a Nation* and talked about Southern segregation and Wilsonian progressivism, the students quickly grew bored with the film. They were confused by its lack of sound. They laughed at the melodramatic acting and the scene where a woman flings herself off a cliff. They found this amusing because it didn't live up to the standards of entertainment production values they were accustomed to: they snickered but they didn't think.

That's what worried me about showing Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). I was relieved when the students laughed at Chaplin's slapstick, because I have always worried that the universalism I see in Chaplin is somehow outdated. But I wasn't sure if students were making the connection between *Modern Times* and a broader criticism of industrialization's degradation of labor. The laughter seemed to drown out those connections.

Most students found James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) cool and iconic—the celebrity hipster ultimately recognized in Johnny Depp and others like him today. But they had a more difficult time understanding the explanation of juvenile delinquency—a pandemic threat, or so it was perceived during the 1950s—expounded in the movie. They thought *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) funny. But it didn't seem that they understood the moral seriousness of the film.

The problem was that the students were having a difficult time extricating themselves from the silky power of entertainment. Over and over I saw this played out: once the film started to roll in class, the pens went down, and the students' eyes glazed over. I could almost hear the critical circuits in the brains snapping off. One time, I could swear seeing, even though the lights were turned down, a student literally drooling.

This repeated response should tell us something: Entertainment doesn't teach. It entertains. It shuts down analytical skills and makes us feel warm inside. Watching a movie is comforting, as is the conversation that typically follows a movie screening—which inevitably concerns little more than a person's likes or dislikes. And opinions comfort us in a way that arguments—supported by evidence and logic and resulting in conflict—seldom do.

The postmodern academy and its citizens are in a bind. Nothing in our culture seems conducive to education, isolating academia

further from what some call the "real world." So the academy resorts to what might be called slumming. "Get the kids where they are" should be written above entrance gates to universities today, not "Wisdom resides here." Build Jacuzzis, water parks, campus megamalls. And offer courses like History Through Film. In a department meeting I suggested that we design a course on the History of Football, Fraternities, and Sex, and heard uncomfortable laughter. Perhaps my colleagues sense that some professor somewhere might take the idea seriously.

For sure, I think my colleagues and I have a lingering hope that the line between entertainment and education might be crossed in order to go back and repair it—define it—in the end. After all, whenever a film about history is released, newspaper reporters check their phone directories and ask history professors to comment. So when Oliver Stone's *JFK* was released, professional historians debated the subject of John F. Kennedy and Vietnam, about how much that president, had he avoided the tragedy in Dallas, would have gotten us embroiled there the way Lyndon Johnson did. Debate flourished, and some of the argument was of high caliber. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for instance, argued that Stone was right to suggest that Kennedy wouldn't have escalated U.S. troops, while others, like Ronald Steel, pointed out how strongly Kennedy was leaning toward intervention.

But here's the rub: Stone didn't listen to his critics. "You cannot tell an artist what to do. It's the First Amendment," he said in his inimical way. Robert Toplin explains, "In Stone's view artists have the right to interpret history as they see it. If an artist wishes to make a movie showing Hitler as a good guy, said Stone, that is acceptable."

My students mimicked Stone when they watched *Casablanca* for the kiss scene or looked stoned and dazed when other movies started to roll. Their message to me was simple and honest: This is entertainment, not a learning experience. And I have a right as a consumer to treat it that way.

The honesty is legitimate. After all, the line between research and Internet surfing continues to blur. The line between news and entertainment shows (think Jon Stewart) continues to blur. The line between colleges and shopping malls continues to blur. America is a republic of cable television more than a republic of letters, and therefore I can't blame my students for their slumbering minds. And I can't blame movies for often failing to elevate their understanding of the past.

People ask me, "Will you teach the course again?" I understand that helping my department is a nice thing to do, doing drudge work ("service") is necessary, and nothing suggests to me that the obsession with "butts in seats" will ever change (the administocracy will make sure of that). So, yes, even with all of my reservations, I will, perhaps more out of duty than anything else. I might break up the showings—stopping the films and commenting throughout—if only to jar my students as they drift into entertainment slumber. Call it an intervention, if you will. I've also thought about using some more difficult films from the past, those that aren't the most well known. Perhaps I'd show John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) instead of *Rebel Without a Cause*, since the movie's nonformulaic nature and lack of celebrity icons might keep my students off kilter enough to prevent them from intellectual snoozing. Still, I'll also go in with a certain trepidation about the chance of success.

But this simple question prompts a larger one about my relation to the postmodern academy. I recognize the absurdity of what I'm expected to do in engaging entertainment as historical knowledge on the part of my students. But then again I realize the absurdity of pursuing self-knowledge and education in a culture of celebrity and entertainment—especially as the university bends to the whims of the larger culture. Still, I'm hardly the only professor who must engage students in this world of wall-to-wall entertainment, and who must help them recognize that there's something more. As a historian, I'll be pointing out those forces that often influence what we at first take to be entertainment, merely flickering images that grab our attention. In other words, it's imperative to get students to see there's something serious behind Chaplin's comic pratfalls or Rick's decision to leave Ilsa for a political cause.

So out of teaching History Through Film, I have become more aware of my own philosophy of teaching. It will change over time, I'm certain, but it seems framed by an almost permanent existential challenge. I see the legitimacy of laughing at our limits as we head into the classroom. But if the postmodern academy has made the effort for intellectual seriousness seem more absurd, I am still cast back upon my own sense of efficacy and professional self-worth. The rock will roll down the hill again, but I am optimistic enough to once again shoulder that rock and draft a revised syllabus for History Through Film. I will summon the energy for one more attempt at the impossible task: to keep them happy and make them smart. •